

MINUTES FROM MEETINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRISONER-OF-WAR AGENCY



ICRC



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INTRODUCTION¹

a. Birth of the ICRC

At the outset of the First World War, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had been in existence for over 50 years. The origins of the ICRC can be traced back to February 1863 when five Geneva citizens met to discuss a number of proposals formulated by one of them, Henry Dunant (1828-1910),² in a book that had become quite well known. The book, *A Memory of Solferino*,³ recounts Dunant's harrowing experience alongside victims of the famous battle that took place in Solferino, Italy on 24 June 1859. Arriving by chance in the aftermath of the fighting, Dunant was appalled by the lack of properly functioning army medical services and the way the wounded soldiers had been abandoned to their fate. Dunant admired the dedication of the villagers who, with the materials at hand, sought to aid the soldiers, with whom Dunant spent several days in the makeshift hospital at the Castiglione delle Stiviere church. Three years later, Dunant took pen in hand to record his traumatic experience. He went to great lengths to distribute his book, which was not available for sale, among his acquaintances in Geneva and to various European luminaries and courts. His account made for gripping reading. Its impact was particularly strong, as the public conscience was already troubled by the development of warfare since the mid-1850s. The Crimean War, the Italian War of Independence and, later, the American Civil War marked the return of excessively bloody battles such as had not been seen since the Napoleonic wars. And the bloodletting was further exacerbated by advances in weaponry. People had rediscovered the death-dealing nature of interstate violence and the unenviable fate of those affected. Also unsettling were the inadequacy of relief efforts and the incompetence of those responsible for them. People extolled the heroic actions of a number of paragons of charity (such as Florence Nightingale, the Grand-Duchess Pavlovna and Clara Barton), who toiled to relieve the suffering of the war-wounded.⁴ Dunant's book was in step with contemporary concerns, and this largely accounts for its success with the public.

The emotional character of *Solferino* resonated with most of Dunant's readers, yet few of them, surprisingly, gave much thought to the two main concrete proposals at the end of the book. Dunant not only relates his experience tending to the wounded and dying soldiers in Castiglione. He also formulates two ways to mitigate the likelihood of a similar disaster occurring again. Clearly inspired by the actions of the Castiglione villagers, Dunant's first proposal was the creation of relief societies in every country during peacetime for the purpose of aiding wounded soldiers. These societies would be made up of civilian volunteers who, if war broke out, would provide support to the army's medical services. This proposal suggested a departure from existing practice. Although it was not uncommon for private individuals to form groups to tend to the wounded in a conflict that only happened once war had already broken out; these groups would then disperse once peace had returned. Secondly, Dunant proposed that European governments enact an "international principle, sanctioned by a Convention inviolate in character, which, once agreed upon and ratified, might constitute the

¹ The original text was published in French.

² In addition to Dunant, the founders of the ICRC were the legal expert and philanthropist Gustave Moynier (1826-1910), doctors Louis Appia (1818-1898) and Théodore Maunoir (1806-1869), and General Guillaume-Henri Dufour (1787-1875).

³ The book was published in October 1862, in Geneva.

⁴ See Daniel Palmieri, "Post Tenebras Lux: New Perspectives on the Foundation of the Red Cross," Wolfgang U. Eckart, Philipp Osten (Hg.), *Schlachtschrecken-Konventionen: Das Rote Kreuz und die Erfindung der Menschlichkeit im Kriege*, Freiburg, 2011, pp. 17-26.

basis for societies for the relief of the wounded in the different European countries."⁵ In other words, he advocated that the status and operating principles of these societies be uniform, permanent and internationally recognized through a treaty ratified by the States. Dunant's initiative is underpinned by the principles of preparedness and recognition. These proposals immediately captured the attention of the chairman of the Geneva Society for Public Welfare, Gustave Moynier (1826-1910), who would seek to turn them into reality. To this end, he assembled a committee of five members – including Dunant and himself – from the Society for Public Welfare on 17 February 1863. At its inaugural session, this committee established itself as an "International and permanent Committee."⁶ The ICRC was born.⁷

