

The Central Prisoners of War Agency

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THE CENTRAL PRISONERS OF WAR AGENCY

The Annual Reports of the ICRC give an account of the considerable work accomplished each year by the Central Prisoners of War Agency. In 1958, this vast information centre dealt once more with a great number of enquiries concerning military personnel and civilians missing or taken prisoner during conflicts and its searches frequently led to successful results. The particulars given below show the nature and the scope of these activities.

During the year the Agency received 104,129 postal items and sent out 93,301; it dealt with 113,928 cases and opened 35,482 enquiries with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as well as with Governments and public offices in numerous States.

The volume of work was, on the whole, about the same as for the previous year. There was some increase in the mail of the German, French Yugoslav and Stateless Persons Sections but a distinct reduction in the work of the Hungarian Section.

It was noted in all the different sections of the Agency that the enquiries are becoming of a more and more complex character, especially those relating to the Second World War. The cases submitted to the Agency by public offices and private individuals — 13 years after the close of the hostilities — present great difficulties on account of the time which has elapsed. A close study of these cases followed by careful searches in card-indexes often led to numerous enquiries being opened with public offices in other countries.

In spite of these difficulties it is interesting to note the considerable increase in the positive results obtained by the Agency sections. The increasingly efficient co-operation in this work of National Societies and the authorities in many countries has been of great assistance in obtaining these results.

Polish Section. — This section continued to be very active during the year; its work consists of searches for military personnel missing during hostilities or former combatants who did not return to their country at the end of the war, the issue of certificates of captivity and applications for death certificates and information concerning graves, etc. The enquiries received in 1958 (6,781) mainly concerned displaced persons.

It happened in several cases that the enquirers and persons sought were both living in Poland and could thus be placed in contact through Geneva.

USSR Section. — Over past years the mail from and to the USSR has continued to increase, especially in 1958. The enquiries mainly concerned civilians who disappeared during the Second World War, but others were related to a much earlier period in some cases, for instance, the person sought had been missing for a number of years, in fact so far back as the Revolution in 1917. Despite this great lapse of time some successful results were obtained which enabled the Agency to renew the contact between near relatives who had given up all hope of being united. Some of this work was carried out in co-operation with the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Moscow, which sent to the Agency a number of enquiries concerning Soviet citizens, military personnel and civilians, who disappeared during the Second World War. In general enquiries of this description were forwarded to the International Tracing Service in Arolsen (See p. 35 ff.).

A branch of this section deals with stateless persons resident in the USSR. These cases are of a very complex nature in general but have led to successful results. Travel documents were issued by the ICRC to some of these stateless persons to enable them to leave the Soviet Union and to join relatives in other countries.

Baltic Section. — The heavy mail which this section continued to receive during the year related firstly to Latvia, then Estonia and Lithuania, and most cases consisted of requests for information concerning civilians separated from their near relatives since the end of the war. These enquiries (4 594 in 1958) led to a good number of positive results and were frequently made through the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Moscow. In some instances contacts between families were renewed and aged parents were authorised to join their children in Western countries.

Jugoslav Section. — In this section also the volume of work was greater than in the previous year. It consisted mainly of searches for former combatants missing since the war and in making out certificates of captivity for former prisoners of war. The majority of these enquiries were received through the Yugoslav Red Cross.

Spanish Section. — The families of deported Spanish nationals who died in concentration camps in Germany continued to make applications to this section for the issue of death certificates to enable them to submit claims for compensation. These certificates were established in co-operation with the ITS in Arolsen.

The Spanish Section also dealt with requests from Spanish nationals recently repatriated from the USSR for the transfer to Spain of old age pensions, sickness and disablement benefits paid to them in the Soviet Union. The ICRC made approaches in this matter through the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Moscow, which usually led to favourable results; by the end of the year most of these cases had been settled. The section dealt with 224 cases in 1958.

Greek Section. — The section continued its work of tracing Greek nationals transferred to various Eastern or Central European countries during the civil war in Greece (1945-1948). It received a number of replies, in particular from the Czechoslovak Red Cross.

