

Central Prisoners of War Agency and international tracing service

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IV. CENTRAL PRISONERS OF WAR AGENCY AND INTERNATIONAL TRACING SERVICE

A) *The Central Prisoners of War Agency*

The world centre of information for which the Geneva Conventions provide, the Central Prisoners of War Agency, was organised by the ICRC in Geneva during the great world conflicts ; its work continues today.

It analyses, registers and transmits to the official countries of origin lists of prisoners of war and of persons released or repatriated. It also collects information from private sources, makes searches for civilians and military personnel who disappeared during conflicts and keeps their families informed of the results.

The Agency draws up certificates of captivity and of deaths.

When all other means of communication have broken down, it forwards messages and transmits news between civilians separated by the events, and prisoners of war and their families.

Its card-indexes contain 45 million cards which represent 15 million cases dealt with.

Although the Second World War came to an end over 12 years ago the work of the Central Agency continues. It is constantly asked to perform new duties ; the number of cases dealt with at present shows a definite increase over the pervious year. The events in Hungary and the Middle East are not the only reason for the increased activity which is largely due to the flow of enquiries received from Central and East European countries.

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In 1957 the Central Prisoners of War Agency received 148,985 postal items and sent out 160,339. It dealt with 187,429 cases and opened 33,112 new enquiries with National Red Cross Societies, Ministries, register offices, Town Halls etc. These figures are double those of 1956 ; the Agency had therefore to make a special effort to carry out its work.

POLISH SECTION.

A great many Polish families apply to the Polish Section in the hope of obtaining news of relatives who disappeared during the hostilities or emigrated immediately after the war. The Section also receives many enquiries concerning persons resident in former Polish territory which is now under Soviet control. These tracing operations often give satisfactory results ; this Section alone received 18,587 postal items in 1957 (9,483 in 1956).

BALTIC SECTION.

The renewed activity of the Baltic Section notified in 1956 increased still further in 1957. Many persons were able to renew contact with near relatives from whom they had been separated since 1944.

USSR SECTION.

The mail from and to the USSR is continually increasing. The USSR Section has renewed contact between persons resident in the USSR and others living abroad who, in some cases, had lost touch with each other for the past 15 to 20 years.

JUGOSLAV SECTION.

The Yugoslav Section is mainly engaged in searching for former Yugoslav combatants and prisoners of war who did not return to their homes after the Second World War.

SPANISH SECTION.

The Spanish Section continues to deal with enquiries concerning deported Spanish persons who died in concentration camps in

Germany, and for whom proof of death is required to enable the families to claim compensation.

Numerous Spanish nationals recently repatriated from the USSR apply to the ICRC to obtain news of their wives, in most cases Soviet nationals, who stayed behind in their country. The Spanish Section also forwards to the Soviet authorities applications from some of the repatriated persons who suffered accidents at work and wish to have their pensions in this connection transferred to Spain.

GREEK SECTION.

In the past few years the Greek Section has increased its enquiries to National Societies for information concerning Greek nationals who were transferred to East European countries during the civil war. In 1957 the ICRC received from the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR over 3,000 replies which it forwarded to the Greek Red Cross ; 134 replies gave positive information while the others reported negative results of the searches undertaken by the Alliance.

FRENCH SECTION.

The events in Algeria caused an increase in the work of this Section which, at the request of French families who are without news of men missing in Algeria, makes enquiries through authorities which may be in a position to supply information.

ITALIAN SECTION.

The principal work of the Italian Section still continues to be the identification of combatants, prisoners of war and civilian internees who died during the Second World War. At the request of the Italian authorities, this Section devotes its efforts to this work with satisfactory results. The Section also searches for combatants who disappeared during the hostilities on the Eastern Front. The Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR, which deals with these enquiries, gave replies to many of them in 1957.

GERMAN SECTION.

In 1957 the German Section received 43,746 postal items (.i.e. 12,000 more than in the previous year), relating to searches for the missing, identification of deceased persons etc. In 1957 it issued 12,568 certificates of captivity to former prisoners of war. As a consequence of mass movements and transfers of the population and the shifting of frontiers, much of its work is also concerned with the tracing of civilians.

The Section also deals with numerous cases of " Volksdeutsche " living in various East European countries who wish to join relatives in Germany, Austria and other parts of Europe, and abroad. In 1957 this work was also carried out on behalf of " Volksdeutsche " in Rumania.

KOREAN SECTION.

In the last months of 1956 and early in 1957 the Korean Section sent to the Red Cross of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in Pyongyang 7,034 enquiries concerning South Korean civilians who disappeared during the hostilities. This National Society sent 337 replies to the ICRC which were forwarded to the Red Cross of the Republic of Korea in Seoul. It also transmitted 14,132 enquiries concerning North Korean civilians, which were sent on to Seoul, through the Central Agency.

MIDDLE EAST SECTION.

This Section, set up in November 1956 following the Suez conflict, continued to seek for Egyptian military personnel missing or captured during hostilities and the transmission of civilian message forms (containing 25 words concerning family news only) sent through the Central Prisoners of War Agency of the ICRC. As a result of the renewal of postal communications and the repatriation of prisoners the Section has less work. It continues nevertheless to receive enquiries from Egyptian families who are without news of men who disappeared during the fighting.