b. The ICRC's first steps

Thanks to the Committee's work, and in particular that of its president, Gustave Moynier,⁸ the two proposals in *Solferino* saw the light of day. In October 1863, at an international conference that it organized in Geneva, the ICRC obtained approval from the representatives of 16 States of the idea of setting up national committees to provide relief for wounded soldiers. They would be staffed by voluntary medical personnel identified by an arm band showing a red cross on a white background. As 1863 drew to a close, these national committees began to form, first in Europe and then elsewhere. Towards the end of the 1870s these committees would take the name "Red Cross Societies" (or "Red Crescent Societies," for the Ottoman Empire). Despite a common misperception, once they were created, these Red Cross Societies were and would remain independent of the ICRC. The latter was only to serve as an intermediary, and it kept the Societies informed of changes to the scope of the work of the Red Cross. An international treaty, another of Dunant's ideas, was established on 24 August 1864 with the adoption by a diplomatic conference of the *Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field*, also known as the original Geneva Convention. The diplomatic conference had been organized by the Swiss government on the initiative of the ICRC, which also proposed the draft law for discussion. Under the terms of the convention, warring nations agreed to care for the wounded without regard for nationality. Medical workers, medical facilities and ambulances would be considered neutral. The Convention also reaffirmed the use of the red cross as the distinctive emblem of field hospitals.

In less than two years' time, the ICRC managed to set up an international system – both permanent and secular⁹ – to provide relief to wounded soldiers. The idea of creating voluntary societies was in fact not new, and others before Dunant had pondered ways to help the war-wounded.¹⁰ But the ICRC alone achieved what may have been previously considered utopian.

⁵ *A Memory of Solferino*, 1986, p. 126.

⁶ Depending on the context, the word 'committee' can refer to an entire organization or only to its highest decision-making body. In this text, we use the term in the latter meaning.

⁷ The organization was called the International Committee for Relief to Wounded Soldiers until December 1875, when the name International Committee of the Red Cross was adopted. The meeting minutes often mention the International Committee (abbreviated IC) when speaking of the ICRC.

⁸ The first President of the ICRC was General Guillaume-Henri Dufour. In March 1864 he passed this role to Gustave Moynier and became honorary president of the Committee.

⁹ Despite the use of the (red) cross as a distinctive emblem. The organization's secular nature went hand in hand with the universality of the action that it promoted. This does not necessarily mean that the ICRC was perceived as a secular organization from the outside. Bavaria, Austria and the Papal States refused to participate in the 1864 Diplomatic Conference in Geneva for reasons having to do with the Protestant character of both the ICRC and the host city; Pierre Boissier, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross*, volume 1, *From Solferino to Tsushima*, Geneva, 1985 (Paris, 1963), p. 113.

¹⁰ The ICRC, in the person of Henry Dunant, would be accused of stealing the ideas from others. See the quarrel between Dunant and Henry Arrault, who was backed by Georges Sand, in Véronique Harouel, *Genève-Paris, 1863-1918, le droit humanitaire en construction*, Geneva, 2003, pp. 106-110.

Not only did it give rise to national relief committees, but it also ensured they had political legitimacy thanks to the adoption of the Geneva Convention. By playing a fundamental role in developing that Convention, the ICRC can to a certain extent be considered the originator of modern international humanitarian law. A simple association of private citizens from a country on the margins of the global chessboard, the organization succeeded in speaking as an equal with governments and exerting influence on the law of nations by methodically laying the groundwork for an international treaty, in part through two diplomatic conferences that it organized.¹¹ The recognition that followed from this achievement increased the ICRC's prestige and gave it moral and political weight on the European scene.

What is most striking about these successes¹² is the modesty of the organization behind them. Consisting initially of five members, the Committee had expanded to only nine¹³ by the eve of the First World War. Limited staffing was accompanied by limited resources; the ICRC paid its own way¹⁴ out of the interest earned on securities that it purchased. It spent most of its time corresponding with the various Red Cross Societies, for which the ICRC was simply the go-between. It also envisaged improvements to Geneva Law – as it would soon be called to distinguish it from Hague Law – and kept abreast of advances made in military medicine and medical equipment. The ICRC generally stayed away from the theatre of conflict at that time. Exceptions included the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1), where the ICRC played an active role through the International Agency for the Relief of Wounded Soldiers that it set up in Basel (see below), and several other conflicts¹⁵ where it had on-the-ground representatives.¹⁶ In general, it assigned primary responsibility for helping victims to the Red Cross Societies of the warring nations, limiting its involvement to forwarding their calls for staff and equipment to the aid societies in neutral countries. When major hostilities broke out in August 1914, the ICRC was international in name but very local in its makeup and routine in its practices.

