

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 13 (1948)
Heft: 3

Rubrik: The work of the International Committee of "The Red Cross" during the Second World War : concerning a local committee for aid to the wounded

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 21.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

SWISS CITIZENS' ASSETS IN FRANCE.

Swiss citizens living in New Zealand who have assets in France which are affected by the nationalization measures of the French Government are recommended to communicate with the Consulate of Switzerland, G.P.O. Box 386, Wellington.

- (aa) bis zum 31. Dezember 1948 für Auslandschweizer, die im Jahre 1917 oder früher geboren sind;
- (bb) bis Ende des Jahres, in welchem sie das 30. Altersjahr vollenden, für Auslandschweizer, die im Jahre 1918 oder später geboren sind;
- (cc) innert sechs Monaten nach Ausscheiden aus der obligatorischen Versicherung, für Schweizerbürger, die die Versicherung freiwillig fortführen wollen.

Die Beiträge.

1. Das Beitragssystem der freiwilligen Versicherung unterscheidet sich nicht grundsätzlich von jenem der obligatorischen Versicherung. Da jedoch der Arbeitgeberbeitrag im Ausland nicht erhoben werden kann, haben die freiwillig Versicherten den vollen 4 %igen Beitrag zu entrichten.

Die Auszahlung der Renten.

Da der Anspruch auf eine ordentliche Rente nur Personen, die während mindestens eines vollen Jahres Beiträge entrichtet haben, oder ihren Hinterlassenen zusteht, werden diese Leistungen erst ab 1949 ausgerichtet.

Anmeldung.

Interessenten wird empfohlen, sich mit dem Schweizerischen Konsulat in Wellington in Verbindung zu setzen.

THE WORK OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF
"THE RED CROSS"
DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR.

CONCERNING A LOCAL COMMITTEE FOR AID TO THE WOUNDED.

Two events of capital importance mark the period between the wars, relating to the two aspects of the Red Cross; the international principle and the relief organization. The first was the adoption, in 1928, by the International Red Cross Conference meeting at The Hague, of the statutes of the International Red Cross. Until then, as has been seen, the organs of the Red Cross had legal status in the national field only. On the international plane, they were one body in actual fact, functioning through periodic conferences, or apparent in the mandates entrusted to the International Committee or to the League. The League, too, was an international organization, but it was a private association subject to national law, just as the Geneva Committee, international in name and work, was legally no more than a private association subject to Swiss law.

It was now a question of going further and giving to the union already achieved a statutory organization, of making it an entity in international law. The "International Red Cross," according to its statutes, comprises the National Societies, the International Committee and the League. Its highest legislative authority is the International Conference, composed of the delegates of these various bodies, and the delegates of the States party to the Geneva Conventions.

Thus, in law, the States, as such, became members of the Red Cross and shared directly in its international life. While the statutory organization of the International Red Cross greatly strengthens the universality of the Red Cross movement, it in no way lessens the autonomy of the Red Cross Societies in their national spheres. Neither can it modify the statutes of the Committee, nor those of the League.

The second event was the signing of the two Geneva Conventions of July 27th, 1929, for the most part due to the preparatory work done by the International Committee of the Red Cross. The first, for the "Relief of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field", was a more complete and definite form of the 1906 Convention which it now replaced. The other was nothing less than what is called the "Prisoners of War Code."

The Prisoners of War Convention took up the section in the Hague Regulations of 1907 relating to prisoners of war, and expanded them into 97 articles. First it re-affirmed the principle; "Prisoners of war are in the power of the hostile Government, but not of the individuals or formation who capture them. They shall at all times be humanely treated and protected, particularly against acts of violence, from insults and from public curiosity. Measures of reprisal against them are forbidden."

The principle was then completed:

"Prisoners of war are entitled to respect for their persons and honour.
Women shall be treated with all consideration due to their sex.
Prisoners retain their full civil capacity."

