



CONFRONTING THE HELL OF THE TRENCHES

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS
AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

François Bugnion



ICRC

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FRANÇOIS BUGNION

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The International Committee of the Red Cross
and the First World War
1914-1922



ICRC

Dedicated to:

My aunt, MATHILDE HUNTER-BUGNION,
*who worked as a volunteer in the International
Prisoners-of-War Agency (1914–1918)*

My godmother, BIENVENUE BUGNION
*who was deputy head of the Swiss Red Cross in Paris
during the Second World War (1939–1945), was made
a chevalier in the Légion d'honneur and was awarded
the Vermeil Medal of the French Red Cross.*

“Blessed are those who died for a temporal earth,
Who have laid down their lives in a war that was just.
Blessed are those who died for a handful of dust,
Blessed are those who died through a solemn rebirth.”
CHARLES PÉGUY, *Ève*, 1913*

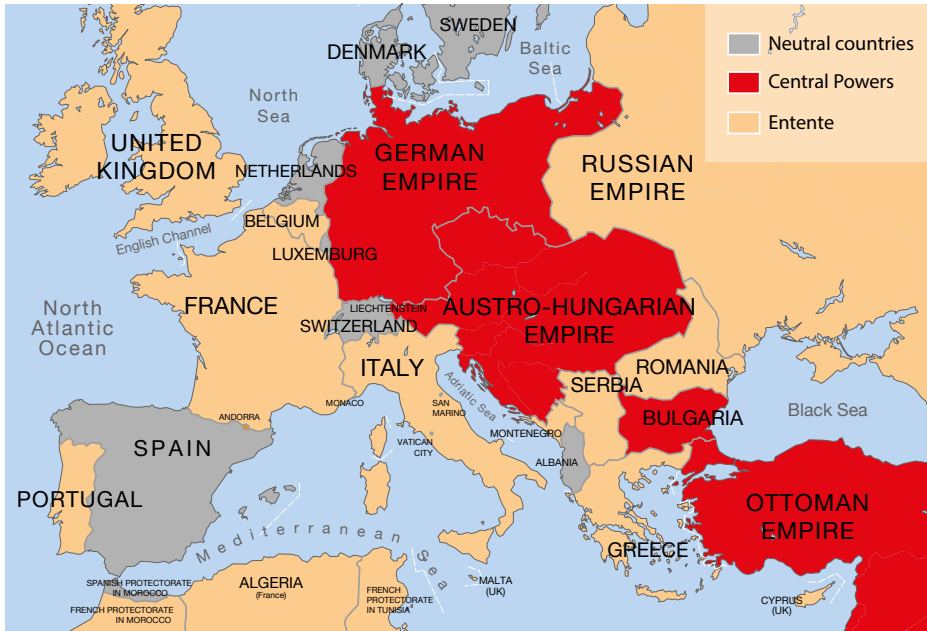
“Soldiers are citizens
of death’s grey land”
SIEGFRIED SASSOON, *Dreamers*, 1918

The First World War constitutes a fundamental break with the past. It marks the end of what we have come to call the “Belle époque” – because anything was better than war – and the start of a century of violence that has yet to end. The Second World War may be seen as a continuation of the First, and many other wars can trace their ancestry to that of 1914-1918. The October Revolution, the Cold War, Fascism and Nazism are all connected to the First World War.

The Great War also represented a break with the past for the International Committee of the Red Cross (the ICRC). To respond to the terrible suffering, privations and grief caused by this unprecedented conflict, the ICRC laid the foundations of an operational framework that still forms the cornerstone of its action today. Of all the conflicts with which the ICRC has been confronted since it was founded in 1863, it is clearly the First World War that brought about the most fundamental transformation of the organization.

The present work will examine that transformation, using official documents, the ICRC archives and eyewitness accounts.

* Charles Péguy, “Ève” (1913), *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, Paris, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1941, pp. 705–946, ad p. 800. [ICRC translation] Charles Péguy died after being shot in the head on 5 September 1914, during the opening clashes of the Battle of the Marne.



1. Europe at the start of the First World War.



2. Europe in 1923, following the entry into force of the Treaty of Versailles.

Introduction

“... preoccupation with the harm one hopes to do one’s enemy all too often supplants one’s thoughts as to the good one could do to oneself. That is the mentality of war ...”

Dr FRÉDÉRIC FERRIÈRE*

In terms of its geographical coverage, its duration, the sheer mass of humanity propelled into battle and the means that were employed in an effort to win it, the “Great War” constitutes a fundamental break with the past.

By 4 August 1914, Europe was ablaze. In the west, fighting stopped on 11 November 1918, but hostilities continued in the east until spring 1921.

Initially, the war was a European affair. Quickly, however, the conflict spread to other continents. When Britain declared war, she brought the Dominions with her – Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand – together with the Indian Empire. Japan declared war on Germany in mid-August 1914, not with the intention of intervening in Europe, but in the hope of seizing Germany’s colonies in the Far East. The Entente powers deployed troops from their colonies – Senegalese Tirailleurs, Moroccan Spahis, Nepalese Gurkhas, etc. France recruited large numbers of Vietnamese and Chinese factory workers to replace men who were at the front. The United States entered the fray in April 1917, extending the conflict to the American continent. The Russian Civil War spread the flames of war as far as Siberia. But Europe was to remain the principal battleground and was to pay the heaviest toll.¹

The entire youth of Europe was thrust into battle, with millions of men called up, most of them responding with naive enthusiasm. The civilian population was also severely affected, by economic warfare, blockades and occupation. In time, the upheavals in eastern Europe would suck the entire population into their maelstrom – men, women and children alike.

¹ The “Entente” was the name of the coalition formed around France and the United Kingdom, which had concluded an “Entente cordiale” (“cordial agreement”) in 1904. In addition to France and the British Empire – including Canada, South Africa, India, Australia and New Zealand – the Entente comprised the Russian Empire, Serbia, Montenegro and Belgium. Several countries joined the Entente later, including Japan (23 August 1914), Italy (20 May 1915), Hejaz (10 June 1916), Romania (28 August 1916), the United States (6 April 1917) and Greece (29 June 1917). Originally, the Central Powers consisted of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire. The Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of the Central Powers on 1 November 1914, followed by Bulgaria on 21 September 1915.



3. Gare de l'Est, Paris, France, 2 August 1914. First French troops leave for the front.

Photographie de presse, Agence Rol, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Rol, 41628.



4. Germany, early August 1914. German troops leave for the front. The graffiti to the left of the door reads: "Excursion to Paris. See you on the Boulevard."

Photographer unknown. Source: www.greatwar.nl.

Military stalemate led the belligerents on a constant search for new means and methods of warfare: tighter blockades, unrestricted submarine warfare, poison gas, etc. Long-established rules that set limits to the violence of war were flouted one after the other.

In humanitarian terms, the consequences were incalculable: millions of men perished in the inferno of the trenches. Artillery shredded their bodies and scattered the remains across the battlefield, rendering identification impossible. Or the collapse of a shelter or a trench buried their bodies, never to be recovered. "One shell would cover the bodies with earth, another would dig them up again," wrote one soldier who fought at Verdun. "The rain and mud rot the bodies and the stench is unbearable," wrote another.² Hospitals overflowed with the wounded, the amputees and the gas victims. Millions more languished in prisoner-of-war camps. Estimates put the number of men

² Noted by the author at the Verdun memorial, 29 September 2016.

killed in combat at 9 million, with a further 21 million wounded. Some were injured more than once, as wounded soldiers were sent back to the front, often with their wounds barely healed. Many suffered irreversible injuries, ending the war maimed or disabled. Between 6 and 8 million men endured the suffering of captivity.

Soldiers who escaped death, mutilation or captivity were indelibly marked by the horrors of battle: weeks and months in the mud of the trenches, in rain, snow and hail, with rats, other vermin and the sight of the corpses no-one dared to collect from no-man's land. The stench of decomposing flesh, the ever-present threat of artillery, gas and infantry attack. The fear of being buried alive when a trench or shelter collapsed. The fear of being sucked down into the mud and, above all, the total powerlessness of the infantryman cowering in his shelter, his trench or his shell-hole, helpless in the face of gas attacks and the all-powerful artillery that could mangle a man's body and bring agonizing death or, worse still, leave him maimed, disabled or disfigured.

Civilians, too, bore their share of suffering and hardship. Not only was there the constant fear as to the fate of a husband, father or son away at the front, but the women, older men and often the children had to take their place in the factories and fields. All over Europe, including the neutral countries, civilians suffered hardship because crops were ruined and trade came to a standstill. The shortages caused by the blockade and economic warfare had particularly severe consequences for civilians in the countries of the Central Powers and the territories under occupation. In occupied zones, such as Belgium, northern France, Trentino, Veneto, Serbia, Romania, etc., the occupying powers adopted extremely repressive measures in order to prevent any hostile activity on the part of the civilian population: internment, hostage-taking, deportation, the burning of villages and parts of cities, mass executions, etc.

Finally, just as the outcome of the war seemed certain, a population weakened by years of shortages and deprivation was ravaged by Spanish flu. The consequences of the epidemic were exacerbated by governments on both sides refusing to take the necessary preventive measures, for fear of revealing to the enemy the gaps that it was leaving in the ranks of their armies. In just a few months, flu killed as many people as four years of war.

For the victors, the bells that announced the armistice also announced the end of the carnage, but the euphoria of victory was tempered by realization of the scale of loss and destruction.

For the other half of Europe, the immediate post-war period was worse than the war itself: anarchy and civil war exacerbated the bitterness of defeat, the grief and the privations already endured. Whole towns were left without supplies, production and transport were paralysed and crops destroyed, leaving entire populations prey to hunger and cold. Hospitals closed their doors and sent their patients away, because they had no food and no coal for heating. Flu and typhoid epidemics killed as many as did war and unrest. Civil wars made no distinction between combatant and non-combatant.



5. Côte 304, Verdun, France, 1916. Soldiers of the 6th Division, 87th Regiment, French Army.
 Photographer unknown. Source: Wikipedia, "Battle of Verdun", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Verdun.
6. Verdun, France, 1916. French soldiers leave their trench to attack an enemy position.
 Photographer unknown. Source: Collection DocAnciens/docpix.fr.
7. Zonnebeke, near Ypres, Belgium, 27 September 1917. Soldiers of the 45th Battalion,
 4th Division, Australian Army, wearing respirators.
 Photographer: Captain Frank Hurley. Source: Collection Database, Australian War Memorial, E00825.
8. Eastern Front, 1917. Russian soldiers await a German attack.
 Photographer: George H. Mewes. Source: National Geographic Magazine, vol. 31, 1917, page 378.



9. Château Wood, Ypres, Belgium, 29 October 1917. Officers and men of the Australian 10th Field Artillery Brigade use duck boards to cross water and mud.

Photographer: Captain Frank Hurley. Source: Collection Database, Australian War Memorial, E01220.

Out of this horror, the Red Cross was to emerge transformed.³

To fulfil their role as auxiliaries to the military medical services and to assist the huge numbers of wounded soldiers, the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the belligerent countries recruited thousands of doctors and nurses, and sent them off to the front. National Societies set up field hospitals just behind the front lines, operated hospital trains to evacuate the wounded, chartered ships and converted them into hospital ships, provided some of the care in rear areas and looked after the maimed and the disabled. They took care of evacuees, refugees and affected populations, and were often in the vanguard of the fight against epidemics.

The National Societies of neutral countries – and in particular the American Red Cross, until the US entered the war – launched unprecedented relief operations for the wounded, refugees and affected populations.

³ Following a tradition hallowed by over 100 years' use, we shall use "Red Cross" to refer to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, especially as this was the usual term at the time of the First World War.



10. Ypres, Belgium, 1915. German artillery fires at night, probably during the Second Battle of Ypres.

Photographer: Colonel George G. Nasmith.
Source: Colonel Nasmith's collection.

To achieve all this, the National Societies had to recruit, train and manage thousands of volunteers, which meant creating structures staffed largely by paid employees. They had to mobilize millions of members and raise funds.

The changes for the ICRC were no less profound. By creating the International Prisoners-of-War Agency, by visiting prison camps, by organizing relief operations and through its initiatives for the repatriation of prisoners, the ICRC laid the foundations of an operational framework more extensive than anything it had previously imagined. It played the role of intermediary, not only between the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the belligerents, but also between their governments. It advocated for compliance with the Geneva Convention and other treaties of international humanitarian law and, where necessary, it did not hesitate to raise its voice to denounce breaches of those instruments. The ICRC thereby demonstrated its value not only in the development of humanitarian law but also in its application. Its position as a neutral intermediary between belligerents was confirmed and strengthened.

We shall attempt to portray the various aspects of that transformation, but first we must examine the basis for the ICRC's work and the resources available to it as Europe descended into war.



11. Asiago, Italy, May 1916. Asiago lies in ruins following the Austro-German offensive of spring 1916.

Photographer unknown. Source: Wikipedia in Italian, "Asiago", <https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asiago>.

CHAPTER 1

A basis for action

In August 1914, as Europe plunged blindly into war, what protection did international humanitarian law offer to the inevitable victims? What tasks did humanitarian law assign to the ICRC, and what remit did this branch of law accord to the organization in order for it to carry out those tasks?

The law of war is based on ancient chivalric codes. For a long time, these were customary rules, obeyed because their origins were lost in the mists of time. The consolidation of nation-states following the treaties of Westphalia in 1648, together with the development of professional armies, led to a strengthening of these rules under the Ancien Régime and in the 19th century. Adoption of the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field, of 22 August 1864, showed that it was possible to take advantage of peacetime to codify these rules, or at least the most important of them. The international peace conferences held in The Hague in 1899 and 1907 gave new impetus to the process of codifying the laws and customs of war.

An injured soldier on the battlefield, a shipwreck victim, a prisoner of war or a civilian all need different kinds of protection, and the circumstances leading to codification of the rules were also different. As a result, there were different legal regimes, protecting:

- sick and wounded military personnel in land warfare;
- sick, wounded and shipwrecked military personnel in maritime warfare;
- prisoners of war;
- civilian victims of war.

In addition, there are specific rules – the laws of the conduct of hostilities – intended to limit the horrors of war by regulating the methods and means of warfare.

The protection of sick and wounded military personnel in land warfare

The Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field of 22 August 1864¹ was the first treaty of contemporary international humanitarian law and still forms its cornerstone.

That convention established two of the basic principles of humanitarian law: the neutrality of medical services and the impartiality of medical care.

Article 1 of the Convention stipulates that:

Ambulances and military hospitals shall be recognized as neutral, and as such, protected and respected by the belligerents as long as they accommodate wounded and sick.

Article 6:

Wounded or sick combatants, to whatever nation they may belong, shall be collected and cared for.

This principle remains the basic rule for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

The 1870–1871 Franco-Prussian war – the first to which the Convention fully applied – convinced the ICRC of the need to revise or supplement the Convention in order to apply the lessons learned from that conflict. Gustave Moynier, who was president of the ICRC from 1864 to 1904, devoted considerable attention to the question, which remained one of his major concerns.²

Not until 1906, however, would the political environment be propitious for revision.

At the request of the ICRC, the Swiss government convened a diplomatic conference, which met in Geneva from 11 June to 6 July of that year. That conference adopted the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field of 6 July 1906, which was still in force at the outbreak of the First World War.³

The 1906 Convention introduced two major improvements by comparison with that of 1864:

¹ *Compte rendu de la Conférence internationale pour la Neutralisation du Service de Santé militaire en Campagne*, handwritten transcription of the proceedings of the Conference in the ICRC Library, Annexe B; De Martens, *Nouveau Recueil général de Traités*, first series, Vol. XVIII, pp. 612-619; *The Laws of Armed Conflicts: A Collection of Conventions, Resolutions and Other Documents*, edited by Dietrich Schindler and Jiri Toman, fourth edition, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Leiden & Boston, 2004, pp. 365-368; *Handbook of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, fourteenth edition, International Committee of the Red Cross and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva, 2008, p. 21.

² François Bugnion, *Gustave Moynier (1826-1910)*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Association Henry Dunant, Humanitarian Geneva, Geneva, 2011, pp. 58–60.

³ *Actes de la Conférence de Révision réunie à Genève du 11 juin au 6 juillet 1906*, Imprimerie Henri Jarrys, Geneva, 1906, pp. 277–293; *The Laws of Armed Conflicts*, pp. 385–395.



12. France. A doctor or nurse of the French Red Cross moves along a trench.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-00323-27.



13. France. French stretcher-bearers in a trench.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-001142-04.

- Firstly, each belligerent was to forward to the authorities of their country of origin, as soon as possible, the marks or military papers of identification found on the bodies of the dead, together with a list of names of the sick and wounded they had taken in charge.⁴ The Red Cross had been requesting such a measure for some time, in order to reduce the number of missing persons and make it possible to provide information to the families of missing soldiers.
- Secondly, the revised Convention assimilated the personnel of recognized volunteer aid societies to the personnel of army medical services.⁵ The revised Convention thereby granted the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of belligerent and neutral countries the same protection as that afforded the medical services of the armed forces.

By so doing, the revised Convention finally recognized the work of the National Societies, by protecting their personnel. If captured, these persons were to be released, just like military medical personnel. This was a form of recognition that the Red Cross had been waiting for since 1864.

⁴ Article 4.

⁵ Articles 10 and 11.



14. Montdidier/Noyon, France. A soldier receives first aid on the front line. Judging by the helmets, the soldiers are probably German.
© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-01138.



15. Battle of the Somme, France, 1916. British soldiers escort and support wounded German prisoners of war.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France/Gallica, Photographie de presse, Agence Rol. 47554.



16. Verdun area, France, 1916. A wounded French soldier is evacuated.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France/Gallica, Photographie de presse, Agence Rol. 47000.



17. France. French military hospital.

Photographer unknown. Source: Postcard, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:H%C3%B4pital_1914-1918.jpg.

Like its predecessor, the revised Convention conferred no specific role on the ICRC. The organization was not even mentioned.

However, even though the Geneva Convention made no mention of the ICRC and assigned no remit to it, everybody knew that the Convention had been adopted at its initiative. Ever since the adoption of the first Geneva Convention on 22 August 1864, the ICRC had monitored application of the Convention and compliance with it. It was also the ICRC that had initiated the revision of the 1864 Convention, to take into account the lessons learned from the wars fought since that date, and it was those efforts that had resulted in the Convention of 6 July 1906.

In addition, Resolution IV/3 of the 2nd International Conference of the Red Cross (Berlin, April 1869) tasked the ICRC with setting up an office to provide information and relief for wounded military personnel in time of war. The resolution required that:

In time of war, the International Committee shall ensure that a liaison and information office is set up in a suitably chosen location, which shall facilitate, in every possible way, the exchange of communications between committees and the sending of relief supplies.⁶

⁶ Résolution IV/3, *Compte rendu des travaux de la Conférence internationale tenue à Berlin du 22 au 27 avril 1869 par les délégués des Gouvernements signataires de la Convention de Genève et des Sociétés et Associations de Secours aux militaires blessés et malades*, Imprimerie J.-F. Starcke, Berlin, 1869, p. 254.

This was only a resolution of an International Conference of the Red Cross, and hence was not binding on belligerent States. It allowed the ICRC to propose its services, but did not require the governments to accept them.⁷

However, the States would have had no difficulty recognizing that the ICRC was empowered to monitor compliance with the Geneva Convention, as it had done since 1864.

The protection of sick, wounded and shipwrecked military personnel in maritime warfare

During the Battle of Lissa (20 July 1866), the Italian battleship *Re d'Italia* was sunk, taking over 400 men with her, and without it being possible to help them. This led several parties – including the Italian government – to ask the ICRC to initiate a convention that would protect hospital ships, just as the Geneva Convention protected ambulances and hospitals during war on land.⁸

At the request of the ICRC, the Swiss government convened a diplomatic conference in 1868, which adopted a number of articles additional to the Geneva Convention, including nine regarding the navy.⁹ These articles were never ratified, however. It was therefore left to the 1899 and 1907 International Peace Conferences in The Hague to decide the matter.

The result was Hague Convention X for the Adaptation to Maritime Warfare of the Principles of the Geneva Convention of 18 October 1907.¹⁰

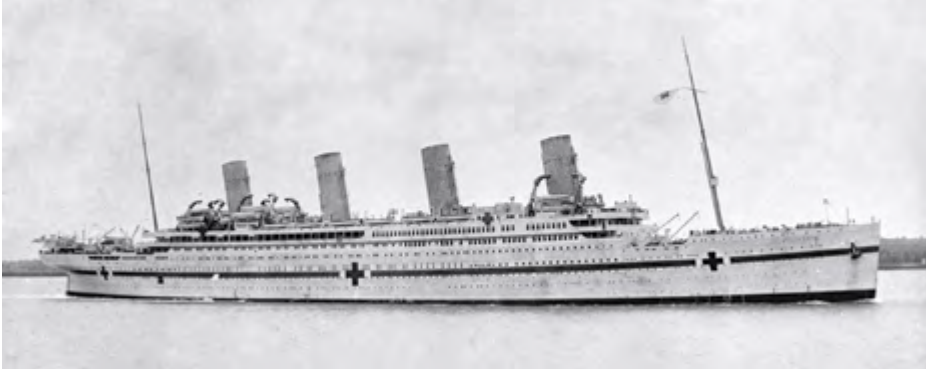
That convention established the protection of hospital ships in accordance with the same principles as those under which the Geneva Convention had ensured the protection of ambulances and field hospitals on land, while having regard to the particular

⁷ Regarding the legal status of resolutions of International Conferences of the Red Cross – which are attended not only by National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the ICRC, but also by the States party to the Geneva Conventions and, since 1921, by the League of Red Cross Societies (now the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) – see: Richard Perruchoud, *Les résolutions des Conférences internationales de la Croix-Rouge*, Institut Henry-Dunant, Geneva, 1979. Regarding the history, organization and role of the International Conferences of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, see: François Bugnion, “The International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent: challenges, key issues and achievements”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 876, December 2009, pp. 675–712.

⁸ Pierre Boissier, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross: From Solferino to Tsushima*, Institut Henry-Dunant, Geneva, 1985 (first French edition: Plon, Paris, 1963), pp. 190–192 and 206–207; Italian Wikipedia entries for “Battaglia di Lissa” and “Re d'Italia (piroregata)”.

⁹ *Protocole de la Conférence internationale réunie à Genève en octobre 1868* (Projet d'articles additionnels à la Convention du 22 août 1864 pour l'Amélioration du Sort des Militaires blessés dans les Armées en Campagne), Imprimerie Fick, Geneva, 1868; Pierre Boissier, *op. cit.*, pp. 218–225.

¹⁰ *Deuxième Conférence internationale de la Paix, La Haye, 15 juin – 18 octobre 1907, Actes et Documents*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Hague, 1907, tome I, pp. 658–663; *The Laws of Armed Conflicts*, pp. 397–404.



18. The hospital ship *HMHS Britannic*. She was requisitioned in November 1915 and converted into a hospital ship. On 21 November 1916, she hit a mine near the Greek island of Kea in the Aegean Sea, sinking shortly after.

Photographer: Allan Green. Source: Wikipedia, "HMHS Britannic", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMHS_Britannic.

circumstances of maritime warfare.¹¹ As a result, the principles of the neutrality of medical services and the impartiality of medical care now applied to maritime warfare just as they already had to war on land.¹²

The Convention also granted the same protection to hospital ships chartered by Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies as that enjoyed by hospital ships of the armed forces' medical services.¹³ The National Societies of the main belligerents did not hesitate to charter ships and convert them into hospital ships in order to evacuate and repatriate wounded military personnel from distant theatres of operations.

The ICRC was not represented at the 1899 and 1907 Hague Conferences at which Convention X was adopted, and nor does the Convention mention the ICRC.¹⁴ However, the Convention did expand on the draft of articles additional to the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field of 22 August 1864. That draft was adopted in Geneva on 20 October 1868, and was produced at the initiative of the ICRC. Furthermore, as the title of Convention X shows, its aim was to adapt the principles of the Geneva Convention to maritime warfare. Convention X could therefore be seen as an extension of the Geneva Convention, enabling the ICRC to claim the same remit with regard to Convention X as it exercised with regard to the Geneva Convention.

¹¹ Article 1 of Hague Convention X of 18 October 1907.

¹² Article 11.

¹³ Articles 2 and 3.

¹⁴ ICRC member Édouard Odier, who had presided over the 1906 Conference that revised the Geneva Convention, also took part in the Second International Peace Conference in The Hague in 1907, but as a member of the Swiss delegation. At the time, international law did not allow an organization such as the ICRC to take part in an international conference of the type held in The Hague.

The protection of prisoners of war

The Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) had highlighted the tragic fate of prisoners of war and the uncertainties regarding their status. That status was governed only by customary law, which led to wide disparities in judgement and interpretation.

Alarmed by this situation, Henry Dunant proposed the setting up of relief societies for prisoners of war, modelled on the Red Cross Societies, plus steps towards a treaty to protect prisoners of war, modelled on the Geneva Convention. As he had been forced to resign from the International Committee of the Red Cross following a financial disaster, he created an ad hoc committee in Paris, which followed exactly the same path as he and the ICRC had followed a few years previously, when the Red Cross was founded and the Geneva Convention adopted. In 1873, that committee sent out invitations to a diplomatic conference, to be held in Brussels the following year.

At that point, the cabinet in Saint Petersburg executed a somewhat strange manoeuvre. Claiming that it had been preparing to convene a diplomatic conference on the same topic, the Tsar's government persuaded the executive committee created by Dunant to withdraw its letters of invitation and sent out its own, to which it attached a draft declaration concerning the laws and customs of war. The chapter on prisoners of war drew heavily on Dunant's draft, while making no mention of the societies to assist prisoners of war that he advocated.

Be all that as it may; the Brussels Declaration, adopted by the diplomatic conference convened by the Russian government, was never ratified.¹⁵ This exercise was all it took to close down the executive committee set up by Dunant and to kill off the idea of societies for assistance to prisoners of war.¹⁶

The work of the Brussels Conference was eventually completed by the 1899 and 1907 International Peace Conferences in The Hague. Those conferences resulted in Hague Convention IV Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land of 18 October 1907.¹⁷ That convention, and the Hague Regulations annexed to it, were to become the primary reference regarding the conduct of hostilities and the protection of victims of war throughout the First World War.

¹⁵ *The Laws of Armed Conflicts*, pp. 21–28.

¹⁶ Yvonne de Pourtalès and Roger-H. Durand, "Henry Dunant promoter of the 1874 Brussels Conference, Pioneer of Diplomatic Protection for Prisoners of War", *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 167, February 1975, pp. 61–85; Roger Durand, "Les prisonniers de guerre aux temps héroïques de la Croix-Rouge", in *De l'utopie à la réalité, Actes du Colloque Henry Dunant tenu à Genève au palais de l'Athénée et à la chapelle de l'Oratoire les 3, 4 et 5 mai 1985*, edited by Roger Durand with the assistance of Jean-Daniel Candaux, Association Henry-Dunant, Geneva, 1988, pp. 225–297; François Bugnion, with Isabelle Vonèche, "La protection des prisonniers de guerre", in *Gustave Ador, 58 ans d'engagement politique et humanitaire: Actes du Colloque Gustave Ador tenu au Palais de l'Athénée les 9, 10 et 11 novembre 1995*, edited by Roger Durand, with the cooperation of Daniel Barbey and Jean-Daniel Candaux, Fondation Gustave Ador, Geneva, 1996, pp. 335–382.

¹⁷ *Deuxième Conférence internationale de la Paix, La Haye, 15 juin – 18 octobre 1907, Actes et Documents*, tome I, pp. 626–637; *The Laus of Armed Conflicts*, pp. 55–87; *Handbook of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, pp. 334–345.



19. Darmstadt, Hessen, Germany. Prisoner-of-war camp, general view of the living quarters.
 © ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-03003-08.

The situation of prisoners of war was governed by Articles 1 to 20 of the Hague Regulations. Those articles defined combatants who, in case of capture, were entitled to prisoner-of-war status, and laid down the conditions of detention and the rules regarding their release.¹⁸

Two provisions of those regulations were of particular interest to the National Societies and the ICRC.

Article 14 stipulated that an inquiry office for prisoners of war was to be established on the commencement of hostilities, in each of the belligerent States. The office would assemble all information concerning prisoners, in particular regarding capture, transfers, hospital admissions and deaths.¹⁹

Furthermore, the Hague Regulations recognized the work of relief societies for prisoners of war, reproducing almost word for word the article drafted by Dunant, which the Brussels Conference had dismissed out of hand.

Article 15 reads as follows:

Relief societies for prisoners of war, which are properly constituted in accordance with the laws of their country and with the object of serving as the channel for charitable effort shall receive from the belligerents, for themselves and their duly accredited agents every facility for the efficient performance of their humane task within the bounds imposed

¹⁸ *Idem.*

¹⁹ Regulations annexed to Hague Convention IV of 18 October 1907, Article 14.



20. Italy. Austrian prisoners of war.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-02540-11A.

by military necessities and administrative regulations. Agents of these societies may be admitted to the places of internment for the purpose of distributing relief, as also to the halting places of repatriated prisoners, if furnished with a personal permit by the military authorities, and on giving an undertaking in writing to comply with all measures of order and police which the latter may issue.²⁰

And let us make no mistake; this article is referring not to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, but to the relief societies for prisoners of war that Dunant had proposed 40 years previously. Thus it was that in an act of incongruity not entirely unknown at international conferences, the Peace Conferences graciously recognized a type of society that did not exist.

This incongruity was to confront the Red Cross with a difficult dilemma. It was unrealistic to think that one could set up relief societies for prisoners of war modelled on the National Red Cross Societies. Such a society would be inactive in peacetime and would hence become lethargic. The public would see it as a sign of defeatism. As a result, it would not enjoy the support it would need in order to help prisoners. The Red Cross was the only charitable organization with shoulders sufficiently broad to bear the load of providing voluntary assistance to hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war in

²⁰ Article 15 of the Hague Regulations (same wording in the 1899 and 1907 Regulations).



21. France, between 1917 and 1919. German prisoners of war in French hands.

Photographer unknown. Source: United States National Archives and Records Administration (NARA 533724).

the event of a new war in Europe. On the other hand, if the Red Cross agreed to help prisoners of war, did it not risk being accused of departing from its original mission, which had been to assist sick and wounded soldiers? Did it not risk being accused of misusing the funds it had received in order to help wounded soldiers and of misusing the emblem on which the Geneva Convention had conferred a legal status in order to protect wounded soldiers and the army medical services?

This dilemma was to be discussed at three International Conferences of the Red Cross – the 7th (Saint Petersburg, 1902), the 8th (London, 1907) and the 9th (Washington, 1912).²¹

The Washington conference passed a resolution (Resolution VI), committing the Red Cross to helping prisoners of war and making the ICRC the lynch-pin of this activity:

²¹ *Septième Conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge tenue à Saint-Petersbourg du 16 au 22 mai 1902, Compte rendu*, Russian Red Cross Society, Saint Petersburg, 1902, pp. 46–51, 243–251 and 346; *Huitième Conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge tenue à Londres du 10 au 15 juin 1907, Compte rendu*, British Red Cross Society, London, 1907, pp. 177–181, 195–210, 70–80 and 167; *Neuvième Conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge tenue à Washington du 7 au 17 mai 1912, Compte rendu*, American Red Cross, Washington, 1912, pp. 132–139 and 318; Pierre Boissier, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross*, pp. 381–384; André Durand, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Vol. II: From Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, Institut Henry-Dunant, Geneva, 1984, pp. 18–22 (hereinafter: André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*).



22. Hospital at Jussy, south of Saint-Quentin, France.
Wounded French prisoners of war eating.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-00358-11.

The Ninth International Red Cross Conference, considering that Red Cross Societies are naturally called upon to assist prisoners of war [...], recommends that these Societies should organize, in peacetime, ‘Special Commissions’ which, in wartime, would collect and forward to the International Committee of Geneva relief for distribution to servicemen in captivity.

The International Committee, through the intermediary of neutral delegates accredited to the Governments concerned, shall ensure the distribution of relief to individual prisoners and shall distribute other gifts between the different prisoner of war depots, taking into account the donors’ wishes, the needs of the prisoners and directions of the military authorities. The expenses thus incurred by the International Committee shall be borne by the Red Cross Societies concerned.

The Special Prisoner of War Commissions shall get into touch with the International Committee of Geneva [...].²²

In a step unprecedented in the annals of the Red Cross, the resolution included an “urgency clause”; the Special Prisoner of War Commissions were to contact the International Committee within one year.²³ Clearly, the delegates had not ignored the warning of their French colleague: “Recent diplomatic complications have reminded

²² Résolution VI, Neuvième Conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge, *Compte rendu*, pp. 138–139 and 318.

²³ *Ibidem*; *Bulletin international*, No. 172, October 1912, pp. 295–296.



23. Italy, 1917. Austrian prisoners of war captured in the region of Fagoré, on the Piave front.

Photographer: official Italian photographer. Source: *The War*, 1917.

us how unstable is peace among nations [...] Do not wait for the sound of gunfire to persuade you.”²⁴

This was only a resolution of an International Conference of the Red Cross, and hence was not binding on belligerent States. It enabled the ICRC to offer to assist prisoners of war and distribute relief to them but, just like the resolution of the Berlin Conference, it did not oblige the governments to accept their offer.

Can one conclude that the Hague Regulations, together with the resolution passed by the Washington Conference, would make it possible to provide effective protection for prisoners of war during the First World War?

No.

For one thing, the Hague Regulations provided for the exchange of information regarding prisoners of war “after the conclusion of peace”,²⁵ which would do nothing to reassure the families of missing soldiers.

For another, the Hague Regulations established general principles rather than directly applicable rules.²⁶ For instance, Article 7 stipulated that “In the absence of a

²⁴ *Neuvième Conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge, Compte rendu ...*, p. 138.

²⁵ Article 14.

²⁶ As Prof. Virally rightly observes: “... a complex legal regime cannot normally be defined at a single stroke, especially when it has to be applied to a diverse series of individual situations. There has, therefore, to be a gradual progression towards realization. The term “principles” is useful for denoting the most general and abstract norms from which this progression starts and for defining the general framework in which it will develop. It also makes us understand that, reduced to the “principles”, a legal regime is incomplete and therefore cannot be applied to those situations it is meant to govern.

special agreement between the belligerents, prisoners of war shall be treated as regards board, lodging, and clothing on the same footing as the troops of the Government who captured them.”

Similarly, Art. 8 stipulated that “Prisoners of war shall be subject to the laws, regulations, and orders in force in the army of the State in whose power they are.”

From autumn 1914 onwards, this reference to domestic law led to major differences in the treatment of prisoners and to countless recriminations. In one country, soldiers were entitled to four blankets, in another to two, and in yet another they slept in their great-coats. Applying national regulations meant that prisoners were subject to the same conditions. In certain armies, regulations provided for corporal punishment in case of disciplinary offences, whereas elsewhere such punishment was considered barbaric, inhuman and degrading.

These differences in the treatment of prisoners were denounced as breaches of the Hague Regulations, which the belligerents used to justify reprisals.²⁷ As reprisals were met with counter-reprisals, the entire legal framework protecting prisoners of war began to fall apart from autumn 1914 onwards.

[...] Principles, in this sense, signify legal rules that are not self-executing”. [ICRC translation]. Michel Virally, “Le rôle des principes dans le développement du droit international”, in *En Hommage à Paul Guggenheim*, Faculté de Droit de l’Université de Genève et Institut universitaire de Hautes Études internationales, Geneva, 1968, pp. 531–554, ad p. 533.

²⁷ Reprisals are acts that are intrinsically illegal, and for which the justification is that the State perpetrating them is reacting to another illegal act, aiming thereby to obtain justice. “... reprisals are acts, otherwise illegal, performed by a State for the purpose of obtaining justice for an international delinquency by taking the law into its own hands. [...] ... reprisals between belligerents are retaliation of an illegitimate act of warfare, whether constituting an international delinquency or not, for the purpose of making the enemy comply in future with the rules of legitimate warfare.” L. Oppenheim, *International Law, A Treatise*, second edition, Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1912, Vol. II, War and Neutrality, pp. 39–40 and 305; “A belligerent who violates the laws and customs of war does so at his own risk. He may well find that his adversary will do the same to him. – Reprisals consist of responding to an injustice by another injustice, of forcing the enemy to behave in an acceptable manner for fear of the harm to which he would expose himself were he to persist in his illicit behaviour.” Paul Fauchille, *Traité de droit international public*, tome II, Guerre et neutralité, Librairie Arthur Rousseau, Paris, 1921, p. 26. “... reprisals in time of war occur when one belligerent retaliates upon another by means of otherwise illegitimate acts of warfare, in order to compel him and his subjects and members of his forces to abandon illegitimate acts of warfare and to comply in future with the rules of legitimate warfare. [...] But while reprisals are frequently an adequate means for making the enemy comply with these rules, they frequently miss their purpose, and call forth counter-reprisals on the part of the enemy. They have often been used as a convenient cloak for violations of international law.” L. Oppenheim, *International Law, A Treatise*, Edited by Sir Hersch Lauterpacht, Vol. II, Disputes, War and Neutrality, 7th ed., Longman, London, 1952, pp. 561–562. “Reprisals are acts of duress that depart from the normal rules of international law, used by a State following illicit acts committed – to its detriment – by another State [...] with the aim of obliging the other State to comply with the law. These are intrinsically illicit acts, for which the exceptional justification is that they are carried out in response to a previous illicit act with the aim of causing that act to cease, obtaining reparation for it or ensuring that justice is done.” Charles Rousseau, *Le droit des conflits armés*, Librairie A. Pedone, Paris, 1983, pp. 8–9.