c. The International Prisoner-of-War Agency

At the start of the First World War, Gustave Ador had been ICRC president since 1910. The organization was still a 'family affair' with all members pitching in to get the work done. In terms of background, the members of the ICRC were closely related, in either biological or class terms. While some of the members were indeed from the same family, they all belonged to the Protestant upper class in Geneva. The ICRC could thus be characterized as a socially close-knit group that had a common world view. The clannish nature of the ICRC was

¹¹ This same "bottom-up" approach would be seen later in the development of international legal protection for intellectual property; see the works of Blaise Wilfert in this regard.

¹² They are also due to factors related to the internal operations of the ICRC; see Daniel Palmieri, "Post Tenebras Lux...", art. cit.; "An institution standing the test of time? A review of 150 years of the history of the International Committee of the Red Cross," *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 888, 2012, pp. 1273-1298.

¹³ Gustave Ador (president), Édouard Odier (vice-president), Adolphe d'Espine (vice-president), Adolphe Moynier (treasurer), Alfred Gautier, Edmond Boissier, Édouard Naville, Horace Micheli, and Frédéric Ferrière. Paul Des Gouttes served as secretary-general (and later become a Committee member).

¹⁴ Jean-François Golay, *Le financement de l'aide humanitaire: l'exemple du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge*, Bern, 1990, p. 8.

¹⁵ The Schleswig War (1864), the Eastern War (1876-1878) and the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. In the Eastern War, the ICRC's delegates tended to victims of the conflict; the main focus of the organization's other missions was on evaluating the belligerents' medical services. International agencies were created in 1877 and 1912-1913, but they were not managed by the ICRC.

¹⁶ The ICRC did not take an interest in colonial wars or troubles until the end of the Second World War, with the sole exception of the Rif War.

reinforced by the way new members were selected, which was through a process of cooptation. The ICRC's humanitarian remit was thus being carried out by a decidedly elite¹⁷ – and male – group. This same profile would also apply to the leadership of the future International Prisoner-of-War Agency, which the ICRC members called upon family and friends to head up and run.

During the first half century of the ICRC's existence, its members carried out their respective professions while engaging in humanitarian work as a sort of pastime. It was headed by only two presidents during that entire time – Gustave Moynier and Gustave Ador – both of whom were indefatigable workers. Needless to say, the ICRC was ill-prepared for the rapid changes and intense activity occasioned by the Great War. The minutes taken at meetings held at the time are telling. On 15 August 1914, at which point the conflict was well under way, the deliberations touched only briefly on those events, the full import of which the ICRC did not really seem to grasp. It still hesitated to set up a tracing service for prisoners, but was ready to do so "if that would be useful."¹⁸ The nine Committee members furthermore felt that they were capable – without additional help and in the small office that served as the organization's headquarters – of reading, filing and replying to the dozens of letters received daily seeking news on missing and captured soldiers. When the number of daily enquiries reached the thousands, the ICRC realized the need to find larger premises and hire additional staff. Given this radically new set of circumstances, it is not surprising that the minutes from the Agency's initial meetings, following its creation on 21 August, deal largely with administrative and organizational issues. They also show how a global network for gathering information on war victims was created, thanks in particular to the involvement of the Red Cross Societies and the prisoner-of-war commissions that they set up.

The ICRC underwent an unprecedented transformation: less than two months after the hostilities erupted it had already increased its staff twelvefold. At the end of 1914, some 1,200 people – a considerable number of whom were salaried – worked for the ICRC, and most were at the Agency.