French Section. — As a result of the events in North Africa the past year was marked by a considerable increase in the mail. A number of enquiries were opened with a view to tracing missing military personnel in Algeria who were sought by their families. Messages from French prisoners held by the ALN were also transmitted. The French Section continued to issue certificates of captivity to former prisoners in the First and Second World Wars. It made further efforts to trace persons deported to Germany and Alsatians and Lorrainers missing on the Eastern Front. The section sent out 1,917 postal items during the year.

Italian Section. — In pursuance of its task which is mostly concerned with the identification of prisoners of war and civilian internees who died during the Second World War, this section remained in close contact with the Italian authorities, especially the Ministry of Defence in Rome. This work still requires long and difficult research.

The Italian Section continued its efforts to trace military personnel missing on the Eastern Front. Enquiries made in this connection to the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies led to a further series of replies which in most cases consisted of notifications of death.

The section also dealt with requests received from former Italian prisoners of war for medical records of their treatment for wounds or sickness during their captivity.

German Section. — This section, one of the most active, is subdivided into two sections: military personnel and civilians. The first deals with enquiries for missing combatants (in particular on the Eastern Front), makes applications for death certificates, seeks information concerning the graves of deceased combatants and prisoners and issues certificates of captivity. In this connection, numerous enquiries were sent during the year to the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to which regular replies were received.

The civilian section is also busily engaged, mainly in searching for persons who disappeared during hostilities or were displaced as a result of post-war events. The numerous enquiries received in this connection reveal in general an appalling degree of distress and suffering. In most cases they concern families of “*Volksdeutsche*” (persons of German origin) in various East European countries (See “*Reuniting of families*”, p. 30).

Middle East Section. — The greater part of this section’s work consisted in the opening of enquiries on persons living in the Near and Middle East, whose near relatives were without news. The Agency dealt with these enquiries through National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, whose co-operation led to successful results in general.

Far East Section. — In addition to other activities, this section made searches for civilians originating from North or South Korea missing since the hostilities (1950-1953). Enquiries were also opened for tracing persons of several nationalities in various parts of the Far East. Positive results were achieved for some of the enquiries sent through the Chinese Red Cross.

Stateless Persons Section. — In comparison with the previous year the work in this section showed a considerable increase in 1958. This was due to the fact that many stateless persons resident in Egypt wished to take advantage of the emigration facilities offered by the authorities

in the U.S.A. Departures for other countries were much fewer. This section sent out 10,963 postal items during the year.

Hungarian Section. — After the events in autumn 1956 and all through 1957 this section was faced with a heavy burden of work which mainly consisted of taking a census and registering tens of thousands of refugees and dealing with the transmission of innumerable messages.

As a result, a great many refugees were put in touch with their relatives in Hungary or in other countries. In consequence the work of the Hungarian Section has decreased considerably, but it nevertheless continues to receive 500 to 600 enquiries each month. These enquiries come in most cases from refugees who wish either to be repatriated, to obtain permission for near relatives to join them or to ask to be transferred from one country of asylum to another. Some applications referred to the payment of maintenance by heads of families living abroad in behalf of their children who remained in Hungary. A total of 7,615 postal items was sent out by this section in 1958.

Other Agency sections not referred to here continued their work on a smaller but nevertheless very useful scale. These activities were very similar to those mentioned above.

The Agency continued to receive enquiries in 1958 concerning nationals of various countries enrolled in the French Foreign Legion, whose relatives were without news. Enquiries were opened to obtain news of these men and to inform their families accordingly.

THE INTERNATIONAL TRACING SERVICE (ITS)

Twenty-five million personal cards, over ten million documents, nearly eight hundred thousand individual files of persons for whom the ITS has received at least one enquiry — these figures reveal the magnitude of the work of the International Tracing Service at its headquarters in Arolsen (German Federal Republic). Since June 1955, the ICRC has been entrusted with the administration of this organisation.

The International Commission of which the purpose, according to present agreements, is to maintain the international co-operation established in the domain of the ITS, held four meetings in 1958, at which the representatives of France, Belgium, the German Federal Republic,