How were civilians protected?

War is not a relationship between man and man, but between State and State, in which individuals become enemies only by accident, not as men, nor even as citizens, but as soldiers; not even as members of their own nation, but as its defenders.²⁸

In these few words, Jean-Jacques Rousseau reminds us of one of the basic principles of the law of armed conflict: the immunity of civilians. War is the concern of those who wage it. Civilians who are not taking part must be spared and protected.

This principle was consolidated progressively, during the wars of the 18th and 19th centuries. As they were fought in the open countryside, some of the great battles that changed the course of history left thousands of dead or wounded combatants – easily recognized by their richly decorated uniforms – without harming a single civilian.

This being so, it is easy to see why the Hague Peace Conferences saw no need to draw up detailed rules to protect civilians. Indeed, the Hague Regulations include only a few articles that apply to them. Those articles cover two situations: sieges and occupation.²⁹ By contrast, there are no rules concerning the nationals of one party to the conflict who find themselves in the territory of the other at the outbreak of hostilities, nor concerning hostages, displaced persons or refugees. It was simply assumed that civilians who were not participating in the fighting would not be threatened.

Humanitarian law, as it existed at the time of the First World War, therefore offered no more than minimal protection to the civilian victims of that conflagration, protection that in no way matched the need for protection to which the war would give rise within a few weeks of starting.

Such provisions as there were made no reference to the International Committee, or to the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and gave them no remit to assist the civilian victims of the war.

Conduct of hostilities

The adoption of the Geneva Convention of 22 August 1864 had shown that it was possible to take advantage of peacetime to draw up rules limiting the violence of war and protecting its victims. This had also been a political success for the diplomacy of a small country located at the heart of Europe. That double lesson had not been lost on the government in Saint Petersburg.

On learning that Russian engineers had developed exploding bullets, minister of war Dmitry Milyutin proposed forbidding their issue to the troops, as their

²⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social* [The Social Contract], Book I, chapter IV, Éditions Garnier, Paris, 1962, (1st ed. 1762), pp. 240–241 (in French), translated by Christopher Betts, Oxford University Press (The World's Classics), Oxford and New York, 1994.

²⁹ Articles 25–28 (sieges and bombardment) and 42–56 (occupation) of the Hague Regulations.



24. Belgium, August 1914. Belgian civilians flee the German advance.

Photographer unknown. Source: Wikipedia, "Belgian refugees", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belgian_refugees.



25. France, 1914. Farmers flee the fighting.

Photographer unknown. German Federal Archives, Bild 183-R05939.



26. Russia, November 1915. Farmers flee the fighting.

Photographer unknown. German Federal Archives, Bild 146-1987-028-03.

use against human beings would cause indescribable suffering and certain death. However, Tsar Alexander II did not wish to put his soldiers at a disadvantage by depriving them of such a formidable weapon, and therefore decided to prohibit their use only if other sovereigns agreed to do likewise. The Imperial Cabinet therefore convened a conference that led to the adoption of the Declaration of Saint Petersburg of 29 November/11 December 1868. That declaration established the basic principles of the law of armed conflict and prohibited the use of explosive projectiles of less than 400 grammes.³⁰

The Declaration of Saint Petersburg marked the beginning of a new branch of the law, intended to limit the evils of war by regulating the methods and means of warfare. The principle milestones were the Brussels Conference of 1874, which adopted a declaration (never ratified) concerning the laws and customs of war on land,³¹ and the 1899 and 1907 International Peace Conferences in The Hague, which adopted a series of treaties regarding the conduct of hostilities on land and at sea.³²

As the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 have long constituted the pillars of the law on the conduct of hostilities, it has become usual to refer to those rules as “Hague law” and to the rules regarding the protection of the victims of war as “Geneva law”.

While the victims are at the heart of both Hague and Geneva law, the means employed to protect them are not entirely the same. The Geneva Conventions are concerned primarily with protecting people once they have become victims – the wounded, the shipwrecked, prisoners of war or civilians in the power of the adverse party – whereas the principal aim of Hague law is to protect combatants and non-combatants by limiting the methods and means of warfare. In a sense, one could say that Hague law operates “upstream” of Geneva law, focusing primarily on prevention.

Of the various conventions and declarations adopted by the two international peace conferences regarding the conduct of hostilities, two are worthy of particular mention:

³⁰ Declaration to the Effect of prohibiting the Use of certain Projectiles in Wartime, signed at Saint Petersburg, 29 November / 11 December 1868, De Martens, *Nouveau Recueil général de Traités*, first series, tome XVIII, pp. 474–475; *The Laws of Armed Conflicts*, pp. 91–93; *Handbook of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, pp. 331–332; Pierre Boissier, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross*, Vol. I, pp. 225–228. The Orthodox Church rejected the new calendar introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 and Russia continued to use the Julian calendar until the October Revolution. There were approximately 15 days’ difference between the two calendars.

³¹ *Actes de la Conférence de Bruxelles (1874)*, Bruxelles, Imprimerie du Moniteur belge, 1874, 76 pp., reproduced in De Martens, *Nouveau Recueil général de Traités*, second series, vol. IV, pp. 1–228.

³² *Conférence internationale de la Paix, La Haye, 18 mai – 29 juillet 1899*, Nouvelle édition, Ministère des Affaires étrangères and Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1907, four parts plus annexes, separate page numbering for each part. *Deuxième Conférence internationale de la Paix, La Haye, 15 juin – 18 octobre 1907, Actes et Documents*, Ministère des Affaires étrangères, The Hague, 1907, 3 volumes, tome I, Séances plénières de la Conférence, XVIII & 723 pages; tome II, Première Commission, LVIII & 1106 pages; tome III, Deuxième, Troisième et Quatrième Commissions, XCVI & 1180 pages.

- Declaration IV / 2, prohibiting the use of projectiles the sole object of which is the diffusion of asphyxiating or deleterious gases, signed in The Hague on 29 July 1899.³³
- Hague Convention IV respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land of 18 October 1907, and the Regulations annexed to it.³⁴

While Declaration IV / 2 only prohibited one thing – the use of gas as a weapon – the Hague Regulations codified all the principles applicable to the conduct of hostilities, including the prohibition of chemical weapons. Art. 23(a) of the Hague Regulations stipulates that it is especially forbidden “To employ poison or poisoned weapons.”

The Red Cross had not been involved in the Peace Conferences, and the conventions regarding the conduct of hostilities mention neither the National Societies nor the ICRC, granting the ICRC no remit concerning their application or compliance with them.

The fitness for purpose of international humanitarian law at the time of the First World War

Did the various legal regimes in force during the First World War offer effective protection to the victims of this unprecedented conflict, which was to provoke suffering and grief on a scale infinitely greater than any war that had preceded it?

Far from it.

The law had three particular weaknesses:

1. The conventions in force at the time laid down general principles rather than directly applicable rules. Those principles gave rise to innumerable divergences of interpretation. In the over-excited atmosphere of war, these were perceived as breaches of the rules in force, leading to reprisals and counter-reprisals.
2. The protection of civilians was totally inadequate, leading to indescribable suffering for civilian internees and the populations of occupied territories. In the absence of any treaty-based protection regime, civilian prisoners were often worse off than prisoners of war.
3. None of the conventions then in force included any mechanism for verifying implementation, or compliance with their provisions.

³³ *Conférence internationale de la Paix, La Haye, 18 mai – 29 juillet 1899*, première partie, annexe, pp. 31–32; De Martens, *Nouveau Recueil général de Traités*, second series, tome XXXVI, pp. 998–1002; *The Laws of Armed Conflicts*, pp. 95–97.

³⁴ *Deuxième Conférence internationale de la Paix, La Haye, 15 juin – 18 octobre 1907, Actes et Documents*, tome I, pp. 626–637; *The Laws of Armed Conflicts*, pp. 55–87; *Handbook of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, pp. 334–345.

There was therefore a gap between the rules in force and the protection needs that were to arise during the 1914–1918 war. Furthermore, from the first months of the war onwards, the belligerents locked themselves into a cycle of reprisals and counter-reprisals that led inexorably and almost mechanically to the dismantling of the convention-based system of protection.

The legal basis for the work of the International Committee was therefore very tenuous, and bore no comparison with the challenges the ICRC was to face.

As had often been the case in the past, the gaps and imperfections in the law were to be as significant as the treaties themselves: they revealed new directions for the ICRC's work, starting with the activities provided for in Resolution VI of the Washington Conference, regarding assistance for prisoners of war.

Three other types of activity would be needed:

- (a) Attempts to define the scope and content of rules protecting the victims of war
- (b) Attempts to have civilian internees protected and treated in the same way as prisoners of war
- (c) The establishment of a minimum of supervision.

However, when Europe went to war, the ICRC had no plan of action. The Committee would end up taking a series of initiatives to respond to humanitarian crises caused by a war of a scale and duration that no-one could have imagined. However, its initiatives would depend not only on the needs of the victims and the legal basis for its work, but also on the resources at its disposal. Let us now turn our attention to this aspect.

CHAPTER 2

Resources

What resources were available to the ICRC when the First World War broke out?

The ICRC had basically remained what it had been at the start: a small committee made up of public figures from the liberal professions or academia, all from the same upper-middle class Protestant circles, all with a university education and all sharing the same ideals.¹ In August 1914 the Committee consisted of nine members – all men – grouped around the president, Gustave Ador. A lawyer, national councillor,² member of the ICRC since 1870 and vice-president since 1888, he had succeeded Gustave Moynier *de facto* in 1904, assuming the position of president officially following Moynier's death in 1910. His influence and authority were recognized by all.³

As the war progressed, the Committee would co-opt four new members. In November 1918 it would appoint its first woman, Renée-Marguerite Cramer.⁴

The Committee's administration was minimal. In 1898, it had recruited a secretary, the lawyer Paul des Gouttes, and he was assisted by two or three typists.

ICRC headquarters consisted of a flat in the rue de l'Athénée, Geneva, comprising two large rooms – a meeting room and a library – and two or three smaller rooms, which served as offices for the secretary and the typists.

The ICRC's financial resources were negligible. In August 1914, the ICRC noted that it held 4,000 Swiss francs on a current account, whereas the balance at the end of the previous year had been 123,000 Swiss francs. Most of this money was merely being managed by the ICRC, and the Committee could not actually spend it.⁵ In other words, financial resources were woefully inadequate. As a result, the ICRC was forced

¹ Regarding the founding of the ICRC and its work from 1863 to 1907, see: Pierre Boissier, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross: From Solferino to Tsushima*, *op cit*.

² A national councillor (*conseiller national*) is a member of the lower house of the Swiss Federal parliament.

³ André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 31–32.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Procès-verbaux des séances du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge, 17 février 1863 – 28 août 1914*, edited by Jean-François Pitteloud, in cooperation with Caroline Barnes and Françoise Dubosson, ICRC and the Société Henry-Dunant, Geneva, 1999, pp. 731–732 and 739. Obviously, one Swiss franc was worth several times as much in 1914 as it is today. However, exactly how much more it would actually buy depended on the goods or services concerned. To take just one example: when compared with other goods or services, a typewriter cost far more in 1914 than a laptop today.

to call on volunteers during the first few months of the war, and most of these were friends and relatives of Committee members. As the war continued, the ICRC became obliged to replace these volunteers with salaried employees and to obtain the resources needed to carry out its tasks.⁶ The Committee would call upon the generosity of the public in Geneva and throughout Switzerland, of local businesses (especially banks), and of the National Societies.⁷ In 1920, after hesitating for a long time, and only in desperation, the ICRC asked the Swiss government for an exceptional contribution of 150,000 Swiss francs.⁸

Furthermore, the ICRC had only very limited operational experience, even if the organization had dispatched two temporary missions to the Balkans in 1912 and 1913, during the Balkan Wars. Its delegates – Dr Carle de Marval of the Swiss Red Cross and Committee member Dr Frédéric Ferrière – visited Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Greece and the Ottoman Empire. Their reports show the exploratory nature of their missions: the aim was to acquire from the Balkan Wars as much experience as possible, with the intention of applying it to the European war that so many feared, but for which the major powers were busy making preparations.⁹

The ICRC could also have drawn on experience acquired during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, especially that of the Basel Agency. In response to the chaotic state of the means of communication, the Agency had appointed escorts to accompany relief deliveries right into the prisoner-of-war camps. These escorts were also authorized to speak to the prisoners in order to find out what they needed and plan relief operations.¹⁰ But this precedent had been forgotten, and the ICRC appears not to have referred to it during the First World War, even though a French officer had discussed the matter in great detail, in a book on the status of prisoners of war published in 1910.¹¹ The French Red Cross had used that experience as the basis

⁶ *Rapport général du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge sur son activité de 1912 à 1920*, ICRC, Geneva, 1921, (hereinafter: *Rapport général 1912–1920*) p. 221.

⁷ “Appel en faveur de l’Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre”, 161st Circular to the Central Committees of Red Cross Societies, 6 October 1914, *Actes du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge pendant la guerre 1914–1918*, ICRC, Geneva, December 1918 (hereinafter: *Actes du Comité international*), pp. 15–16; “Deuxième appel en faveur de l’Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre”, 166th Circular, *Idem*, pp. 33–35; “Troisième appel en faveur de l’Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre”, 170th Circular, *Idem*, pp. 59–61; *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 218–228.

⁸ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 230 and 232.

⁹ “Rapport de M. de Marval sur sa mission dans les Balkans”, *Bulletin international*, No. 173, January 1913, pp. 17–24; No. 174, April 1913, pp. 145–164; “Rapport du Dr Ferrière”, *Bulletin international*, No. 175, July 1913, pp. 200–212.

¹⁰ *Rapports de l’Agence internationale de secours aux militaires blessés*, Imprimerie Soullier et Wirth, Geneva, 1870–1871; *Rapports du Comité international de Bâle pour les secours aux prisonniers de guerre*, Imprimerie G.A. Bonfantini, Basel, 1871; François Bugnion, *The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Protection of War Victims*, ICRC, Geneva, and MacMillan, Oxford, October 2003, pp. 32–37.

¹¹ Armand Du Payrat, *Le Prisonnier de Guerre dans la Guerre continentale*, Librairie Arthur Rousseau, Paris, 1910, pp. 324–343.



27. Musée Rath, Geneva, Switzerland. Central Prisoners-of-War Agency. Meeting of the Committee. On the left, ICRC president Gustave Ador.
 © ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-03117-13.

for a major report submitted to the 9th International Conference of the Red Cross (Washington, 1912).¹²

So as the youth of Europe headed off to war, the ICRC could only call on a very limited degree of operational experience.

However, the ICRC did have one great asset: the network of 38 Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, with all their branches and their thousands of volunteers, whose number was to increase rapidly after the first few weeks of the war.¹³

The ICRC and the National Societies were united by the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross, and in particular by that of impartiality, which had been laid down

¹² *Neuvième Conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge tenue à Washington du 7 au 17 mai 1912, Compte rendu*, pp. 132–138. The report by the French Red Cross drew heavily on a chapter from Armand Du Payrat's *Le Prisonnier de Guerre dans la Guerre continentale*, pp. 324–343.

¹³ André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, p. 32.

in the original Geneva Convention of 22 August 1864 and which remained the cornerstone of the Movement.¹⁴

However, while the Red Cross constantly talked about its Fundamental Principles, for 80 years it made no effort to put them into a universally accepted form.¹⁵

Within the Movement, the specific position of the International Committee was generally recognized. The ICRC was seen as the guarantor of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross, and was required to ensure that they were respected.¹⁶ The National Societies frequently consulted the ICRC when faced with new situations or difficult choices. Starting with the Franco-Prussian war – the first conflict to which the Geneva Convention applied – not only the National Societies of the belligerents but also the governments asked the ICRC to forward to the adverse party their requests, complaints and protests, thereby conferring on the ICRC the role of neutral intermediary between the parties to a conflict, a role that was to become its true vocation.¹⁷

However, one cannot in all honesty claim that the ICRC was ready to face the catastrophe that would descend upon Europe and the world in August 1914. It was not. The ICRC lacked experienced personnel, financial resources and a plan of action. Although the missions undertaken by Dr de Marval and Dr Ferrière had allowed numerous lessons to be learned from the Balkan Wars, the ICRC was taken by surprise at the scale and duration of the conflict – as indeed were civilian and military leaders throughout Europe. The Committee had to deal with circumstances that no-one could have predicted. Nonetheless, the ICRC succeeded in adapting to the unexpected situation by means of several daring initiatives that would enable it to meet the new needs arising from this unprecedented conflict.

¹⁴ Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field of 22 August 1864, Article 6. This principle was restated in Article 1 of the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field of 6 July 1906.

¹⁵ Not until the end of the Second World War did the Red Cross make an effort to produce a universally accepted and legally-based formulation of the fundamental principles that had underpinned its work since the outset. Those efforts led to the adoption by the 20th International Conference of the Red Cross (Vienna, October 1965) of the Proclamation of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross (Resolution VIII). When the 25th International Conference of the Red Cross (Geneva, October 1986) adopted the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the Proclamation of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross was incorporated into the preamble to the Statutes, confirming the fundamental character and the authority of the Proclamation, which was recognized as the basic charter of the Movement and a set of obligations for all Red Cross and Red Crescent bodies. (*Handbook of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, pp. 519-520).

¹⁶ The 2nd International Conference of the Red Cross (Berlin, April 1869) conferred upon the ICRC the task of preserving and diffusing the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross (*Compte rendu des Travaux de la Conférence internationale tenue à Berlin du 22 au 27 avril 1869 par les Délégués des Gouvernements signataires de la Convention de Genève et des Sociétés et Associations de Secours aux Militaires blessés et malades*, pp. 80–84 and 264).

¹⁷ Regarding the development of the ICRC's role of neutral intermediary from the 1870–1871 Franco-Prussian War to the 1912–1913 Balkan wars, see: François Bugnion, *The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Protection of War Victims*, pp. 32–53.

We shall now examine those initiatives, but without necessarily spending too much time on the doubts and uncertainty that preceded them. In the interests of clarity, we shall start by looking at the ICRC's operations (Agency, delegations, relief and repatriation) and then move on to its dealings with the belligerents (interpretation of humanitarian law and representations to the authorities regarding breaches of the law of war). Given the specific nature of the situation prevailing in Russia from October 1917 onwards, a separate chapter will discuss the work of the ICRC in connection with the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War.

CHAPTER 3

The International Prisoners-of-War Agency

The International Committee held its first “war” meeting on 15 August 1914.¹ At the proposal of its president Gustave Ador, it decided to send its first circular, dated 15 August, in which it announced that it was making itself available to the central committees of the National Societies in order to fulfil its “role of intermediary in the requesting and forwarding of relief between Red Cross Societies.”² In a second circular, issued the same day, the ICRC reminded the National Societies of the resolution passed by the Washington Conference and encouraged them to set up the special commissions mentioned in that resolution as quickly as possible.³ Finally, in a third circular dated 27 August 1914, it announced the opening of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency and requested “the rapid forwarding of all lists of prisoners, with precise indication of their names, the units to which they belonged and the

¹ One might be excused for wondering why the ICRC waited until 15 August 1914 to meet, given that hostilities had commenced on 28 July with the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s declaration of war on Serbia and that the war had taken on a European dimension on 2 August 1914 when Germany declared war on France. We believe that the delay was related to the fact that Switzerland had – and indeed still has – compulsory military service. Desirous of serving his country, Gustave Ador had become an officer in the Swiss Army, rising to the rank of lieutenant-colonel. While he had been released from his military obligations for some time, he had been appointed head of the press censorship office in Geneva. It took him over ten days to extricate himself from these duties, which constituted an obstacle to discharging his responsibilities as a member of parliament and as president of the ICRC. In addition, the instructions he was receiving from the Federal Council were at odds with his liberal political philosophy. (Frédéric Barbey, *Un homme d’État suisse, Gustave Ador, 1845–1928*, Librairie J.-H. Jeheber, Geneva, 1945 (republished in facsimile by the Comité Gustave Ador, Geneva, 1995), pp. 96–97 and 235). This situation shows how ill-prepared the ICRC of summer 1914 had been to meet the challenges of a European war. Furthermore, the fact that his colleagues had not dared to meet in his absence showed the influence that Gustave Ador exercised over them. If one reads the minutes of the meeting of 15 August attentively, one cannot escape the impression that Gustave Ador rejected the very timid communication proposals that his colleagues had prepared in his absence, and that it was he who pushed the ICRC to take the audacious decision to create the International Prisoners-of-War Agency. (*Procès-verbaux des séances du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge, 17 février 1863 – 28 août 1914*, pp. 737–739).

² 158th Circular to Central Committees, 15 August 1914, *Bulletin international*, No. 180, October 1914, pp. 225–226; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 7–8.

³ 159th Circular to Central Committees, 15 August 1914, *Bulletin international*, No. 180, October 1914, pp. 227–228; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 9–10.

place where they are being held.”⁴ It also underlined the importance of centralizing information concerning prisoners of war:

To carry out useful work in this field there must be unity of approach, centralized information and one sole organization for bringing the relief to the prisoners. A dispersal of efforts would only create confusion which would be prejudicial to the prisoners’ interests.⁵

This initiative came just at the right time. The fighting in Belgium, northern France and East Prussia had already resulted in large numbers of requests.⁶

But did the ICRC have the resources it needed?

Not exactly. For the first few days at least, it had been thinking in terms of a small information bureau, on the lines of the Belgrade Agency that had operated during the two Balkan Wars: “two rooms in the rue de l’Athénée, the efforts of the members of the Committee, perhaps assisted by a few friends who had time on their hands. We thought this would be quite adequate in terms of premises and staff,” wrote ICRC member Alfred Gautier in describing the Agency’s first steps.⁷

“It was ridiculous to think one could empty this sea of horrors with a thimble,” wrote Stefan Zweig in an essay devoted to the Agency, before continuing: “But I cannot bring myself to smile patronizingly at this beautiful madness. Because I love all those who, even at the eleventh hour, could not imagine the suicidal lunacy of Europe.”⁸

But those expectations were confounded.

The Agency was soon engulfed by thousands of requests from the families of soldiers absent from parade after a battle, families who did not know whether their relatives were living or dead, wounded or taken prisoner.⁹ “The first letters arrived like storm-birds,” continued Zweig, “but they became a storm, a billow, a sea. Suddenly, there were 1,000 letters a day, then 3,000, then 5,000 and by the end of December, 30,000 letters were arriving each day, sweeping the fears of Europe into our offices.”¹⁰

The ICRC was forced to set up operations on a totally different scale, recruiting hundreds of volunteers, drawing up procedures and transferring the Agency to larger

4 160th Circular to Central Committees, 27 August 1914, *Bulletin international*, No. 180, October 1914, pp. 228–230; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 11–12.

5 *Ibidem*.

6 During the Battle of Charleroi (22–24 August 1914), 25,000 French soldiers died in a single day, the worst losses in one day in France’s military history.

7 *L’Agence internationale des Prisonniers de guerre, Genève, 1914 – 1918*, ICRC, Geneva, 1919, p. 7.

8 Stefan Zweig, “Das Herz Europas: Ein Besuch im Genfer Roten Kreuz”, *Neue Freie Presse*, Vienna, December 1917. [ICRC translation from the German original]. The Austrian author Stefan Zweig worked for the Agency as a volunteer for a while, as had another great pacifist before him, Romain Rolland. Zweig recorded his experiences in the above essay – “Das Herz Europas” [The Heart of Europe].

9 The figures for the first Battle of the Marne (5–12 September 1914) were as follows: French army: 21,000 dead, 84,000 missing and 122,000 wounded; British army: 3,000 dead, 4,000 missing and 30,000 wounded; German army: 43,000 dead, 40,000 missing and 173,000 wounded. (Source: Wikipedia.fr, “Bataille de la Marne (1914)”, consulted 22 February 2016).

10 Stefan Zweig, “Das Herz Europas”.



28. Geneva, Switzerland. Staff and volunteers of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency in front of the Musée Rath.

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premises. At the beginning of October, the Agency moved into the spacious galleries of the Musée Rath, which the City of Geneva made available to the ICRC and which the Committee had to equip for its new role in great haste.

That autumn, the Agency took on 1,200 volunteers to handle the thousands of letters that were arriving every day. As the war continued, the volunteers were gradually replaced by salaried employees.¹¹

The slowness of communications with Russia was causing problems, so the ICRC asked the Danish Red Cross to open an information bureau in Copenhagen to deal with matters arising from the eastern theatre of war. This bureau was sometimes referred to as a branch of the Geneva Agency, but it was in fact an entirely separate body, operating under the responsibility of the Danish Red Cross.¹²

¹¹ *Bulletin international 1912-1920*, No. 181, January 1915, p. 52; No. 182, April 1915, p. 157; No. 191, July 1917, p. 298; No. 193, January 1918, p. 35; *Rapport général 1912-1920*, p. 221.

¹² *Bulletin international*, No. 180, October 1914, pp. 253–254; No. 182, April 1915, pp. 146–153; No. 183, July 1915, pp. 319–322; No. 186, April 1916, p. 152; No. 189, January 1917, pp. 79–82; *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge* (hereinafter; *RICR*), No. 7, July 1919, pp. 885–887.

After Italy entered the war in May 1915, the ICRC asked the Austrian and Italian National Societies to open their own information bureaux and to correspond via Switzerland.¹³

The ICRC therefore applied the principle of centralization on a front-by-front basis: the Geneva Agency concentrated its efforts on the western theatre and played only a subsidiary role in respect of the war in the east and in the Austro-Italian theatre.

For whom was this work carried out?

Two categories of person could clearly use the Geneva Agency's services: those protected by the Geneva Convention (sick and wounded soldiers, members of the medical services) and prisoners of war protected by Articles 4 to 20 of the Hague Regulations.

But could one stop there?

A new phenomenon had materialized: from the outset of hostilities, the belligerents had detained a large number of enemy civilians.

There were civilian internees – citizens of a belligerent who, at the start of the war, happened to be in the territory of the enemy coalition and who were interned purely on account of their nationality.

Then there were hostages – people seized to guarantee submission by the populations of occupied territories.

There were also deportees, plus “political” detainees, arrested for breaking rules imposed by the occupying armies or merely suspected of intending to do so and arrested preventively.

“From the first days of the war onwards, enemy civilians were ruthlessly hunted down following the first mass exodus,” wrote the ICRC in the *Rapport général* on its activities during the First World War, adding: “Needless to say, it was those who were the least agile, precisely because they were the least capable of doing harm, who were arrested without knowing why, having had neither time nor leave to take their property away with them. Most of them were penniless. Suddenly, they were being treated as criminals, and taken to concentration camps or to centres that were improvised at best and grossly inadequate at worst. Here men, women and children, the sick, people of all sorts and conditions, were herded together, all too often in lamentable overcrowding and discomfort undiminished by the passage of time. Few pitied them. Hatred and threats were their portion. [...] Measures which, while they appeared to be for the security of the State, and hence would have been justified had they been temporary, soon became instruments of reprisal or retaliation, rendering the captured civilian a mere bargaining piece in the hands of his captor.”¹⁴

In general, civilian detainees were worse off than prisoners of war, for whom conditions were regulated – at least as far as the principles were concerned – by the Hague Regulations. Despite the fact that many of these civilians were women, children and

¹³ *Bulletin international*, No. 183, October 1915, pp. 323–326.

¹⁴ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 151–152.



29. International Prisoners-of-War Agency, Musée Rath, Geneva, Switzerland. Telegram Department, under the management of Gustave Ador.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-03557-03.

elderly people, they were frequently held under worse conditions than prisoners of war and were more exposed to reprisals and other forms of arbitrary behaviour and violence. “[...] the recent war has been cruel to civilians, [...] none of the agreements stipulated what was to happen to them, [...] they were at the mercy of the State which captured them or worse, at the mercy of incompetent and irresponsible subordinates.” observed the ICRC in the *Rapport général*.¹⁵

On top of this, inhabitants of the invaded territories were cut off from the outside world, while thousands had fled the conflict zone and disappeared without trace. Others had been evacuated by force from the combat zone or areas near the front and deported to improvised camps. Should the Agency be concerning itself with the civilian victims of the conflict?

The absence of a legal foundation on which to base any Agency activity in aid of civilians, together with the innumerable requests concerning prisoners of war, which were stretching its resources to breaking point and beyond, meant that the answer had to be “No”. That was the opinion of the majority of the members of the ICRC. But Dr Frédéric Ferrière could not bear to see urgent requests going unanswered, just because they concerned civilians. As the ICRC felt it could do nothing, he took these letters back to his surgery and sat down to answer them, with the help of his family

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 173.



30. The executive committee of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-00581-12.

and friends. Despite closing his practice and turning away his patients so that he could devote all his energy to this work, he soon realized that the number of requests was such that he could not possibly cope with them without the support of the Agency. He therefore asked the ICRC to assume responsibility for this activity. The difference now was that he had shown that it was possible to handle these cases, even in the absence of any legal basis. He had “created the road by walking”, setting in motion a work that could no longer be stopped.¹⁶ The ICRC consulted the National Societies, without whose cooperation it would be impossible to operate. Some National Societies were opposed to extending the remit of the Red Cross still further, stating that they were already overstretched by their efforts to help prisoners of war and wounded soldiers. Others promised their cooperation. The ICRC took the decision to create the Civilians Department of the Agency, which Dr Ferrière was to head throughout the war.¹⁷

This was a bold decision, and the starting point for a new area of humanitarian action and, in time, of humanitarian law.

¹⁶ Adolphe Ferrière, *Le Dr Frédéric Ferrière*, Éditions Suzerenne, Geneva, 1948, pp. 24–28; Georges Werner, *Frédéric Ferrière, 1848–1924*, ICRC, Geneva, 1924 (reprint from the *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, No. 67, July 1924, pp. 485–543), p. 22.

¹⁷ *Bulletin international*, No. 180, October 1914, pp. 261–263; *Rapport général 1912–1920*, p. 130; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 83–86.

The Agency's work focused primarily on nationals of countries fighting on the Western Front, but it also played a supporting role with regard to other theatres of war. Its services for prisoners of war set up sixteen card indexes, each for a particular nationality: the American, Belgian, Brazilian, British, French, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian and Serbian sections for the Entente Powers, and the Austro-Hungarian, Bulgarian, German and Ottoman sections for the Central Powers.¹⁸ The Civilians Department dealt with enemy aliens interned in the belligerent countries and their dependencies, including Japan; nationals of countries which were nominally at war but which took no active part in the fighting (the Latin American countries, China and Siam); and civilians who had sought refuge in neutral countries. This section's work therefore covered every part of the world.¹⁹

The Agency's workload depended on the military situation, especially the fighting on the Western Front. Every major battle – Marne, Ypres, Yser, Artois, Verdun, Somme, Chemin-des-Dames, Passchendaele, etc. – resulted in a massacre, with thousands of men blown apart by shells, sucked into the mud of the trenches or taken prisoner. It also resulted in a flood of desperate enquiries from the families of soldiers who had gone missing.²⁰

The work of the Agency

What did the Agency do?

To get a clear understanding, we must first distinguish between two categories of beneficiary:

- military personnel (the sick and wounded, medical personnel and prisoners of war);
- civilians (internees, deportees, hostages, the populations of occupied territories, and refugees).

We shall also need to examine the Agency's procedures in some detail, as the process of re-establishing communication between a prisoner and his family calls for painstakingly meticulous work, which one cannot really understand if one looks at the question superficially. Furthermore, the ultimate aim of humanitarian law is to protect the individual: we cannot merely speak in abstractions.

¹⁸ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 42–46.

¹⁹ *Idem*, pp. 132–134.

²⁰ The figures for the Battle of Verdun (21 February–19 December 1916) were as follows: French army: 62,000 dead, 101,000 missing and 215,000 wounded; German army: 143,000 dead or missing and 196,000 wounded. First day of the Battle of the Somme (1 July 1916): British army: 19,240 dead, 2,082 missing, 35,493 wounded and 585 prisoners. For the Battle of the Somme as a whole (1 July–18 November 1916): British army: 206,283 dead or missing and 213,372 wounded; French army: 66,688 dead or missing and 135,879 wounded; German army: 170,100 dead or missing and 267,222 wounded. (Source: Wikipedia.fr, “Bataille de Verdun (1916)” and “Bataille de la Somme (1916)”, consulted on 25 February 2016).

GUSTAVE ADOR 1845–1928

Gustave Ador was born on 23 December 1845 in Cologny, just outside Geneva, to a wealthy Protestant family. His father Louis Ador, headed the Banque Paccard, Ador & Cie. His mother, Constance-Palmyre Paccard, was the daughter of the banker David-Marc Paccard.

After studying philology and law, Ador became a lawyer. In 1874 he was elected as a Liberal to the Grand Conseil (parliament) of the Canton of Geneva, of which he would remain a member until 1915. From 1879 to 1880 and from 1885 to 1897, he was a member of the Conseil d'État (government) of the canton. As head of the finance department, and an advocate of maintaining a tight rein on public funds, he restored Geneva's finances to good health, following mis-management by the previous government. He also helped to calm the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants inherited from the *Kulturkampf*. In the historiography of Geneva, these years would come to be known as *les années Ador*, or "the Ador years".

Ador was a member of the Swiss federal parliament from 1878 to 1880 and from 1889 to 1917, where he established a reputation as an advocate of harmony between Protestants and Catholics and agreement between the French- and German-speaking regions of the country.

In December 1870, Gustave Ador was only 25 when his uncle by marriage, founder member of the International Committee of the Red Cross and current president, Gustave Moynier, asked him to become a member of the Committee. He was to serve the organization as secretary and then, from 1888, as vice president. He participated in several International Conferences of the Red Cross, notably the 7th (Saint Petersburg, 1902), the 8th (London, 1907) and the 9th (Washington, 1912). He pushed for the mandate of the Red Cross to be extended to include prisoners of war. He succeeded Gustave Moynier as acting president in 1904 and as president in 1910, holding the position until his death in 1928.

In 1914, he created the International Prisoners-of-War Agency, which helped to trace missing soldiers and restore contact between prisoners and their families. He travelled to Bordeaux, which had become the temporary seat of the French government following the German invasion, and then to Berlin, obtaining authorization for the ICRC to nominate delegates who would visit prisoner-of-war camps on both sides and report on the condition of the prisoners.

On 18 June 1917, Federal Councillor Arthur Hoffmann, head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, was forced to resign after committing a serious breach



31. ICRC president Gustave Ador at his desk.
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of Swiss neutrality. On 26 June, the Federal Assembly chose Gustave Ador as his replacement. As head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, he restored the credibility of Swiss neutrality and organized several meetings between representatives of the belligerent States, at which they signed agreements on improving the situation of prisoners of war and repatriating war invalids and civilian internees.

After being elected president of the Swiss Confederation in 1919, he defended the interests of his country at the Paris Peace Conference. In particular, he succeeded in obtaining agreement for Switzerland to join the League of Nations without giving up its status of permanent neutrality and advocated for Geneva to become the headquarters of the League.

After leaving the Federal Council following his year as president (1919)

he played a major role in the campaigning leading up to the referendum in which the people of Switzerland approved the entry of Switzerland into the League of Nations. He represented his country at the first sessions of the General Assembly of the League.

Ador advocated for the founding of the Nansen International Office for Refugees (the ancestor of the UNHCR) and the adoption of the Geneva Protocol of 17 June 1925 prohibiting bacteriological and chemical weapons.

In 1872, he married Alice Perdonnet, daughter of Gustave Perdonnet, a wealthy financier from Lausanne. The couple had five girls and a boy, and Gustave Ador lived to see 34 grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren.

He died on 31 March 1928 in his beautiful villa Hauterive, in Cologne. Just three days previously, he had chaired a meeting of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Military personnel

The Agency carried out the following activities for captured servicemen (sick, wounded, medical personnel, able-bodied prisoners):

(a) Exchanging lists of prisoners

Article 4 of the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field of 6 July 1906 stipulated that: “As soon as possible each belligerent shall forward to the authorities of their country or army the marks or military papers of identification found upon the bodies of the dead, together with a list of names of the sick and wounded taken in charge by him.”