The idea of creating an entity capable of caring for wounded soldiers and providing information on their whereabouts to their family dated back to 1869. The Second Conference of National Aid Societies for the War Wounded (the forebears of the Red Cross Societies), meeting in Berlin, adopted for purposes of efficiency a resolution that stated: "In time of war, the International Committee [i.e. the ICRC] 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."¹⁹ These offices would be called agencies, and the first one was created by the ICRC in Basel during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1. Initially, the Basel agency dealt only with wounded soldiers, some of whom were also held prisoner. For the thousands of healthy prisoners being sought by their families and whom the ICRC could not ignore, the organization set up a special entity in Basel independent of the Agency called the International Relief Committee for Prisoners of War.²⁰ In 1914, the distinction between healthy and wounded captives was no longer made, and the Agency handled both categories. This was also the first time that a

¹⁷ Diego Fiscalini, *Des élites au service d'une cause humanitaire: le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge*, Master's thesis, Geneva, 1985.

¹⁸ *Procès-verbaux des séances du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge, 17 février 1863 – 28 août 1914*, Geneva, 1999, p. 739.

¹⁹ Resolution cited by François Bugnion, *The International Committee of the Red Cross and the Protection of War Victims*, Geneva, 2003, p. 33.

²⁰ To clearly show the independence between the Agency and the Relief Committee, the Committee adopted the green cross as its emblem; Gradimir Djurovic, *The central tracing agency of the International Committee of the Red Cross: Activities of the ICRC for the alleviation of the mental suffering of war victims*, Geneva, 1986, pp. 22-25.

tracing service was created in Geneva which the ICRC was alone responsible for managing. It is clear why technical and practical questions concerning the tracing service dominate the Agency's minutes of its meetings in 1914 and then again in 1918, when it is restructured with the addition of a secretary-general and a director.

The tracing service was organized into 14 national sections (Franco-Belgian, British, Italian, Greek, American, Brazilian, Portuguese, Serbian, Romanian, Russian, German, Bulgarian, Turkish and Austro-Hungarian) as the various countries entered the war. There were also two specialized sections: for civilians²¹ and medical staff. The Agency reached agreement with the belligerent nations and the national Red Cross Societies to obtain information on individual prisoners and other victims covered by its remit. This information was combined with the thousands of enquiries the ICRC received daily from families and was incorporated into a complex card-index system. Constantly updated, the cards served to keep track of the individuals concerned and to provide enquiring families with information. By the end of the war, the Agency in Geneva had over six million index cards (concerning some two and a half million people), a database of considerable size for the period, despite the fact that some of the national indexes were incomplete. The ICRC had in fact delegated the tracing work for the German-Austrian-Russian front to the Danish Red Cross, which had set up its own information agency.²² The data about prisoners on the Austro-Italian front did not go through the International Agency either, being exchanged directly between Rome and Vienna. In addition to prisoners of war, the Agency also concerned itself with civilian internees and civilians living in occupied areas. This was an innovation, since the scope of the ICRC's activities had not previously included civilians. Yet in 1914 civilians – who were protected by the Regulations respecting the laws and customs of war supplementary to the Hague Convention of 1907 – bore the brunt of the first months of the war and the various subsequent military occupations on the western, eastern and Balkan fronts. From the Agency's inception, one of the members of the Committee, Dr Frédéric Ferrière, ran a special section in the organization whose work was to respond to enquiries specifically concerning civilians (deportees, hostages, and people living in occupied territories). Although among the most important, the ICRC is not the only humanitarian organization that worked to help victims of the 1914-1918 war. In addition to the Red Cross Societies, many private initiatives flourished throughout Europe and elsewhere in the world. In Switzerland alone, some 400 relief societies operated in 70 different towns. Geneva was home to 80 such societies.²³

d. The law and war

When the First World War broke out, international humanitarian law (or the law of war) comprised, alongside several minor texts, two main branches: the Geneva Conventions and the Hague Conventions. As mentioned above, the Geneva Convention of 1864 – which had just been updated in 1906 – protected wounded servicemen. In 1899 and again in 1907, this principle was expanded to include maritime warfare, with the adoption of another convention signed in The Hague as a result of two international peace conferences. Prisoners of war and

²¹ This was the first time an Agency also took care of civilian victims (civilians in occupied territories, interned civilians, hostages, etc.). The civilian section of the International Prisoner-of-War Agency was created in September 1914 (ACICR, A PV, AIPG, 16 September 1914) and owed its existence to the pugnacity of its founder, Frédéric Ferrière, who had to "overcome" the opposition of the other members of the Committee to bring it about; Rachad Armanios, *Le Dr Frédéric Ferrière. Les années de formation d'un médecin et d'un philanthrope*, Master's thesis, Geneva, 2003, pp.166 ff.