Further, the Prisoners Convention tries to fill up the gaps left in the text of 1907, seeking to define not so much the duties of prisoners of war as their rights and the obligations of the detaining Power with regard to them.

One part of the 1929 Convention directly concerns the Red Cross organizations and especially the International Committee. This is Part VI, entitled - "Bureaux of Relief and Information concerning Prisoners of War." Article 77 confirms the establishment of official Information Bureaux and describes in detail the way in which they should function. Article 78 repeats the authorization given to the recognized Relief Societies. Article 79, which was new, sanctions the earlier undertakings of the International Committee; the establishment of a Central Information Agency. This was the first time that a private institution had been mentioned by name in a humanitarian convention. The International Committee was mentioned twice more; in Article 87 which says that in the event of dispute between the belligerents regarding the application of the Convention, the Protecting Power may submit for the approval of the Powers in dispute the name of a person belonging to a neutral Power or a person "nominated by the International Red Cross Committee," who shall be invited to take part in the conference of the representatives of the belligerents in dispute; and in Article 88, belonging to the same section about the organization of control - "The foregoing provisions do not constitute any obstacle to the humanitarian work which the International Committee of the Red Cross may perform for the protection of prisoners of war with the consent of the belligerents concerned." The International Committee did not fail to make use of this.

The 1929 Convention was a victory for the Red Cross; the principle for which it stood was becoming ever more firmly established in the conscience of the nations. All its detailed regulations are but the repeated affirmation, in every part of the prisoner's life, of the principle that he is first of all a man, and that nothing not even war, can deprive him of the things which are necessary for a man's material and spiritual life, and for his dignity.

But the Red Cross had further aims. Earlier wars really affected the armies alone; civilians were involved only indirectly. In the first World War civilians, even women and children, were victims of bombardments by long-range guns and by planes; ships had been torpedoed; enemy aliens had been interned; hostages had been taken, and sometimes massacred. It was to be feared that

increase of technical skill not to mention of human wickedness, might make future wars more and more deadly for non-combatants.

The Red Cross did for these what it had done in 1863 for the wounded and sick, and later for prisoners. A plan for a Convention, drawn up chiefly by the International Committee was carefully studied, set on foot and approved for submission to a diplomatic conference, by the International Red Cross Conference which met at Tokio in 1934. International diplomacy does not always move quickly, and when war broke out in 1939 the "Tokio Draft" was still no more than a draft.

Four more times, on the occasion of the wars of the Chaco, Abyssinia, Spain and China, the International Committee was called upon to play the part of intermediary for welfare purposes, by sending delegates, organizing relief work or a prisoners of war agency. The Spanish War especially, a civil war in which the Conventions did not automatically come into play, but in which the International Committee was nevertheless able to undertake and carry through large-scale relief schemes, had many lessons to teach. Before it was over the threat of a fresh world war was already looming up.

Once more, the International Committee had to make ready to play its specific part in the work of relieving the sufferings due to war.

.....

Having come to the end of this historical sketch, we can briefly answer the question with which we began - "What is the International Committee of the Red Cross?" On the eve of the second World War, what was required of it?

In law, it was still only a private association. In actual fact it was a score of Swiss citizens, all of them giving their services, most of them occupying posts in business or the professions, assisted by a small permanent secretariat. The future belligerents required the Committee to perform a definite service, by running the Prisoners of War Agency, and to do something not clearly defined; everything possible for the protection of prisoners of war, with the consent of the Powers concerned. What the Red Cross as a whole asked of it was to be a "neutral intermediary."

This was both much and little. Much, because no bounds were set to the nature of its interventions. Little, because nothing except the running of the Agency was definite and especially because the Texts we have been considering opened doors for the International Committee, but provided it with no means of action whatever. They conferred upon it neither legal authority nor material power. They put at its disposal neither sanctions to enforce respect for the Convention's regulations about the one activity it entrusted to the Committee, nor arms to compel acceptance of measures which the Convention recognized its right to take. And the Committee had no money.