By contrast, Article 14 of the Hague Regulations of 18 October 1907 had provided for the exchange of information regarding prisoners of war “after the conclusion of peace”. Clearly, information exchanged after the conclusion of peace would do nothing to reassure the families of missing soldiers. The ICRC therefore endeavoured to persuade the belligerents to inform the Agency as soon as a prisoner of war arrived in a camp, was transferred to another, entered hospital or died.

Germany submitted a first list of French prisoners at the beginning of September 1914, but soon raised the issue of reciprocity.²¹

Despite his age – he was almost 70 – Gustave Ador travelled to Bordeaux between 26 September and 4 October. The French government had fled to Bordeaux as the Germans advanced to within artillery range of Paris. “An interminable, difficult journey. Forty-eight hours on the train, with seven changes,” wrote Frédéric Barbey, working on the basis of Ador’s notebooks. “The waiting room at Saint-Germain-des-Fossés Station was filled with visions of war, the sad spectacle that he would witness throughout the coming years: wounded soldiers on stretchers, groans, imploring eyes, eyes that had already closed.”²²

Thanks to the intervention of the Marquis de Vogüé, who was president of the French Red Cross, Gustave Ador was able to meet foreign minister Paul Delcassé, war minister Alexandre Millerand and the Council president, René Viviani. One of the main objectives of his mission was to request the lists of German prisoners that the French army had captured.²³ From autumn onwards, both sides accepted the principle of exchanging lists of prisoners of war via the Agency. The International Committee received lists from all the belligerents, with the exception of Russia (whose lists were sent to Copenhagen) and Italy (which sent them to Vienna directly, without going through the Agency in Geneva).²⁴

²¹ *Bulletin international*, No. 180, October 1914, p. 251.

²² Frédéric Barbey, *Un homme d'État suisse, Gustave Ador, 1845 – 1928*, p. 203.

²³ *Idem*, pp. 203–204 and 251–252; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 40–42.

²⁴ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 47–48.

Following this, the parties to the conflict agreed to exchange lists of prisoners through the good offices of the Protecting Powers mandated to safeguard their interests and to protect their nationals in the power of the enemy.²⁵ One might therefore ask whether there was any further point in exchanging lists via the Red Cross. In fact, it was still extremely necessary. Not only were lists communicated far more quickly by the Red Cross than through diplomatic channels,²⁶ but the Agency received countless enquiries from prisoners' families and could use the lists in order to reply directly. The Agency also obtained a great deal of information from unofficial sources, corroborating and supplementing the official notifications it received. This explains why the twin-track exchange of information continued to appear in the 1929 and 1949 Geneva Conventions for the protection of prisoners of war.²⁷

When the Agency received two copies of a list of prisoners, it immediately sent one copy to the National Society of the country to which the prisoners belonged. In cases where the Agency received only one copy it made copies itself, retained the original and sent the copies to the National Societies concerned.²⁸

There were three types of list:

- able-bodied prisoners;
- sick or wounded prisoners, with an indication of their medical condition;
- prisoners who had died, with information on where they had been buried.²⁹

²⁵ A Protecting Power is a neutral State that a belligerent nation asks to look after its interests, and those of its nationals, on the territory of an enemy. In autumn 1914, the United States represented British interests in Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, and German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman interests in the British Empire and France. Spain looked after French interests in the countries of the Central Powers. After the United States entered the war in the spring of 1917, Switzerland took over some of the protection mandates held until then by US diplomatic missions, in particular German interests in France and the United Kingdom. The other mandates held by the US were handed over to Spain, the Netherlands and Sweden. Switzerland also assumed responsibility for German interests in the USA. For that reason, it was Switzerland that was tasked with passing Germany's request for an armistice to President Wilson in October 1918, together with other messages that would lead to the armistice of 11 November 1918. Regarding the role of a protecting power under diplomatic law and international humanitarian law, see: Alfred Escher, *Der Schutz der Staatsangehörigen im Ausland durch fremde Gesandtschaften und Konsulate* (Zürcher Beiträge zur Rechtswissenschaft, Neue Folge, Heft 16), Graphische Werkstätten H. R. Sauerländer & Co, Aarau, 1929, 101 pp.; William Mc Henry Franklin, *Protection of Foreign Interests, A Study in Diplomatic and Consular Practice*, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1946 (Department of State Publication No. 2693), VII & 328 pp.; Antonino Janner, *La Puissance protectrice en droit international, D'après les expériences faites par la Suisse pendant la seconde guerre mondiale*, Verlag von Helbing und Lichtenhahn, Basel, 1948, 79 pp. (reissued by the same publisher in 1972).

²⁶ *Bulletin international*, No. 180, October 1914, pp. 252–253. *Agence des Prisonniers de Guerre*, French Red Cross, Paris, 1917, p. 10, ICRC Archives, File 472/X.

²⁷ Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 27 July 1929, Art. 77; Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 12 August 1949, Art. 122.

²⁸ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 51–52.

²⁹ *Idem*, pp. 48–51.



32. International Prisoners-of-War Agency. The typing pool.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-01816-13.

Transcription errors were frequent, leading the ICRC to ask that the lists be compiled by designated prisoners and not by officials of the detaining power. This gradually became standard practice and was confirmed in the agreements reached between the belligerents in the course of the war.³⁰

In all, the Agency received 398,336 pages of lists of prisoners from official sources, which it forwarded to the National Societies concerned.³¹ If we assume that each page carried information on 20 to 25 prisoners,³² the Geneva Agency registered more than 8 million items of information.

Unofficial informants (country doctors, parish priests, etc.) also provided a great deal of information; some 10,000 pages of lists concerning French soldiers alone arrived at the Agency from such sources.³³

³⁰ *Bulletin international*, No. 184, October 1915, p. 477; Protocole de clôture de la réunion des Croix-Rouges allemande, autrichienne, hongroise et russe, 1er décembre 1915, *Bulletin international*, No. 185, January 1916, p. 131; Accord anglo-ottoman signé à Berne le 28 décembre 1917, Arts. 12 and 22, *Bulletin international*, No. 195, July 1918, pp. 432–435.

³¹ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 42–46.

³² *Bulletin international*, No. 183, October 1915, p. 334.

³³ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 43 and 51.

(b) Establishing card indexes

The originals of the prisoner-of-war lists remained at the Agency and formed the basis for card indexes. All information concerning the identity of the prisoner – but nothing else – was copied onto a card, which also showed the source of this information (list number and page number). For other data concerning the prisoner (location, state of health, follow-up, etc.) it was necessary to consult the original list, which avoided mistakes due to transcription errors.³⁴

The cards were then filed according to the prisoner's nationality and, within each nationality, in alphabetical-phonetical order. In the alphabetical-phonetical index, all the cards referring to surnames pronounced in the same way were kept together, regardless of any differences in spelling, and filed in alphabetical order by first name. For instance, the surnames Lefaibre, Lefaibvre, Lefaire, Lefèbre, Lefèbre, Lefèvre, Lefèvre, etc. were classified as being the same surname. Likewise for all those called Schmied, Schmiedt, Schmitt, Schmidt, Smith, etc. The Agency's volunteers started developing this method in autumn 1914, and it circumvented most transcription errors.³⁵

Requests for information about missing soldiers were recorded on cards of a different colour and filed in the relevant national indexes according to the same principles. In this way, the enquiry card was placed together with the index card on which the particulars of the missing person were recorded, thus establishing a link (in French, the *concordance*) between them. The information was then verified against the original document. The Agency had to resolve the difficulties linked to the many homonyms between surnames. For instance, by the end of the war, the Agency's files included between 8,000 and 10,000 cards for prisoners with the surname Martin, including 700 by the name of Jean Martin.³⁶ In order to be sure that one had found the right person, it was therefore necessary to verify dates of birth, service numbers and call-up group. Once all these checks were complete, the Agency could respond to the enquirer. By the *concordance* method alone, the Agency was able to provide more than 560,000 replies to French families and more than 537,000 to German families.³⁷

By the end of the war, the Geneva Agency held 4,895,000 cards,³⁸ the Copenhagen Agency 3,500,000.³⁹

However, if the name of the person sought had not appeared on a list, or if it had been incorrectly transcribed – which frequently happened in the case of the dead – there was no hope of finding a match between an enquiry and a personal record card. To get round this, the Agency had to create two new card indexes:

³⁴ *Idem*, pp. 52–53.

³⁵ *Idem*, p. 56.

³⁶ *Idem*, p. 57.

³⁷ *Idem*, pp. 43 and 45; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 36–38.

³⁸ André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, p. 46.

³⁹ 10th International Conference of the Red Cross, *Activités de la Croix-Rouge danoise*, Danish Red Cross, Geneva, 1921 (Document No. 82), p. 13; "L'Agence des prisonniers de guerre de la Croix-Rouge danoise de 1914-1917", *RICR*, No. 7, July 1919, pp. 885–887, ad p. 886.



33. A typical card index box. Each box held approximately 100 individual records.
© Archives of the City of Geneva/ICRC Archives (ARR), Frédéric Boissonas, V-P-HIST-00569-30.



34. A typical card index: that of the German Enquiry Department.
© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-00570-11.

- A topographical index, where cards for dead military personnel were filed not alphabetically but according to where they had died – the battlefield, first-aid post, hospital, prison camp, etc. If it was known roughly where a soldier was last seen, a check in the topographical index would give information on the identity tags, warrant books, grave inscriptions, etc. that had been recorded by the medical service, local authorities or others; a missing soldier who could not be identified in the general index because of a transcription error might thus be traced in the topographical index.⁴⁰
- A regimental index, in which information on personnel in the same military unit (regiment or ship) was recorded on large cards. Using this index, it was also possible to trace a soldier if transcription errors made that impossible in the general index. The regimental index also served as the main reference tool for enquiries.⁴¹

(c) Enquiries

The Agency's card indexes, and the matches found, enabled it to answer hundreds of thousands of enquiries. Yet despite the care with which the Agency's staff carried out their work, and the search methods they developed as the months went by, many others went unanswered. A man might have been buried when a trench or shelter collapsed, or torn apart by an artillery shell or a mine.⁴² His name would never appear on a list of prisoners, wounded personnel or identified corpses.⁴³

It is easy to imagine the suffering of the families of missing soldiers, tortured by an uncertainty more cruel than grief. In other cases, a family might be concerned about the health of a prisoner who had been hospitalized or of whom they had lost track because he had been transferred.

⁴⁰ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 57–58.

⁴¹ *Idem*, p. 58.

⁴² It is estimated that on the first day of the Battle of Verdun (21 February 1916), the German artillery fired over a million shells, with calibres varying from 77 to 420 mm. This equates to an average of ten shells per second. Most were fired along a front of a few kilometres (the slopes of Le Mort Homme, Haumont Wood, Caures Wood, etc.) In just a few hours, the landscape became unrecognizable. Villages were destroyed, forests uprooted, hills pulverized. The first line of trenches almost completely disappeared. Later artillery bombardments were even more extensive. Examples include the first day of the Franco-British Somme Offensive on 1 July 1916 and the first day of the major German spring offensive in Picardy on 21 March 1918.

⁴³ The Menin Gate at Ypres bears the names of 54,896 servicemen of the British Empire (English, Scots, Welsh, Irish, Canadian, Australian, South African, Indian, etc.) who went missing at Ypres and whose bodies were never found or could not be identified. The military cemeteries in the area contain thousands of anonymous graves bearing just the inscription "Known unto God". The Douaumont Memorial at Verdun was erected in honour of the 130,000 French and German soldiers who fell during the Battle of Verdun, and whose bodies were never found or could not be identified. There is no reason to think that the percentage of missing soldiers was any smaller after other battles or in other armies.

In each case, the Agency opened an enquiry, of which there were two types:

- The first, concerning prisoners whose whereabouts were known, caused no particular difficulties. Generally, it was sufficient to contact the camp commandant, the head doctor of the hospital or the prisoner himself to obtain the information needed.
- The second category of enquiries was that concerning missing persons who could not be traced through the Agency's card indexes. In such cases, the evidence of a fellow soldier was often the last resort, and here the regimental index enabled the Agency to question all the members of a given regiment who had been taken prisoner during the same battle. The Agency questioned over 500,000 prisoners to obtain such information. This approach allowed the Agency to gather some 90,000 reports concerning French soldiers alone, from fellow-prisoners held in Germany.⁴⁴ From such sources one learned that Sergeant B. had died on 16 June 1915 at about 9am when a shell landed close to his shelter. Or that Captain de B.R. of the 68th Territorial Infantry Regiment had been killed by a bullet from a revolver on 27 May 1918 at 8am in the Caverne du Dragon, 1500 m from the Mont d'Hurtebise, because he had refused to surrender.⁴⁵ In many cases, these humble testimonies were the only information that the families would receive. It is worth mentioning that in Germany, a negative response from the Agency to a tracing request was considered the equivalent of a death certificate, at least for the purpose of obtaining a pension.⁴⁶

The Tracing Service was also responsible for obtaining and forwarding various documents, such as death certificates, wills, powers of attorney, etc.

Matches in the card indexes and individual enquiries enabled the Agency to issue more than a million items of information to prisoners' families.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *Bulletin international*, No. 188, October 1916, pp. 407–408; *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 43 and 58–62; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, p. 44.

⁴⁵ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, p. 61; *L'Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre*, p. 60

⁴⁶ *Bulletin international*, No. 187, July 1916, p. 303; *Le Rôle et l'Action du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge pendant la guerre européenne de 1914 à 1916*, ICRC, Geneva, 1917, p. 22.

⁴⁷ By 31 December 1918, 1,370,000 items of information had been communicated to prisoners' families, and about 125,000 people had visited the Agency. These figures do not take account of the first three months of the war, when no statistics were kept. *Bulletin international*, No. 193, January 1918, p. 83; *RICR*, No. 1, January 1919, p. 110.



35. Franco-Belgian Enquiry Department. Part of the card index.

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36. Missing Persons Department. This employee is using two types of record: the smaller individual records on the shelves above and the larger regimental records in the boxes directly in front of her. The regimental records hold the names of all prisoners of war from a given regiment, which makes it possible to ask all of them about soldiers from their regiment who are missing. The employee is wearing a coat, as coal is in short supply in Switzerland, and the Musée Rath is not very well heated.

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37. Cornavin Station, Geneva, Switzerland. Parcels for prisoners of war. The parcels are taken to Cornavin Station, where they are loaded onto trains. Here, they are being transported by horse-drawn wagons, as lorries are rare and petrol rarer still.

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(d) Mail, parcels and money transfers

When war broke out, the Agency took on the task of forwarding letters, parcels and money orders to prisoners of war. This activity was clearly part of its traditional work, but it soon assumed such proportions that it threatened to paralyse the Agency's other work.⁴⁸

The ICRC therefore approached the postal administrations of neutral countries, requesting them to take over responsibility for forwarding prisoners' letters, parcels and money orders, and to do so free of charge. The burden was progressively shouldered by the postal services of Switzerland, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden.⁴⁹ The Agency's role in this field therefore became subsidiary – forwarding parcels when the address was incomplete, making enquiries when consignments proved impossible to deliver, etc.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Some 4,000 to 5,000 letters were sorted, checked and forwarded each day in the autumn of 1914. *Rapport général 1912-1920*, pp. 65–66.

⁴⁹ Statistics for POW mail handled by the Swiss postal services were as follows: 497 million letters or cards, 115 million parcels and 10 million money orders worth a total of 148 million Swiss francs. *RICR*, No. 3, March 1919, pp. 309–313.

⁵⁰ The Agency forwarded 1,884,914 parcels, together with money transfers to a value of 21,603,800 Swiss francs. *Rapport général 1912-1920*, pp. 64–69 and 224.

Civilians

Dr Frédéric Ferrière instigated the creation of the Civilians Department of the Agency and was its head throughout the four years of the war. While not a rich man, he gave up his practice and his patients so he could devote himself to the task. An untiring worker, he also ran the section responsible for military medical personnel and the section for war invalids.

The work of the Civilians Department had two particular characteristics:

- The great variety of situations to be addressed: there were prisoners sentenced by criminal or military courts, administrative detainees, persons under house arrest, hostages, deportees, the inhabitants of occupied territories, refugees in neutral countries, etc.
- The complete absence of any rules determining the status of civilians under the control of an enemy power.⁵¹

As far as possible, the Agency sought to assist civilians in the same way as it helped prisoners of war, by:

- forwarding lists of internees, displaced persons, refugees, etc.;
- creating card indexes;
- making enquiries and tracing missing persons;
- submitting requests for repatriation;
- forwarding official documents;
- forwarding letters, parcels and money.⁵²

However, the lack of any legal basis and the disparate situations faced by civilian war victims meant that it was never possible to carry out these activities systematically. The lists sent to the Agency were never complete and they arrived irregularly; many of its enquiries were never answered; the occupying powers cited security reasons for prohibiting the exchange of correspondence with the occupied territories, etc.⁵³

⁵¹ With the exception of Articles 42 to 56 of the Hague Regulations, concerning military authority over the territory of a hostile State. However, after laying down some general principles, even these articles provide detailed rulings only on the amount of the levies that an occupying army might raise. The Regulations say nothing about the internment of enemy civilians, the taking of hostages, or deportation.

⁵² *Organisation et fonctionnement de l'Agence internationale des Prisonniers de Guerre*, ICRC, Geneva, February 1915, pp. 43–47; *Renseignements complémentaires sur l'activité de l'Agence internationale des Prisonniers de Guerre*, ICRC, Geneva, March 1916, pp. 40–56; *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 135–151.

⁵³ *Bulletin international*, No. 181, January 1915, pp. 71–73; No. 182, April 1915, pp. 169–173; No. 183, July 1915, pp. 344–345; No. 184, October 1915, pp. 505–506, etc.; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 86–89.



38. Civilians Department.

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39. Civilians Department.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-00571-33.

It was only in 1917 and 1918 that the belligerents took steps to regulate the position of civilians, through bilateral agreements negotiated under the auspices of the Protecting Powers, the Red Cross Societies of the neutral countries or the International Committee. Unfortunately, most of these agreements came too late to ease the plight of civilian war victims.

Despite the difficult conditions under which it worked, the Civilians Department of the Agency achieved quite remarkable results and managed to send tens of thousands of replies to anxious relatives

Sadly, the ICRC's *Rapport général* on its work during the First World War contains few statistics on the work of the Civilians Department of the Agency. What we do know, however, is that the Agency was able to supply over 190,000 pieces of information concerning civilians.⁵⁴ The ICRC also mentions in its report that the Civilians Department of the Agency handled over 80,000 repatriation requests concerning French civilians in 1917 alone.⁵⁵

But above all, the work of the Civilians Department of the Agency enabled the ICRC to maintain constant pressure on the belligerents, with the aim of limiting arbitrary measures against civilians and ensuring they enjoyed at least some degree of protection and much-needed moral support.

Other services

In addition to processing requests for information regarding prisoners of war, civilian detainees and prisoners' families, the Agency provided two other types of service which, while indirect, were just as important.

The Agency's help was called for in settling numerous individual cases: a sick prisoner needed to be examined by the Mixed Medical Commission and repatriated,⁵⁶ another asked to be transferred to a neighbouring camp to be with his brother, yet another had received no news from his family left behind in occupied territory or forced to flee the fighting; a child had been separated from its parents while fleeing the fighting or because they had been deported. In many cases, enquiries necessitated an approach to a medical officer, a camp commandant or a military governor. This would be followed by a sustained exchange of correspondence. The Agency handled thousands of such cases, significantly improving the situation of war victims.

But perhaps the Agency's most important contribution was the wealth of information it accumulated, which enabled it to maintain a "humanitarian map" of the war.

⁵⁴ *RICR*, No. 1, January 1919, p. 110.

⁵⁵ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, p. 143.

⁵⁶ The Mixed Medical Commissions visited prison camps, examined the wounded and sick, and made lists of prisoners eligible for repatriation or internment in a neutral country. They were composed of doctors from the detaining power and a neutral State. One of their main tasks was to ensure that all belligerents applied the same criteria (wounds, illnesses, handicaps). In practice, this responsibility fell primarily to the neutral members of the commissions.

FRÉDÉRIC FERRIÈRE 1848–1924

Frédéric Ferrière was born in Geneva on 9 December 1848 to a deeply Calvinist family – both his father and his grandfather were ministers.

He studied medicine at Geneva, Bern, Vienna and Heidelberg, obtaining his doctorate from the University of Heidelberg.

Just after he started his studies, his uncle, Louis Appia, one of the founder members of the ICRC, encouraged him to volunteer as a nurse with an ambulance of the Grand Duchy of Baden, which had just been drawn into the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1871. This would be his first experience of war.

In 1876, he carried out one of the ICRC's first missions, to Montenegro. Thousands of refugees were arriving in the principality, along with combatants wounded during the fighting in neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina, and he helped set up the Red Cross of Montenegro and organize the care of the wounded.

He was elected to the ICRC in 1884, and participated in several International Conferences of the Red Cross, notably the 5th (Rome, 1892), the 7th (Saint Petersburg, 1902) and the 9th (Washington, 1912). In 1913, he undertook a major mission to the Balkans, to study the options for helping prisoners of war and develop ideas that could be applied in the event of a new European war.

In August 1914, he set up the Civilians Department of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency. In doing so, he went against the advice of his colleagues, who considered the task impossible on account of the absence of a legal basis and the enormous workload stemming from the ICRC's other responsibilities, especially assistance to prisoners of war. Initially, he handled enquiries concerning civilians from his surgery, with the aid of family and friends. Seeing the scale of the task, he asked the Agency to take it over once again, which resulted in expansion of the ICRC's scope of action and that of the Red Cross as a whole. He was to lead the Civilians Department throughout the war, along with the sections responsible for military medical personnel and war invalids. He gave up his practice and his patients in order to devote himself to the work of the Agency.

Following the armistice, he focused his energy on drafting a convention to protect civilians in time of war. Sadly, the 11th International Conference of the Red Cross (Geneva, 1923) went no further than expressing pious hopes, with no



40. Dr Frédéric Ferrière, ICRC vice-president and head of the Civilians and Medical Personnel Departments.

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legal significance. It would take the horrors perpetrated against civilians during the Second World War to make the States finally agree to tie their hands by adopting a convention to protect civilians. This was the Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in time of War, of 12 August 1949 (the Fourth Geneva Convention), for which Dr Ferrière's document to some extent formed a preliminary draft.

Frédéric Ferrière married Adolphine Faber in 1878, and the couple had four children: three sons and a daughter.

He died in Geneva on 14 June 1924.

The topographical index revealed the mortality rates in the various camps. Using the card indexes, it was possible to maintain lists of medical personnel detained in violation of the Geneva Convention, of invalids eligible for repatriation before the end of hostilities or for internment in a neutral country, of soldiers detained in “reprisal” camps, of hostages, deportees, etc. Through this painstaking work, the Agency assembled data that gave the ICRC a reliable basis for its representations to National Societies and governments. The ICRC’s credibility among both neutral and belligerent States stemmed largely from the meticulous accuracy and attention to detail with which the Agency operated.⁵⁷

Closure of the Agency

During the war, the ICRC had expected to close the Agency once peace was concluded and to hand over what would then be its dormant archives to the archives department of the Canton of Geneva. Administratively and financially, the Agency was liquidated on 31 December 1919, when its accounts were integrated with those of the ICRC.⁵⁸ However, the ICRC continued to manage the Agency’s archives, and to reply to enquiries it received. Thus it was that the Agency became a permanent part of the ICRC. Today, the enquiries regarding the First World War that the ICRC receives are of a purely historical, biographical or genealogical nature.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 62–64.

⁵⁸ *Idem*, p. 228.

⁵⁹ Since 4 August 2014, it has been possible to access the databases of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency online via the ICRC website: <https://grandeguerre.icrc.org/>. The Agency’s card indexes are on display at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva.

CHAPTER 4

The Committee's delegations and its visits to prison camps

At the end of 1914, the Committee appointed four delegates to undertake temporary missions in the countries at war. On 3 January 1915, Dr Carle de Marval left Switzerland for France and Arthur Eugster for Germany. A few days later, Édouard Naville and Victor van Berchem left for Britain. Their mission was to visit camps for prisoners of war and civilian internees, and to report on the detainees' conditions.¹

This marked the opening of a new sphere of activity, which would soon shape the ICRC's identity. It therefore merits closer examination.

Two questions immediately spring to mind:

- (a) Clearly, the Committee did not send its delegates on the off-chance that they might accomplish something; a refusal, even from only one of the belligerents, would have had disastrous consequences. The three missions must therefore have been prepared in advance, if only to ensure that the delegates would actually be able to see the prisoners. Is it possible to retrace the negotiations that took place prior to these missions?
- (d) Why did the ICRC take on this sensitive task, for which it appeared ill-equipped?

The ICRC's archives do not provide a complete answer, but it is possible to identify the main stages in the negotiations.²

ICRC president Gustave Ador spent 26 September to 4 October 1914 in Bordeaux, where he had talks with members of the French government and the Central Committee of the French Red Cross. These talks focused on the exchange of prisoner lists and the forwarding of correspondence and relief.³ There is every reason to believe that the

¹ *Documents publiés à l'occasion de la guerre* (reports by the Committee's delegates on their visits to prison camps), 24 volumes published between March 1915 and January 1920, first series; Reports by Mr Naville, Mr van Berchem, Dr de Marval and Mr Eugster on their visits to prison camps in Britain, France and Germany, ICRC, Geneva, March 1915, p. 3; *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 85–86.

² In addition to the minutes of the Committee and the International Prisoners-of-War Agency, the author has studied the following archive documents: 1914–1918 war, general file; files 418/I, 418/II, 418/IX, 431/IIIa, 431/IIIb, 431/IIIc, 431/V, 431/VIII, 432/I, 432/II, 434/I, 434/II, 444/III, 471/I, 472/X. The minutes are disappointingly terse, while the files for the First World War are incomplete, particularly those covering the first months of the war.

³ *Bulletin international*, No. 180, October 1914, pp. 251–252; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 66–70.

question of visits to prisoner-of-war camps was also raised; in a letter dated 31 October 1914, French Red Cross president, the Marquis de Vogüé, relayed his government's opposition to the idea of German prisoners of war being visited by neutral delegates.⁴ The Marquis proposed that "visits to Germans in France be carried out by delegates of the French Red Cross, authorized by the military authorities, while visits to French prisoners in Germany be made by delegates of the International Committee", adding that "strict reciprocity is not necessary in this case".⁵ His point of view was unlikely to be shared in Berlin.

In November 1914, Baron d'Anthouard, French Red Cross delegate for assistance to prisoners of war, visited a number of prison camps in France and sent the ICRC a report that emphasized the "excellent" conditions in which the Germans were being held. The French Red Cross asked that the report "be made public and communicated to the German Red Cross as an ICRC document, established on the basis of information received from the French Red Cross following ICRC enquiries".⁶

The ICRC was not going to fall for this. The report was sent to the German Red Cross as a "Communication [...] issued at the request of the French Red Cross"⁷ Would this report succeed – as the French Red Cross hoped – in "reassuring families in Germany and putting an end to the unfounded complaints which are so often made in the German newspapers"? Probably not. Without questioning the Baron's good faith, there are good reasons for thinking that this report was read in Berlin with as much scepticism as a similar document from the German Red Cross would have received in Paris.

Another means of breaking the stalemate was required. Gustave Ador visited Berlin from 9 to 16 December 1914, accompanied by Dr Ferrière, and held discussions with the leaders of the German Red Cross and the ministers of Foreign Affairs and War. He also met the Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg. On the basis of what

⁴ We do not know of any detailed report on Gustave Ador's visit to Bordeaux. The minutes of the International Committee's meeting held on his return summarize his report in just ten lines. There is no mention of his raising the issue of visits to POW camps. However, the minutes do state that ICRC member Mr Micheli had made enquiries about visiting prisoners in Germany, without establishing a link between those enquiries and Ador's visit to Bordeaux: "We have received requests regarding visits to prisoners in Germany. The Dutch minister in Bern, in response to an enquiry regarding this matter from Mr Micheli, replied that the German ambassador Baron Romberg felt that such an undertaking would present serious difficulties. He has raised the issue with his government." (Minutes of the International Committee (Prisoners-of-War Agency, Vol. 7, meeting of 5 October 1914). The question was clearly under discussion. Frédéric Barbey, who consulted Gustave Ador's notebooks (which have since disappeared) would appear to indicate that during his visit to Bordeaux, Gustave Ador had asked that neutral delegates be authorized to visit prisoner-of-war camps. Frédéric Barbey, *Un homme d'État suisse, Gustave Ador*, p. 97.

⁵ Letter of 31 October 1914, ICRC Archives, file 418/IX/A [ICRC translation].

⁶ Letter of 15 November 1914 from Baron d'Anthouard, ICRC Archives, file 418/IX/A [ICRC translation].

⁷ Letter of 25 November 1914 to the Central Committee of the German Red Cross, ICRC Archives, file 431/VIII, published in the *Bulletin international*, No. 181, January 1915, pp. 56–58.



41. Somewhere between Paris and Issoudun, France, February 1915.
Gustave Ador, Paul des Gouttes and Louis Ador.

© Olivier Dupraz.

had already been agreed with the French Red Cross, arrangements were made to set up “prisoner-of-war relief committees” in Paris and Berlin. The committees would comprise representatives of the war ministries, the National Societies, the Protecting Powers (Spain and the United States) and the ICRC.⁸ Their tasks were to “visit prison camps in both countries, study the prisoners’ needs, and report on their treatment”.⁹ It seems clear that responsibility for carrying out the visits rested with the neutral members of these committees, in other words the delegates of the Protecting Powers and of the ICRC. In practice, however, the ICRC’s delegates acted independently.¹⁰

While they were in Germany, Gustave Ador and Frédéric Ferrière took the opportunity to visit the camps at Magdeburg, Torgau and Zossen.¹¹

Gustave Ador informed the French Red Cross regarding the results of these negotiations and the situation in the prison camps in a letter dated 19 December 1914.¹²

⁸ *Bulletin international*, No. 181, January 1915, pp. 58–61; minutes of the International Committee (Prisoners-of-War Agency), Vol. 7, 19 December 1914. Spain was representing French interests in Germany, while the United States was representing those of Germany in France.

⁹ *Documents publiés à l’occasion de la guerre*, first series, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Rapport général 1912-1920*, p. 86.

¹¹ *Bulletin international*, No. 181, January 1915, pp. 62-63.

¹² ICRC Archives, file 471/I; letter published in the *Bulletin international*, No. 181, January 1915, pp. 58–64.

On the previous day, the German Red Cross had confirmed the imperial government's consent to prison camp visits by neutral delegates.¹³ The way was clear for the ICRC delegates to take up their posts.

Did the ICRC conduct similar negotiations with the British? It would appear so, but we have been unable to find any documents on the matter.

What made the ICRC decide to shoulder these new responsibilities?

In its publications, the ICRC has sought to link this initiative to the mandate it received under Resolution VI of the Washington Conference.¹⁴

Under the terms of that resolution, the International Committee was responsible for transporting and distributing relief for prisoners of war "through the intermediary of neutral delegates accredited to the governments concerned".¹⁵ The Committee's purpose in sending delegates to the prison camps would therefore appear to have been to oversee the distribution of relief supplies.

The question of assistance was indeed discussed during the meetings in Bordeaux and Berlin, and the dispatch of collective relief supplies would obviously imply the exercise of outside supervision, if only to reassure those who provided the relief that it was getting through to the prisoners for whom it was meant.

However, overseeing the distribution of relief supplies cannot have been the ICRC's motivation in deciding to take on these responsibilities, because at about the same time, it had already asked other intermediaries, in particular the postal administrations of neutral countries, to take over the task of forwarding assistance.¹⁶ Furthermore, the delegates' reports reveal that relief was not their main concern; they were more interested in obtaining as complete a picture as possible of the prisoners' conditions. This is reflected in the term "inspections" often used in documents of that time.¹⁷ Furthermore, a letter from Gustave Ador indicates that his delegate in Germany, Mr Eugster, had complained of having nothing to distribute.¹⁸

There must therefore have been a different reason. We must place the problem in its historical context, focusing on the situation in autumn 1914.

Following the battle of the Marne (5–12 September 1914), governments, military commanders and the public all realized that the war was going to be a long one. The armies had become bogged down in the mud of the trenches and the barbed

¹³ Minutes of the International Committee (Prisoners-of-War Agency), Vol. 7, 18 December 1914.

¹⁴ *Le Rôle et l'Action du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge pendant la Guerre européenne de 1914 à 1916*, p. 31.

¹⁵ *Neuvième Conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge tenue à Washington du 7 au 17 mai 1912, Compte rendu*, p. 318.

¹⁶ "The International Committee left relief operations to others, but it kept the delegations", wrote the ICRC in *Le Rôle et l'Action du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge pendant la Guerre européenne*, p. 31. However, under the Washington resolution, the distribution of relief was the very raison d'être of the delegations.

¹⁷ See, for example, the *Rapport général 1912-1920*, p. 85.

¹⁸ Letter of 16 January 1915, ICRC Archives, file 431/III/c.

wire entanglements. Europe settled down to a war of attrition – or rather, exhaustion – which was likely to last months or years.

The most pressing humanitarian concern was therefore the fate of prisoners of war captured during the fighting in East Prussia, Belgium and France, who already numbered several hundreds of thousands.¹⁹ No plans had been made to shelter, clothe or feed them. Camps had to be built, supplies organized, medical care arranged, etc. Winter was on the way, but most prisoners had only the summer uniforms they were wearing when they were taken prisoner in August or September. Conditions for civilian internees were no better.

News of these practical difficulties gave rise to the most fantastic rumours, which were readily believed by a tense and credulous public. An indignant public demanded reprisals and governments hastened to accede to their wishes. As reprisals were met with counter-reprisals, the entire legal framework protecting prisoners of war began to fall apart.

“A fearsome power has appeared, an omnipresent and inflexible Sovereign Lord, dominating the relations between States, strangling initiatives, suspending the application of legal and regulatory provisions, paralysing all progress and improvement: its name is Reciprocity”, declared the editor of the *Bulletin international*, in a burst of breathless prose not entirely typical of the ICRC. “There is not one State which will agree to carry out what its signature in fact obliges it to do, without first being assured of Reciprocity. And this attitude has become so widespread [...] that one is tempted to ask whether all the humanitarian treaties are but an illusion, and whether this implacable Reciprocity is in fact, at least in war time, the only principle that governments will uphold”.²⁰

Visits to prison camps by neutral and impartial observers had two main objectives:

- to urge the belligerents to make whatever improvements were necessary to the prisoners' conditions;
- to provide objective reports on the prisoners' conditions to governments and the prisoners' families.²¹

But there was more to it than that: by providing objective and impartial reports to governments and the general public, the International Committee hoped to put an

¹⁹ According to figures given to Gustave Ador during his mission to Berlin, by December 1914 there were more than 600,000 prisoners of war in Germany alone (Minutes of the International Committee (Prisoners-of-War Agency), Vol. 7, 19 December 1914). It is estimated that six months after hostilities commenced, there were already between 1.3 and 1.4 million prisoners of war in Europe. (Heather Jones, “Prisoners of war”, in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, edited by Jay Winter, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014, Vol. II, pp. 266–290, ad p. 270.)

²⁰ *Bulletin international*, No. 181, January 1915, pp. 31–32. The atmosphere was so poisoned by insistence on reciprocity and by retaliatory measures that the ICRC threatened to lay down the mandate it had received from the 9th International Conference of the Red Cross (telegram of 21 September 1914, ICRC Archives, file 418/IX/A).

²¹ *Rapport général 1912-1920*, p. 85.



42. Prisoner-of-war camp, Issoudun, Indre, France. An ICRC delegate speaks to a French officer before meeting the prisoners assembled in the courtyard.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-00617-42.

end to the prevailing irresponsible propaganda regarding prisoners, and in so doing prevent any further retaliatory measures against them. Naturally, the ICRC could not say this in as many words. But it becomes crystal clear when one reads the handwritten letter that Dr de Marval sent to Gustave Ador from Paris on 8 January 1915.²² It also appears between the lines of certain documents published by the ICRC:

... these visits, carrying the greatest guarantees of independence and impartiality, are capable of reassuring families by informing them of the real situation – too often distorted by a tendentious press – and to bring about, in certain cases, a *salutary lessening of tension* between the belligerent governments.²³

²² Letter from Dr de Marval to Gustave Ador, 8 January 1915, ICRC Archives, file 432/II/2/G.

²³ *Renseignements complémentaires sur l'activité de l'Agence internationale des Prisonniers de Guerre à Genève en 1915 et en 1916*, p. 37 (emphasis added). Similarly, see the 166th Circular to Central Committees, 17 February 1916, *Bulletin international*, No. 186, April 1916, p. 151, and the Minutes of the International Committee (Prisoners-of-War Agency), Vol. 7, 9–14 August 1915. At about the same time, parallel approaches were being made by the diplomatic services of the Protecting Powers that the belligerents had designated to look after their interests and safeguard their nationals in enemy hands (Spain was representing French and Russian interests, the United States those of the United Kingdom, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire). The idea of preventing reprisals by informing governments in detail of the conditions in which their nationals were being held by the enemy is clearly reflected in US diplomatic documents. See *Papers relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1915, Supplement, The World War*, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1928, p. 999.