²² Bent Bludnikow, "Denmark during the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 24, No. 4 (October 1989), pp. 683-703. We would like to thank Cédric Cotter for bringing this article to our attention.

²³ *Les Nouvelles de l'Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre*, No. 50, 30 December 1916; No. 8, 24 February 1917.

civilians living under enemy occupation were covered by two conventions concerning laws and customs of land warfare also approved at The Hague in 1899 and 1907. This significant corpus of legal instruments could lead one to conclude that, on the eve of the First World War, the "codification movement reached its first and decisive peak."²⁴ But would the warring parties comply with them after hostilities broke out in August 1914?

To a certain extent, yes. Despite some reservations, the governments agreed to the repatriation of sick and wounded soldiers – even if this was no easy task – or would accept their internment in a neutral country (often Switzerland or Holland). But a number of situations showed the limits of the law of war as it stood. In some cases these limits could be ascribed to situations that had not been addressed by the law. For example, under Article 19 of the Hague Convention, prisoners who died in captivity were to be buried on site under the same conditions as soldiers from the national army. But the law was silent on the question of transferring bodies for burial in their country of origin. Beginning in 1915, several letters reached the German Red Cross from France requesting the transfer to French territory of the bodies of French soldiers who fell in battle or who died in a hospital and were buried on the territory of the Reich. The ICRC responded by contacting undertakers in Geneva who made their services available to the Agency, exhuming the bodies and transporting them to France at their families' request.

The law also ran up against practical considerations put forward by the States, related to facts on the ground. The question of the repatriation of medical staff, which comes up time and again in the minutes of the Agency's meetings, is a good example. Under the 1906 Geneva Convention, if military medical staff and those performing similar functions (such as Red Cross volunteers) were captured, they should not be considered prisoners but rather allowed to carry out their work. Once they completed their task, they were to be sent back to their army or country. Yet the belligerents were reluctant to comply with this last obligation which, for the ICRC, was essential, as it was a question of protecting medical staff, i.e. the very foundation of the Geneva Convention. The governments cited a number of reasons, some more valid than others, to justify their reluctance: for example the fact that the war led to the immediate capture of tens of thousands – and then hundreds of thousands – of prisoners, meaning that the medical staff of the detaining power would never be able to provide the necessary care by itself. They therefore needed the enemy's doctors and nurses. Hypothetically, the warring parties also justified holding onto medical staff, even if they were not an active duty, in the event that an epidemic struck the prisoner-of-war camps. Initially, however, the governments appeared to support the ICRC's view. The repatriation of medical staff took place between Germany and France, before being interrupted, and then restarted – and then interrupted again – in a sort of two-step waltz that would last the entire war. Far from wishing to completely ignore the law, the governments began interpreting it through ad hoc agreements among themselves that defined the number of medical staff who could be detained as a function of the number of their compatriots being held. The ICRC chose to live with this solution.

This type of bilateral pact was by no means rare. Beginning in 1915, in fact, conferences held in neutral countries (Holland, Sweden, Denmark and Switzerland) brought together belligerent States to discuss issues of humanitarian issues. The Russian, Austrian and German Red Cross Societies met three times in Stockholm between May 1915 and December 1916 to discuss the repatriation, exchange and internment in a neutral country of seriously sick and wounded servicemen. In June 1917, representatives of the British and German governments met at The Hague to consider improvements to the treatment of prisoners of war. By turns, the French and Germans, Serbs and Bulgarians, Russians and Central Powers, and Turks and

²⁴ Dietrich Schindler, Jiri Toman, *The laws of armed conflicts: a collection of conventions, resolutions and other documents*, Geneva, 2004, p. vi.

English, met in Copenhagen, Geneva and Bern to negotiate issues related to war victims. The last major conference was held in the Swiss capital between German and American representatives in September 1918.

