

# The Central Prisoners of War Agency

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## VI. — The Central Prisoners of War Agency

At the beginning of 1949, the Central Agency, which had been installed in the *Palais du Conseil général* in September, 1939, was transferred to headquarters.

The archives, containing about forty million cards, were provisionally installed in four wooden huts loaned by the Swiss Army.

Although its activities had lessened very much since the end of hostilities (staff decreasing from 1,000 in 1944-1945, to about fifty in January 1949), the Agency still had plenty to do.

*Tracing of those posted missing, and identification of war dead* made it necessary to keep most of the Agency's Services in operation. Hundreds of requests for information, requiring early replies, continued to reach Geneva daily. The volume of correspondence received during the year may be set out under a number of headings, which give a very incomplete idea only of its variety and complexity :

- (a) — Missing military personnel, presumed dead or prisoners.
- (b) — Prisoners of war not yet released.
- (c) — Prisoners of war released, due or eligible for discharge, but not yet returned home.
- (d) — Inventories, and personal property of combatants or prisoners.
- (e) — Requests for Death Certificates for prisoners of war, civilian internees or deportees.
- (f) — Tracing of Displaced Persons for whom IRO has no responsibility (persons from Central and East Europe who, voluntarily or not, have left their country and are unable to correspond with their homes).
- (g) — Persons from occupied countries enlisted, voluntarily or otherwise, in the German Army and posted missing either during the War or since.

- (h) — German civilians hailing from territories detached from the former Reich since 1945.
- (i) — Transmission of family messages following interruption of postal communications (e.g. with Russian Zone of Occupation, Japan, Greece, and some Balkan States).
- (j) — Tracing in Switzerland, where the ICRC functions as the National Tracing Bureau.
- (k) — Search in the archives in response to requests forwarded by the National Societies.
- (l) — Attempts to identify military personnel buried without proper identification (Army number, or prisoner of war number alone available, etc.).

The ICRC index being the only source of information about former prisoners, about 18,000 *Captivity Certificates* were issued. The recipients were thus enabled to claim assistance from IRO, or to prove, either in the country of residence or in a country prepared to receive them, that they had been prisoners of war.

*Italian Service* — From 1943 on, hundreds of thousands of Italians, mostly military personnel, were deported to Germany without their names being communicated to the Agency. The Agency received from them, however, messages which it transmitted to their relatives in Italy—collecting, in the process, certain essential information about them. Thanks to this precaution, the Italian Service has been able to help the Italian authorities (particularly the Ministry of Defence) by identifying a great number of Italian internees who died in captivity in Germany. In most cases, the date or place of birth, or the address of next of kin was missing, and the family name was often incorrect. By detailed search, the Italian Service was able to bring the required information together, enabling the provincial or municipal authorities to confirm the identity of most of the missing persons.

The Italian Service received 6452 mail items and sent out 4000; 10,858 searches were made in the records, for the Ministry of Defence. Colonel Zecca, Head of the Tracing Bureau of the Ministry of Defence, visited the ICRC in April

1949; he emphasized the fact that the Agency was the only office capable of providing the Italian authorities with so many data for their identification work.

Signor Luigi Meda, Under-Secretary of State for Defence, while at Geneva, also visited the Agency.<sup>1</sup>

*German Service* — As in 1948, the German Service was responsible for two-thirds of the Agency's work, 80,816 communications being received in connection with inquiries about military and civilian persons, and 92,194 sent in reply. Inquiries from relatives about those posted missing on the Eastern front represented a fifth of the mail. Some inquiries were made in Soviet Russia, but replies were few, the Soviet Union not being signatory to the 1929 Prisoners of War Convention.

As nearly all countries had by then repatriated their prisoners of war, there remained in 1949 only a number—fortunately small—retained by the judicial authorities. It was almost impossible for many of these, to communicate with their families, and there were consequently many inquiries to the ICRC about their legal situation or their state of health. The Agency forwarded applications for release, appeals, documents for the defence and so forth, to the responsible tribunals.

The German Service continued to receive reports from various countries on the exhumation of German military personnel. These documents were transmitted to the proper quarters in Germany.

*Civilian Section* — This department had a considerable amount of work, especially in connection with the transfer of ethnic minorities from Poland and Czechoslovakia. The Agency forwarded lists to the Governments concerned, and sent to Germany the entry permits for repatriates received from its correspondents.

*Tracing Service* — During the year, there had been a proposal to take over the IRO International Tracing Service,

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 28.

created by the Allies in 1945, at Arolsen. The Service had made much use of the Agency index set up in 1945 and dealing with civilian internees. Nothing came of the proposal, however, it being decided to continue the Service as before.

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Conflicts in certain countries required the Agency to arrange the exchange of news and messages, and communicate lists of prisoners and civilian internees.

*Greece* — Following events in Greece, the Agency received many inquiries about missing soldiers; numerous messages were forwarded between prisoners of war and their relatives.

The Agency set up the index used in the search for Greek children transferred to countries bordering Greece<sup>1</sup>.

In addition to classifying, collecting, and comparing documents, the Agency made 9600 photostat copies of lists and requests for repatriation.

*Palestine* — As the conflict was localised, and ICRC Delegations had qualified personnel at hand, little call was made on the Agency. It did, however, receive lists of prisoners of war, wounded or deceased military personnel, and civilian internees.<sup>2</sup>

The total average monthly correspondence—mostly concerning Germany—was about 21,000 letters and cards.

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> See also pp. 72 et seq.