43. Morocco, camp for German prisoners of war. An ICRC delegate speaks to the prisoners.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST- 00617-14.

In a long article that appeared in the *Journal de Genève* on 4 November 1914, the great pacifist writer Romain Rolland, who had been working for the International Prisoners-of-War Agency as a volunteer, attempted to reassure the families of prisoners regarding the situation of their loved ones, and criticized the press which, in both France and Germany, was fanning the flames of hate by making itself a channel for tendentious information that led to reprisals:

‘War is war.’ Granted! Then it is natural that it drags in its train thousands of prisoners, officers and men. Of these I shall, for the moment, say but a few words. By those words I shall endeavour, as best I am able, to reassure their families who search for them and are concerned as to their condition. On both sides hateful rumours circulate only too easily, rumours given currency by an unscrupulous press, rumours which would have us believe that the most elementary laws of humanity are trampled under foot by the enemy. [...] When after three months of fratricidal struggle one has felt the calming influence of this wide human sympathy, and turns once more to the field of strife, the rasping cries of hate in the press inspire only horror and pity. What object have they in view? They wish to punish crimes and are a crime in themselves; for murderous words are the seeds of future murder. In the diseased organism of a fevered Europe everything vibrates and reverberates without end. Every word, every action, arouses reprisals.²⁴

²⁴ Romain Rolland, “Inter Arma Caritas”, *Journal de Genève*, 4 Novembre 1914, supplement, p. 5. English translation: “Inter Arma Caritas”, in Romain Rolland, *Above the Battle*, translated by C.K. Ogden, The Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago, 1916, available through Project Gutenberg at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/32779>.

The desire to prevent reprisals by providing objective, reassuring information explains why the ICRC had its delegates' reports circulated as widely as possible. They were sent as a matter of course to the news agencies and to all subscribers to the *Bulletin international des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*. They were also sold in bookshops, and several series were reprinted.

The visits by neutral observers to prison camps on both sides also aimed at achieving a certain parity in the way prisoners of war were treated, to obtain a degree of "positive reciprocity" that could only work in the prisoners' favour.²⁵

When they began, the visits by representatives of the Protecting Powers and the ICRC had no legal basis other than the assent, on specific occasions, of the governments concerned. The agreements reached between the belligerents during the latter part of the war took account of the work already done and allowed for visits to places of detention by delegates of the Protecting Powers and those of "neutral Red Cross Societies".²⁶

We have an excellent source regarding the procedure followed during the visits: the ICRC delegates' reports.²⁷

Although the circumstances in which the visits were conducted varied according to the countries concerned and the conditions prevailing in each place of detention, the delegates clearly all followed the same procedure. It is therefore possible to retrace the outline of a typical visit.

The delegates would start by making general enquiries of the bodies responsible for prisoner-of-war and civilian internee camps (war ministry, interior ministry, Red Cross Society, etc.). They found out as much as they could about the rules and regulations governing the conditions of detention and then drew up a list of camps they wished to visit.

Next came the visit proper. After a preliminary discussion with the camp commander, the delegates would inspect all the facilities, including the sleeping accommodation, workshops, canteen, kitchen, infirmary, showers, sanitary facilities, disciplinary cells, food and parcel stores, exercise area, etc. The delegates were thus able to gain a complete idea of the material conditions in each camp. They enquired about the food, hygiene, medical care and the prevention of contagious diseases, the duration and nature

²⁵ See: "Égalité de traitement pour les prisonniers de guerre militaires ou civils", 163rd Circular to Central Committees, 15 January 1915, *Bulletin international*, No. 181, January 1915, pp. 5–8; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 21–23.

²⁶ Protocol of the Copenhagen conference, 15 October to 2 November 1917 (meeting of representatives of the Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman, Romanian and Russian governments and National Societies, under the auspices of the Swedish and Danish Red Cross Societies), Art. VIII, *Bulletin international*, No. 193, January 1918, pp. 122–124; Franco-German agreement signed in Bern on 15 March 1918, Art. 51, *Bulletin international*, No. 194, April 1918, p. 277; Franco-German agreement signed in Bern on 26 April 1918, Article 23, *Bulletin international*, No. 195, July 1918, p. 400.

²⁷ *Documents publiés à l'occasion de la guerre* (reports by the delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross on their visits to prison camps), 24 volumes published between March 1915 and January 1920.



44. Oued Stita, Algeria. Camp for German prisoners of war. An ICRC delegate speaks to the prisoners' spokesman. The camp is still under construction, and the first step is to erect the fence.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-00617-34.

of the work the prisoners were carrying out, deliveries of correspondence and relief, disciplinary measures, punishments, etc. Although the reports were usually written in general terms, certain specific remarks – such as comparing the calorie content of food rations in the different camps, or listing the death and sickness rates – shows that the delegates aimed for great precision in carrying out their visits.²⁸

Throughout the visits, the delegates had discussions with groups of detainees. From the outset, the delegates attached considerable importance to speaking freely with the prisoners.²⁹ The ICRC stated several times that it would not carry out any new visits unless it received assurances that its delegates could converse in private with the prisoners of their choice. This was seen as an essential condition:

“For our inspections to be worthwhile and offer the guarantees without which we would not undertake them, our delegates must have the assurance of being able to speak freely with the prisoners.”³⁰

²⁸ See, for example, *Documents publiés à l'occasion de la guerre*, second series, pp. 79–80; seventh series, *passim*, etc.

²⁹ *Documents publiés à l'occasion de la guerre*, first series, pp. 12–15, 25–26, 27 and 46; second series, p. 34; third series, pp. 26, 46 and 50; seventh series, pp. 5–9; ninth series, p. 6; regarding difficulties encountered during visits to Russian prisoners in Germany, see eleventh series, p. 5.

³⁰ *Bulletin international*, No. 188, October 1916, p. 408; similarly, No. 194, April 1918, p. 216.



45. Cottbus, Germany. Prisoner-of-war camp. ICRC delegate Arthur Eugster visits a workshop.
© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST- 03004-17A.

Visits to places of detention and private discussions with the prisoners enabled the delegates to build up a precise, complete and detailed picture of conditions in the camps.

A prison camp is never heaven on earth. At the end of the visit the delegates again met the camp commandant, presented their observations and suggestions and passed on any requests or complaints from the prisoners. Major issues were raised with the relevant ministries after the visit, and in the case of any particularly serious incidents the delegates would call for an enquiry.³¹

The delegates' final report on their mission was usually in three parts: a general section outlining the points common to all the camps visited; a section describing the particular conditions at each camp; and lastly the delegates' conclusions, stating the improvements which they felt should be made regarding the prisoners' treatment and conditions. The reports were sent to the ICRC, which forwarded them to the governments of the Detaining Power and of the power of origin of the prisoners, and published them as official documents.

The ICRC no longer publishes its delegates' reports of visits to places of detention, but otherwise the procedures established in spring 1915 have been the model for its

³¹ *Documents publiés à l'occasion de la guerre*, first series, pp. 49–50 and 89–91; third series, pp. 49, 52 and 53; fifth series, pp. 18–19; seventh series, pp. 61–63 and 91; tenth series, pp. 13–14, 53 and 60; twelfth series, pp. 27, 28 and 53; sixteenth series, pp. 46–67.

detention visits ever since. They remain the model for ICRC activities aimed at helping people deprived of their liberty.³²

During and immediately after the war, the ICRC sent delegates on 54 missions, covering the following countries and territories: Algeria, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, Burma, Czechoslovakia, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, the Indies, Italy, Japan, Morocco, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Siberia, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.³³

The delegates carried out 524 visits to places of detention.³⁴ This figure appears impressive, given that no treaty accorded the ICRC a legal basis for making the visits, and that each mission had to be negotiated individually. This task was made all the more difficult by the fact that none of the belligerents was prepared to open up its camps unless it had the assurance that its enemies would do the same. But of course, set against the total number of prisoners taken, and the length of their captivity, the number of visits seems almost derisory; the ICRC was certainly not in a position to exercise overall supervision of the camps on a systematic and regular basis.

The question therefore arises as to why the ICRC did not attempt to obtain permission for its delegates to make regular visits to all the camps.

Two factors provide the answer to that question:

- (a) ICRC delegates carried out a large number of visits in 1915, before representatives of the Protecting Powers started to visit prison camps on a regular basis, and in 1919, after these Powers had relinquished their mandate. In the intervening years, ICRC visits were fewer.³⁵
- (b) In spring 1917, ICRC delegates visited eight camps where Allied prisoners of war were being held in Bulgaria. A year later the ICRC decided to send another mission there, because "visits by attachés of the Dutch delegation had not been authorized by the Bulgarian government".³⁶

So while the Committee believed that neutral supervision of the treatment of prisoners of war and civilian internees was essential, and where need be had done whatever it could to bring this about, it had not, on the other hand, felt it necessary to send its own delegates to places that were already being visited regularly by representatives of

³² François Bugnion, *The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Protection of War Victims*, pp. 580–657.

³³ *Rapport général 1912-1920*, pp. 86-90.

³⁴ *Idem*, p. 87. This figure, which appears in all the official ICRC documents, corresponds to the number of visits that resulted in reports being written that were subsequently published. Examination of the archives reveals the number of visits to have been substantially higher, but the sources are too fragmentary to allow us to establish a precise figure.

³⁵ *Rapport général 1912-1920*, pp. 88-90.

³⁶ *Bulletin international*, No. 195, October 1918, p. 348. The ICRC often asked that a particular group of prisoners be allowed a visit by representatives of the Protecting Powers or by its own delegates. See *Bulletin international*, No. 191, July 1917, p. 287; No. 192, October 1917, p. 403; No. 194, April 1918, p. 216; *Documents publiés à l'occasion de la guerre*, 23rd series, p. 128.

the Protecting Powers. This conclusion was all the more logical in that the diplomatic services of the Protecting Powers sent copies of their reports to the ICRC, which was therefore adequately informed of the situation.³⁷

Is it possible to judge what good these visits achieved?

In its publications, the ICRC made much of the “moral support” the visits gave the prisoners by providing contact with the outside world, and the many improvements in their conditions of detention that resulted from the delegates’ requests and recommendations.³⁸

These benefits are beyond doubt, even though they are impossible to measure.

But in our opinion this was not the most important aspect.

The greatest benefit lay in the fact that action by the Protecting Powers, the National Societies of neutral countries and the ICRC succeeded in breaking the vicious circle of reprisals and counter-reprisals in which the belligerents had become trapped. This uncontrollable spiral was leading, through implacable reciprocity and with almost mathematical inevitability, to the collapse of the treaty-based system of protection.

For the prisoners, a legally-based system, supervised by independent bodies, made all the difference between decent conditions – however Spartan – and hell.

*

The International Committee had no mandate to do anything for civilians living in occupied territories, who were virtually cut off from the rest of the world and who had been subjected to extreme restrictions and hardships. It could not, however, turn a blind eye to their plight.

The ICRC tried to send missions to these areas on several occasions. Gustave Ador proposed going to Belgium and the *départements* of northern France himself, but his requests were rejected by Berlin. The Committee’s attempts to visit occupied Serbia were equally unsuccessful. The fact was that in every theatre of war, the Central Powers were fighting in enemy territory, making it pointless for the International Committee to invoke the argument of reciprocal interest.³⁹

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³⁷ *Bulletin international*, No. 192, October 1917, p. 398; No. 194, April 1918, p. 216; No. 195, July 1918, pp. 345–346; *Rapport général 1912–1920*, p. 63.

³⁸ *Le Rôle et l’Action du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge pendant la Guerre européenne de 1914 à 1916*, p. 31; *Rapport général 1912–1920*, p. 85.

³⁹ Minutes of the International Committee (Prisoners-of-War Agency), Vol. 7, 22 January 1915, 12 May 1915, 21 August 1915, etc.

Itinerant missions from Geneva were quite adequate for visits to internment camps, such as the ICRC expected to be carrying out at the time of the First World War. However, a more permanent structure was required when it came to distributing and supervising large quantities of relief supplies. By 1917, the worsening food situation in most of Europe was having alarming consequences for prisoners. Relief once again became the top humanitarian priority.

Furthermore, in the immediate post-war period the ICRC would be faced with the issue of repatriating prisoners of war and civilian internees. This would involve countless discussions with governments and complex negotiations with a great many parties, requiring the organization to maintain a permanent presence in several capitals.

The International Committee therefore opened permanent delegations in several cities, including Salonika (present-day Thessaloniki), Berlin, Petrograd,⁴⁰ Warsaw, Vienna, Budapest, Vladivostok, Moscow, etc.⁴¹ They dealt mainly with the handling of relief supplies, and later with the repatriation of prisoners of war. As we shall be discussing these two points in later chapters, there is no need to dwell on them here.

⁴⁰ In August 1914, Saint Petersburg was renamed Petrograd, as its former name was considered too Germanic. When Lenin died in 1924, the by now former capital was given the name of Leningrad, reassuming its original name of Saint Petersburg in 1991, following the breakup of the USSR.

⁴¹ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 90–91; *Bulletin international*, No. 193, January 1918, pp. 69–71; No. 194, April 1918, p. 227; see also Article 51 of the Franco-German agreement of 15 March 1918, *Bulletin international*, No. 194, April 1918, p. 277.

CHAPTER 5

Relief operations

Article 15 of the Hague Regulations granted relief societies for prisoners of war access to prison camps, and set out rules concerning their activities. However, these societies did not exist, and the Red Cross had decided to take over their mandate – that was the purpose of Resolution VI passed at the Washington conference.¹ According to this resolution, the ICRC's role was to arrange the transport and distribution of relief supplies entrusted to it, acting as a relay between each National Society and prisoners of the same nationality.

So how did the ICRC carry out this task?

The ICRC dealt with two kinds of relief supplies: individual parcels addressed to specific prisoners, and collective consignments.

It had already created the appropriate body for handling individual parcels – the Agency. However, the forwarding of parcels soon took on such gigantic proportions that it threatened to swamp the Agency entirely. Furthermore, the Agency was not an essential intermediary if a family knew exactly where to send a parcel. In autumn 1914, the ICRC was able to pass on most of this work to the postal administrations of neutral countries,² and from then on the Agency no longer accepted parcels that could be sent by normal post.³

However, many prisoners received nothing from home, because their families were either too poor or lived in occupied areas, cut off from the outside world. The ICRC therefore organized collective relief consignments,⁴ the first of which passed through Geneva by rail in December 1914.⁵ Under the terms of Resolution VI, the ICRC was responsible for distributing these supplies, but it delegated the task to the National Societies of the destination countries.

¹ *Neuvième Conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge tenue à Washington du 7 au 17 mai 1912, Compte rendu*, p. 318.

² *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 64–69; *RICR*, No. 3, March 1919, pp. 309–313.

³ It intervened only in cases where, for example, the recipient's address was not known, or when the parcel could not be delivered to the address shown. In all, the Agency handled 1.8 million individual parcels. *Rapport général*, p. 67.

⁴ *Bulletin international*, No. 181, January 1915, pp. 58–62.

⁵ The ICRC handled more than 1,800 wagon-loads of collective relief supplies during the First World War. *Rapport général 1912–1920*, p. 67.

The Committee thus played a decisive role in launching the transportation of individual and collective relief. It did not, however, seek to create a special position for itself in this field, but instead arranged for other bodies to manage the practical aspects where possible.

However, things did not remain quite so straightforward. The “triangular” routing of assistance envisaged in Washington (National Society – ICRC – prisoner) had to be re-thought before the end of the war. From 1917 on, events in Russia left the Russian Red Cross paralysed; Russian prisoners of war hard hit by the famine in Germany and Austria were deprived of any assistance from their homeland. German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners soon found themselves in a similar position because of food shortages and political upheavals in central Europe.

Meanwhile, the Russian civil war, the collapse of the Dual Monarchy⁶ and the continued enforcement of the blockade after the Armistice led to increased suffering among the civilian population. The effects of the famine and shortages of other essentials were beyond description: whole towns were cut off from supplies, medicines were non-existent and hospital wards went unheated. Epidemics of flu and typhus cut through the undernourished population like a scythe; in a few months, there were more deaths from flu than from four years of fighting.

While the ICRC could hardly ignore such suffering, its scant resources ruled out any large-scale operations. It did, however, take a variety of measures, which can be grouped under four main headings:

- (a) Information: thanks to its delegations in Berlin, Warsaw, Vienna, Budapest, Bucharest, Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), Vladivostok and elsewhere, the Committee was able to provide governments and relief organizations with detailed information about the situation in central and southern Europe, and in Siberia. The delegations’ reports were an important source of information for the early relief operations of the League of Red Cross Societies and the League of Nations.⁷
- (b) Coordination: the ICRC was asked on several occasions to coordinate the work of public and private organizations that were providing relief for stricken areas or striving to control the epidemics. The ICRC’s main initiative in this field was the setting up of the Central Bureau to Combat Epidemics in Eastern Europe, which met in Vienna under its auspices, grouping experts from Austria, Czechoslovakia,

⁶ The Double Monarchy was the Austro-Hungarian Empire as it existed from 1866 to 1918; the Emperor of Austria was also King of Hungary.

⁷ *RICR*, No. 11, November 1919, pp. 1370–1372. The League was founded after the war as a federation of National Red Cross Societies, on the initiative of Henry Davison, Chairman of the War Council of the American Red Cross. Its aim was to promote cooperation between member societies and foster Red Cross activities in peacetime, particularly in the fields of public health and disaster relief. The National Societies of the defeated countries – Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary and Turkey – were excluded from the League until 1922. In 1983, the organization changed its name to the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, becoming the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in 1991.

Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia. This bureau, which allowed the representatives of countries with no diplomatic relations to meet in an apolitical, neutral context, was the cornerstone of a concerted effort to halt the spread of typhus, which was widespread in Russia and Ukraine, by setting up a network of quarantine and disinfection centres on all main routes.⁸

- (c) Advocacy: the ICRC repeatedly drew the attention of the victorious nations to the situation in the lands of the former Central Powers and in Russia. There was, notably, the appeal of 10 March 1919 to the Peace Conference, in which the Committee called for the lifting of the blockade, at least for medical supplies, and for an emergency operation to supply the hospitals in central Europe.⁹
- (d) Direct intervention: the ICRC carried out a number of relief operations using its own resources, both for the civilian population (supplying hospitals, running soup kitchens, setting up or supplying children's homes, etc.) and for prisoners of war (delivering supplies to Russian prisoners of war in Germany, organizing transit, disinfection and recuperation centres for returnees, etc.). The most spectacular operation was the relief and repatriation mission for prisoners of war in Siberia, which ran from March 1919 to June 1921.¹⁰

In relief work, too, the position of the ICRC thus changed fundamentally during the war and the immediate post-war period. From being simply an intermediary, the Committee was impelled to take up new activities in aid of prisoners of war and civilians.

⁸ *RICR*, No. 5, May 1919, pp. 497–507; No. 7, July 1919, pp. 788–805; No. 10, October 1919, pp. 1209–1216; No. 15, March 1920, pp. 282–295; No. 17, May 1920, pp. 557–577; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 202–205, François Bugnion, “Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et la protection de la santé”, in *La Conférence médicale de Cannes, 1er – 11 avril 1919*, edited by Roger Durand, Société Henry-Dunant, Geneva, 1994, pp. 177–188.

⁹ Appel du CICR à la Conférence de la Paix, 10 March 1919, *RICR*, No. 4, April 1919, pp. 465–469.

¹⁰ *RICR*, No. 4, April 1919, p. 471; No. 5, May 1919, p. 585; No. 6, June 1919, pp. 702–703; No. 7, July 1919, 869–870; No. 8, August 1919, p. 1002; No. 11, November 1919, pp. 1348–1350; No. 12, December 1919, pp. 1489–1493 and 1521–1522; No. 14, February 1920, pp. 198–205; No. 16, April 1920, pp. 405–411; No. 17, May 1920, pp. 610–611; No. 20, August 1920, pp. 937–941; No. 23, November 1920, p. 1360; No. 27, March 1921, pp. 263–265; No. 36, December 1921, pp. 1197–1232 (report by Dr Montandon); André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 117–123.

CHAPTER 6

The ICRC and the repatriation of prisoners

After the Battle of the Marne (4–9 September 1914) it became clear that this would be a long war. The ICRC and the governments concerned were therefore faced with the question of repatriating prisoners – or at least some of them. This would be one of the ICRC's priorities until the last groups of prisoners were repatriated in July 1922.

There were, however, two quite distinct categories of prisoner involved:

- Those to be repatriated during the war.
- Those to be repatriated at the end of the war.

Prisoners to be repatriated during the war

Customary law and the Hague Regulations stipulated that prisoners of war be sent home as speedily as possible after the conclusion of peace. Repatriation during hostilities could, however, be considered for the following:

- Seriously ill or seriously injured prisoners of war
- Medical personnel
- Civilians who were not of an age to bear arms.

As the war dragged on, the question arose of interning in a neutral country those war invalids who were not eligible for repatriation before the end of hostilities and of repatriating prisoners of war who had been held for an extended period.

Seriously ill or seriously injured prisoners of war

Article 6 of the Geneva Convention of 22 August 1864 had stipulated that seriously wounded enemy combatants were to be repatriated without waiting for the end of hostilities:

Those who, after their recovery, are recognized as being unfit for further service shall be repatriated.

On the pretext that the belligerents should have an absolute right to retain those wounded enemy servicemen whom they considered it important to have in their

possession, the 1906 Diplomatic Conference decided to abolish this obligation and replace it by the completely discretionary provision in Article 2 of the Geneva Convention of 6 July 1906 that “the belligerents shall have authority to agree to send back to their own country the sick and wounded who have recovered, or who are in a condition to be transported and whom they do not desire to retain as prisoners”.¹

The first few months of the First World War sufficed to show how absurd this decision was. Before long, the belligerents found themselves having to maintain hundreds, then thousands, of maimed and disabled men whom it was inhumane and pointless to keep in captivity.

On 12 November 1914, ICRC president Gustave Ador wrote to the head of the Swiss Federal Political Department (foreign ministry)² proposing that Switzerland approach France and Germany regarding the repatriation of war-disabled from both sides before the end of hostilities.³ Negotiations were conducted by Swiss diplomats.⁴

The first exchange of seriously wounded French and German soldiers took place between 2 and 11 March 1915. They made the journey between Lake Constance and Lyon via Switzerland, on hospital trains provided by Switzerland.⁵ Similar operations took place throughout the war. After Italy entered the war, repatriation convoys were also organized between Como in northern Italy and Feldkirch in Austria, via the Gotthard Tunnel. The first exchange of seriously wounded Italian and Austrian soldiers took place on 28 November 1916.⁶

On a practical level, the ICRC’s role was limited but nonetheless crucial, consisting of drawing up lists of disabled personnel eligible for repatriation before the end of hostilities.⁷ These lists, constantly updated by the Agency, were the indispensable reference for every agreement between the belligerents. Mixed medical commissions, consisting of doctors from neutral countries and from the Detaining Power, examined sick and wounded soldiers and decided which of them were eligible for repatriation before the end of hostilities according to criteria drawn up by the belligerent States.

In four years, 81,597 American, Austro-Hungarian, Belgian, British, Bulgarian, French, German, Italian, Ottoman, Portuguese, Russian and Serbian soldiers were

¹ *Actes de la Conférence de Révision réunie à Genève du 11 juin au 6 juillet 1906*, p. 283.

² Now entitled the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

³ Letter from the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, G. Ador, to the head of the Political Department, A. Hoffmann, 12 November 1914, and letter from the Political Department to the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, G. Ador, 13 November 1914, *Documents diplomatiques suisses*, volume 6 (1914–1918), 29 June 1914–11 November 1918, prepared by Jacques Freymond, Isabelle Graf-Junod and Alison Browning, Benteli Verlag, Bern, 1981, p. 109; *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 91–109.

⁴ In his report dated 19 December 1914, the Swiss minister in Paris Charles Lardy reported on his efforts to obtain the repatriation of war wounded (Swiss minister in Paris, Ch. Lardy, to the head of the Political Department, A. Hoffmann, 19 December 1914, *Documents diplomatiques suisses*, Vol. 6 (1914–1918), pp. 124–126).

⁵ André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, p. 57.

⁶ *Idem*, p. 58.

⁷ *Bulletin international*, No. 182, April 1915, pp. 166–168 and 174–175.



46. Cornavin Station, Geneva, Switzerland. Wounded soldiers pass through on their way home.

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repatriated via Switzerland, on 301 special trains.⁸ The Swiss Federal Council entrusted this operation to Colonel Carl Bohny, the Chief Medical Officer of the Swiss Red Cross, and the Swiss Red Cross looked after the disabled soldiers as they passed through the country. Col. Bohny accompanied most of the convoys himself, smoothing out the many problems that an operation on this scale was bound to encounter. He was ably supported by his wife, who supervised the nursing care. Many of the sick had tuberculosis, and it is unlikely that they would have recovered had they remained in captivity. There were also a large number of mentally-ill soldiers, traumatized by the fighting; many could not even remember their names.⁹

⁸ This figure included 16,780 Germans, 29,223 French or Belgians, 13,675 Austro-Hungarians, 3,209 Serbs, 17,479 Italians, 406 British, 63 Bulgarians, 45 Ottomans, 13 Americans, 2 Portuguese, 2 Russians and 700 French or Belgian civilian evacuees. *La Croix-Rouge suisse pendant la mobilisation 1914-1919*, Imprimerie coopérative, Bern, 1920, (report submitted to the 10th International Conference of the Red Cross, Geneva, 1921, Document 101), p. 72. The Swiss Red Cross gives a total of 81,377, but that figure does not match the sum of the various contingents.

⁹ *Documents diplomatiques suisses*, volume 6 (1914–1918), pp. 132 and 157; *Bulletin international*, No. 182, April 1915, pp. 256–263; No. 184, October 1915, pp. 566–576; No. 185, January 1916, pp. 79–84; No. 186, April 1916, pp. 204–206; No. 187, July 1916, pp. 300–301 and 311–312; No. 188, October 1916, pp. 415–417; No. 189, January 1917, pp. 54–57; No. 191, July 1917, p. 296; No. 193, January 1918, pp. 79–80; No. 194, April 1918, pp. 223–224; No. 195, July 1918, pp. 359–361; No. 196, October 1918, pp. 498–499. Until 1916, the persons repatriated were Belgian, British, French and German war-disabled. From November 1916, there is also mention of the repatriation of Austrian and Italian war-disabled. *Bulletin international*, No. 189, January 1917, pp. 120–126; No. 191, July 1917, pp. 248–249; No. 194, April 1918, p. 224; *La Croix-Rouge suisse pendant la*



47. Sweden.
Disabled soldiers
on their way home.
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photographer unknown,
V-P-HIST-01144-05.



48. Sweden.
Disabled soldiers on
their way home.
© ICRC Archives (ARR),
photographer unknown,
V-P-HIST-01144-04.



49. Sweden.
Staff assigned to
look after disabled
soldiers who are being
repatriated.
© ICRC Archives (ARR),
photographer unknown,
V-P-HIST-01144-06.

Some 13,000 German and British war-disabled soldiers were repatriated in 27 operations carried out using hospital ships that sailed between British and Dutch ports.¹⁰ 65,000 wounded or ill Austro-Hungarian, German, Russian and Ottoman soldiers taken prisoner on the Eastern Front were repatriated via Sweden. Transport and medical care was provided by the medical services of the States through which the soldiers passed, with the assistance of their National Societies.¹¹

It is absolutely certain that these operations saved the lives of thousands of seriously ill or wounded soldiers; they had at least some hope of recovery once they were back in their home countries, close to their families, but would have died had they remained prisoners.

Medical personnel

The Geneva Convention of 22 August 1864 established the principle that army medical personnel were not to be taken prisoner. In the event of occupation by the enemy, doctors and nurses were to be allowed to continue to look after the wounded in their care, and were to be handed over to the outposts of their own forces when their presence was no longer required.¹² The idea was that only if they were absolutely safe from

mobilisation 1914–1919, p. 72; Dr G.A. Bohny, *Carl Bohny* (Schweizerköpfe, Heft 11), Orell Füssli Verlag, Zurich, 1932, pp. 8–18; André Durand, *History of the ICRC Vol. II*, pp. 56–57. These operations continued until 1920. In total, the Swiss Red Cross looked after over 118,000 war-disabled soldiers as they passed through Switzerland. 150 ans de passion humanitaire, La Croix-Rouge genevoise de 1864 à 2014, edited by Guy Mettan, Éditions Slatkine, Geneva, 2014, pp. 19 and 104.

¹⁰ *Bulletin international*, No. 192, October 1917, pp. 456–457; No. 196, October 1918, p. 500. The report that the Dutch Red Cross submitted to the 10th International Conference of the Red Cross (Geneva, 1921) stated that 12,587 German and 4,745 British war-disabled had been transported, in 27 journeys made by two Dutch hospital ships. However, these figures include both prisoners on their way to being repatriated during hostilities and those who were to be interned in the Netherlands. This explains the difference between the numbers of British and German personnel. (10th International Conference of the Red Cross, Dutch Red Cross, *Activités pendant la guerre*, date and place of publication unknown (Document No. 85), p. 13; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, p. 60.

¹¹ “Rapatriements d’invalides de guerre allemands, autrichiens ottomans et russes à travers la Suède”, *Bulletin international*, No. 189, January 1917, pp. 108–110; No. 191, July 1917, p. 243. In a letter to Gustave Ador dated 12 May 1917, Prince Carl of Sweden, who was president of the Swedish Red Cross, stated that more than 41,000 war-disabled soldiers had been repatriated via Sweden as of 12 May 1917. *Bulletin international*, No. 191, July 1917, pp. 341–345. In a report dated October 1918, the Swedish Red Cross announced that 65,000 Austrian, German and Russian war-disabled prisoners had been repatriated via Sweden. *Bulletin international*, No. 196, October 1918, pp. 542–546, ad p. 544; *Rapport général sur l’activité de la Croix-Rouge suédoise 1912–1920*, Swedish Red Cross and Imprimerie P.A. Norstedt & Fils, Stockholm, 1921 (10th International Conference of the Red Cross, Geneva, 1921, Document No. 47), pp. 73–76; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, p. 60.

¹² Geneva Convention of 22 August 1864, Article 3, *Compte rendu de la Conférence internationale pour la Neutralisation du Service de Santé militaire en Campagne, 8–22 August 1864*, Annexe B; *Handbook of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, p. 21.

capture could medical personnel remain with the wounded as the enemy advanced, and continue to provide care unimpeded. This rule was maintained in the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field of 6 July 1906. Article 12 of that Convention stipulated that personnel of the army medical services and of relief societies were to be repatriated “when their assistance is no longer indispensable”.¹³

Despite this requirement, all the belligerents retained as prisoners the doctors, nurses and stretcher-bearers whom they captured, either so they could care for their fellow-prisoners or as a form of retaliation. This deprived the medical services of valuable personnel precisely when the fighting was bringing new casualties every day.

The ICRC condemned this state of affairs in its solemn appeal of 7 December 1914 regarding the return of medical personnel.¹⁴ Referring to the preparatory work for the 1906 Diplomatic Conference, the ICRC reminded the belligerents that the intention of the Conference had been that medical personnel be able to continue to care for the wounded even after falling into enemy hands, and that they be returned to their respective armies once there was no longer a need for their presence with the wounded personnel they had been caring for when they were taken prisoner. The ICRC called for strict compliance with these rules, emphasizing that “it would be unworthy of civilized nations, which were the first to desire that these rules be applied, not to observe them with every care”.¹⁵

This matter was high on the agenda during Gustave Ador’s negotiations in Bordeaux and Berlin, in autumn 1914,¹⁶ and it can scarcely have been a coincidence that the ICRC published its appeal on 7 December 1914, immediately before its president left for the German capital. As a result of these negotiations, the situation was resolved at the beginning of 1915. Here again, following the initial negotiations that had made it possible to start the repatriation process, the ICRC’s main role was to maintain a list of medical personnel and personnel of the National Societies who were being held prisoner in contravention of the Geneva Convention, and to take steps to secure their release. During the First World War, some 26,000 medical personnel were repatriated via Switzerland, and resumed their task of caring for the wounded. In general, these doctors and nurses were repatriated on the trains carrying seriously wounded soldiers.¹⁷

¹³ *The Laws of Armed Conflicts*, p. 388.

¹⁴ “Renvoi du personnel sanitaire”, Note aux ministres de la Guerre des États belligérants. 7 December 1914, *Bulletin international*, No. 181, January 1915, pp. 45–46; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 19–20.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

¹⁶ *Bulletin international*, No. 181, January 1915, pp. 63–67; *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 91–111.

¹⁷ *150 ans de passion humanitaire, La Croix-Rouge genevoise de 1864 à 2014*, p. 104.

Civilians

Until the end of the nineteenth century, it was generally accepted that nationals of a party to a conflict who were in enemy territory at the outbreak of hostilities should be allowed to leave. They were given a stated time – often several weeks or months – to dispose of their property and pack their bags.¹⁸

This practice appears to have been sufficiently well-established for the Hague Conference of 1907 to refuse to include in any convention a rule that would have legitimized the internment of enemy civilians while at the same time restricting the use of such security measures.¹⁹

These happy illusions were to evaporate in August 1914. Right from the first few days of fighting, the belligerents interned huge numbers of civilians; not only men who could have borne arms, but also women, children, elderly people and disabled persons. Their status was not defined by the conventions, but the fundamental distinction between combatants and non-combatants applied. While there may have been some legitimacy in the internment of men of an age to bear arms, it seemed clear that women, children, the sick and the elderly should be repatriated.

From September 1914 onwards, the Federal Political Department proposed to the German and French governments that these civilians be repatriated via Switzerland. Having received positive reactions from Bordeaux and Berlin, the Political Department set up an office in Bern for the repatriation of civilian internees. As time went on, other governments asked the Swiss to arrange the repatriation of their nationals interned in enemy countries, and Germany offered to extend the agreement with France to include the repatriation of civilians in the occupied departments of northern France who could not serve in the armed forces. This mainly involved evacuating residents of towns and villages close to the front whose homes had been destroyed in the fighting.

The Swiss authorities arranged the transportation necessary to repatriate these people via Switzerland,²⁰ and the International Prisoners-of-War Agency handled thousands of individual repatriation requests.²¹ The ICRC mentions in its *Rapport*

¹⁸ For example, Article 24 of the Peace of the Pyrenees, signed by France and Spain on Pheasant Island, on 7 November 1659, provided that in case of renewed hostilities, subjects of either power would be allowed a period of six months to remove their persons and property to any destination of their choice. See: *The Consolidated Treaty Series*, edited by Clive Parry, Oceana Publications, New York, 1969–1986, Vol. 5, p. 338.

¹⁹ *Deuxième Conférence internationale de la Paix, La Haye, 15 juin – 18 octobre 1907*, Actes et Documents, tome III, pp. 9–10, 109–110, 114–118 and 128–129.

²⁰ On 22 September 1914, working on the basis of preliminary consultations with the French and German governments, the Federal Council decided to set up a central agency for the repatriation of civilian internees, attached to the Federal Political Department. *Documents diplomatiques suisses*, volume 6 (1914–1918), pp. 71, 75–77, 82–83 and 85–86.

²¹ *Bulletin international*, No. 183, July 1915, p. 343; No. 184, October 1915, pp. 501–503; No. 185, January 1916, pp. 57–60; No. 186, April 1916, pp. 198–199 and 200–203; No. 187, July 1916, pp. 306–309; No. 189, January 1917, pp. 46–50; No. 190, April 1917, pp. 178–179; No. 191, July



50. Holzminden Camp, Germany. French civilians evacuated from the occupied departments of northern France.
© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-03541-32.



51. Holzminden Camp, Germany. French evacuees leave for France, via Switzerland.
© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-03539-08A.



52. Geneva, Switzerland. French evacuees arrive from Germany.
© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-03529-31A.

général that the Civilians Department of the Agency handled over 80,000 repatriation requests concerning French civilians in 1917 alone.²²

Almost 500,000 civilians – women, children and elderly men – from the occupied departments of northern France were evacuated via Belgium and Germany, then returned to France via Switzerland. Initially, they were taken to Annemasse, just over the Swiss border from Geneva. Later, at the request of the French government, they were moved to Évian, a holiday resort on the shore of Lake Geneva. For three years, the town became a huge reception and transit centre.²³

Prisoners of war in prolonged captivity

When Europe plunged into war in August 1914, it was thought in Paris, Berlin, London, Saint Petersburg and Vienna that this would be a matter of a few weeks and that the troops would be home (victorious) in time for Christmas. But as the war continued and both sides became unable to make any progress, prisoners of war faced prolonged imprisonment with no end in sight. This caused a pathology known as “barbed-wire syndrome”, with such symptoms as neurasthenia, anorexia and muscular atrophy, leading to marked impairment of the prisoners’ physical and mental faculties. If these men were no longer capable of fighting, should they not be sent home?