The States made some progress without the involvement of any other parties. Admittedly, the negotiations focused on very specific points, which could be considered trivial in comparison with the major problems resulting from the war. The French and German governments agreed, for example, that captive rank-and-file soldiers – who according to Hague Law were subject to forced labour – would receive accident insurance. Irrespective of any legal framework, the States also proved to be surprisingly open to private initiatives on occasion. Noëlle Roger, a nurse and writer from Geneva, suggested via the press in October 1915 that neutral individuals be temporarily posted to the prisoner-of-war camps to ensure they were being properly run. The ICRC sent this proposal to the belligerents. Against all expectations, Rome and Berlin accepted it, and the German government did not even demand reciprocity from the French. The repeated refusal by Paris would ultimately bury this initiative. In the place of an on-site arrangement of this sort, the warring parties quite readily authorized visits to their prisoner-of-war camps.²⁵ The ICRC was among the first to take advantage of this, and in January 1915 it began regularly sending representatives (delegates) to inspect camps in Europe, North Africa and Asia. The reports on its visits were even published.²⁶ In accordance with the Hague Conventions, access to prisoners was also granted to representatives of neutral States (Switzerland, Holland, Spain, and the USA until it entered the war) and international organizations (e.g. Young Men's Christian Associations). Individuals with close ties to one of the governments could even visit.

These gestures of goodwill must not, however, mask the reality of war and the deliberate violations of the law committed by all the warring nations throughout the conflict. Even minor violations could have unpleasant consequences for the people affected. Some weeks before the end of the war, for example, the United States complained that its prisoners had had their shoes confiscated. This was, it was claimed, in violation of Hague Law, which stated that prisoners were allowed to keep their equipment (with the exception of weapons, of course). The Germans responded by saying that, for them, heavy boots were simply the spoils of war. More serious incidents led the ICRC to intercede in the form of dialogue, representations, appeals and protests. These efforts give an idea of the organization's relentless struggle with the brutality of the belligerents. The use of reprisals is one of the most flagrant examples, and this accounts for the recurrence of this word in the minutes of the Agency's meetings. At the time, the principle of reprisals was not formally prohibited by custom or by international law. This explains why such action was frequently taken in response to transgressions – actual or perceived – committed by the enemy. In January 1915, for example, ICRC delegate Carle de Marval noted that he was having trouble visiting German prisoners in France because "people are upset, there are disturbing reports on French prisoners in Germany; the French government intends to engage in reprisals."²⁷ Retaliation was a simple affair, as shown by the case of German prisoners in Dahomey, which the Agency dealt with in 1915 and 1916. Berlin felt its soldiers were being held in unhealthy conditions. In retaliation, Germany sent French prisoners to work in marshy areas and peat bogs. In other cases, captives were intentionally housed close to the front lines in clear violation of the Hague Conventions.

Soldiers were not the only ones to suffer from reprisals. Civilians living in occupied areas were also affected. In the "best" case, they would not be allowed to exchange letters or packages with loved ones serving in the military. In the worst, they were taken hostage and deported. In February 1918, a thousand hostages in occupied areas of France were sent to the

²⁵ This magnanimity was also good for propaganda purposes.

²⁶ CICR, *Documents publiés à l'occasion de la Guerre*, 24 series, Geneva, March 1915 – January 1920.

²⁷ AIPG, meeting minutes of 12 January 1915.

camp in Holzminden (Lower Saxony) and to occupied Russia "in retaliation for measures taken in France involving Alsatians [who were also held captive]."²⁸ Given the gravity of the situation, in July 1916 the ICRC issued an international plea against the use of reprisals and implored the belligerents to abandon this barbaric principle. Unfortunately, the ICRC's appeal – which went unheeded – only concerned reprisals against prisoners of war, to the exclusion of civilians. This did not mean that the organization was not worried about their fate as well. In September 1915, unable to visit the site in person, the ICRC issued "a vigorous protest... to the *Red Crescent* against *the systematic extermination of Armenians*, because the Red Crescent cannot turn a blind eye to this destruction."²⁹ The Bulgarians in turn were accused of pursuing "systematically the extermination"³⁰ of civilians in occupied Serbia.