STATELESS PERSONS SECTION.

During the last quarter of 1956 the Central Agency set up this Section for the purpose of assisting stateless persons leaving Egypt. This Section was very active in 1957 and assisted numerous persons wishing to emigrate.¹

HUNGARIAN SECTION.

With the co-operation of National Red Cross Societies in the countries of asylum, the Central Agency made a census of Hungarian refugees and set up a central card-index which, at present, contains over 310,000 cards. With the information thus collected, the enquiries opened and the transmission of civilian messages, the Hungarian Section was able to place in contact thousands of persons who were without news of near relatives.

In addition 27,000 civilian messages were broadcast over the ICRC wave-length² during the interruption in postal communications with Hungary.

This Section received 55,303 postal items in 1957 and sent out 61,588.

* * *

The Central Agency's other Sections are still engaged in activities on a more limited scale but for an equally useful purpose.

Enquiries are still received concerning nationals of various countries enrolled in the French Foreign Legion who have ceased to give news. Enquiries are opened to obtain news of these men and inform their families.

* * *

B) *The International Tracing Service—Arolsen*

The International Tracing Service (ITS), whose headquarters are at Arolsen (Germany), is today the most important source of information concerning persons deported or displaced during the Second World War, either in Germany itself or in the countries occupied by the German forces.

¹ See p. 25.

² See p. 71.

about 800,000

Its card indexes contain 25 million individual cards ; ~~8 million~~ cases have already been dealt with.

The transmission of the bureau and administration of the ITS to the ICRC was set forth in the agreements concluded at Bonn on June 6, 1955. The International Commission for the administration of the ITS, instituted in accordance with the agreements and to which the ICRC is responsible in this connection, met four times in 1957. This Commission includes a delegate of each of the following Governments : Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. A representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a representative of the ICRC and of the ITS management also attend the meetings. As in the past, four members of the ICRC staff¹, all Swiss nationals, are at the head of the ITS, of which the staff on December 31, 1957, was composed of 248 employees (Germans and displaced persons).

* * *

The work of the ITS increased in 1957. Compared with 1956 the number of enquiries received shows an increase of 30 % and the number of certificates issued 50 %. This increase is partly the result of the prolongation to October, 1957, of the time-limit fixed by the Government of the German Federal Republic for sending in claims for compensation and, further, the measures taken to increase the output of the ITS, in particular by the introduction of new working methods and by increasing the staff.

* * *

In 1957 the ITS received a total of 203,801 applications (158,439 in 1956). This figure includes :

32,445 individual enquiries (39,572 in 1956) concerning victims of deportation measures or racial persecution, and refugees ;

134,462 (95,680 in 1956) requests for certificates to obtain compensation ;

¹ Mr. N. Burckhardt, Director ; Mr. A. de Cocatrix, Mr. G. Hoffmann and Mr. Bruns.

36,740 applications for death certificates (22,951 in 1956) ;
154 requests for information of a historical or statistical
nature (236 in 1956).

* * *

The postal items dispatched by the ITS in 1957 amounted to 358,842 (236,523 in 1956). The documents consisted of:

138,700 reports on individual enquiries concerning interned, persecuted or displaced persons, or refugees (105,107 in 1956) i.e. 6,905 positive reports, 48,161 temporary reports, 83,634 negative reports.

218,030 certificates or reports concerning applications to obtain compensation (129,611 in 1956) including 31,147 certificates of captivity, 37,576 certificates of residence, 22,337 temporary replies and 126,700 negative replies.

1,958 death certificates (1,538 in 1956).

154 reports of a historical or statistical nature (267 in 1956).

* * *

The ITS central card-index was supplemented by the addition of 343,869 cards (328,398 in 1956) and the classification of 425,979 cards (341,438 in 1956).

In addition the ITS handed over 4,792 photostat copies of documents to national Tracing Bureaux and other organisations. Some tasks are not included in the above figures, for instance the microfilms of ITS documents produced by the Yad Vashem Memorial Authority. This work, carried out with the help of the ITS staff and on its premises, was started in 1955 and finished in December 1957. The ITS has continued to analyse and make use of new documents made available in 1957 concerning persons who disappeared in concentration camps. These documents contain some 700,000 names.

An important number of documents was sent to the ITS by the World Jewish Congress in London, the Ministère des Anciens Combattants et Victimes de la Guerre, Paris, the Comitato Ricerche

Deportati Ebrei, Rome, the Musée d'Etat d'Oswiecim (Auschwitz), and the Yad Vashem Memorial Authority.

All the information drawn by the ITS from new documents is entered on cards which are then placed in the central card-index. If, when filing a card bearing new information, it joins up with an enquiry card, this is called a " concurrence ". No information is communicated until a study of the file has been made to ascertain if it will be of use to the enquirer. This checking is useful since only one-sixth of the " concurrences " (which numbered 30,000 in 1957) have led to the issue of new certificates or supplementary reports.

During the year, the ITS came to the end of its inventory of documents in connection with former concentration camps. In accordance with the provisions of the agreements, this complete inventory signed by the delegates of the former Occupying Power and by a representative of the ICRC is deposited at the International Committee's headquarters. The Government members of the International Commission for the ITS, the Secretary-General of the West European Union and the Secretary-General of the United Nations have each received a copy.