In its appeal of 26 April 1917, the ICRC appealed for the repatriation of prisoners of war who had been held for an extended period.²⁴ On 26 April 1918, following long negotiations in Bern under the auspices of the Federal Political Department, France and Germany agreed to repatriate all soldiers and non-commissioned officers who had been imprisoned for more than 18 months, with equal numbers of men of each rank to be repatriated from each side. In addition, all soldiers and non-commissioned officers were to be repatriated, with no restrictions on numbers or ranks, who were over 40 and had more than three children, or were over 45.²⁵

1917, pp. 291–295; No. 192, October 1917, pp. 406–408; No. 193, January 1918, pp. 75–77; No. 195, July 1918, pp. 348–359; No. 196, October 1918, pp. 493–498; *Rapport général 1912–1920*, p. 143.

²² *Rapport général 1912–1920*, p. 143.

²³ *Bulletin international*, No. 190, April 1917, pp. 178–179; Françoise Breuillaud-Sottas, *Évian et le drame de la Grande Guerre – 500'000 civils rapatriés, Catalogue de l'exposition, Maison Gribaldi, Évian, 5 avril – 25 décembre 2014*, Silvana Editoriale, Milan, 2014, 96 pp; “Le rapatriement de 500'000 civils français par la Suisse. Un épisode méconnu de la Grande Guerre”, in *La Suisse et la guerre de 1914–1918, Actes du colloque tenu du 10 au 12 septembre 2014 au Château de Penthes*, edited by Christophe Vuilleumier, Éditions Slatkine, Geneva, 2015, pp. 117–142.

²⁴ *Bulletin international*, No. 190, April 1917, pp. 142–144; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 45–46.

²⁵ Franco-German agreement signed in Bern on 26 April 1918, Articles 1–3; *Bulletin international*, No. 195, July 1918, pp. 396–397; *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 109–111.

Internment in neutral countries

When they agreed to release seriously sick or wounded prisoners of war before the end of hostilities, the belligerents only deemed eligible for repatriation those who had suffered injuries that rendered them permanently and seriously disabled, such as the loss of an arm or a leg, complete blindness, etc.

The reasons are clear. While all were aware that repatriated ex-POWs could not be returned to active military service, the belligerents feared that they might release prisoners who, while disabled, were still capable of playing an economic or military role, especially by taking jobs in factories and offices, and thereby freeing up men to serve at the front.

Extremely restrictive criteria had therefore been applied, with only seriously handicapped persons being entitled to direct repatriation before the end of hostilities. The inevitable result was that there were many in the prisoner-of-war camps who had suffered injuries that were serious, but not serious enough to get them repatriated before the end of hostilities. Was there any way of helping them?

The French government, in particular, was unwilling to return to Germany disabled soldiers – especially officers – who could still be useful to the German army, for example in General Staff offices or depots. On 28 January 1915, Gustave Ador discussed with the French minister of war, Alexandre Millerand, the possibility of hospitalizing French and German war invalids in Switzerland if they were not eligible for repatriation. In a letter dated 4 February, he suggested to the Swiss Federal Council that Switzerland propose to the belligerents that those wounded persons be hospitalized in Switzerland who, while not fulfilling all conditions that would allow their repatriation before the end of hostilities, had nonetheless suffered wounds that made it difficult for them to endure life in detention and who were referred to as a *petit grand blessé*, or “slightly seriously wounded person”, a tragically inadequate term. Internment in a neutral country was rightly perceived as less cruel than captivity in an enemy prison camp and more likely to lead to their recovery, whilst making it impossible for them to resume military service.²⁶

The Swiss Federal Council negotiated the internment and admission to hospital in Switzerland of more than 67,000 sick and wounded prisoners of war. Many of them had tuberculosis, and were taken to mountain resorts such as Davos, Leysin and Villars.²⁷ The internees could move about freely within a certain area and could even receive visits from their families. Over 25,000 of these military internees were still in Switzerland

²⁶ *Documents diplomatiques suisses*, volume 6 (1914-1918), pp. 195–198, 311–312, 396–398 and 399–400. On the subject of internment in Switzerland in the First World War, see the report by Major Édouard Favre, *L'internement en Suisse des prisonniers de guerre malades ou blessés*, 3 volumes, Librairie Georg & Cie, Geneva, and Bureau du Service de l'Internement, Bern, 1917–1919, in particular Vol. I, pp. 3–8 and 187–189. The Holy See made similar representations in spring 1915. (*Documents diplomatiques suisses*, volume 6 (1914–1918), pp. 197–198).

²⁷ 37,515 French, 4,326 Belgians, 4,081 British, 21,225 Germans, 411 Austrians and 168 Hungarians. Favre, *L'internement en Suisse des prisonniers de guerre malades ou blessés*, Vol. III, p. 37.

when the Armistice was signed on 11 November 1918.²⁸ Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden also agreed to take in wounded and sick prisoners and give them hospital treatment.²⁹

Repatriations at the end of hostilities

When the Central Powers called for an armistice, there were between seven and eight million prisoners of war and civilian internees. Most were in Europe, but many had been transferred to North Africa, the Middle East, the British Indies, Turkistan or Siberia. Japan held a few thousand prisoners captured in Germany's former Far-Eastern colonies.³⁰ Repatriating such a huge number of people involved major difficulties. New borders had disrupted communications and vast areas of land had been devastated. On the railways, rolling stock was severely dilapidated and coal was unobtainable. These practical difficulties were compounded by the political situation: war had broken out along almost all the frontiers of the former Russian Empire, which was sliding into civil war, Germany was in the throes of revolutionary upheaval and the Austro-Hungarian Empire was falling apart.

Article 20 of the Hague Regulations of 18 October 1907 stipulated that: "After the conclusion of peace, the repatriation of prisoners of war shall be carried out as quickly as possible". This provision was in accordance with customary law and with the practice of States since the Treaties of Westphalia (1648). Its purpose was to avoid having people remain prisoners for months or even years after the conclusion of peace. However, it did not prohibit the victor from demanding the immediate repatriation of his soldiers following the signing of an armistice agreement, as Germany had done following the war of 1870–1871.³¹

How were the prisoners repatriated, given the legal obstacles, the practical difficulties and the chaos that reigned in Europe? What was the role of the ICRC? To understand the situation, one must distinguish between three different operations:

²⁸ Favre, *L'internement en Suisse des prisonniers de guerre malades ou blessés*, Vol. III, pp. 36 and 249.

²⁹ *Rapport général 1912-1920*, p. 108.

³⁰ It is estimated that between 8 and 9 million men were made prisoners of war during the First World War. (Heather Jones, "Prisoners of War", in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, edited by Jay Winter, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014, Vol. II, pp. 266–290, ad p. 269). However, some of the Austrian, German, Ottoman and Russian prisoners captured on the Eastern Front were repatriated under the terms of the treaties of Brest-Litovsk. In October 1918, Germany still held 2.4 million prisoners of war (*ibidem*).

³¹ Under Article 14 of the Armistice Convention of 28 January 1871, France was required to free all German prisoners of war, in exchange for an equivalent number of French prisoners of war of equivalent rank. However, as the number of German prisoners held by France was minute by comparison with the number of French prisoners in German hands, this provision effectively imposed unilateral repatriation. Germany agreed to the repatriation of French prisoners under the terms of Article 6 of the peace preliminaries signed at Versailles on 26 February 1871.

- (a) Repatriation of Allied prisoners held on the territory of the former Central Powers
- (b) Repatriation of prisoners who were nationals of the former Central Powers, held by the Allied and Associated Powers
- (c) Repatriations between the successor States to the former Central Powers on the one hand, and Soviet Russia on the other.

**(a) Repatriation of Allied prisoners held
on the territory of the former Central Powers**

The armistice agreements signed between the Allied and Associated Powers and Bulgaria (29 September 1918), the Ottoman Empire (30 October 1918), Austria-Hungary (3 November 1918) and Germany (11 November 1918), provided for the immediate and unilateral repatriation of all prisoners of war belonging to the victorious nations.³² This was carried out during the winter of 1918–1919 under the supervision of an Allied Commission, without the involvement of the ICRC.³³

**(b) Repatriation of prisoners who were nationals of the former
Central Powers, held by the Allied and Associated Powers**

The repatriation of prisoners of war belonging to the former Central Powers was deferred until after the signing of a peace treaty.³⁴

However, the negotiation of these treaties was to take a long time. The peace treaty with Germany was signed at Versailles on 28 June 1919, while those with Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Turkey were signed, respectively, at Saint-Germain on 10 September 1919, at Neuilly on 27 November 1919, at Trianon on 4 June 1920 and at Sèvres on 11 August 1920.

Furthermore, Articles 214 and 215 of the Treaty of Versailles made repatriation conditional on the Treaty coming into force. As a result, more than six months after the cessation of hostilities, the repatriation of prisoners was postponed indefinitely.³⁵

³² Armistice with Bulgaria, 29 September 1918, Art. 6; armistice with the Ottoman Empire, 30 October 1918, Art. 4; armistice with Austria-Hungary, 3 November 1918, Art. 7; armistice with Germany, 11 November 1918, Art. 10, De Martens, *Nouveau Recueil général de Traités*, third series, Vol. XI, pp. 126, 159, 165 and 174.

³³ *RICR*, No. 1, January 1919, pp. 37–43; No. 2, February 1919, pp. 180–181.

³⁴ Art. 6 of the armistice with Bulgaria; Art. 22 of the armistice with the Ottoman Empire; Art. 10 of the armistice with Germany. The question of the repatriation of Austro-Hungarian prisoners was not dealt with in the armistice agreement of 3 November 1918. De Martens, *Nouveau Recueil général de Traités*, third series, Vol. XI, pp. 126, 160 and 174. Even the repatriation of severely wounded personnel was suspended by the annulment of all agreements concluded to this effect between the belligerents during the war. See, for example, Art. 10 of the armistice agreement with Germany of 11 November 1918. De Martens, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

³⁵ The Treaty of Versailles came into force on 10 January 1920.



53. Narva Transit Camp, Estonia.

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54. Narva Transit Camp, Estonia.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-03050-26.



55. Narva Transit Camp, Estonia. Medical and nursing personnel.

© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-03058-23.

The ICRC could not remain indifferent to this situation. On 22 August 1919, the ICRC asked the Supreme War Council to repatriate prisoners of war held in the countries of the Entente.³⁶ On 28 August, the Council authorized the release of German prisoners.³⁷ Over the following months, Britain, the United States, Italy and Serbia repatriated those German prisoners held by them. France, on the other hand, waited until the Treaty of Versailles came into force, on 10 January 1920, before doing likewise.³⁸

However, the decision of the Supreme War Council only applied to German prisoners of war. On 18 October 1919, the ICRC therefore made further representations to the Supreme War Council, requesting the repatriation of Austrian, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Turkish prisoners, stressing the particular hardships suffered by prisoners in Siberia.³⁹ The Secretary-General of the Peace Conference replied that a comprehensive repatriation plan for all prisoners was about to be drawn up.⁴⁰ No such plan ever emerged. It was only in the spring of 1920 that the League of Nations took charge of the repatriation of prisoners of war and appointed the renowned Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen to carry it out in co-operation with the ICRC.⁴¹

(c) Repatriations between the successor States to the former Central Powers and Soviet Russia

The situation of prisoners captured on the eastern front was far more complex and far more precarious; it is impossible to separate their fate from the political turmoil in central and eastern Europe and in the former Russian Empire.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (3 March 1918) between the Central Powers and Russia's new Soviet government stipulated that all nationals of the signatory States were to be repatriated immediately.⁴² However, because of the Russian Civil War, only a very small number of prisoners had actually been sent home.

In the winter of 1918–1919, a great many prisoners took advantage of the chaos reigning in Germany, in the collapsing Austro-Hungarian Empire and in Russia to try to make their own way home. They did so in appalling conditions: weakened by years of captivity and hardship, infested with vermin, their clothes in rags and their shoes

³⁶ *RICR*, No. 9, September 1919, pp. 1108–1109.

³⁷ Note from the Secretary General of the Peace Conference to the ICRC, 2 September 1919, *RICR*, No. 9, September 1919, pp. 1111–1112.

³⁸ *RICR*, No. 11, November 1919, pp. 1323–1334.

³⁹ Note from the ICRC to the President of the Supreme Interallied Council, 18 October 1919, *RICR*, No. 11, November 1919, pp. 1348–1350.

⁴⁰ Note from the Secretary-General of the Peace Conference to the ICRC, 25 October 1919, *RICR*, No. 11, November 1919, p. 1351.

⁴¹ Note from the Secretary-General of the League of Nations to the ICRC, 28 April 1920, *RICR*, No. 17, May 1920, pp. 601–602.

⁴² Peace treaty between the Central Powers and Russia, signed at Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918, Art. 8, De Martens, *Nouveau Recueil général de Traités*, third series, Vol. X, p. 776.

in tatters, forced to steal food for their survival, ignorant of the new borders and often of their own new nationality, many of them died on the way, victims of exhaustion, sickness and deprivation; others ended up returning to the camps from which they had escaped. This uncontrolled ebb and flow of people helped to spread the epidemics of influenza and typhus even further.

When the Armistice agreement between the Allies and Germany was extended (16 January 1919), Germany was compelled to accept the setting up of an Allied Commission, entrusted with the task of supervising the return of Russian prisoners of war.⁴³ But the Commission simply banned all repatriations between the two countries.⁴⁴ This was a political response: most of the Russian prisoners in Germany were suspected of being Bolshevik sympathizers, and the Allies feared that by sending them home they would be providing fresh troops for the Soviet government, with which they were *de facto* in a situation of conflict. The Allied Commission was dissolved in February 1920 after the Treaty of Versailles came into force.⁴⁵

All this meant that repatriations between eastern Europe and Soviet Russia were suspended for more than a year. The decision mainly affected three groups of prisoners: Russians held in Germany and in the territories of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire; German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners held in Russia, mostly in areas controlled by the Soviet government; and German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war held in parts of Siberia under the control of the counter-revolutionary leader Admiral Kolchak or the Japanese expeditionary force.

In view of this situation, what did the ICRC attempt to do?

In the winter of 1918–1919, the ICRC began putting together a plan to feed and evacuate Russian prisoners held in central Europe.⁴⁶ To carry out the plan, the ICRC opened several permanent delegations in central and eastern Europe. However, the operation failed to materialize because of the Allied Commission's refusal to allow repatriations to areas controlled by the Soviet government. The ICRC, on the other hand, held that the prisoners must be sent back to their native districts or elsewhere if they so wished, and that their repatriation could not be delayed for political reasons:⁴⁷

The International Committee lost no opportunity [...] of pointing out the absolute necessity of repatriating Russian prisoners of war from all the countries where they were still held, and to return them to their place of origin, regardless of whether the place in question was within the territory of the Soviet Republic or in areas controlled by the

⁴³ Convention afin de prolonger la convention d'armistice du 11 novembre 1918, signée à Trèves le 16 janvier 1919, article 4, De Martens, *Nouveau Recueil général de Traités*, third series, Vol. XI, p. 210.

⁴⁴ Nevertheless, some Russian prisoners were sent back to areas controlled by the White Russian armies – about 58,000, according to *RICR*, No. 29, May 1921, p. 494.

⁴⁵ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 116–119.

⁴⁶ 177th Circular to Central Committees, 14 January 1919, *RICR*, No. 2, February 1919, pp. 210–213.

⁴⁷ *RICR*, No. 16, April 1920, pp. 416–418; Renée-Marguerite Cramer, “Rapatriement des prisonniers de guerre centraux en Russie et en Sibérie et des prisonniers de guerre russes en Allemagne”, *RICR*, No. 17, May 1920, pp. 551–552.

RENÉE-MARGUERITE FRICK-CRAMER 1887–1963

Renée-Marguerite Cramer was born in Geneva on 28 December 1887 into a Protestant family that had lived in the city since the 17th century.

After studying law in Geneva and Paris, and obtaining a law degree, she switched to history and obtained a doctorate. In 1914, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Geneva's joining the Swiss Confederation, she published a work entitled *Genève et les Suisses, histoire des négociations préliminaires à l'entrée de Genève dans le corps helvétique, 1671-1792* (Geneva and the Swiss: The history of the negotiations leading to the entry of Geneva into Switzerland, 1671–1792).

Several of her close relatives were members of the ICRC, and she volunteered to work for the International Prisoners-of-War Agency as soon as it was established, in August 1914. She organized the Entente section, which she managed in conjunction



56. Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer, head of the Entente Department at the International Prisoners-of-War Agency.

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with Jacques Chenevière, and played a decisive role in setting up the procedures and working methods that enabled the Agency to fulfil its role, despite the constant increase in the number of requests. Because of her knowledge and her abilities, she accompanied several members of the Committee on missions abroad, notably to Paris, Berlin, Copenhagen and Stockholm, thereby becoming the first female delegate. At the request of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, she took part in the Franco-German negotiations that led to the agreements of 15 March and 26 April 1918 concerning prisoners of war and civilians. She was coopted onto the International Committee of the Red Cross on 27 November 1918, becoming its first female member.

In that capacity, she coordinated from Geneva the ICRC's efforts to repatriate prisoners following the Rethondes armistice of 11 November 1918. She also took part in the drafting of new and revised conventions that the ICRC was preparing in order to take advantage of the lessons of the Great War and to ensure more comprehensive legal protection for wounded military personnel, prisoners of war and civilians.

In 1920, she married Édouard Frick, former ICRC delegate to Russia and later delegate general for Eastern Europe.

However, Édouard Frick left the ICRC and moved first to Germany and then to Paris, so Frick-Cramer resigned from the Committee in December 1922, becoming an honorary member. This did not prevent her from following the drafting of new conventions. She and Professor Georges Werner together drafted the convention for the protection of prisoners of war that the 1929 diplomatic conference took as the basis for its work. She played an active role in that conference, which adopted the Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 17 July 1929, an instrument that was to ensure the protection of millions of prisoners during the Second World War.

Frick-Cramer also participated in the drafting of a convention for the protection of civilians and took part in the 15th International Conference of the Red Cross (Tokyo, 1934), which supported the draft. Sadly, the Second World War arrived before the "Tokyo draft" could receive the blessing of a diplomatic conference.

She returned to Geneva just before the Second World War and was re-elected to the Committee in September 1939. She once again devoted herself to organizing the Agency, took a particular interest in the protection of prisoners of war and civilians, and tried – in vain – to get the ICRC to commit itself more actively to the protection of civilians and to publicly condemn the persecutions they were suffering.

Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer resigned from the ICRC in October 1946 and was once again made an honorary member of the Committee. She died in Geneva on 22 October 1963.



57. Kowel, Poland.
Disinfestation point.
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V-P-HIST-01716-09A.

anti-Bolshevik armies. The only criterion for repatriation should be the prisoners' heartfelt wish, expressed everywhere, to return home.⁴⁸

The situation faced by German, Austro-Hungarian and Turkish prisoners of war captured on the Eastern Front and transferred to Siberia was far more alarming, and the Allies had postponed their repatriation until the peace treaties came into force. On 8 October 1919, the International Committee asked the Allied Supreme War Council to take urgent steps to bring these prisoners home,⁴⁹ but despite the assurances given,⁵⁰ nothing was done. The Committee reiterated its request on 22 November 1919,⁵¹ but it was not until 23 March 1920 that the Supreme Allied Council authorized the repatriation of all prisoners, whatever their nationality, who were still in Siberia.⁵² By then, however, the Allies no longer had any control over events in eastern Siberia, as the area had come under the authority of the Soviet government.

On 11 April 1920, the Council of the League of Nations appointed Dr Nansen as High Commissioner, to take overall responsibility for the repatriation of prisoners of war.⁵³

Finally, on 19 April 1920, Germany and the Soviet Government of Russia signed an agreement in Berlin covering the mutual repatriation of prisoners of war and interned

⁴⁸ *Rapport général 1912-1920*, p. 117.

⁴⁹ *RICR*, No. 11, November 1919, pp. 1348–1350.

⁵⁰ Note from the Secretary-General of the Peace Conference to the ICRC, 25 October 1919, *RICR*, No. 11, November 1919, p. 1350.

⁵¹ Note from the ICRC to the Allied Special Commission, 22 November 1919, *RICR*, No. 12, December 1919, pp. 1516–1518.

⁵² 193rd Circular to Central Committees, 8 April 1920, *RICR*, No. 16, April 1920, pp. 405–409, in particular p. 407.

⁵³ Note from the Secretary-General of the League of Nations to the ICRC, 28 April 1920, *RICR*, No. 17, May 1920, pp. 601–602.



58. Stettin, Germany (now Szczecin, Poland). Russian prisoners of war who are being repatriated via Narva.

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civilians. Article 9 of that agreement provided that “Both parties entrust the conduct of negotiations with such states as may be concerned in the passage of convoys to the International Red Cross at Geneva, which body shall also be responsible for the management and safety of the convoys during their passage through the territory of such states.” (Agreement between Germany and the Soviet Government of Russia, Berlin, 19 April 1920. *League of Nations Treaty Series*, Vol. II, pp 64–69).

Once the political obstacles had been removed, it was possible to get down to practical arrangements. The German, Austrian and Hungarian governments asked the ICRC to negotiate with the Soviet authorities for the return of all prisoners captured on the Eastern Front.⁵⁴ On 18 and 19 May 1920, Dr Nansen and representatives of the German, Austrian, Hungarian and Soviet governments met in Berlin, at the ICRC’s invitation, and procedures for the repatriation were established.⁵⁵

The operations were carried out mainly by sea, using three routes:

- Across the Baltic Sea, from Narva (Estonia) or Björkö (Finland) to Stettin (Germany)
- Through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, from Novorossiysk on the Black Sea to Trieste
- Via the Pacific, from Vladivostok to Trieste.⁵⁶

Other repatriations were carried out by train, via Lithuania, Latvia or Poland.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, p. 119; *RICR*, No. 36, December 1921, pp. 1197 and 1204; Renée-Marguerite Cramer, “Rapatriement des prisonniers de guerre centraux en Russie et en Sibirie et des prisonniers de guerre russes en Allemagne”, p. 532.

⁵⁵ *RICR*, No. 18, June 1920, pp. 721–722; No. 19, July 1920, pp. 838–840.

⁵⁶ *Rapport général du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge sur son activité de 1921 à 1923*, ICRC, Geneva, 1923, pp. 77–134.

⁵⁷ *RICR*, No. 16, April 1920, pp. 372–381 and 418–421; No. 20, August 1920, pp. 967–969; No. 26, February 1921, pp. 156–158.



59. Stettin. German prisoners of war arrive.

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The International Committee's role was to conduct the negotiations with the transit countries, draw up lists of returnees and supervise customs operations.⁵⁸ At the request of the Austrian and Hungarian governments, the ICRC's delegation in Vladivostok was also instructed to prepare identity documents to enable the prisoners to board ship.⁵⁹ The ICRC organized transit camps and disinfection centres, and chartered some of the transport needed,⁶⁰ the expenses being shared between the governments concerned, the ICRC and the League of Nations.

By the end of the operation, some 425,000 Austrian, German, Hungarian, Russian and Turkish prisoners had been repatriated under the auspices of the ICRC.⁶¹

⁵⁸ *RICR*, No. 16, April 1920, pp. 372–381 and 418–421; No. 17, May 1920, pp. 609–610; No. 23, November 1920, pp. 1189–1199; Agreement between Germany and the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic with regard to the mutual repatriation of prisoners of war and interned civilians, signed at Berlin on 19 April 1920, Article 9, *League of Nations, Treaty Series*, Vol. 2, pp. 64–69; Agreement between Germany and Latvia concerning the exchange of their respective prisoners, signed at Berlin on 20 April 1920, Article 7, *ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 72–77; Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer, *Repatriation of prisoners of war from the Eastern front after the war of 1914–1918*, ICRC, Geneva, 1944, p. 15.

⁵⁹ *RICR*, No. 17, May 1920, pp. 610–611; No. 36, December 1921, pp. 1210–1211; Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer, “Rapatriement des prisonniers de guerre centraux en Russie et en Sibirie et des prisonniers de guerre russes en Allemagne”, p. 550; Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer, *Repatriation of prisoners of war from the Eastern front after the war of 1914–1918*, pp. 18 and 30.

⁶⁰ *RICR*, No. 18, June 1920, pp. 725–728; Agreement between Germany and Hungary with regard to the through transport of their respective prisoners of war, signed at Berlin on 8 May 1920, Article 2, *League of Nations, Treaty Series*, Vol. 2, pp. 80–83.

⁶¹ *Rapport général du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge sur son activité de 1921 à 1923*, p. 132.

CHAPTER 7

The ICRC and the interpretation of international humanitarian law

One of the main problems encountered in the application of the Geneva Conventions of 1864 and 1906, and of the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, was that their terms were too general. Rather than laying down rules that could be applied directly, these Conventions established general principles, leaving their implementation to the goodwill of the contracting parties. This led to serious discrepancies in the treatment of prisoners, which provoked heated recriminations between the belligerents, who sought satisfaction through reprisals. The net result was that the whole framework of treaty-based protection risked breaking down because the law was too vague.

What could the International Committee do to help eliminate this threat?

It appears to have tried two approaches.

In concrete terms, the ICRC's visits to prison camps, the reports compiled by its delegates and the representations it made to the authorities helped to ensure some uniformity in the conditions of detention. The ICRC was well aware of the importance of this, hence its instructions in the spring of 1915 to its delegates in France and Germany (Carle de Marval and Arthur Eugster) to carry out a series of visits – together, to camps in both countries.¹ These joint visits provided an opportunity to create a point of comparison, with the aim of obtaining similar treatment for prisoners on both sides of the front.²

Should the International Committee also tackle the problem at a theoretical level, by offering the warring parties its own interpretation of the law?

It did so on a number of occasions, of which we shall mention but two.

- In its note dated 7 December 1914, addressed to all governments and communicated to National Societies, the ICRC set out what it judged to be the correct interpretation of articles in the Geneva Convention concerning the return of captured medical personnel. It listed the categories of people entitled to benefit from the Convention, together with the circumstances under which it was obligatory to repatriate medical personnel of the armed forces and Red Cross auxiliaries.³
- It issued a circular dated 15 January 1915, addressed to Central Committees and, through them, to the governments, entitled “Equality of treatment for military and

¹ Documents publiés à l’occasion de la guerre, third series, June 1915, pp. 26–56.

² *Idem*, p. 26.

³ *Bulletin international*, No. 181, January 1915, pp. 33–46; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 19–20.

civilian prisoners of war". In that circular, the ICRC proposed a set of practical measures that it felt would lead to a fair application of the Hague Convention respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land; it expressed the hope that its proposals would "lead to agreement between the belligerents on granting the same treatment to all prisoners of war".⁴

What was the legal status of the ICRC's opinions?

Certainly, interpretations of the Geneva and Hague Conventions issued by a body that had no arbitral or judicial authority could not be binding on the parties to the conflict. The ICRC's interpretation was no substitute for agreements between the belligerents that imposed obligations on the contracting States.⁵ Experience showed, however, that bilateral agreements were reached with great difficulty and only after considerable delay; it was not until 1917 and 1918 that the belligerents concluded detailed accords spelling out the practical implications of the principles enshrined in the Geneva and Hague Conventions.

So should we conclude that the ICRC's interpretation had no legal weight, because it was not legally binding? Not at all. By giving an independent opinion as to how the Conventions should be interpreted, the ICRC helped to narrow the differences between the parties. For governments that perceived some advantage to correcting disparities in the treatment of prisoners, the ICRC's proposals represented a point of convergence, and governments did not ignore the Committee's suggestion⁶.

Furthermore, in putting forward its own interpretations, the ICRC compelled the governments to take a position themselves and to say what practical measures they intended taking to apply the law. The governments' responses formed the starting-point for negotiations and marked out a certain common ground.

It is clear that, both by its legal interpretations and by practical steps such as visiting prison camps, the ICRC helped to overcome divergences between governments and to promote uniform application of the Geneva and Hague Conventions. Furthermore, the governments did not consider that the Committee had overstepped its authority – indeed, they often made reference to the ICRC's interpretations.

⁴ 163rd Circular to Central Committees, 15 January 1915, *Bulletin international*, No. 181, January 1915, pp. 5–8; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 21–23.

⁵ The ICRC was only too aware of its limitations in this respect, as shown by a comment in the *Bulletin international* on the Anglo-German agreement signed in The Hague on 2 July 1917:

"It is obvious that direct negotiations between governments, if they result in agreements and practical measures, are the most efficient way of improving the conditions of prisoners; they are worth far more than the statements and representations of neutral States or unofficial bodies, which have no power of enforcement". *Bulletin international*, No. 192, October 1917, p. 397.

⁶ The ICRC published the replies it received. Regarding the note of 7 December 1914, see *Bulletin international*, No. 182, April 1915, pp. 144–146; No. 183, July 1915, pp. 314–319; No. 184, October 1915, pp. 469–471. Regarding the Circular of 15 November 1915, see *Bulletin international*, No. 182, April 1915, pp. 203–208, 225–226 and 253–254; No. 183, July 1915, pp. 401–402.

CHAPTER 8

The ICRC and violations of international humanitarian law

Article 28 of the Geneva Convention of 6 July 1906 required the signatories to take measures under penal law to repress and punish breaches of the Convention within their respective jurisdictions.¹ Furthermore, Article 3 of Hague Convention IV Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land of 18 October 1907 stipulated that a belligerent had to pay compensation for breaches committed by its armed forces. This indicated the manner in which complaints regarding violations of the Convention should be handled at an international level, but it was unlikely that the principle thereby established would be applied during hostilities. As a result, neither the Geneva Convention nor the Hague Convention specified how complaints about violations should be dealt with during a conflict.

The International Committee therefore did as it had in the past: when a National Society or government sent it a complaint, the ICRC passed it on to the alleged wrongdoer and asked for an enquiry to be held; it then sent the plaintiff any resulting reply, explanation or apology.²

In assuming this task, the ICRC did not intend to pronounce on the material facts, which it had neither the wish nor the means to verify. But when passing on these communications, it did frequently remind both sides of the principles and provisions of the Geneva and Hague Conventions, and offered its interpretation of the law applicable to the case.

It also explained its policy on dealing with alleged violations, as for example in the dispute between Britain and Germany regarding the *Ophelia*:

We took this opportunity of stating, once again, that our Committee was unable to verify the facts – mostly contradictory – presented by the opposing parties, and that we had to content ourselves with asserting the principles, and with giving the interpretation that appears to us to be both legally and historically correct, of the provisions of the Geneva Convention, on the basis of the facts as presented. But at the same time we insisted strongly on our independence, and reserved our right to say categorically and

¹ Article 21 of Hague Convention X for the Adaptation to Maritime Warfare of the Principles of the Geneva Convention of 18 October 1907 introduced a similar rule.

² These exchanges were regularly published in the *Bulletin international des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge* and later in the *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*.

impartially that a certain occurrence or action or procedure seemed to us to be contrary to the intention of the international legislators and to the letter or spirit of the international agreements of 1906 and 1907; and this we would do irrespective of whether our opinion upheld one side or the other in the argument.³

So what were the aims of this procedure? The ICRC gave three reasons which, in its view, justified its practice of passing on complaints:

- (a) The complaints were a reminder in themselves of the existence of the treaty and of the desire of governments to abide by them and to benefit from them.
- (b) Passing on a protest gave the accused belligerent an opportunity of providing an explanation, of refuting the complaint or of apologizing.
- (c) An internal enquiry involving subordinates would serve as a reminder of the international rules in force and would draw the attention of the troops to the need to comply with them.⁴

However, the International Committee was forced to admit that the enquiries were not always carried out as thoroughly and in such good faith as might be hoped. In some cases, governments found that the simplest response was to make counter-accusations, rather than hold enquiries of which the results could have been damaging. In other instances, complaints were shelved and forgotten, despite reminders from the ICRC.⁵

Yet there could be a far more serious obstacle than the negligence of civil servants; while this procedure could indeed uncover misconduct by members of the armed forces, it presupposed a will on the part of the higher authorities to ensure that the provisions of the conventions were respected. If, therefore, the government itself deliberately decided to break the rules, it would be a waste of time passing on complaints from the adverse party and demanding an enquiry.

Was it necessary that the ICRC speak out in such cases?

It did so on a number of occasions. It is clear that the line between appealing for respect for the law and publicly denouncing a violation can be a fine one; the same can be said for the distinction between interpreting the law and condemning a failure to comply with it. However, even if one were to adopt the narrowest interpretation, there

³ *Bulletin international*, No. 186, April 1916, p. 172. Similarly, see *Bulletin international*, No. 183, July 1915, p. 309; No. 191, July 1917, pp. 266–267. The *Ophelia* was commissioned by the German navy as a hospital ship; she was captured on 18 October 1914 and condemned by the British prize court for having, in addition to her medical installations, the communications equipment and codes of a “signalling ship” used for military purposes. As one may imagine, the capture and condemnation of the *Ophelia* provoked indignant reactions in Germany.

⁴ *Bulletin international*, No. 196, October 1918, pp. 468–469.

⁵ *Bulletin international*, No. 194, April 1918, pp. 197–198.

were at least four public statements in which the ICRC's undoubted intention was to protest publicly against violations of the Conventions:⁶

- The appeal of 12 July 1916 to the belligerents and neutral countries regarding reprisals against prisoners of war⁷
- The note of 14 April 1917 to the German government concerning the torpedoing of hospital ships⁸
- The appeal to the belligerents of 21 January 1918 to close the "propaganda camps"⁹
- The appeal to the belligerents of 6 February 1918 condemning the use of poisonous gases.¹⁰

Two of these representations are of particular interest: the note to the German government regarding hospital ships and the appeal against the use of gas.

The torpedoing of hospital ships

During the first three years of the war, implementation of Hague Convention X had brought the same problems as implementation of the Geneva Convention, and the ICRC had handled complaints and protests regarding attacks on hospital ships in the same way as those regarding attacks on ambulances or field hospitals. Hague Convention X was seen as an extension of the Geneva Convention, so nobody was surprised to see the ICRC take an interest in its implementation. In most cases, belligerents accused of attacking hospital ships put the blame on identification errors or the absence of notification.

⁶ We have not counted the ICRC's protest against the dismissal of the Central Committee of the Belgian Red Cross (164th Circular to Central Committees, 8 May 1915) and the appeal regarding the Russian Red Cross of 6 May 1918, as these were protests against attacks on the principles of the Red Cross and threats to its existence, rather than against breaches of a convention. *Bulletin international*, No. 183, July 1915, pp. 275–295; No. 195, July 1918, pp. 446–448; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 25–27.

⁷ *Bulletin international*, No. 187, July 1916, pp. 266–268; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 39–41.

⁸ *Bulletin international*, No. 190, April 1917, pp. 140–142; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 43–44.

⁹ *Bulletin international*, No. 194, April 1918, pp. 183–185; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 71–72. The belligerents on both sides attempted to turn prisoners of war belonging to minorities and induce them to change sides (e.g. in the case of soldiers from Alsace or Lorraine serving in the German army, Poles serving in the Russian army, etc.). As the war continued, and military manpower became scarce, the belligerents put this category of prisoner in special camps, where they were subjected to intense propaganda. Those who appeared disposed to change sides received favourable treatment, while those who did not were subject to particularly severe regimes, accompanied by all sorts of victimization and ill-treatment.

¹⁰ *Bulletin international*, No. 194, April 1918, pp. 185–192; positions of the various governments, *idem*, pp. 188–192, No. 195, July 1918, pp. 312–316; No. 196, October 1918, pp. 461–464; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 73–78; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 89–96.



60. HMHS Llandoverly Castle. This hospital ship was torpedoed on 27 June 1918.

Photographer unknown. Source: Wikipedia, "HMHS Llandoverly Castle", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMHS_Llandoverly_Castle.

But that all changed dramatically in January 1917. The German government claimed that the British government had misused hospital ships to carry troops, munitions and military stores. In its note of 29 January 1917, addressed to the British and French governments via the United States and Spain,¹¹ Germany announced that henceforth its submarines would attack without warning any hospital ship they encountered in the English Channel or the North Sea.

In other words, the German government was openly announcing its intention of breaching a treaty to which it was party.

Several hospital ships were sunk in the succeeding months.