New methods of warfare were an additional cause for concern. The appearance of poison gas in 1915 marked a new manifestation of the total war in which the belligerents were engaged. At the time it was difficult to grasp the destructive potential of this innovation. It was not until 1918 that the ICRC understood the full scope of the threat, when the belligerents appeared ready to use any and all means to achieve victory. The organization had also received first-hand information on the perils of poison gas and the ease of producing it on a large scale. In February 1918, the ICRC issued a solemn appeal to belligerents against the use of poison gases. The response from the Entente Powers was "glorious and unanimous"³¹ but meaningless in reality, since the Allies would only refrain from using "these methods condemned by the laws of man" if Germany did so as well. The ICRC's ultimately symbolic appeal nevertheless raised public awareness, which in 1925 led the States to prohibit the use of asphyxiant or poisonous gases in war (Geneva Protocol).

Breaches were committed not only of Hague Law, but also of the Geneva Convention of 1906. This despite the fact that the ICRC had carefully reminded the governments from the outset of the need to comply strictly with the law. It was all for naught, as complaints began reaching Geneva about the bombing of field hospitals and the torpedoing of hospital ships, even though they displayed the protective emblems of the red cross or red crescent. The complaints led the accused States to justify their actions, and this often led to a counter accusation. If that hospital ship was sunk, wasn't it because it was transporting troops and munitions in addition to the wounded soldiers, in blatant violation of the law? Even the Red Cross as an organizational entity was not spared the effects of war. In spring 1915, the Central Committee of the Belgian Red Cross was simply dissolved by the occupying Germans, despite vehement protests by the ICRC.

In view of the many depredations committed during the war, the ICRC planned a meeting of the Red Cross Societies of the warring nations in April 1918 in Geneva for the stated purpose of revising the Hague Law. The ad hoc bi- and trilateral accords noted above were official agreements between warring States that laid the groundwork for future conventions, in particular relating to prisoners of war. In the end the conference could not be held, so the ICRC forged ahead alone with plans to write a new, ideal code to protect captured servicemen. A comprehensive convention addressing the treatment of prisoners of war, drawing on the experience of the First World War, was finally adopted in 1929.

e. The diplomatic role of the ICRC

Looking at the minutes of the Agency's meetings, one may be surprised at the ICRC's extensive diplomatic activity throughout the war. This "humanitarian diplomacy," which

²⁸ AIPG, meeting minutes of 27 February/4 March 1918.

²⁹ AIPG, meeting minutes of 14/15 September 1915.

³⁰ AIPG, meeting minutes of 20 May 1916.

³¹ AIPG, meeting minutes of 13 May 1918.

began with the outbreak of hostilities and would continue after the end of the war, was not limited to the ICRC's extensive correspondence with governments and their general staffs. It can also be seen in the ICRC's on-the-ground presence. As we have seen, the organization began sending its delegates to visit prisoner-of-war camps in early 1915. Between January 1915 and December 1919, more than five hundred visits were conducted. But the Committee members themselves were not to be outdone. Despite his nearly 70 years, ICRC President Gustave Ador went in person to Bordeaux in September 1914 to negotiate several points of the Hague Convention of 1907 with the French government, which had relocated there given the uncertain situation in northern France. The ICRC's diplomacy was predicated on achieving concrete results, even for topics that were of secondary importance. It carried out other such missions to France, as well as to Germany, Scandinavia, Italy, Austria-Hungary and elsewhere. It is of interest to note that, despite being an association, the ICRC was able to hold discussions not only with government officials in charge of the issues in question, but also with the highest authorities of state. In March 1918, the ICRC's representatives were received in Paris both by President Poincaré and Prime Minister Clemenceau. The organization was recognized for its extensive humanitarian work, although sometime it was perceived as a branch of Swiss diplomacy.

The Agency's meeting minutes do in fact bear witness to the very close links between the ICRC and the Swiss government. Officially, the organization was neutral and proclaimed its independence from political authority. In practice, however, the situation was less cut and dried as evidenced by the close ties that existed between the upper echelon of the ICRC and that of the Swiss government. Regular meetings were held in Bern between ICRC and government officials. The latter did not hesitate to share with the organization confidential information collected by Swiss diplomats on issues of primary interest to the ICRC. In return, the ICRC kept the Swiss government closely apprised of its activities and discussed its projects and action plans with the government. It was also true that, for their trips abroad, the ICRC's delegates needed travel papers issued by Bern. Each side thus gained from the relationship: while the ICRC benefited from the Swiss diplomatic and consular network in pursuit of its goals, the Swiss government took advantage of the organization's reputation and work to promote the country's neutrality, pairing its legendary armed neutrality with the ICRC's humanitarian neutrality. These close ties would only intensify with the election of Gustave Ador to the Swiss Federal Council, that country's government, in June 1917, particularly since he chose to remain president of the ICRC at the same time. The organization thus had one of its own at the centre of Swiss politics and would not hesitate to call on him when the need arose to promote one of its humanitarian initiatives. For the Swiss people, the war turned the ICRC into a national symbol whose values they could claim as their own and consider part of their national character.