Yet, although it could count only on the resources and the support that would willingly be given, it would have authority; the authority of the idea it served; it would have power; the power which made Dunant bend, through days and weeks, over the beds of the wounded; it would have energy; the hope which millions of human beings placed in it.

.....

To make ready; that was Dunant's original idea, born of his sense of impotence; the idea behind the activities of the Aid Societies. It accounted for the whole history of the Red Cross, both for what it had achieved at the International Conferences and for what had been done in the national field. Newer had it ceased studying ways of increasing its efficacy, following the progress of technical skill in order to profit by it, and anticipating needs in order to be prepared, when the moment came, to fulfil its duties as auxiliary to the Army Medical Service.

A National Society knows in advance, if not the extent, at least the nature of the work which will devolve upon it in the event of war. It is in its own country that it will have to function. It is in contact with the army, and

knows how many men, how many women and what kinds of equipment it must supply; it knows its resources. It is to a large extent able to organize and train its relief units according to a definite plan, so that they may identify themselves with the army, which knows beforehand that they will become its auxiliaries. For the International Committee of the Red Cross, the position is quite different. Except with regard to the Agency, no practical preparation can be made. This is not only because it has no financial resources, but because it does not know for what to prepare. Where will war break out? Between which States? In which fields will it be right and possible for the International Committee to intervene? The steps that it is permitted to take in the name of human charity will be determined by events, and even then it will still be necessary to obtain the consent of the belligerents. It is quite impossible to ask permission beforehand to take measures of which the nature, urgency and scope, and therefore of course, the ways and means, are all unknown. That is the difficulty of the International Committee of the Red Cross; what is required of it is improvisation - the very thing which the Red Cross originally set out to prevent! Even in the case of the Prisoners of War Agency, practical preparation can only be sketched out, for no-one knows even where the work is to be done; everything will depend on the centre of gravity of the war and on the possibility of communication. "A Central Agency of information regarding prisoners of war shall be established in a neutral country," says Article 79 of the 1929 Convention. "The International Committee of the Red Cross shall, if they consider it necessary, propose to the Powers concerned the organization of such an agency."

The International Committee "shall propose." All it can do, is not to delay matters by proposing and awaiting consent; as soon as war breaks out, it must establish the Agency. That is what it decided to do, and for that it prepared. Some of its members and staff had belonged to the 1914-1918 Agency. Their memories and experiences were useful. In May 1938, they set to work, devised a system, evolved a plan. They decided on the form of the index-cards, and on the wording; they secured premises and assistants; they prepared beforehand the text of the notifications. In short, they constructed a "shadow" agency.

Then war broke out. On the first of September, 1939, Poland was invaded. On the third of September, Great Britain and France went to war with Germany. That very day, four notifications left Geneva, informing the belligerents that the International Committee of the Red Cross was ensuring the establishment of the agency contemplated in Article 79 of the Prisoners of War Convention.

The Committee waited only to take possession of the premises put at its disposal by the Genevese authorities, to make the necessary arrangements there, to collect equipment and furniture, to call together and train the staff, and then, on September 14th, the "Central Agency for Prisoners of War" was officially opened.

SUNDRY NEWS.

The Annual Seismological Report concerning Swiss earthquakes during 1945 has been compiled by Dr. E. Wanner of Zurich. Seismographs are installed at the Swiss Observatories of Zurich, Chur, Neuchâtel, Basel and Brig, and during the year 85 near earthquakes and 189 strong distant earthquakes were registered. There were ten earth tremors with epicentres in Switzerland which were felt by people during the year. None of these had a greater intensity than V on the Rossi-Forel Scale, so that none reached destructive intensity. The greatest three tremors were (1) May 13th at Freiburg, (2) October 13th, at Engadine and (3) November 10th, at Wildhorn.