In a note to the German government dated 14 April 1917, and made public a few days later, the ICRC unhesitatingly rejected Germany's arguments, emphasized that torpedoing a hospital ship was an attack, not on combatants, but on defenceless people, stated that even if the facts that Germany adduced in attempting to justify its order were true, nothing would excuse the torpedoing of a hospital ship and called on the German government to ensure that this order was not carried out in future.¹²

In its note of 17 August 1917, the German government reiterated its previous claims regarding misuse of hospital ships by the British and French governments and stated once again that this misuse justified the interdiction measures ordered by Germany and the torpedoing of any hospital ships that entered the exclusion zones.¹³ While stating that it did not intend to make any pronouncement regarding facts that it was in no position to verify, the ICRC reiterated in its note of 22 September 1917 that

¹¹ The United States was responsible for representing British interests in Germany, while Spain was protecting those of France.

¹² "Torpillage des navires-hôpitaux, note au gouvernement allemand, 14 avril 1917", *Bulletin international*, No. 190, April 1917, pp. 140–142; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 43–44. The ICRC supported its approach by publishing a study of the facts and of the law concerning the torpedoing of hospital ships. *Bulletin international*, No. 191, July 1917, pp. 223–236; Paul Des Gouttes, "Le torpillage des navires-hôpitaux par l'Allemagne", *Revue générale de Droit international public*, Vol. XXIV, 1917, pp. 469–486.

¹³ *Bulletin international*, No. 192, October 1917, pp. 384–386.

the misuse alleged by Germany – even if it had taken place – could not justify the torpedoing of hospital ships.¹⁴

The Allies' protests and reprisals having had no effect, the French government offered to demonstrate its good faith by submitting all hospital ships sailing under the French flag to inspection by neutral commissioners, who would be free to remain on board and to monitor both embarkation and disembarkation. Paris requested the International Committee to nominate one of its members to visit the Entente's hospital ships and verify that they were complying with the provisions of Hague Convention X.¹⁵ Eventually, France, the United Kingdom and Germany agreed to entrust the task of inspecting hospital ships in the Mediterranean to Spain, the protecting power handling French interests. Officers of the Spanish Royal Navy travelled on board Allied hospital ships, and no further attacks took place.¹⁶ However, despite prolonged negotiations, no similar agreement was reached concerning the Atlantic, the Channel or the North Sea, and several hospital ships were sunk with all hands.¹⁷

Gas

Of all the violations of the laws and customs of war committed during the First World War, the use of gas prompted the strongest reactions. Gas was first used on 3 January 1915 on the Eastern Front and on 22 April 1915 on the Western Front. The first attack using a blister agent ("mustard gas") took place on 11 July 1917 in the area of Ypres, in Flanders.¹⁸ While gas caused far fewer casualties than machine guns or artillery, there was something particularly vile, perfidious and terrifying about this weapon. Not only did gas inflict terrible suffering on the troops affected, but it also made any form of life impossible wherever it was used. Furthermore, it contravened

¹⁴ *Bulletin international*, No. 192, October 1917, pp. 386–388.

¹⁵ *Bulletin international*, No. 190, April 1917, p. 145.

¹⁶ *Bulletin international*, No. 192, October 1917, pp. 389–390.

¹⁷ J. Galloy, *L'inviolabilité des navires-hôpitaux et l'expérience de la guerre 1914-1918*, Sirey, Paris, 1931, pp. 103–129.

¹⁸ At the time, each side claimed that the other had been the first to use gas, and each side claimed to have merely responded to the actions of the other. Today, it is generally accepted that the German army was the first to use gas. (John Keegan, *The First World War*, Hutchinson, London, 1998, pp. 213–215; Pierre Renouvin, *La crise européenne et la Première Guerre mondiale*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, (Collection: Peuples et civilisations, vol. XIX), 5th edition, 1969, p. 298; Wikipedia in German, "Gaskrieg während des Ersten Weltkrieges", consulted on 6 June 2016). Herfried Münkler writes that the French army had attempted to use munitions containing tear gas in autumn 1914, but that they had quickly abandoned these experiments because this type of gas was ineffective on the battlefield. However, he also cites documents and eye-witness accounts indicating that the German High Command was the first to use asphyxiating gas. Naturally, as soon as one belligerent used gas, the others followed suit. (Herfried Münkler, *Der grosse Krieg, Die Welt 1914-1918*, 4th edition, Rowohlt, Berlin, 2014, pp. 389–399).

the prohibition of poisoned weapons, which appeared to date from the dawn of time and which had been solemnly reaffirmed by the 1899 and 1907 Peace Conferences.

As one might expect, both sides took advantage of these attacks in the propaganda war.

The ICRC, however, waited until 1918 before raising its voice. In its “Appeal against the use of poison gas” of 6 February 1918, the ICRC condemned “a barbarous innovation which science is in the course of perfecting, that is, making it more murderous and more refined in its cruelty.” The Committee stressed “the terrible suffering caused by these gases, which is more harrowing to see than that resulting from the worst of wounds.” Faced with the prospect of new attacks on a scale far greater than before, the members of the ICRC solemnly declared: “We protest with all the strength of our being against this method of warfare, which we can only describe as criminal.” After reiterating the prohibitions set out in the Hague Conventions, the ICRC pointed out that a belligerent who resorted to chemical weapons forced his enemy to do likewise, and demanded “a ban on this appalling method of waging war,” and called on “the Sovereigns, the Governments and the generals, first of all, and then upon the nations now ranged against one another” to ensure the drawing up of “an immediate agreement which the various armies must undertake to observe faithfully.”¹⁹

As one may imagine, this appeal dragged the ICRC into the propaganda war in which the two coalitions were engaged. Accusing the Entente of being first to use gas, the German press criticized the ICRC for condemning chemical weapons just when Germany had acquired clear superiority in this area. It claimed that the ICRC had issued its appeal under pressure from the Entente, with a view to protecting the French forces as Germany prepared to launch a decisive attack on the Western Front.²⁰

Meanwhile, the British press criticized the ICRC for having remained silent when Germany had been the first to use chemical weapons in 1915 and for calling for a ban on these weapons just when the British had acquired a superior position regarding the production and use of them, and in countermeasures. As far as the British press was concerned, the ICRC’s appeal was further proof of the degree to which Germanic influence had penetrated Switzerland.²¹

“We were therefore being attacked from both sides. Each accused us of working for the other. We could not have wished for a more striking affirmation of our neutrality,” observed the ICRC, philosophically.²²

¹⁹ “Appeal against the use of poisonous gases”, 6 February 1918. French original: *Bulletin international*, No. 194, April 1918, pp. 185–192. English version: <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/statement/57jnhq.htm>; government responses: *Bulletin international*, No. 194, April 1918, pp. 188–192; No. 195, July 1918, pp. 312–316; No. 196, October 1918, pp. 461–464; *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 73–78; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 89–96.

²⁰ *Bulletin international*, No. 194, April 1918, p. 189. On 21 March 1918, the German army indeed launched an offensive on the Western Front more intensive than any that had preceded it.

²¹ *Bulletin international*, No. 194, April 1918, p. 189; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, p. 93.

²² *Bulletin international*, No. 194, April 1918, p. 189.



61. Soldiers open gas containers, releasing poison gas.

Photographer unknown. German Federal Archives, Bild 183-F0313-0208-007.

In retrospect, it is perhaps surprising that the ICRC waited over three years after the first chemical attack before condemning the use of such weapons, and that it chose this precise moment to do so.

One can readily understand, however, that the ICRC had previously been of the opinion that it was not qualified to pronounce on a matter related to the law of the conduct of hostilities and which involved breaches of conventions in the adoption of which it had played no part. The timing can be explained by the fact that the “winter break” was ending and new offensives were about to begin. In all countries, 1917 had revealed the extent to which both combatants and the civilian population were worn out by the war; it came to be known, particularly in French historiography, as the *fatigue des peuples* or “fatigue of the peoples”, with strikes and mutinies revealing the extent to which armies and civilians alike were tired of this murderous and exhausting war, to which no end was yet in sight. The October Revolution had been a warning as to what this fatigue could bring. The governments were in a hurry to end the war. Everybody expected that the belligerents would launch major offensives in 1918, in an effort to decide the outcome of the war, and that they would stop at nothing to achieve victory.

Releasing large quantities of gas would threaten not only the combatants but also the civilian populations. The Committee had consulted an eminent professor of chemistry, who had confirmed its own fears.²³ Issuing the appeal pre-emptively made it appear less accusatory than if it had been published immediately after large-scale use of gas.

In their response of 8 May 1918, the governments of the Entente nations, while accusing Germany of being the first to have used gas, welcomed the ICRC's initiative and expressed their willingness to examine a proposal for a ban on chemical weapons, on condition that suitable guarantees could be provided.²⁴

The German reply did not reach the ICRC until 12 September 1918. After accusing the Entente of being responsible for the use of chemical weapons, the Imperial government declared that it would make no proposal of the sort that the ICRC was advocating, but would examine carefully any proposals from its enemies that it might receive. This implicitly excluded considering any proposals from the ICRC itself.²⁵

But by this time, the outcome of the war was clear. Following the Second Battle of the Marne (14–16 July 1918) and above all following the Franco-British victory of 8 August 1918, there was no longer any doubt as to how the war would end. The time had passed for agreements on the conduct of hostilities. "The delay in the German response has made it impossible for the International Committee to present to the belligerents a proposal for preventing the use of gas. This question, along with others, will have to be examined at a diplomatic conference to once again decide the laws of war" stated the ICRC in November 1918, following the signing of the Armistice of Rethondes.²⁶

In other words, the ICRC's actions had not stopped the use of chemical weapons, and the governments' reactions had attempted to justify their use rather than indicate a willingness to agree to a ban. Nonetheless, neither the Entente nations nor Germany had contested the ICRC's right to issue an appeal on the subject. The appeal of 6 February 1918 had therefore indirectly prompted a certain recognition of the ICRC's competence regarding the law of the conduct of hostilities.

As soon as the war was over, the ICRC called on the States to restore and extend this area of law. In a letter to the president and members of the First Assembly of the League of Nations dated 22 November 1920, the ICRC requested the adoption of a series of measures intended to render war less inhumane, notably "the limitation of aerial warfare to strictly military objectives", "an absolute prohibition of asphyxiating gas [...]", "the prohibition of bombing or shelling cities that are open or not defended", and "the prohibition of deportations of civilians".²⁷

²³ André Durand, *History of the ICRC*, Vol. II, p. 92.

²⁴ *Bulletin international*, No. 195, July 1918, pp. 312–316: *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 76–77.

²⁵ *Bulletin international*, No. 196, October 1918, pp. 461–464: *Actes du Comité international*, pp. 77–78.

²⁶ *Actes du Comité international*, p. 78.

²⁷ "Limitation de la guerre, Lettre du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge à l'Assemblée de la Société des Nations", ICRC Archives, file B CR 82, reproduced in the *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, No. 24, December 1920, pp. 1348–1349.

In parallel, the ICRC raised these questions at the 10th International Conference of the Red Cross (Geneva, 30 March–7 April 1921). The Conference had no hesitation in approving the ICRC's proposals and demanded, in particular, "the absolute prohibition of the use of gas as a method of warfare".²⁸

The ICRC continued its efforts to obtain a ban on chemical weapons, especially after the Washington conference on arms limitations.²⁹

Ultimately, it was the Conference for the Supervision of the International Trade in Arms and Ammunition and in Implements of War (Geneva, 4 May–17 June 1925) that restored the prohibition of poisoned weapons by adopting the Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare of 17 June 1925.³⁰ As far as we are aware, the ICRC took no direct part in this final phase of the negotiations.³¹ Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that by its appeals, by its representations to the governments and by mobilizing public opinion, the ICRC had opened the way for the adoption of the Protocol.³² One dare not imagine the situation in the Second World War if this treaty had not existed.

These public communications allow us to identify the ICRC's policy on reacting to breaches of the Geneva and Hague Conventions: as a general rule, the Committee restricted itself to passing on the complaints it received without commenting on the alleged facts, but with a reminder of the law applicable in such circumstances. It took a stance only when it was confronted with incontrovertible and exceptionally serious facts arising from a deliberate decision by a government, facts that were likely to jeopardize the entire system of protection afforded by the Conventions.

²⁸ Resolution XII, *Dixième Conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge réunie à Genève du 30 mars au 7 avril 1921, Compte rendu*, ICRC, Geneva, 1921, pp. 142–144 and 216.

²⁹ Letter from Gustave Ador to US Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes, 16 February 1922, reproduced in the *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, No. 38, February 1922, pp. 161–162.

³⁰ Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare, signed at Geneva, 17 June 1925, *Journal officiel de la Société des Nations*, No. 8, 1925, pp. 1158–1167; *League of Nations Treaty Series*, Vol. 94, pp. 65–74; *The Laws of Armed Conflicts*, pp. 105–123; *Handbook of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, p. 348.

³¹ "Protocole de 1925", note for the record by Isabelle Vonèche Cardia, 26 April 2001, ICRC Archives, file 141.2–1.

³² "... the ICRC, in 1917, took the lead in a movement of opinion which was to lead to a protocol, known as the Geneva Protocol of 17 June 1925, prohibiting the use of chemical and bacteriological weapons." André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, p. 262; see also pp. 89–96. André Durand is probably mistaken when he writes "1917", given that the ICRC's appeal against the use of poison gas is dated 6 February 1918, and that we have no knowledge of any public action on this question prior to that date. On the other hand, André Durand is right to point out that this appeal was aimed as much at the public as it was at governments. This marked a departure from the ICRC's *modus operandi* and underlines the exceptional nature of the appeal.



62. 10 April 1918. Gas casualties, 55th Division, British Army.

Photographer: Second Lieutenant Thomas Keith Aitken. © Imperial War Museum.

But how effective were these protests? They certainly did not put a stop to reprisals against prisoners of war,³³ or the torpedoing of hospital ships, or the existence of propaganda camps, much less the use of poison gas. The ICRC was under no illusions about the practical effects of its interventions.

Nevertheless, they had helped recall the existence of the rules protecting the victims of war, highlight the breaches of those rules that were taking place and condemn those breaches as breaches, even if both sides were guilty, as was the case for chemical

³³ The French government replied to the appeal of 12 July 1916 by proposing that all planned reprisal measures be notified to the Protecting Power, followed by a period of four weeks during which the belligerents might be able to come to terms and thereby avert implementation of the measures announced. (*Bulletin international*, No. 188, October 1916, p. 405; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 80–82.) Negotiations followed, before the proposal was adopted in the agreements of 1917 and 1918. (Anglo-German agreement of 2 July 1917, Chapter 9, Article 20, *Bulletin international*, No. 192, October 1917, p. 445; Protocol of the Copenhagen Conference, 2 November 1917 (Austria-Hungary, Germany, Ottoman Empire, Romania, Russia), Chapter 14, Article 9, *Bulletin international*, No. 193, January 1918, p. 133; Franco-German agreement signed in Bern on 26 April 1918, Article 42, *Bulletin international*, No. 195, July 1918, pp. 411–412. Article 21 of the Anglo-Ottoman agreement signed in Bern on 28 December 1917 allowed for a period of eight weeks, *Bulletin international*, No. 195, July 1918, p. 435. Article 182 of the agreement between Germany and the United States signed in Bern on 11 November 1918 allowed a period of 40 days, *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 13, 1919, Supplement, p. 52.)

weapons. The ICRC's efforts therefore helped to prevent repeated breaches leading to acceptance of a new rule that would legitimize such violations once they became standard practice. The ICRC's actions during the war paved the way for the restoration of humanitarian rules once the war was over, as happened with the Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare of 17 June 1925 and the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 27 July 1929, which was to be a life-raft for millions of prisoners during the Second World War.³⁴

³⁴ Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 27 July 1929, *Actes de la Conférence diplomatique convoquée par le Conseil fédéral suisse pour la révision de la Convention du 6 juillet 1906 pour l'amélioration du sort des blessés et malades dans les armées en campagne et pour l'élaboration d'une convention relative au traitement des prisonniers de guerre, réunie à Genève du 1er au 27 juillet 1929*, Imprimerie du Journal de Genève, Geneva, 1930, pp. 681–724; De Martens, *Nouveau Recueil général de Traités*, third series, Vol. XXX, pp. 846–881; *League of Nations Treaty Series*, Vol. 118, pp. 343–411; *The Laws of Armed Conflicts*, pp. 421–444.

CHAPTER 9

The ICRC and the challenges of the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War (1917–1921)

Russia was the only major European power to have maintained an absolute monarchy right up to the start of the 20th century. But its basis had been eroded by economic and social changes; the defeat in Manchuria and the 1905 Revolution had exposed the weaknesses of the regime.¹ However, the government's response to calls for reform was to clamp down more firmly than ever.

It was this empire, undermined by nationalist demands and social tension, which had to face the challenges of the First World War. The early defeats at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes, together with the efforts to reverse the military situation, were to impose enormous sacrifices on the Russian people, sacrifices that were all the more painful because the nation was divided.² As the ultimate source of authority, the Tsar was blamed for his government's incompetence, the economic crisis and the disasters on the battlefield. In March 1917, violent riots over food shortages broke out in Petrograd,³ with troops joining the mob. Nicholas II abdicated in the night of 15–16 March.⁴

A Provisional Government, led first by Prince Lvov and then by a lawyer, Alexander Kerensky, attempted to reorganize the country and stage a military recovery, but to

¹ At the beginning of 1904, the competing ambitions of the Russian Empire and Japan in the Far East led to war breaking out between the two countries. The Russian forces were defeated on land and at sea, and Russia's main fortress in Manchuria – Port Arthur – surrendered on 2 January 1905 after a ten-month siege. These defeats undermined the authority of the regime. On Sunday 22 January 1905, when workers came to demand that the Tsar correct the terrible injustices being perpetrated upon them, the army and police opened fire on demonstrators in front of the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg. Officially, 130 were killed, but the true figure was over 1,000, and as many again were injured. This “Bloody Sunday” caused an irreversible schism between the monarchy and the working class.

² To reduce the pressure on France, which was bearing the full weight of the war against Germany practically alone, the Russian First and Second Armies entered East Prussia in mid-August, even though the Russian army was far from fully mobilized. Together, these two armies were far larger than the German Eighth Army, which was covering Germany's eastern border, but they were too far apart to provide each other with mutual support. They were defeated at the Battle of Tannenberg (27–30 August 1914) and the first Battle of the Masurian Lakes (9–14 September 1914).

³ This corresponds to 23–27 February in the Julian calendar (also known as Old Style, and hereinafter as OS), which is why Russian historiography refers to these events as the “February Revolution”.

⁴ 2 March 1917, OS.



63. Petrograd, Russia, February 1917. Workers from the Putilov Mill demonstrate on the first day of the February Revolution. Photographer unknown. © State Museum of Political History of Russia.



64. Nevsky Prospect, Petrograd, Russia, 4 July 1917. Demonstrators flee as troops of the Provisional Government open fire. Photographer: Viktor Bulla. Source: Wikipedia, "February Revolution", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/February_Revolution.

no avail. The old order was collapsing under the revolutionary onslaught unleashed by the downfall of the Romanovs.

Lenin fanned the flames of revolution from Switzerland, where he was living in exile. Immediately after the Tsar's abdication, Lenin returned to Petrograd and took control of the Bolshevik Party. A new power emerged to challenge the authority of the Provisional Government; the Soviets of workers and soldiers. In October 1917, the Petrograd Soviet ordered an armed insurrection, which overthrew the government on 7 November (25 October OS).

The new authorities acted swiftly: agrarian reform (9 November) was followed by workers' control of the factories (14 November), the Decree on Nationalities (15 November), etc. Though these measures initially had little more than symbolic impact, they were evidence of the profound changes that had occurred. This was no mere transfer of power – it was a complete overturning of economic and social conditions.

But the most urgent priority was peace. The army, wracked by doubt, indiscipline and desertion, was on the verge of collapse. The publication of the Decree on Peace, on 9 November, made clear the Soviet authorities' intention to secure peace without annexations or indemnities. It also confirmed their wish to withdraw from the conflict as soon as possible, a move that presaged the end of the Entente with Britain and France. On 26 November, the government called for an armistice, which was agreed on 15 December 1917. Negotiations with Germany stalled, and fighting broke out again on 18 February 1918, but peace was finally concluded at Brest-Litovsk on 3 March.

Meanwhile, the whole edifice of the old imperial State was falling apart. Secessionist movements sprang up in Finland, the Baltic States, Poland, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and elsewhere, while at the same time counter-revolutionary forces were gathering strength. The new Soviet authorities were soon faced with armed insurrection all along the periphery of the former empire; civil war was superseding the international war.

Would the Armistice of Rethondes (11 November 1918) determine the outcome of the Civil War? After their victory over the Central Powers, several Allied leaders gave serious thought to crushing the Russian Revolution and thereby suppressing a "source of infection" that threatened the whole of Europe. Britain and France landed troops in northern Russia and Ukraine, while the Japanese occupied Vladivostok and part of Siberia. The Soviets were assailed from all sides: by the troops of General Yudenich in the north, Generals Denikin and Wrangel in the south, Petliura in Ukraine, and Admiral Kolchak and the Czechoslovak Legion in the Urals.

The Western Powers were unable to sustain a costly and prolonged war, and withdrew their forces after a few months, having failed to affect the course of events. Deprived of this support, and incapable of coordinating their operations or winning popular support, the White armies were defeated one by one. Resistance collapsed in southern Russia in November 1920 and in Siberia the following year.

But the end of the fighting did not mean the end of the suffering. A terrible famine swept through the country, already ravaged by seven years of international and civil war, while refugees flooded into eastern Europe, Turkey, Persia and China.

The Civil War took place in a country the size of a continent and gave rise to an upsurge of violence that can be explained only by intense class hatred that had festered for generations. It posed new problems for the International Committee, problems for which it was ill-equipped to find solutions, both legally and at the practical level, as the Committee had no resources of its own and could only channel relief supplies provided by others at their own discretion.

However, the Committee could hardly shut its eyes to a conflict that was causing countless victims – and which had to be seen as an extension of the Great War.

What options did it have?

Legally speaking, the International Committee had no mandate to intervene in a civil war. The law of war emanated from the confrontation on the battlefield between two sovereigns equal before the law, i.e. between two States.⁵ Hitherto, these had been customary rules with which sovereigns would comply when dealing with their peers, but which they firmly refused to observe in case of civil war, rulers reserving the right to apply the full force of criminal law to any of their subjects who revolted.⁶ Likewise, the Geneva Conventions of 1864 and 1906, and the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, applied only to relations between the contracting Parties, i.e. the States. None of their provisions applied in cases of civil war. The American Red Cross did submit an important report regarding the role of the Red Cross in cases of civil war to the 9th International Conference of the Red Cross (Washington, May 1912) but consideration of the report came to a rapid halt, as the representative of the Russian government vehemently opposed even discussing the document.⁷ As a result, the ICRC could not cite any treaty rules or resolution of an International Conference of the Red Cross as justification for taking action during the Russian Civil War.

Furthermore, the ICRC was not represented in Russia, any more than in the other belligerent States. But it happened that Édouard Odier, the Committee's vice-president, had been Swiss minister in Saint Petersburg/Petrograd since 1906.⁸

⁵ “The law of war, as a system of legal rules, originates in the customs established to regulate the relations, on the battlefield, between two entities equal before the law”, Jean Siotis, *Le Droit de la Guerre et les Conflits armés d'un Caractère non-international*, Librairie générale de Droit et de Jurisprudence, Paris, 1958, p. 53.

⁶ Vattel gives examples: Emer de Vattel, *Le Droit des Gens, Ou principes de la loi naturelle appliqués à la conduite et aux affaires des Nations et des Souverains*, Slatkine Reprints and Institut Henry-Dunant, Geneva, 1983, 2 volumes (facsimile of the original edition published in London in 1758), Vol. II, pp. 238–248; English translation: *The Law of Nations or the Principles of Natural Law Applied to the Conduct and the Affairs of nations and of Sovereigns*, Translation of the 1758 edition by Charles G. Fenwick, with an introduction by Albert de Lapradelle, reprint of the 1916 edition (Washington, The Classics of International Law), Slatkine Reprints and Institut Henry-Dunant, Geneva, 1983, pp. 336–340.

⁷ *Neuvième Conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge tenue à Washington du 7 au 17 mai 1912, Compte rendu*, pp. 40, 45–49, 60–61, 197 and 199–208.

⁸ Édouard Odier had been Secretary General of the 7th International Conference of the Red Cross (Saint Petersburg, May 1902) before becoming Swiss minister in Russia in 1906. Switzerland gave the



65. Eastern Front, December 1917. German and Russian soldiers fraternize the lines following the signing of the armistice between Russia and the Central Powers at Brest Litovsk on 15 December 1917. Photographer unknown. German Federal Archives, Bild 183-S10394.



66. Siberia, Russia. End of the civil war. Refugees prepare to flee their country on railway flat wagons. Photographer unknown. Source: Wikipedia, “Russian Civil War”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Civil_War.

Alarmed by the collapse of the Russian Red Cross in the spring of 1918, Odier took the initiative of appointing Édouard Frick as ICRC delegate. Frick was a Swiss citizen, born in Saint Petersburg and living in Russia, where he worked as a private tutor. He had been a volunteer with the Russian Red Cross since December 1914.⁹

The Committee confirmed the appointment on 7 May 1918, giving its delegate instructions that allowed him considerable freedom of action:

The essential purpose of the mandate we entrust to you is to help the Red Cross of Russia, so that the humanitarian activities protected by the Geneva Red Cross may continue there, despite the changes which have occurred in the country. But we cannot venture to specify in any way the form this mandate should take.¹⁰

The new delegate’s first concern was to try to preserve what remained of the Red Cross in Russia.

heads of its representations abroad the title of “minister”, maintaining that the title of “ambassador” was reserved for the representatives of crowned heads.

⁹ Letter from Mr Odier to the ICRC, 2/15 April 1918, ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.5.

¹⁰ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, p. 187.

Founded in 1867, the Russian Red Cross had grown remarkably. From the outbreak of the First World War, it had run a network of dispensaries and hospitals, together with hospital ships and trains. It had a large staff and many warehouses. But it also suffered from the same defects as the imperial administration: inefficiency, corruption and nepotism. Furthermore, it was controlled by the aristocracy. After the Tsar's abdication, the Society's leaders were replaced by people who knew little about its workings. Like all institutions at the time, it soon began to crumble; its employees fled and its warehouses were ransacked. In the border regions, local branches were reconstituted as independent Societies. Just like the empire itself, the Russian Red Cross was falling apart.¹¹

After the October Revolution, the Central Directorate of the Red Cross fell out with the new Soviet authorities. By a decree dated 6 January 1918, the Council of People's Commissars confiscated the assets of the Red Cross, handed them over to the Russian Republic, abolished the central administrative committee and created a Reorganization Committee that was to submit a plan for reorganizing the Society.¹² Several members of the Central Directorate were arrested, and the head of the Prisoners Commission was assassinated.¹³

The consequences soon made themselves felt. After fighting broke out again on 18 February 1918, the Central Powers promptly seized all Red Cross property their troops could lay their hands on: as it now belonged to the State, they saw it as part of the spoils of war. Many hospitals, trains and ships were lost in this way. It would appear that the Reorganization Committee's main concerns were to dismiss the staff and sell off the Society's assets.¹⁴

By stressing the international nature and role of the Red Cross, Édouard Frick managed to convince the new leaders of the need to preserve what was left of the Russian Red Cross.¹⁵ He achieved a first success in the form of a decree, promulgated on 3 May 1918 and supplementing that of 6 January 1918, which declared that the Russian Red Cross "as part of the international association of the Red Cross, of which the activities are based on the Geneva Conventions of 1864 and 1907, is not dissolved," and that "all the prerogatives of the Russian Red Cross, as part of the international Society of the Red Cross, are maintained."¹⁶

But this was only a first step.

¹¹ Édouard Frick's mission report, 1 November 1918, pp. 2–3, ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.5; Jiri Toman, *La Russie et la Croix-Rouge (1917-1945)*, Institut Henry-Dunant, Geneva, 1997, pp. 6–8.

¹² Decree of 6 January 1918, French translation: ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.5; Jiri Toman, *La Russie et la Croix-Rouge (1917-1945)*, pp. 8–15. The "Council of People's Commissars" was the name of the Russian government immediately after the October Revolution.

¹³ *Bulletin international*, No. 194, April 1918, p. 298.

¹⁴ Report by Édouard Frick to Édouard Odier, undated, attached to the letter of 2/15 April 1918 from Édouard Odier to the ICRC, ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.5.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

¹⁶ Decree of 3 May (20 April OS) 1918. [ICRC translation from French] Letter from the Council for the Administration of the Russian Red Cross to the ICRC representative at Petrograd, undated, ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.5; Jiri Toman, *La Russie et la Croix-Rouge*, pp. 16–17.

The ICRC wrote to the People's Commissar for War on 6 May 1918 to protest against the abolition of the central administration of the Russian Red Cross and the seizure of the Society's assets.¹⁷

After further talks with the Society's Council and the government, Édouard Frick was invited to join a commission set up to draft a decree on the reorganization of the Russian Red Cross and its position within the international Red Cross movement.¹⁸ It seems that the draft proposed by Frick was used as the basis for the decree of 2 June 1918, which is reproduced here in full:

The Council of People's Commissars of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic informs the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva and the Governments that have acceded to the Geneva Convention, that this Convention in its first version and in all subsequent versions, and all other international conventions and agreements relating to the Red Cross to which Russia adhered before October 1917, are recognized and will be respected by the Russian Soviet Government, which retains all rights and prerogatives based on the said conventions and agreements.

As a result of the changes that have taken place in the organization of the Red Cross, details of which will be communicated at a later date to the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Russian Government deems it necessary to bring to the attention of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the governments of the States that have adhered to the Geneva Convention that the supreme body of all Russian Red Cross organizations is the Committee for the Reorganization of the Russian Red Cross Society, of which the offices are situated at Armyanskiy Pereulok, dom 3, Moscow.

The Russian government has assigned to this Committee all duties related to the functions of the Red Cross, together with all rights and prerogatives based on the Geneva Convention and other international agreements.

At the present time, following the conclusion of peace, the main task of the Russian Red Cross is to help prisoners of war; both Russian prisoners in Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey, and German, Austro-Hungarian and Turkish prisoners in Russia.

To this end, the Russian government has instructed the Russian Red Cross Society to devote all the energy and means at its disposal to assisting prisoners of war.

The Moscow Committee for Assistance to Prisoners of War, of which the offices are situated at Krasnaya ploshchad', Srednie torgovie riady 302, Moscow, and which is part of the Russian Red Cross Society, has not ceased its work of assisting Russian prisoners of war abroad, and continues to enjoy all rights and prerogatives granted by international conventions and special agreements to the Red Cross, and continues to carry out all the functions that it carried out previously. It has been specifically instructed by the Russian government and the Committee of the Russian Red Cross Society to devote all its energy to helping Russian prisoners of war abroad, and enjoys the greatest autonomy

¹⁷ Appeal of the International Committee on behalf of the Russian Red Cross, 6 May 1918, *Bulletin international*, No. 195, July 1918, pp. 446–448.

¹⁸ Letter from Édouard Frick to the ICRC, 11 July 1918, ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.5.



67. Russia, 1921–1923. Famine.
© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer
unknown, V-P-HIST-01312-21.



68. Russia, 1921–1923. Famine.
© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer
unknown, V-P-HIST-02591-34A.



69. Russia, 1921–1923. Famine.
© ICRC Archives (ARR), photographer
unknown, V-P-HIST-01107-18.

in this respect. The Russian Government and the Russian Red Cross Society request the International Committee of Geneva, all governments that have adhered to the Geneva Convention and all existing Red Cross Societies to provide every assistance to this Committee.

The Russian Government, convinced of the exceptional importance of the question of prisoners of war, considers it necessary to inform the governments and organizations concerned that it has created a special body entitled the “Central Commission for Prisoners of War and Refugees” (Balshaya Nikitskaya 43, Moscow), empowered to exercise all government functions relating to prisoners of war, civilian prisoners and refugees.¹⁹

We should not underestimate the importance of this decree, apparently drafted by Édouard Frick and signed by Vladimir Ulyanov (Lénin), president of the Council of People’s Commissars, and G.V. Chicherin, People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs. At a time when the Soviet government was denouncing all political, economic and military treaties concluded by the imperial government, it nevertheless recognized the immutability of its humanitarian commitments and demonstrated its intention to remain a member of the international community of the Red Cross, thereby underlining the universality of the Movement’s Fundamental Principles.²⁰

For the time being, the decree guaranteed the existence of a Red Cross Society in Russia – but that Society had to be completely reorganized.

To this end, Frick brought together members of the Reorganization Committee, together with representatives of the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish Red Cross Societies, which had large delegations in Russia, in an ad hoc body called the “International Conference of the Red Cross”.²¹ It was through this group, of which he was the driving force, that Édouard Frick accomplished his work.

That being so, we shall turn our attention to the work of the International Conference. Its main activities would appear to have been as follows:

¹⁹ Decree of 2 June 1918. [ICRC translation from the Russian original at <http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/DEKRET/18-05-30.htm>]. ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.5, and CR 00/50c, recognition of the Soviet Red Cross, file P. Des Gouttes (Box No. 38); this decree was accompanied by an order dated 7 August 1918, *ibidem* and *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, No. 34, October 1921, pp. 1038–1040. The version of the decree published in *Izvestiya* No. 112 (4 June 1918) mentions in the first paragraph the treaties to which Russia had acceded up to October 1915, rather than October 1917, but this is probably an error. (Jiri Toman, *La Russie et la Croix-Rouge (1917-1945)*, p. 20, note 39). The version on the website of the historical faculty of Moscow State University has “October 1917”, which is almost certainly correct (<http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/DEKRET/18-05-30.htm>). In his letter of 11 July 1918 to the president of the ICRC, Édouard Frick confirmed that he had himself drafted the decree of 2 June 1918 at the request of the Soviet government. (ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.5, E 100/338).

²⁰ André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 103–104.

²¹ The representatives of the German and Austro-Hungarian Red Cross Societies, and those of the Ottoman Red Crescent, participated in the discussions of the international conference regarding prisoners of war.

- Reorganize the Red Cross in Russia.
- Protect Russian Red Cross assets and facilities that were in the hands of the Central Powers.
- Protect and assist German, Austro-Hungarian and Turkish prisoners of war in Russia and Russian prisoners on the territories of the Central Powers, mainly by sending mixed commissions made up of representatives of the Russian Red Cross and of neutral Societies to visit prisoners of war and distribute relief.
- Form two committees, one in Moscow and one in Petrograd, to help persons detained in prisons.
- Send a mission composed of members of the Swedish and Danish Red Cross Societies to Siberia, to deliver relief supplies to civilians and prisoners of war.
- Send a mission to the authorities in Siberia to seek the release of hostages held by the White Guards and to locate children from Moscow and Petrograd holiday camps who had become trapped in the Urals. These children were eventually evacuated eastwards and brought back to Russia by the American Red Cross, after travelling all the way across Siberia, the Pacific Ocean, the Panama Canal, the Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea and the Baltic.
- Combat epidemics, in particular by sending a large medical team to the Caucasus. The team was placed under the protection of a joint delegation of the Danish Red Cross and the International Committee. Édouard Frick appointed Paul Piaget, a fellow Swiss citizen living in Russia, as the ICRC's representative.²²

Most noteworthy here is the work carried out in the prisons, as this was the first time that the International Committee had tried to help people detained in connection with an internal conflict. This was primarily a relief operation, as the food crisis, the general shortages and the overcrowding in prisons had left the inmates in desperate need. The Conference distributed food, medicines, clothing, shoes, books, etc. The main beneficiaries of the operation were to be foreign detainees, regardless of why they were imprisoned. However, the delegates were authorized to visit prison infirmaries, together with places of detention that held both Russian prisoners and foreigners; the improvements they requested were consequently of benefit to Russians and foreigners alike.²³

Delegates appear to have obtained permission for monthly visits to the detainees, with additional distributions of aid.²⁴

²² Édouard Frick's mission report, 1 November 1918, ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.5. Minutes of the international conference, *ibidem*; *Rapport général 1912–1920*, pp. 190–193; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 102–105.

²³ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, p. 192; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 104–105; Jacques Moreillon, *Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et la protection des détenus politiques*, Institut Henry-Dunant, Geneva, and Éditions L'Âge d'Homme, Lausanne, 1973, pp. 41–47.

²⁴ Report by W. Volkov, secretary of the International Conference, to Édouard Frick, 29 December 1918, ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.



70. After the First World War. Ship chartered by the American Red Cross to transport 780 Russian children from Vladivostok, Siberia, to Petrograd, via San Francisco, the Panama Canal, New York and Brest (France). The ship left Vladivostok on 13 July 1920 and arrived in Koivista, Finland, on 13 October, having travelled 14,880 nautical miles (23,947 km).

© ICRC Archives, (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-02491-01A.

