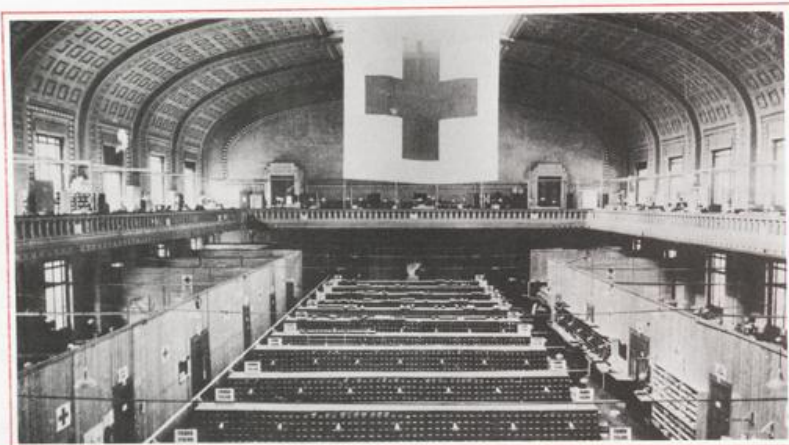


THE SECOND WORLD WAR



One year before the first shots were fired in the Second World War, the Committee had set up a special "Commission for war works", to prepare the way for the re-activation of a large-scale tracing agency.

The Commission met 25 times before war broke out and by January 1939, 30 Agency veterans of the 1914-18 war had already volunteered for duty, should the need arise.

On the invasion of Poland on September 1939, the Agency was officially opened. The scale of the work the Agency was to face can be measured by the fact that in the first weeks of the war 600,000 Polish troops alone were captured by German and Soviet forces.

All belligerents were officially informed that the Central Prisoners of War Agency was in existence, and reminded that under the 1929 Geneva Convention they should

open National Information Bureaux, to liaise with the Agency on POW matters, the exchange of lists of names and messages, as well as news relating to individuals.

The Central Prisoners of War Agency rapidly adopted the most modern means of office administration and communication. Photocopiers and statistical machines, as revolutionary as computers are today, helped the 4,000 employees in Geneva and other parts of Switzerland to match the dry information from battlefields and prison camps with the desperate and heart-rending letters from wives, mothers and children.

Processing floods of information from mail deliveries that sometimes reached 100,000 items a day, the Agency's 26 services soon assumed factory proportions.

From 1940 onwards, the Agency had persuaded almost all the belligerents to make general use of Red Cross capture

cards. They did not replace the official lists sent by the detaining powers, but as the prisoners themselves filled in the cards there were fewer of the time-wasting mistakes contained on lists written by people with little knowledge of another language. More importantly, the cards arrived in Geneva sometimes weeks before the official lists and families could be informed more quickly that their relatives had been captured.

The work of the ICRC also stretched beyond Swiss frontiers. Delegates during the five years of war made 11,000 visits to POW camps and to civilian detainee camps in certain countries. But unfortunately few records were ever forwarded to the Agency from the fighting on the Eastern Front. This was because the Soviet Union had not signed the 1929 Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war, and both Germany and the Soviet Union refused a reciprocal agreement on the exchange of POW details.

The belligerents refused to extend to civilians in occupied territories the benefits of the 1929 Geneva Convention on the treatment of POWs. Inmates of concentration camps in Nazi occupied territory were therefore deprived of protection. The Central Prisoners of War Agency, however, had done everything humanly possible to bring what moral comfort it could to millions of other victims of the Second World War.

A total of 36 million Red Cross parcels had been distributed: 120 million letters were exchanged between POWs and their families, and 23 million between civilians living in countries at war.

It has been estimated that thanks to the Agency 700,000 people in Europe alone were reunited with their families.

Nearly 40 years after the ending of hostilities cases relating to the Second World War still arrive at the C.T.A., especially to the Polish, Italian, German and Soviet Services. These stem mainly from ex-servicemen seeking to establish their pension rights with a certificate of captivity from the Agency, and of course from people still looking for missing relatives.

How long will the millions of records held at the Geneva headquarters be needed for practical and humanitarian reasons? The C.T.A. envisages that its work will continue on WW2 at least until the year 2,000.



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But after that the files will be retained – on microfilms for maximum security – as an invaluable historic record.

With the end of hostilities in 1945, the work of the Agency was far from finished. Even today 25% of its work is taken up with the aftermath of the Second World War.

MODERN CONFLICTS

The Agency was now firmly established as a permanent part of the ICRC, and the adoption in 1949 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, relative to the protection of civilians in times of war, gave subsequent legal status to some of the initiatives taken by the Agency during World War II.

But peace had hardly settled on the world when the Agency was again called to render its services to the victims of war, the first post-war action being the war in Palestine in 1948. The Agency used the Red Cross message system for those cut off from their families after the creation of the state of Israel. And through the Suez Conflict, the Six Day War, the war of 1973 up until the present day the Agency has never ceased to develop its action in the Middle East. Its tracing services in the region are the largest and most continuous since the Second World War.

Indeed, the Agency has been active in practically every conflict since 1945.

Through the 60's in the conflict in Vietnam and the wars of independence in Africa, in the 70's during the Cyprus conflict and the Indo-Pakistani War the Agency has been present. Much of the work is also taken up today with visits to political prisoners all over the world. Their registration by the Agency is regarded by the ICRC and the prisoners themselves as a form of protection.

A policy of decentralisation over the past decade has also led to the creation of agencies in the field, near the theatres of operations, in Lebanon, El Salvador and several parts of Africa and elsewhere. However, this is more of an operational de-

centralisation for Geneva remains the principal point of convergence for all information obtained in the field. Over a dozen countries presently have ICRC tracing agencies, and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are continually being encouraged to establish their own services.

Some of the Central Tracing Agency's figures for 1984:

- Nearly 41,000 new cases opened

worldwide by the C.T.A. on missing people.

- 2 million Red Cross messages exchanged between separated family members, civilians, POWs and detainees, when normal lines of communication were interrupted;
- The Agency organised family reunions or repatriations for nearly 12,000 people.



Y. MILLER/ICRC



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