A visit report drawn up by Dr C. Martini and Dr J. Boss, which was addressed to the People's Commissar for Justice, indicates that the delegates based the procedure for their visits on the standard procedure for visits to prisoners of war.²⁵

Édouard Frick returned to Geneva in October 1918. He expected to be away only for a few weeks, to enlist support for the Russian Red Cross and to find solutions to the problems that prisoners of war were facing. In fact, he was never to return to Moscow.²⁶

Frick had barely arrived in Switzerland when the Armistice of Rethondes was signed, on 11 November 1918, changing the whole situation. It was now the turn of the Central Powers to slide into chaos, leaving the Russian prisoners they held in a disastrous situation. The prisoner-of-war camps were no longer receiving supplies, either from the detaining powers, which were still blockaded and where the food crisis was worse than ever, or from Russia, which was in the throes of civil war.²⁷ Thousands of prisoners took to the roads in the hope of reaching home on foot; many died on the way, from cold, hunger or exhaustion. At the same time, the power to take decisions now lay elsewhere, as the Armistice had transferred responsibility for the fate of Russian prisoners to the Allied Powers.

²⁵ Report by Dr C. Martini and Dr J. Boss, 10 December 1918, ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1 (Box 1).

²⁶ At least, not as an ICRC delegate. To the best of our knowledge, Édouard Frick first returned to Russia in August 1921, as deputy to Fritjof Nansen, who had just been appointed High Commissioner for the relief action in Russia.

²⁷ For many months, Allied prisoners of war in Germany and Austria had received most of their supplies in the form of collective relief supplies sent from their own countries. Those who did not receive any assistance from their home country, in particular the Romanians, whose country was entirely occupied, with the armies of occupation requisitioning large quantities of food, were described somewhat laconically by the ICRC as dying “like flies”.



71. After the First World War. Siberia. American Red Cross hospital train specially equipped to fight the typhus epidemic in Russia and Siberia. The doctors, nurses and assistants are from the Red Cross.

© ICRC Archives, (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-01682-20.

The Committee therefore decided to send Frick to Paris, to submit a plan to the Allies for delivering supplies to the Russian prisoners and repatriating them.

Once the Allies had given him the requisite assurances of financial backing for the ICRC, the Committee put Frick in charge of mounting and coordinating its relief operation for Russian prisoners of war.²⁸ In fact, he soon became the head of all the Committee's operations in eastern Europe and spent the following three years travelling between Geneva and the ICRC missions in Berlin, Warsaw, Riga, Reval (present-day Tallinn), Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Bucharest, Kiev and elsewhere.

But because of this new assignment, the post in Moscow remained vacant,²⁹ just as relations between the Committee and the Soviet authorities entered a critical phase.

²⁸ Report to the ICRC on the operation to assist Russian prisoners of war, June 1919, ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1; Minutes of the International Committee (Prisoners-of-War Agency), Vol. 8, 11 and 23 December 1918, etc.

²⁹ Before leaving Moscow, Édouard Frick had asked Paul Piaget and Eugène Nussbaum to replace him during what should have been a temporary absence. However, since they had not been properly accredited and had no contact with Geneva, they could not properly represent the ICRC.

After Frick's departure the International Conference soon collapsed; it was dissolved, and its offices ransacked, in June 1919.³⁰

In the meantime, Édouard Odier's mission in Russia had come to a sad end on 11 November 1918. On the very day when, in one half of Europe, the church bells were ringing to celebrate the Armistice and the end of four years of fighting, suffering and loss, Switzerland was paralysed by a general strike – the most recent as of the time of writing – which deeply divided the country. The strike was mainly motivated by the accumulated deprivation and suffering of four years of war, but the authorities and a large section of the population perceived it as an act of insurrection, orchestrated by Moscow via the mission of Soviet Russia in Bern, known as the Berzine Mission.³¹ The same day, the Federal Council broke off diplomatic relations with Russia, ordered the expulsion of the Berzine Mission and demanded that the Russian government return the passports of the members of the Swiss Legation in Russia to them.³²

However, while the Federal Council organized the repatriation of the Russian diplomats the following day, the Soviet authorities announced that they would not allow the Swiss diplomats to leave Russia until Switzerland once again agreed to the presence of a Russian mission in Switzerland. The Swiss Federal Council and a large section of public opinion would not hear of such a thing. Furthermore, the Entente and Switzerland's other neighbours were pressuring Bern to oppose the reopening of a Russian mission, seeing such a presence as a source of propaganda and revolution that would threaten the stability not only of Switzerland, but of the whole of Europe. It took three months to resolve the crisis.³³ So, after having represented his country in Russia for 12 years, Édouard Odier found himself under house arrest and had to watch as the Swiss Mission's valuables were plundered, along with those of the embassies that the Swiss Legation was protecting. He was repatriated in February 1919, a sick and broken man, and died in Geneva on 7 December 1919.³⁴

As a result, the ICRC ceased to be represented in Russia on 11 November 1918, and had no further communication with the country, just at a time when the Soviet authorities were facing civil war and foreign intervention.

Two issues soured relations between the ICRC and the Soviet government.

The first was that the authorities considered the reconstituted Russian Red Cross to be the continuation of the Society founded in 1867, as the decree of 6 January 1918 had dissolved the Central Committee without abolishing the Red Cross as a corporate

³⁰ Letter from Eugène Nussbaum to the ICRC, 22 June 1920, ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.5.

³¹ Edgar Bonjour, *Geschichte der schweizerischen Neutralität, Vier Jahrhunderte eidgenössischer Aussenpolitik*, Vol. II, 5th ed., Helbing & Lichtenhahn, Basel, 1970, pp. 260–271; Roland Ruffieux, *La Suisse de l'entre-deux-guerres*, Éditions Payot, Lausanne, 1974, pp. 49–72.

³² *Documents diplomatiques suisses*, vol. VII (1918–1920), Tome 1, 11 November 1918–28 June 1919, prepared under the direction of Jacques Freymond and Oscar Gauye by Antoine Fleury and Gabriel Imboden, in cooperation with Daniel Bourgeois, Bern, Benteli Verlag, 1979, pp. 1 and 6.

³³ *Documents diplomatiques suisses*, Vol. VII (1918–1920), Tome 1, pp. 8, 44, 75, 81–84, 140, 308–311 and 548–552; Roland Ruffieux, *La Suisse de l'entre-deux-guerres*, pp. 113–114.

³⁴ “Décès de M. Édouard Odier”, *RICR*, No. 12, December 1919, pp. 1495–1497.

entity. The Soviet authorities therefore demanded that the Russian Red Cross enjoy the same prerogatives as any recognized National Society.³⁵

But the International Committee found itself confronted with rival claims, from the Soviet-backed society and from the former leaders of the original society, which had been re-formed both in the area held by the counter-revolutionary forces and abroad. Furthermore, societies using the red cross emblem had been formed in parts of the old empire, such as Finland, the Baltic States, Ukraine and Georgia. While the ICRC was ready to cooperate with all Red Cross bodies that were carrying out humanitarian activities, it was not prepared to grant formal recognition to any society before the situation in Russia had stabilized.³⁶

The second difficulty concerned the 2.5 million Russian prisoners of war held in territories of the former Central Powers, who constituted a major reserve of trained manpower that both sides in the Civil War wanted to exploit. Both the Soviets and their enemies demanded that all these prisoners be returned to them.

The Committee believed that the repatriation of prisoners of war should not be contingent on political considerations, and that these prisoners should be sent home or to whichever part of Russia they chose.³⁷

Nonetheless, although the Committee never took part in any forced repatriations, the simple fact that it was assisting Russian prisoners of war at a time when the only prisoners of war who could be sent home returned to areas controlled by the White armies was enough to give the impression that the ICRC was helping the enemies of the revolution.

Furthermore, one cannot help feeling that by not sending Édouard Frick back to Moscow, by not appointing a successor and by failing to inform the Soviet authorities of the reasons why Frick had been assigned elsewhere, the Committee showed a lack of tact towards a government whose sensitivities were all the more acute because the rest of the world refused to have any dealings with it.

³⁵ From the beginning of the Red Cross Movement, newly-constituted Red Cross Societies had approached the ICRC to ask that it accredit them with the existing National Societies. The International Conference of the Red Cross then tasked the ICRC with verifying that the new National Society was complying with the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and had the structures and statutes it needed to carry out its duties. This verification process culminated in the formal recognition of the new National Society, whereby the ICRC acknowledged that the Society met the conditions for recognition and accredited it with its sister Societies. In particular, recognition allowed the new National Society to play a full part in the International Conference of the Red Cross and other statutory meetings.

³⁶ 178th Circular to Central Committees, 7 February 1919, *RICR*, No. 3, March 1919, pp. 327–328; letter from the ICRC to Dr Bagotzky, delegate of the Russian Red Cross in Bern, 30 July 1919, ICRC Archives, file CR 00/50 c. The ICRC recognized the Russian Red Cross in October 1921. Jiri Toman, *La Russie et la Croix-Rouge (1917-1945)*, pp. 25–30.

³⁷ *Rapport général 1912–1920*, p. 117; *Rapport général du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge sur son activité de 1921 à 1923*, ICRC, Geneva, 1923, p. 123.



72. Varna, Russia. Civil war. Sanatorium.

© ICRC Archives, (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-02837-11.

It was not until July 1919 that the Committee decided to send a new mission to Moscow to resume contact with the Red Cross and the Soviet authorities.³⁸ However, just as this mission (conducted by Major Léderrey) was ready to leave, Soviet radio announced that the delegates would not be allowed to enter Russia.³⁹

Nevertheless, renewed contact was vital. At the beginning of 1920, the International Committee decided to send Édouard Frick to Copenhagen, to meet Mr Litvinov, Deputy People's Commissioner for Foreign Affairs.⁴⁰ For reasons that we have been unable to ascertain, the meeting did not take place. The Committee then wanted Frick to return to Moscow – but this attempt also failed. In a letter dated 12 June 1920, the chairman of the Russian Red Cross Central Committee, Dr Soloviev, justified the Soviet authorities' refusal on the grounds that Frick had been to Kiev, which was then held by counter-revolutionary forces, and had been in contact with representatives of the former Red Cross organization. Frick was also seen in a poor light by the government because of his role in the repatriation of Russian prisoners of war.⁴¹

In opposing the sending of an ICRC mission, the Russian Red Cross also raised the issue of the ICRC's refusal to grant it formal recognition.⁴² It was only in October 1921, after the Russian Red Cross had been recognized, that the ICRC was able to send a delegate to Moscow.⁴³

However, these disputes and problems did not prevent the ICRC from helping the large numbers of refugees who poured into Turkey, eastern Europe and China,⁴⁴ and the victims of the appalling famine that struck large areas of Russia in 1921.⁴⁵

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What conclusions can be drawn from this operation, the ICRC's first confrontation with civil war?

Quite clearly, the results were mixed.

While there were resounding successes – foremost among them Édouard Frick's contribution to the decree of 2 June 1918 and to the reform of the Russian Red Cross – there were also serious failures. Ultimately, the ICRC was unable to fulfil its role of neutral intermediary between the parties to the conflict.

³⁸ Minutes of the International Committee (Prisoners-of-War Agency), Vol. 8, 1 July 1919.

³⁹ *Idem*, 8 September 1919.

⁴⁰ *Idem*, 9 January and 2 February 1920.

⁴¹ Letter from Dr Soloviev to the ICRC, 12 June 1920, ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.5. It is worth noting that in the autumn of 1919, the ICRC had to recall Édouard Frick from Poland at the request of the Polish authorities, who accused him of being a Bolshevik agent! Minutes of the International Committee (Prisoners-of-War Agency), Vol. 8, 27 October, 3 and 10 November 1919.

⁴² Telegram from Dr Soloviev to the ICRC, 23 May 1920, ICRC Archives, file CR 00/50 c.

⁴³ 206th Circular to Central Committees, 15 October 1921, *RICR*, No. 34, October 1921, pp. 1035–1040.

⁴⁴ *Rapport général 1921–1923*, pp. 60–65; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 205–212.

⁴⁵ *Rapport général 1921–1923*, pp. 65–69; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 212–216.



73. Samara, Russia, 1921–1923. Famine. Canteen operated by the Swedish Red Cross.
© ICRC Archives, (ARR), photographer unknown, V-P-HIST-02590-23A.

That failure was largely due to the refusal by the belligerents to acknowledge each other's legitimacy and to observe the laws and customs of war in their relations. Each side demanded exclusive recognition and challenged the ICRC's right to deal on equal terms with its opponents.

But it was equally due to the deep mutual mistrust between the International Committee and the new Soviet authorities. This was made worse by the fact that the ICRC failed to distance itself sufficiently from the Allied Powers, which actively supported the enemies of the Soviet regime, and from the Swiss Federal Council, which had also taken sides.

From August 1914 to May 1917, the ICRC did manage to keep a distance from the Federal Council, which was leaning dangerously towards the side of the Central Powers, despite Switzerland's traditional neutrality, which had been solemnly reiterated when war was declared. But things changed dramatically in June 1917. On 18 June 1917, the most serious political crisis erupted since the Sonderbund War of 1847 and the founding of the federal State. Federal Councillor Arthur Hoffmann, who had dominated the government thanks to his great intelligence, had broken the law on neutrality by acting as a go-between to facilitate a separate peace between Russia and the Central Powers. He was forced to resign, under dramatic circumstances that affected both Switzerland's relationships with the belligerents and the internal cohesion of the country. To replace him, the Federal Parliament called upon Gustave Ador, perceived

as the man of the hour – the only person capable of re-establishing the credibility of Swiss neutrality externally and harmony domestically.⁴⁶ But from Moscow's point of view, how could one believe that the ICRC was independent of the Federal Council if the ICRC president was a member? Following the general strike of 11 November 1918, the taking of Swiss diplomats in Russia as hostages, the nationalization of Swiss assets in Russia and the June 1919 ransacking of the Swiss Legation in Petrograd, the Federal Council refused to have any contact with the Soviet authorities.

Finally, the fact that the Committee was not represented in Moscow during the most crucial period of the Civil War – 1919 and 1920 – turned out to be an insuperable handicap.

As the Committee had to admit: "Neutrality between parties is far more difficult to maintain and to have accepted than neutrality between nations".⁴⁷

Yet the Committee's failures were just as vital as its achievements in demonstrating the importance of Red Cross operations during civil wars and the need to establish a basis for them. The 9th International Conference of the Red Cross (Washington, 1912) had studied the question without reaching a decision. Subsequently, events themselves provided the answer. By a strange twist of fate – not uncommon in history – Red Cross intervention was demanded by the very people who had been its fiercest opponents at the Washington conference.

The need having been demonstrated, it was only necessary to draw conclusions. The ICRC did so in its report to the 10th International Conference of the Red Cross, which met in Geneva in March and April 1921:

The efforts of the International Committee and those of other neutral representatives in Russia and Hungary have proved that:

1. In the event of civil war it is possible to persuade new governments that are being organized of the supranational value of Red Cross organizations and activities.
2. Action by neutral delegates, and possibly by a supranational body whose members do not go beyond their capacity as delegates of the Red Cross, may greatly help to ease relations between Red Cross bodies that have remained active or those of the

⁴⁶ In spring 1917, not content with having facilitated the return to Russia of Lenin and his associates, Arthur Hoffmann – Federal Councillor and head of the Federal Political Department – became involved in secret negotiations between the Bolshevik Party (which was still in opposition) and Germany, with a view to arranging a separate peace between Russia and the Central Powers. This manoeuvre, which targeted the provisional Russian government and the Entente, was clearly contrary to the laws governing neutrality. When a coded telegram from Arthur Hoffman setting out Germany's war aims was intercepted, decoded and published, he was forced to resign, plunging Switzerland into one of the most serious political crises it had ever faced. Regarding the crisis of 18 June 1917 and the election of Gustave Ador to the Federal Council, see: François Bugnion, "L'affaire Grimm-Hoffmann et l'élection de Gustave Ador au Conseil fédéral : naufrage et restauration de la neutralité suisse", in *La Suisse et la guerre de 1914–1918, Actes du colloque tenu du 10 au 12 septembre 2014 au Château de Penthes*, edited by Christophe Vuilleumier, Éditions Slatkine, Geneva, 2015, pp. 513–543.

⁴⁷ Note from Renée-Marguerite Cramer to Édouard Frick, 17 February 1919, ICRC Archives, file Mis. 1.

various parties to the conflict and may even succeed in bringing these parties to acknowledge the apolitical and purely humanitarian character of all activities carried on under the Red Cross flag.

Since civil war, when prolonged, gradually but inevitably becomes regular war, it seems that the two possibilities described above deserve to be officially adopted by a decision of an International Conference proclaiming the indispensable role of the Red Cross in a civil war.⁴⁸

It was now up to the 10th International Conference to confirm that “indispensable role” of the Red Cross. It did so by passing an important resolution in which the Red Cross proclaimed its right and its duty to assist the victims of civil war and made the ICRC the lynchpin of Red Cross work in this area.⁴⁹ That resolution was to form the basis of the major operations the ICRC undertook during the 1936–1939 Spanish Civil War.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Rapport général du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge sur son activité de 1912 à 1920*, p. 208. Regarding the work of the ICRC in Hungary, see the *Rapport général 1912–1920 op. cit.*, pp. 194–208, and the following: Louis Léopold, “Le régime soviétiste en Hongrie du 21 mars au 1er août 1919 et la Convention de Genève”, *RICR*, No. 12, December 1919, pp. 1427–1439; André Durand, *History of the ICRC, Vol. II*, pp. 123–138; Jacques Moreillon, *Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et la protection des détenus politiques*, pp. 47–52.

⁴⁹ Résolution XIV, *Dixième Conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge tenue à Genève du 30 mars au 7 avril 1921, Compte rendu*, ICRC, Geneva, 1921, pp. 217–218.

⁵⁰ Regarding the discussions of the 10th International Conference of the Red Cross on the role of the Red Cross in time of civil war, and regarding the work of the ICRC during the Spanish Civil War, see: François Bugnion, *The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Protection of War Victims*, pp. 258–262 and 266–283; Pierre Marqués, *La Croix-Rouge pendant la Guerre d'Espagne (1936–1939) : Les Missionnaires de l'humanitaire*, L'Harmattan, Paris and Montreal, 2000, 452 pp.

Conclusions

The International Committee of the Red Cross emerged transformed from the First World War. Through force of circumstances, it had laid the basis of an unprecedented operational framework that would change very little in later conflicts. The Agency had watched over the fate of millions of prisoners, and through its tireless efforts and highly organized working methods had restored contact between prisoners and their families and traced thousands of missing persons. The ICRC had sent its delegates to visit camps holding prisoners of war and civilian internees in practically every warring country, and had set up relief operations for prisoners and the civilian population. Where its own resources had been inadequate, it had succeeded in coordinating the work of others in order to instigate joint operations. It had played a decisive role in the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of prisoners, both during and after the conflict.

The Committee had also been involved in important negotiations; throughout the war it had deployed discreet but continuous diplomatic efforts aimed at improving prisoners' conditions and had played the role of neutral intermediary between enemies that refused to meet directly. It had not hesitated to make its voice heard, either to offer its own interpretation of the law or to protest against violations of the Geneva and Hague Conventions.

Its field of work had expanded considerably. Previously, the ICRC had concentrated on sick and wounded soldiers, and on members of the medical corps; during the First World War it became equally active on behalf of prisoners of war and civilian victims of conflict, such as internees, hostages and deportees. It went even further, speaking out on the methods and means of warfare used by the opposing sides and condemning reprisals against prisoners of war, propaganda camps, the torpedoing of hospital ships and the use of gas.

Despite the absence of any legal basis, the ICRC operated in Russia in the midst of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary tumult that led to an extremely violent civil war. The ICRC ran up against insurmountable difficulties, partly due to a complete lack of understanding of the revolutionary process on the part of the ICRC, and an equally complete lack of understanding of humanitarian endeavour on the part of both the Soviet authorities and their adversaries. However, its actions did lead to recognition by the authorities of the validity of the Geneva Convention and other

humanitarian treaties, the saving of the Russian Red Cross and the continuation of its work. The ICRC was also able to undertake certain activities to protect prisoners of war, political prisoners and populations affected by the civil war and the famine that followed. Furthermore, this was the first time the Red Cross had operated on a large scale during a civil war, paving the way for new developments.

The transformation was spectacular, affecting many different areas. In retrospect, one can say that no other period has wrought such radical change over such a short time in the ICRC, its mandate and its scope for action.

Obviously, none of this work would have been possible without the cooperation of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the belligerent and neutral countries. Indeed, the work of the entire Red Cross was transformed by this experience.

But how would this forced evolution affect its future development? Two factors were to have significant consequences for the future of the Committee and of humanitarian law.

The first is that the involvement of neutral bodies – Protecting Powers, the ICRC and the National Societies of neutral countries – proved essential in ensuring the application of the Geneva and Hague Conventions. Without this involvement, the whole edifice of treaty rules would probably have crumbled in the first few months of the war under the onslaught of reprisals and counter-reprisals. Subsequently, the “neutrals” had exercised that minimum degree of supervision over prisoners’ conditions without which no treaty commitment can be maintained. In formally acknowledging this supervision, the agreements concluded between the belligerents in 1917 and 1918 did no more than confirm a situation that had existed *de facto* since 1915. It had become clear that it would be impossible to establish a treaty-based system of protection unless the parties accepted at least a minimum of external supervision.

The second point is that the International Committee became a vital component of the machinery for protecting prisoners. It did not seek a predominant position in this; where possible, it passed on to other intermediaries those tasks for which it felt its own involvement was not indispensable. Nonetheless, its complete independence guaranteed it exceptional freedom of action, allowing it to take a wide variety of initiatives and maintain relations with any authority, recognized or not, that was holding prisoners. In forwarding prisoner lists, mail and relief supplies and in carrying out visits to prison camps, the ICRC performed pioneering work, opening doors for itself and others. In the repatriation of prisoners it sought to create common ground between governments that did not recognize one another and refused to communicate directly. Finally, it took the risk of operating in Russia while the country was descending into chaos and, ultimately, civil war. Overall these efforts were applauded and earned the ICRC immense respect and authority.

Ultimately, it was the circumstances themselves that showed the need for an organization that was totally independent of the parties to the conflict and had no interest other than securing humanitarian protection for the victims of war.

This was precisely the role the ICRC sought to play during the conflict and which it would continue to play thereafter; and it was fully aware of this:



74. National cemetery, Fleury-devant-Douaumont, near Verdun, France.
“Only the dead will see the end of this battle.” Letter from a soldier, 1916.
Photographer: François Bugnion, 29 September 2016.

The present war has shown the need for an organization, working outside governments and National Red Cross Societies, with the task of upholding the international conventions and protecting the principles of humanity.

The International Committee has sought to be that organization, and to accomplish this expanded mission. To do so it established an information service for prisoners of war; it took steps to bring about the repatriation of prisoners, both the disabled and the able-bodied; during the war it made appeals and protests whenever it felt that circumstances so required. In doing all this, it always acted on its own initiative and responsibility. Consequently, as the National Red Cross Societies become more closely enmeshed in the official structures, set in motion and directed by their governments, the Committee, for its part, must avoid being subject to official or political influence if it wishes to develop and to accomplish useful work. It can remain impartial only insofar as it remains free of any ties. Its only power lies in its absolute and jealously-guarded independence.¹

The ICRC received the Nobel Prize for Peace in December 1917 – the only time the prize was awarded during the First World War. The award recognized the achievements of the ICRC since the outbreak of hostilities and brought the organization both the support of the Nobel Committee and a form of recognition for the future.

¹ *Actes du Comité international*, p. 3 (Foreword, November 1918).

Annex

The First World War Chronology

Sources: Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *La Grande Guerre, 1914-1918*, Gallimard, Paris, (Découvertes) 1998; John Keegan, *The First World War*, London, Hutchinson, 1998; Pierre Renouvin, *La crise européenne et la Première Guerre mondiale*, (Collection: Peuples et civilisations, vol. XIX), 5th edition, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1969; Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Histoire de la Russie, des origines à 1992*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 1994.

From one war to another

1870–1871

Franco-Prussian War.

18 January 1871

Proclamation of the German Empire in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles. The unification of Germany makes the German Empire the foremost military power on the continent, with a degree of military superiority with which no other country can compete. Unifying Germany therefore destabilizes the five-way system the 1814–1815 Congress of Vienna had created. This relied on a relatively balanced arrangement involving the five Great Powers: the United Kingdom, France, Prussia, Austria and Russia.

10 May 1871

Signature of the Treaty of Frankfurt. By forcing France to cede Alsace and Lorraine, the Treaty of Frankfurt creates a barrier to reconciliation between France and Germany, paralysing the “Concert of Europe” created by the Congress of Vienna following the Napoleonic wars.

June 1873

League of Three Emperors: Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia. Clearly, it is Bismarck, the German chancellor, who is pulling the strings within this alliance. The League enables him to isolate France all the more completely because the United Kingdom is focusing all its attention on colonial matters. However, rivalry between Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Balkans will gradually cause the League to crumble.

18 March 1890

Germany: Bismarck, the architect of German unity, resigns. His successors consider the system of alliances that he had created excessively complex, and decide to give more weight to Germany's alliance with the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which means sacrificing that linking Germany to Russia. Russia is even more isolated, as it faces opposition from Britain on account of the two countries' rivalry in Asia. Isolated on the European stage, Russia will seek a closer relationship with France. In addition, Russia urgently needs capital to finance the modernization of the country and the building of railways, and the French government has indicated that they will allow the Russian government to obtain loans on the French capital market. France sees closer relations with Russia as a way to escape the isolation that Bismarck has imposed since the 1870–1871 Franco-Prussian war. Kaiser Wilhelm II and Bismarck's successors are hence at the origin of the unnatural alliance between Alexander III's ultra-conservative Russia and Third-Republic France. Furthermore, while Bismarck had no colonial ambitions for Germany, preferring to ensure his country's superiority on the European continent, Wilhelm II dreams of acquiring a high-seas fleet and a colonial empire to match Germany's position in Europe. Unfortunately for him, by 1890 the carve-up of Asia and Africa has been a *fait accompli* for some time. Inevitably, therefore, Wilhelm II's colonial ambitions are going to bring Germany into conflict with the interests of France and of the UK.

27 August 1891

Franco-Russian alliance.

14 November 1897

China: Germany occupies Tsingtao (current-day Qingdao) in Shandong and sets up a naval base.

18 May–29 July 1899

First International Peace Conference, The Hague. Adoption of the Convention Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land (Convention II) and a Declaration Concerning Asphyxiating Gases (Declaration IV,2).

1900

Germany: In response to the Franco-Russian alliance, the General Staff adopt the Schlieffen Plan. In case of a European war, Germany is to initially focus its main effort on crushing the French army in no more than six weeks, i.e. before Russia can mobilize and deploy the bulk of its reserves. Germany will then be free to use all its energy against Russia. To avoid the need to besiege the French fortifications along the Franco-German border, the right flank of the German army is to pass through Belgium. The Schlieffen Plan will remain the cornerstone of German military doctrine until the Battle of the Marne (4–9 September 1914), after which it will become clear that the plan has failed.

June 1900

Germany: The Reichstag passes a new law on the navy, which aims to give Germany a high-seas fleet capable of challenging the British Royal Navy on the North Sea. The German shipbuilding programme will force Britain to abandon the policy of “splendid isolation” it has followed since 1815, and work more closely with other naval powers – France and Japan.

8 February 1904–5 September 1905

Russo-Japanese war. Defeat of the Russian armies in Manchuria. Destruction of the Russian fleet in the Tsushima Straits. Riots in Saint Petersburg. The Russian defeat will weaken the Franco-Russian alliance for many years.

14 March 1904

Gustave Ador succeeds Gustave Moynier as president of the ICRC.

8 April 1904

Franco-British agreement on Egypt and Morocco. France recognizes British interests in Egypt, while Britain recognizes those of France in Morocco. The agreement makes it possible to smooth over colonial disputes between the two countries and forms the basis for an “Entente cordiale” between them.

11 June–6 July 1906

Conference to revise the Geneva Convention. Adoption of the Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field of 6 July 1906.

15 June–18 October 1907

Second International Peace Conference in The Hague. Adoption of Convention IV respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and of Convention X for the Adaptation to Maritime Warfare of the Principles of the Geneva Convention.

5 October 1908

Taking advantage of Russia’s temporary absence from the world stage following its defeats in Manchuria, the Austro-Hungarian Empire annexes Bosnia-Herzegovina, which it has been administering on behalf of the Sublime Porte since the Berlin Congress of 1878. This annexation violates the conclusions of that congress and thwarts the ambitions of Russia’s ally and protégé Serbia of one day uniting all the Serbo-Croatian-speaking peoples.

1911–1912

Turco-Italian War. Following the frustrating of its colonial ambitions with regard to Ethiopia as a consequence of the Adwa disaster, Italy attempts to carve out a colonial empire in Libya and Tripolitania, at the expense of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans are beaten in Libya and in the Dodecanese.

7–17 May 1912

The 9th International Conference of the Red Cross (Washington) passes a resolution committing the Red Cross to providing voluntary assistance to prisoners of war and making the ICRC the lynchpin of Red Cross work in this area.

17 October 1912–16 April 1913

First Balkan War between Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro on the one side, and the Ottoman Empire on the other. The Ottoman Empire has already been defeated by Italy the year previously. The war ends in victory for the coalition, who get as far as Istanbul.

November–December 1912

Dr Carle de Marval's mission to the Balkans. He visits Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Greece. His mission report focuses on assistance to war-wounded patients.

Spring 1913

Dr Frédéric Ferrière's mission to the Balkans. He visits Serbia, Greece and the Ottoman Empire. His mission report focuses on assistance to prisoners of war.

29 June–10 August 1913

Second Balkan War. This war pits Bulgaria against a coalition consisting of Serbia, Greece, Romania and the Ottoman Empire and ends in defeat for Bulgaria.

The July 1914 crisis

28 June 1914

Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife are assassinated in Sarajevo. The assassins are Bosnian Serbs, members of a secret organization covertly supported by the Serb secret services.

23 July 1914

The Austro-Hungarian Empire delivers an ultimatum to Serbia.

28 July 1914

As Serbia has accepted certain clauses of the Austrian ultimatum but not all of them, the Austro-Hungarian Empire declares war on Serbia and shells Belgrade.

31 July 1914

Russia announces general mobilization.

1 August 1914

Germany declares war on Russia. Despite having decided to direct the bulk of its military effort against France as soon as possible, in accordance with the Schlieffen Plan, Germany postpones declaring war on France, expecting France to make the first move. This would oblige Italy and Romania to enter the war on the side of the Central Powers.

2 August 1914

Germany delivers an ultimatum to Belgium. German troops enter Luxembourg and Belgium.

3 August 1914

The invasion of neutral Belgium provokes a wave of indignation, especially in the United Kingdom, as the 1839 treaty made the UK co-guarantor – with France and Prussia – of Belgian neutrality.

3 August 1914

Germany declares war on France. In accordance with the Schlieffen Plan, Germany will focus almost its entire military effort on France, with the aim of crushing the country in no more than six weeks, i.e. before Russia can mobilize its reserves and before Britain can launch any major operations on the Continent. As it was Germany that declared war, first on Russia then on France, Romania and Italy announce their intention of remaining neutral. The Ottoman Empire has been favourable to Germany since the revolution of the Young Turks, but plays for time while completing military preparations.

4 August 1914

The United Kingdom declares war on Germany in response to its violation of Belgian neutrality.

The Great War

1914

15 and 20 August 1914

To relieve the pressure on France, the Russian First and Second Armies enter East Prussia, even though the Russian army is far from fully mobilized.

15 and 27 August 1914

In its 159th and 160th Circulars to the Central Committees of Red Cross Societies, the ICRC announces the opening of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency in Geneva.

22–24 August 1914

Franco-British forces are defeated at the battles of Mons and Charleroi. In accordance with doctrine inherited from the Napoleonic Wars, and despite the fact that the machine-gun has revolutionized the battlefield, French troops attack in close order, shoulder to shoulder. At the Battle of Charleroi, the French army loses 25,000 men in a single day. This is the worst massacre in one day in French military history. To escape encirclement and total destruction, the French Army and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) are obliged to withdraw to the west and the south.

26 August 1914

France: Formation of a *union sacrée* (holy union) government, bringing together the representatives of all political parties.

27–30 August 1914

Battle of Tannenberg (East Prussia). The German army encircles and crushes the Russian Second Army. 50,000 Russian soldiers are killed and 92,000 are taken prisoner.

2 September 1914

The French government withdraws to Bordeaux.

4–9 September 1914

Battle of the Marne. In an effort to envelop the British Expeditionary Force and the left flank of the French army, the German army undertakes a forced march southwards and attacks east of Paris. In doing so, it exposes its right flank to an attack from the Paris region, having rendered itself all the more vulnerable because its rapid advance has stretched its lines of supply and thinned its right flank. The French army and the BEF take advantage of the situation to launch a counter-offensive. The German army is pushed back north of the Marne and its southwards advance is halted. While losses are similar on both sides (256,000 German soldiers killed, wounded, missing or taken prisoner, against 270,000 on the Franco-British side), the Franco-British victory destroys the Schlieffen Plan. Germany will be forced to fight a war on two fronts. The Battle of the Marne also puts an end to German hopes of a brief war. Prolongation of the conflict will give Britain the opportunity to raise a large army and will allow Russia the time it needs to mobilize its reserves. War has taken Europe in its grip.

9–14 September 1914

The Russian army is defeated in East Prussia, near the Masurian Lakes.

17 September–17 November 1914

The “race to the sea”. The French and German armies try to outflank each other to the west and the front expands rapidly until it extends from the Swiss border to the North Sea.

19 September 1914

German artillery shells Reims Cathedral, setting it on fire.

22 September 1914

The *Journal de Genève* publishes “Au-dessus de la mêlée” by Romain Rolland.

26 September 1914

The Ottoman Empire closes the Dardanelles to commercial shipping, isolating Russia.

26 September–4 October 1914

Gustave Ador undertakes a mission to Bordeaux. He speaks to members of the French government and of the Central Committee of the French Red Cross. Discussions centre on the exchange of lists of detainees, the delivery of correspondence and aid and, very probably, the question of visits to internment camps by neutral delegates.

9 October–22 November 1914

First Battle of Ypres. The Germans unsuccessfully attempt to take the Ypres salient, which is held by the Belgian army and the BEF.

17 October 1914

The ICRC announces the opening of the Civilians Department of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency.

19 October–17 November 1914

Unsuccessful German offensive at the Yser. Following the failure of this offensive, the German high command adopts a defensive strategy on the Western Front and an offensive strategy on the Eastern Front, the length of which makes it impossible to build a continuous network of trenches and fortifications. The objective is to force Russia to accept a separate peace. Throughout the winter of 1914–1915, the German army will transfer large numbers of troops from the Western to the Eastern Front.

1 November 1914

The Ottoman Empire enters the war on the side of the Central Powers. Despite committing large numbers of men, the Ottoman attack on the Caucasus ends in disaster, largely because of the snow and the cold.

7 November 1914

After a siege lasting three months, Japanese forces take the German colony of Tsingtao (present-day Qingdao) in China.

12 November 1914

Gustave Ador writes to the head of the Swiss Federal Political Department (foreign ministry) proposing that Switzerland approach France and Germany regarding the repatriation of war-disabled personnel from both sides before the end of hostilities.

3–10 December 1914

Battle of Limanowa. The Austro-Hungarian army inflicts a major defeat on the Russian army south of Krakow.

7 December 1914

Note to the governments of the belligerent States: Repatriation of medical personnel – interpretation of Article 12 of the Geneva Convention.

9–6 December 1914

Gustave Ador and Dr Ferrière undertake a mission to Berlin. They meet members of the government and leaders of the German Red Cross. Their discussions cover the exchange of prisoner lists, the delivery of aid and visits to internment camps by neutral delegates. While in Germany they take the opportunity to visit the camps at Magdeburg, Torgau and Zossen.

29 December 1914

The Russian army launches a counter-offensive on the Caucasus front and advances deep into Armenia.

Overview of 1914 The main event of 1914 is the Battle of the Marne, which marks the failure of the Schlieffen Plan. This failure will force Germany to fight a war on two fronts and to fight a long war, which will give Russia time to finish mobilizing its reserves and allow Britain to raise a large army. The failure of Germany's Yser offensive prompts the German high command to focus its main effort on the Eastern Front. At the end of autumn 1914, the German army begins transferring large numbers of troops from the Western Front to the east.

1915

2 January 1915

Capitulation of the Ottoman 9th Army in Armenia. Cold has decimated the troops deployed to the Caucasus.

January 1915

The ICRC sends one delegate to France, one to Germany and two to the United Kingdom, to visit prisoners of war.

15 January 1915

163rd Circular to Central Committees: Equal treatment for military and civilian prisoners of war.

18 January 1915

The Japanese government sends the president of China an ultimatum. It consists of 21 demands, compliance with which would make China a Japanese protectorate.

4 February 1915

In response to the blockade set up by the Entente at the start of the war, Germany declares that the waters surrounding the British Isles will henceforth be considered war zones and that any commercial vessel found in those waters will be destroyed.

4 February 1915

Gustave Ador writes to the Swiss Federal Council, suggesting that Switzerland propose to the belligerents that those wounded persons be hospitalized in Switzerland who, while not fulfilling all conditions that would allow their repatriation before the end of hostilities, have nonetheless suffered wounds that make it difficult for them to endure life as prisoners.

15 February–18 March 1915

French offensive in Champagne. Despite the deployment of considerable resources, this offensive does not even disrupt the transfer of German troops to the Eastern Front.

19 February–4 March 1915

The British Mediterranean Fleet attempts to force the Dardanelles. The aim is to oblige the Ottoman Empire to withdraw from the war and to re-open a line of communication between the western allies and Russia.

February–May 1915

The ICRC sends delegates to visit prisoner-of-war camps in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Germany.

2–11 March 1915

First repatriation of seriously injured French and German soldiers via Switzerland.

22 March 1915

After a six-month siege, a 120,000-man garrison surrenders the Austrian fortress of Przemyśl.

April 1915

A group of Armenian nationalists announces the creation of a “provisional Armenian government”. Following this declaration, and the major defeats that its army has suffered on the Caucasus front, the Ottoman government orders the deportation of all Armenians. It is estimated that several hundred thousand men, women and children die during this deportation.

22 April 1915

First use of asphyxiating gas on the Western Front, north of Ypres, in Flanders. The agent used is a chlorine-based gas, developed by German chemists.

25 April 1915

British, Australian, New Zealand and French troops land on both sides of the Dardanelles. They are pinned down by an Ottoman counter-offensive.

May–June 1915

Joint mission by Dr Carle de Marval and Arthur Eugster, visiting prisoner-of-war camps in Germany and France.

2 May 1915

Start of a major German offensive on the Eastern Front, between the Vistula and the Carpathians (the Battle of Gorlice-Tarnów).

7 May 1915

British liner *Lusitania* torpedoed. 1,200 deaths, including 118 US citizens.

8 May 1915

In its 164th Circular to Central Committees, the ICRC protests against the dissolution by the occupying power of the Central Committee of the Belgian Red Cross.

9 May–16 June 1915

To reduce pressure on the Russian army, the French army launches an offensive in Artois. Despite achieving some initial success, the offensive has no real results.

20 May 1915

Italy declares war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire, having remained neutral in 1914 despite belonging to the Triple Alliance (consisting of Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Italy).

23 June 1915

The Italian army launches an unsuccessful offensive at the River Isonzo.

July–September 1915

A major Austro-German offensive pushes the Russian army to behind the eastern border of Poland. However, while the Russian army suffers significant losses, it avoids becoming surrounded and withdraws east. Convinced that the Russian army will continue to withdraw in order to escape encirclement, the German high command decides to focus its main effort on Serbia.

September–October 1915

Missions to Austria-Hungary and Italy, to visit prison camps.

September 1915

End of the large-scale Austro-German offensive against Russia. German forces reach the Berezina. The Central Powers have forced the Russian army out of Poland, Galicia and Lithuania. Almost half the Russian army is dead, wounded or taken prisoner, but it has managed to fall back to a new defensive line.

18 September 1915

In response to American protests, Germany ceases submarine attacks west of the United Kingdom and in the English Channel.

21 September 1915

Despite being a traditional ally of Russia, Bulgaria enters the war on the side of the Central Powers, which have promised her Serbian Macedonia and other territories, at the expense of Romania, Serbia and Greece.

25 September 1915

Franco-British offensive in Champagne. Despite the forces deployed, the Allies suffer heavy losses in exchange for insignificant gains.

October 1915–February 1916

Mission to Russia and Russian Turkestan.

5 October 1915

Beginning of the Germano-Austro-Bulgarian offensive against Serbia. Austro-German forces cross the Danube and occupy Belgrade.

5 October 1915

Allied expeditionary force lands at Salonica (present-day Thessaloniki). The expeditionary force arrives too late to prevent Bulgaria from joining the Central Powers and is not powerful enough to incite Greece to ally herself with the Entente.

28 October 1915

Open letter to sovereigns, heads of State and governments of the belligerent countries: the ICRC calls for ceasefires to allow medical personnel of the various armies to recover the wounded and to identify and bury the dead, in order to reduce the number of persons going missing.

6 December 1915

Inter-allied military conference at Chantilly, France. The French, British, Italian and Russian allies decide to launch a coordinated series of major offensives on the Western Front, the Eastern Front and the Austro-Italian Front, to prevent the Central Powers from moving their reserves from one front to the other.

28 December–8 January 1916

British forces evacuate the Gallipoli Peninsular. Some of the evacuated troops are transferred to Salonica (Thessaloniki).

Overview of 1915 Throughout the year, German has retained the initiative, allowing the Central Powers to achieve major successes in Russia and Serbia. However, neither the German offensive against Russia nor the Austro-German offensive against Serbia have resulted in an irreversible strategic success. The Russian and Serbian armies have not been forced to surrender. Franco-British attempts to support their Russian and Serbian allies by major offensives on the Western Front or through the diversionary manoeuvre in the Dardanelles have resulted in costly failures. Having failed to force the Russian army to surrender, the German high command decides to direct its main effort against France.

1916

8 January 1916

Evacuation of the last troops from Gallipoli. The expedition has cost the Allies 265,000 men. Ottoman losses are estimated at around 300,000.

January 1916

United Kingdom: The flood of volunteers having dried up at the end of 1915 (after 1,888,000 men had volunteered in 13 months), the House of Commons adopts the principle of conscription for unmarried men and widowers with no children.

26 January 1916

First sick and wounded prisoners of war interned in Switzerland.

21 February 1916

Start of the Battle of Verdun. In attacking the Verdun salient, the German high command has estimated that the French army will do everything in its power to hold this forward strongpoint and will hence “bleed to death” in order to save Verdun.

25 February 1916

The Germans capture Fort Douaumont. The defence of Verdun appears to be threatened.

April 1916

As a result of the blockade, the German government reduces the ration of bread flour from 225 g to 170 g per person per day. The shortage of flour sparks a black market, creating increasing frustration, especially among the working class.

15 May 1916

Battle of Asiago: Start of the Austrian offensive in Trentino. After early successes, the offensive grinds to a halt.

31 May–1 June 1916

Battle of Jutland. While the Royal Navy suffers heavier losses than the Kriegsmarine, the German Navy's attempt to defy the British fleet in the North Sea and force the blockade ends in failure. In the face of the Home Fleet, the Kriegsmarine has no choice but to retreat. German battleships will not leave port for the rest of the war.

4 June 1916

Start of General Brusilov's major offensive on the Russian front. The Austrian lines are broken and the Russians take 378,000 prisoners. After advancing more than 100 km, the offensive is halted in the Carpathians at the beginning of August.

24 June 1916

Aware that the Allies are preparing to launch a major offensive on the River Somme, Commander-in-Chief of the German army General Falkenhayn decides to withdraw troops from the Verdun sector. The German plan has failed, not only because the German army has been unable to take Verdun, but above all because losses are becoming evenly balanced.

1 July 1916

Start of the Battle of the Somme. To reduce German pressure on Verdun, the British and the French launch a major offensive in the Somme sector. Despite an unprecedented preparatory bombardment by the artillery, the British forces suffer huge losses. More than 19,000 are killed and almost 40,000 wounded or reported missing after 1 July alone. These are the worst losses the British Army has ever suffered in one day. However, the offensive continues.

12 July 1916

The ICRC appeals to the belligerents and neutral countries regarding reprisals against prisoners of war.

27 August 1916

Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff are appointed as commanders of the German army. Their strategy is to reorganize the defence, in order to use fewer troops on the Western Front and increase numbers on the Eastern Front.

28 August 1916

Romania enters the war on the side of the Entente.

September, October and November 1916

Seventh, eighth and ninth battles of the Isonzo. Unsuccessful Italian offensives.

October 1916–January 1917

Missions to the Ottoman Empire and Egypt.

24 October 1916

French troops retake Fort Douaumont near Verdun.

18 November 1916

End of the Battle of the Somme. The attempt to force the German lines has ended in failure, with considerable losses of British and French troops. 420,000 British soldiers are dead or wounded, as are 194,000 French and approximately 600,000 German. The Allies have achieved none of their strategic objectives.

28 November 1916

First exchange of seriously wounded Italian and Austrian soldiers via Switzerland.

6 December 1916

United Kingdom: David Lloyd George becomes prime minister. He forms a five-member war cabinet that meets almost daily and takes control of the war effort.

6 December 1916

German forces occupy Bucharest. The Romanian army has lost 310,000 men, of whom approximately half have been taken prisoner. The Romanian army withdraws to Moldavia.

12 December 1916

Peace offer by the Central Powers. This offer contains no concrete proposals. The Entente nations reject the offer, describing it as a political manoeuvre and a trap.

18 December 1916

Following ten months of fierce fighting, the German army suspends its offensive on Verdun. The major German offensive aimed at “bleeding the French army to death” at Verdun has failed. At the end of the battle, losses are similar on both sides: 378,000 French soldiers killed, wounded or missing, against 339,000 Germans. The French army’s dogged resistance at Verdun has a considerable impact on morale.

20 December 1916

Peace initiative by President Wilson. Coming as it does eight days after the Central Powers’ initiative, Wilson’s initiative is perceived as supporting theirs.

Overview of 1916 Once again, Germany has retained the initiative, launching its offensive on Verdun before the Allies could launch theirs on the Somme. However, both the German offensive against Verdun and the Franco-British offensive on the Somme have failed, prompting Hindenburg and Ludendorff to once again switch the German army’s main effort to the Eastern Front. While Germany has achieved important successes on the Eastern Front, it is starting to run short of men, leading the high command to call for new measures to recruit manpower. Discouragement is becoming apparent everywhere.

1917

January 1917

France: Strikes begin.

9 January 1917

Germany decides to launch unrestricted submarine warfare on 1 February, with the aim of forcing the United Kingdom to surrender. This will be contrary to international law and to the undertakings Germany has given to the United States.

29 January 1917

The German government announces that from now on, its submarines will attack all hospital ships in the North Sea or English Channel without warning, alleging that the British government has regularly been misusing hospital ships to carry troops and munitions.

31 January 1917

Germany informs the United States of its decision to launch unrestricted submarine warfare.

February–April 1917

Mission to the Indies and Burma.

February–April 1917

German submarines sink so many British merchant vessels that the government in London becomes concerned that industry will be paralysed by the lack of raw materials and that there will be food shortages as a result of the threat to supplies.

8–12 March 1917 (23–27 February OS)¹

Riots in Petrograd. The population is protesting against government incompetence, military defeats and shortages. Troops sent to quell the riots fraternize with the population.

14 March 1917

Russia: The Douma and the Petrograd Soviet agree to form a provisional government headed by Prince Lvov. The provisional government proclaims its loyalty to the Entente, but the country is exhausted and the army demoralized.

15 March 1917 (2 March OS)

Russia: Nicolas II abdicates.

¹ The Orthodox Church rejected the new calendar introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, and Russia continued to use the Julian calendar until the October Revolution. The letters OS (Old Style) are generally used to indicate dates from the Julian calendar.

15 March 1917

German submarines sink three US merchant vessels.

6 April 1917

The United States declares war on Germany. As well as enabling the US to support its allies, joining the war will stimulate the industrialization and economic development of the country as it equips its army. The war will also reverse the financial position of the US, making the country a creditor rather than a debtor. The US decides to raise an expeditionary force of 1.8 million men. However, as the US has only a very small army, which guards the Mexican border, they will have to build their expeditionary force virtually from nothing.

14 April 1917

Note to the German government concerning the torpedoing of hospital ships.

16-20 April 1917

Franco-British Chemin-des-Dames offensive (second Battle of the Aisne). The offensive fails, with heavy losses. The French army will be incapable of launching further offensives for over a year.

16 April 1917

Lenin and his companions arrive in Petrograd, having left Switzerland on a special train provided by Germany.

17 April 1917

First act of collective insubordination in the French army.

17 April 1917 (4 April OS)

Russia: Lenin's first speech to the Petrograd Soviet – the April Theses. The Menshevik majority in the Socialist Party advocates cooperation with the provisional government in order to consolidate the achievements of the February revolution. Lenin rejects the achievements of the “bourgeois revolution”. He favours refusing to cooperate with the provisional government and moving on to a new stage in the revolutionary process based on a rallying of the masses under the motto “peace and land”. He claims that the Bolsheviks are sure of victory if they promise peace to the troops and land to the peasants.

26 April 1917

ICRC appeal requesting the repatriation of prisoners of war who have been in captivity for an extended period.

May 1917

The number of merchant ships sunk by German submarines falls significantly, thanks to the Admiralty's convoy system. Famine and industrial paralysis are averted.

15 May 1917

General Philippe Pétain replaces General Nivelle as commander-in-chief of the French army. His first task is to re-establish discipline. The army has been put under strain by General Nivelle's offensives, which have resulted in terrible losses and no strategic gains. Pétain, who won his laurels at Verdun, favours adopting a defensive strategy until the balance of forces tips in the Allies' favour.

15 March 1917

Russia: Changes in the provisional government, with the dismissal of Milyukov, who favours loyalty to the Entente and continuation of the war. Alexander Kerensky, a lawyer, advocates revising Russia's war aims to exclude any thought of annexation, as he believes this to be the only way of preserving the cohesion of the army. He is appointed Minister of War, which gives him a decisive degree of influence within the provisional government.

20 May 1917

Mutinies in the French army units that participated in the Chemin-des-Dames offensive.

18 June 1917

The Russian army launches a major offensive, breaching the Austrian lines in Galicia. However, on 2 July the German army launches a counter-offensive, forcing the Russian troops to fall back in disarray. The failure of the 18 June offensive further undermines the credibility of the provisional government.

18 June 1917

Russia: The provisional government expels Swiss trade union leader Robert Grimm, who has acted as a go-between for the Bolsheviks and the German government with a view to arranging a separate peace, and publishes the coded telegrams between Grimm and Swiss Federal Councillor Arthur Hoffmann. Hoffmann resigns.

26 June 1917

The Swiss Federal Assembly elects Gustave Ador to the Federal Council, to replace Hoffmann.

29 June 1917

Greece enters the war on the side of the Entente.

2 July 1917

The British Empire and Germany sign an agreement in The Hague concerning civilian and military prisoners of war.

July 1917

The first permanent ICRC delegation is established, in Salonica.

1 July 1917

At Kerensky's instigation, the Russian army returns to the offensive under the command of General Brusilov. After initial successes, the offensive comes to a halt, as the troops refuse to continue attacking. The officer corps is demoralized and the army is being undermined by desertion.

11 July 1917

Ypres area: Germany becomes the first belligerent to use a blister agent. "Yperite" becomes one of the names for this gas.

19 July 1917

German counter-offensive in Russia. The German army re-occupies Galicia and continues its offensive eastwards and northwards.

20 July 1917

Russia: Changes to the provisional government. Kerensky replaces Prince Lvov as prime minister.

31 July–10 November 1917

Battle of Passchendaele (3rd Battle of Ypres). The aims of this major British offensive are to break through the German lines towards Passchendaele, liberate western Flanders and neutralize the German submarine base at Zeebrugge, in occupied Belgium. The British offensive is paralysed not only by German resistance but also by the torrential rain that makes it impossible to advance. Despite repeated attacks up to 10 November, British forces are unable to advance beyond the village of Passchendaele.

14 August 1917

Pope Benedict XV launches a peace initiative. The Pope's initiative corresponds closely to the ideas of the Central Powers and makes no mention of Alsace-Lorraine or Trentino.

19 August–12 September 1917

11th Battle of the Isonzo. The Italian army loses 100,000 men in this offensive, but achieves nothing.

September 1917

Further defeats for the Russian army. The German army occupies all of Lithuania.

23 October 1917

After returning secretly from Finland, Lenin calls a meeting of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. He maintains that now is the time to strike, and that the Party absolutely must not wait for the Constituent Assembly to meet, as the Assembly will not be favourable to the Bolsheviks. He calls for the destruction of the "state

machinery” by an insurrection and for “bourgeois parliamentarism” to be replaced by the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. He states that success is certain if the Party promises immediate peace to the soldiers and land to the peasants. The majority of the Central Committee support Lenin’s position.

24 October–10 November 1917

Caporetto. The Austrian army, supported by the German army, breaks through the Italian lines, taking 290,000 prisoners and capturing 3,000 artillery pieces. France and Britain send several divisions to Italy, to support the new Italian front on the River Piave.

7 November 1917 (25 October OS)

Russia: October Revolution. Bolshevik detachments from the Petrograd garrison take the main strategic points across the capital and besiege the Winter Palace, which is the seat of the provisional government. The defenders of the Winter Palace surrender at dawn on 7 November (25 October OS) and the Palace is taken. All members of the provisional government are arrested, with the exception of Kerensky, who manages to escape. The Petrograd Soviet gives power to the “Council of People’s Commissars”, presided by Lenin.

9 November 1917

The Council of People’s Commissars adopts the Decree on Peace, which sets out the principle of peace with no annexations or reparations and the Decree on Land, which promulgates the seizure of all land belonging to the Crown, the clergy and anyone who does not cultivate the land themselves, and the redistribution of this land to peasant communities.

10 November 1917

End of the Battle of Passchendaele (3rd Battle of Ypres). None of the strategic objectives have been achieved. The British forces have only managed to push the German lines back some 10 to 12 kilometres along a front approximately 20 km long, north-east of the Ypres salient. The effort has cost the British 70,000 dead, with 170,000 more wounded.

15 November 1917

Representations to France and Germany, requesting the repatriation of prisoners who have been detained for a long period.

16 November 1917

France: Formation of the Clémenceau government.

3 December 1917

Start of negotiations at Brest-Litovsk to agree an armistice between Soviet Russia and the Central Powers.

7 December 1917

Finland declares independence.

10 December 1917

The Nobel Committee of the Norwegian parliament awards the Nobel Peace Prize to the ICRC. This will be the only time that the Prize is awarded during the First World War.

11 December 1917

Palestine: After breaking through the Ottoman lines in Gaza, General Allenby enters Jerusalem.

15 December 1917

Armistice between Russia and the Central Powers. As soon as the armistice comes into force, huge numbers of Russian soldiers desert, heading back to their villages in an attempt to be present when land is redistributed. The army loses what little discipline it still maintained. In certain units, the soldiers kill their officers.

28 December 1917

The British and Ottoman Empires sign an agreement in Bern concerning prisoners of war and civilians.

Overview of 1917 Neither the French offensive at Chemin-des-Dames, nor the British offensive in Flanders, nor the German submarine offensive, nor even the Austro-German victory at Caporetto have had a strategic effect. The only two events of strategic importance in 1917 are the United States' entry into the war on the side of the Entente and the withdrawal of Russia. Eventually, the arrival of the United States, as the world's leading industrial power, will ensure victory for the Entente. However, the Entente Powers will need to hold on until summer 1918, as the United States has only a minute army, stationed on the Mexican border, and will need a year to recruit, equip and train an expeditionary force capable of affecting the course of the war. Until then, Russia's withdrawal will leave the Central Powers in a superior position. The German high command is fully aware of this situation, and will attempt to achieve victory on the Western Front before US forces arrive. This means that Germany will have to go on the offensive in the west, abandoning its strategy of allowing the enemy to exhaust himself with futile offensives.

1918

6 January 1918

Russia: The Council of People's Commissars dissolves the central administration of the Russian Red Cross and confiscates the Society's assets, which are declared the property of the Russian Republic.

8 January 1918

Washington: President Wilson delivers a speech to Congress, in which he presents the United States' war aims – his “Fourteen Points”. In repudiating secret diplomacy, proclaiming the right of peoples to self-determination and proposing the creation of an organization to preserve peace – the future League of Nations – his speech is intended to keep Russia in the war.

21 January 1918

Appeal to the belligerents to close the “propaganda camps”.

28 January 1918

Strikes in Germany. These strikes confirm the view of the Soviet government that revolution in Germany is imminent, and that it should play for time rather than accept Germany's demands regarding a peace treaty.

6 February 1918

Appeal against the use of poison gas.

18 February 1918

Hostilities resume between the Central Powers and Russia. As peace negotiations are getting bogged down, and as Germany is impatient to have its hands free on the Eastern Front so it can focus its efforts on France and Britain, Germany and Austro-Hungary resume hostilities. The Russian army can offer no resistance, as it is incapacitated by indiscipline, doubt and desertion.

21 February 1918

Peace negotiations resume at Brest-Litovsk, with German troops already in Narva, 150 km from Petrograd.

3 March 1918

Russia and the Central Powers sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Russia renounces sovereignty over Poland, Lithuania, Courland and Finland, evacuates Livonia and Estonia, and leaves the Central Powers to determine the fate of these territories. Signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk allows Germany to transfer to the Western Front some of the soldiers who have been fighting the Russian Empire and hence to deploy more troops than the Entente. The German high command knows, however, that this numerical superiority will be short-lived, as the United States will soon be in a position to send large numbers of troops to Europe.

12 March 1918

Russia: The Soviet government leaves Petrograd for Moscow, which becomes the capital once again.

21 March 1918

Germany launches a major offensive on the Western Front, focused on the boundary between the French and British armies in Picardy. Convinced that Germany has to win the war before the summer, after which deployment of US forces will render defeat inevitable, Ludendorff commits all his reserves. German forces break through the Franco-British lines near Amiens. In just a few days, the German army advances 60 km, an advance not seen on the Western Front since October 1914. The German army will launch repeated attacks until the beginning of July in an attempt to achieve victory.

23 March 1918

Germany starts shelling Paris using “Big Bertha”.

26 March 1918

With defeat looming, the Allies agree to the appointment of a commander-in-chief. General Foch is appointed the same day.

9–25 April 1918

German offensive in Flanders.

May 1918

Mass strikes in France.

6 May 1918

Appeal by the ICRC regarding the Russian Red Cross.

7 May 1918

The ICRC confirms the appointment of Édouard Frick as its delegate in Russia.

27 May–11 June 1918

German offensive at Chemin-des-Dames.

June–July 1918

ICRC mission to Japan.

June 1918

First wave of Spanish flu. Almost 500,000 German soldiers are affected. The Allies are also affected, but their soldiers are better supplied and better fed, and are therefore better able to resist the epidemic. There will be an even worse Spanish flu epidemic in the autumn.

2 June 1918

Russia: The Council of People’s Commissars issues a decree confirming the existence of the Russian Red Cross and confirming Russia’s adhesion to the Geneva Convention and other treaties related to the Red Cross.

15–23 June 1918

Battle of Mount Grappa. The Austrian army commits almost its entire forces in an attempt to break through the enemy lines at the River Piave. Following initial successes, the Austrian attack is halted.

June–July 1918

Russia: Start of the civil war. Elements of the army that wish to continue the fight against the Central Powers turn on the Soviet government. They are rapidly joined by all the minorities that are hoping for independence. The “Whites” bring together army officers, cadets, Cossacks, the aristocracy and a section of the bourgeoisie. Over the course of the summer, they seize control of all of Russia’s outer regions, plus Siberia. However, the centre of the country remains under the control of the Bolsheviks and of the Red Army. This means that even though it is under siege from all around what was formerly Russia, the Soviet government retains control of the centre of the country, including Moscow and Petrograd, and of most industrial regions. Furthermore, the Whites do not have a unified command structure. They alienate the ethnic minorities by refusing the principle of self-determination and fail to win over the peasants because they refuse to commit themselves to redistributing land.

14–16 July 1918

Second Battle of the Marne. The Allies are ready for this new German offensive, which becomes bogged down on 15 July. Allied air superiority allows them to destroy the bridges across the river, including the temporary bridges that the Germans deploy. As in September 1914, the German army is pushed back north of the Marne. The second Battle of the Marne marks the failure of the great German offensive of spring 1918. Between 21 March and 16 July, over 850,000 German soldiers are killed, wounded or taken prisoner. The German high command has committed all its reserves in this offensive. The Allies are also exhausted, but they are being reinforced by regular arrivals of US troops. The United States’ mobilization efforts, launched in April 1917, enable it to send 250,000 fully-equipped soldiers to Europe every month from April 1918 onwards. The numerical imbalance from summer 1918 onwards is further accentuated by the failure of the German high command to invest sufficient effort in developing two types of weapon that will play a decisive role in the final phase of the conflict: the aeroplane and the tank.

18 July 1918

On the Western Front, the French 10th Army’s counter-offensive enables the Allies to regain the initiative. The German army is forced back to the positions it held on 27 May 1918.

8 August 1918

Franco-British offensive in the Montdidier sector (Somme), supported by aircraft and over 600 tanks. The Allies are victorious, breaking through the German lines. Thanks to their superior numbers, their air superiority and their large-scale use of tanks, behind

which columns of infantry can advance, the Allies change the war from one of position to one of manoeuvre, something they have been unable to achieve through any of their offensives on the Western Front since autumn 1914. "This is the German army's black day," notes General Ludendorff in his diary. In one month, the German army has been forced back to the positions it held before 21 March.

13–14 August 1918

Wilhelm II calls a conference at the Supreme Army Command in Spa, occupied Belgium. The conference is attended by German chancellor Hertling, foreign secretary Hinze and Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff. The participants recognize that the war is lost, and that Germany will have to sue for peace, but they believe that they are still in control of the calendar and that Germany can hope for less disadvantageous conditions if they wait for the Allied offensive to run out of steam before asking for an armistice.

15 September 1918

The Army of the Orient, commanded by General Franchet d'Espérey, launches a major offensive towards Prilep, in Macedonia. Demoralized, ill-equipped and poorly supplied, the Bulgarian army can no longer resist.

19–25 September 1918

Battle of Megiddo. General Allenby inflicts a decisive defeat on Ottoman forces in northern Palestine. This victory opens the way to Damascus for the British and their Arab allies.

26 September 1918

Start of the general counter-offensive on the Western Front. In less than three weeks, this offensive will force the German army to abandon all the positions between Verdun and the sea that it has occupied since October 1914.

26 September 1918

Bulgaria requests an armistice.

28 September 1918

In Spa, Generals Ludendorff and Hindenburg realize that the war is lost, and that Germany must immediately begin negotiations for an armistice. They decide to inform Wilhelm II.

29 September 1918

Bulgaria and the Allies sign an armistice in Prilep. The defeat of Bulgaria isolates the Ottoman Empire from Germany and from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and allows the Army of the Orient to deploy part of its forces towards Istanbul, with the Ottoman army just having suffered a heavy defeat in Palestine. Bulgaria's withdrawal from the conflict also leaves the southern flank of the Austro-Hungarian Empire exposed, forcing it to quickly deploy several divisions to the Balkans.

29 September 1918

Wilhelm II visits the Supreme Army Command in Spa. He speaks to Hindenburg, Ludendorff and foreign secretary Hinze. Ludendorff and Hindenburg convince the Emperor of the need to take immediate steps towards an armistice, as otherwise the situation is likely to become uncontrollable. The Emperor unhesitatingly accepts the conclusions of the two generals. That afternoon, the four are joined by the chancellor, Hertling. On being informed of the military situation and the need to request an armistice, Hertling resigns. He will be replaced by Prince Maximilian of Baden, who has a reputation as a liberal and has been advocating for peace through compromise for several months. In addition, in his capacity as Honorary President of the Red Cross of the Grand Duchy of Baden, he has been involved in matters related to prisoners of war, putting him in indirect contact with the Entente.

October 1918

The ICRC opens a permanent delegation in Germany.

October 1918

Spanish flu epidemic. The governments of the belligerent countries fail to take effective prophylactic measures to contain the epidemic for fear of revealing to the enemy its effects on their troops.

1 October 1918

Emir Faisal enters Damascus at the head of the Arab army. British forces arrive a few hours later.

4 October 1918

Prince Maximilian of Baden, who has been appointed chancellor the previous day, sends President Wilson a request for an armistice, based on Wilson's Fourteen Points, via the Swiss government.

5 October 1918

Prince Maximilian of Baden announces to the Reichstag the sending of the note to President Wilson and the steps being undertaken in parallel by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. The chancellor also states that he expects to be able to count on the parliamentary majority for its support.

7 October 1918

Istanbul: The "Young Turks" government resigns. The Ottoman Empire abandons its German and Austrian allies, and takes separate steps towards an armistice.

17 October 1918

Liberation of Ostend, Lille and Douai.

18 October 1918

Belgian and British troops liberate Bruges and Zeebrugge, together with the entire Belgian coast up to the Dutch border. The German submarine base at Zeebrugge is neutralized.

23 October 1918

Third note from President Wilson. He sets the conditions for an armistice, which include a prohibition on any resumption of hostilities by Germany.

24–30 October

Italy: Battle of Vittorio-Veneto. The Austro-Hungarian lines collapse, and defeat turns into a rout. Military defeat leads to the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Czechs and the Yugoslavs start to create independent States, taking no further account of what is happening in Vienna, while Hungary proclaims the end of the Dual Monarchy.

29 October 1918

The Austro-Hungarian Empire requests an armistice.

30 October 1918

The Ottoman Empire and the Allies sign the Armistice of Mudros.

30 October 1918

Kiel: Mutiny by crews of the German fleet. The government hesitates to send in troops, fearing that this will lead to mutinies in the army.

1 November 1918

Hungary declares independence.

1 November 1918

The Serbian army enters Belgrade. Most of Serbia, as defined by its July 1914 borders, has now been liberated.

3 November 1918

The Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Allies sign the Armistice of Villa Giusti.

7 November 1918

Revolution in Bavaria. Independent Social Democrat Kurt Eisner takes leadership of the Bavarian Workers' Council, declaring Bavaria a "Free State".

9 November 1918

Insurrection in Berlin. Abdication of Wilhelm II, who flees to the Netherlands. Proclamation of the republic. Resignation of chancellor Prince Maximilian of Baden, who is replaced by the socialist Friedrich Ebert.

11 November 1918

Germany and the Allies sign the Armistice of Rethondes. The armistice specifies that Germany is to evacuate all territory that it still occupies in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Alsace and Lorraine within 15 days, and that in the following 15 days it is to evacuate a ten-kilometre strip along the left bank of the Rhine, together with three bridgeheads 30 km in radius on the right bank of the river, opposite Mainz, Koblenz and Cologne. Within 20 days, Germany is to hand over 5,000 artillery pieces, 25,000 machine guns, 1,700 aircraft, all its submarines and 24 large warships. Germany is also to immediately release all Allied prisoners of war, without reciprocation from the Allied side. The blockade is to be maintained until signature of a peace treaty.

11–15 November 1918

Switzerland: General strike.

11 November 1918

Switzerland and Soviet Russia break off diplomatic relations.

Overview of 1918 The decisive factor in 1918 is the increasing power of the US army. From April 1918 onwards, the US is able to send 250,000 fully-equipped soldiers to Europe every month. Aware that Germany has to win the war before the arrival of these forces renders defeat inevitable, the German high command launches a series of offensives, starting on 21 March. These offensives exhaust the German army but fail to secure victory. The second Battle of the Marne (14–16 July 1918) marks the failure of the great German offensive. From August 1918 onwards, the Entente's superior numbers and its deployment of aircraft and tanks in huge numbers force the German army to retreat. As Germany can no longer support its allies, they withdraw from the conflict, one after the other. Faced with a rout, and the disintegration of the country, the German high command has no choice but to admit defeat. Germany accepts an armistice that confirms the Allied victory.

1919-1929**5–11 January 1919**

Spartacist insurrection in Berlin.

18 January 1919

Paris: Peace conference opens.

24 February 1919

In its 180th Circular, the ICRC requests the lifting of the blockade as regards supplies to hospitals.

March 1919–1921

Dr Georges Montandon undertakes a mission to Siberia, to organize the repatriation of prisoners of war.

10 March 1919

The ICRC asks the Peace Conference to lift the blockade, at least as regards medical supplies, and to arrange for hospitals in Central Europe to receive supplies.

1–11 April 1919

The president of the American Red Cross calls a medical conference at Cannes. This is attended by the leaders of the American, British, French, Italian and Japanese Red Cross Societies, together with leading medical experts. The conference lays the foundations for the League of Red Cross Societies (now the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies).

15–16 April 1919

The ICRC calls a meeting in Vienna of health ministry representatives from Austria, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine and Yugoslavia, to coordinate the fight against epidemics in Eastern Europe. The conference sets up the Central agency to combat epidemics in Eastern Europe, enabling the representatives of countries that have no diplomatic relations to meet under the auspices of the ICRC and take joint preventive measures.

4 May 1919

China: Student protests in Peking and other cities against the decision of the Peace Conference to award the former German colonies in China – especially Tsingtao – to Japan, rather than restore them to China, a member of the Entente. These demonstrations mark the beginning of a resurgence in Chinese nationalism.

5 May 1919

Paris: Founding of the League of Red Cross Societies.

28 June 1919

Versailles: Signing of the Peace Treaty between the Allies and Germany. The Covenant of the League of Nations forms the first chapter of the treaty.

22 August 1919

The ICRC asks the Supreme War Council to repatriate prisoners of war held in the countries of the Entente.

10 September 1919

Saint-Germain-en-Laye: Signing of the Peace Treaty between the Allies and Austria.

18 October 1919

The ICRC once again asks the Supreme War Council to repatriate Austrian, Bulgarian, Hungarian and Turkish prisoners.

19 November 1919

United States: The Senate refuses to ratify the Treaty of Versailles. The United States thereby refuses to join the League of Nations, despite their president having played a larger part in its creation than anyone else.

27 November 1919

Neuilly-sur-Seine: Signing of the Peace Treaty between the Allies and Bulgaria.

10 January 1920

The Treaty of Versailles comes into force.

19 April 1920

Berlin: Signing of an agreement between Germany and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic regarding the reciprocal repatriation of prisoners of war and civilian internees.

12 May 1920

Resumption under the auspices of the ICRC and the League of Nations of the repatriation of Russian prisoners of war and civilian internees held in the successor States to the former Central Powers, and of Austrian, German, Hungarian and Turkish citizens held in Russia and Siberia.

4 June 1920

Trianon: Signing of the Peace Treaty between the Allies and Hungary.

10 August 1920

Sèvres: Signing of the Peace Treaty between the Allies and Turkey. As a result of the Kemalist revolution in Turkey and of the Greco-Turkish War, this treaty will not be ratified and no steps will be taken to implement it. Following Turkey's victory over Greece, it is replaced by a new treaty signed in Lausanne on 24 July 1923.

11 November 1920

Paris: The ashes of the Unknown Soldier are interred under the Arc de Triomphe.

22 November 1920

In a letter to the president and members of the 1st Assembly of the League of Nations, the ICRC requests the adoption of a series of measures intended to render war less inhumane, notably "the limitation of aerial warfare to strictly military objectives", "the prohibition of bombing or shelling cities that are open or not defended", "the prohibition of deportations of civilians" and "an absolute prohibition of asphyxiating gas".

30 March–7 April 1921

The 10th International Conference of the Red Cross, held in Geneva, passes a resolution in which the Red Cross proclaims its right and duty to assist civilian victims of war and makes the ICRC the lynchpin of Red Cross work in this area.

13 July 1922

End of the repatriation of Russian prisoners of war and civilian internees held in the successor States to the former Central Powers, and of Austrian, German, Hungarian and Turkish citizens held in Russia or Siberia. Between 12 May 1920 and 13 July 1922, over 425,000 former prisoners of war and civilian internees have been repatriated under the auspices of the ICRC, most of them by sea, via the Baltic, the Black Sea or Vladivostok and Trieste.

24 July 1923

Lausanne: Signing of the Peace Treaty between the Allies and Turkey.

17 June 1925

The Conference for the Supervision of the International Trade in Arms and Ammunition and in Implements of War (Geneva, 4 May–17 June 1925) restores the prohibition of poisoned weapons by adopting the Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare of 17 June 1925.

1–27 July 1929

Geneva: Diplomatic conference. Adoption of the Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field and of the Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 27 July 1929.

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François Bugnion

CONFRONTING THE HELL OF THE TRENCHES

In terms of the number of nations involved, the duration of the conflict and the resources deployed, the First World War constituted a fundamental break with the past. It ushered in a century of violence, of which we continue to suffer the consequences today.

Out of this horror, the Red Cross was to emerge transformed.

In the first few months of the conflict, the International Committee of the Red Cross set up a system of operations that remains the cornerstone of its action today: tracing missing persons, restoring contact between prisoners and their families, visiting prison camps, delivering aid and repatriating ex-detainees. No other conflict has transformed the organization so deeply. This book examines the main elements of that metamorphosis.

François Bugnion holds a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Doctorate in Political Science. He joined the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1970 and has served as a delegate in Israel and the occupied territories, Bangladesh, Turkey and Cyprus, and as head of delegation in Chad, Vietnam and Cambodia. From January 2000 to June 2006, he was director for International Law and Cooperation at the ICRC and from 2010 to 2017 he was a member of the ICRC Assembly, the organization's governing body.



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