f. An organization of men and women

The Prisoner-of-War Agency employed hundreds of men and women – many of them throughout the war – who carried out the day-to-day work. One page of the minutes of the Agency's meetings contains some incomplete information on the tracing service's salaried and volunteer staff. A few well known names stand out (Romain Rolland, Camille Schlumberger), but most of the staff remained anonymous. Apart from those individuals who had particular duties, like the professional typists, it is impossible to ascertain the real reasons hundreds of Genevans and foreigners offered their services and gave their time to the Agency. There were some exceptions to the rule, such as Max Dollfus (1864-1937) and Renée-Marguerite Cramer (1887-1963), who represent two diametrically opposed paths in the short history of the tracing service. Dollfus, a French industrialist from Mulhouse, where he worked until 1913, helped

found the Agency and was one of its directors. He managed the office responsible for reading and sorting incoming correspondence, i.e. the strategic hub of tracing work. Why Dollfus went to Geneva is unknown (although he had acquired Swiss citizenship in the 1890s), as is the nature of his connection with the Committee members, especially its president. Dollfus quickly assumed a leading role in tracing. He was the key point of contact between the Agency and the Committee, and he served as the Agency's spokesman in dealings with the local press. Under one of Dollfus's initiatives, the ICRC sometimes sent letters and packages to prisoners of war through the "marraines de guerre" movement that began in France in January 1915. But his position and privileged relationship with ICRC leaders also made him the focus of ferocious hostility, and this led him to resign in September 1916.³² Resentment centred on his French nationality – considered incompatible with such an important role, particularly in view of the ICRC's stated neutrality – and this seems to be the cause of his departure. At least that was the reasoning put forward by a number of French newspapers informed (possibly by Dollfus himself) of the matter. After leaving the Agency, Dollfus remained in Geneva where he headed a support committee that had been set up there for Romanian prisoners.

By contrast, the Agency represented an extraordinary opportunity for promotion for a woman, Renée-Marguerite Cramer. Cramer belonged to the Genevan middle class, with a diploma in law and a doctorate in history. She had already set a precedent on the eve of the First World War when she became the first woman to be named to a professorship at the University of Geneva. She would soon leave this position to join the Agency several days after it was created. Had she been contacted by the ICRC? This is possible, since Cramer was related to several members of the Committee, both living and dead. At the Agency, she was immediately given the position of co-director of the *Entente* services, which managed information on Allied prisoners of war. She was also the first woman to carry out diplomatic missions and to negotiate singlehandedly with political and military authorities on the ICRC's behalf, going to France, Germany and Scandinavia. Gustave Ador, after joining the Federal Council, had her visit Bern specially to "help in negotiations between the French and the Germans concerning repatriation and internment."³³ Her mix of skills and intelligence led the Committee members to seek her appointment as the first woman in their group, the organization's highest body. After much discussion and some internal discord, her appointment was approved in November 1918.

Cramer's story is remarkable, but it should not overshadow the important role played by women more generally in tracing work. First and foremost is their number: two-thirds of the Agency staff were female. It was thanks to these women that the enormous task of analysing correspondence, copying information onto index cards and then compiling and collating these cards was done so effectively. In addition to Cramer, other women occupied managerial positions at the Agency, such as Evelyn Brooke, head of the English service. In 1918, around 30 women were in charge of an Agency service. These women staked out territory in war-related humanitarian work, which until then had been reserved for men. This trend would continue in the immediate post-war period, as women were hired to work as field delegates and in relief and assistance operations run by the organization in Europe.

g. Money and publicity

As in war, money is indispensable in humanitarian work. It is no surprise that financial issues were often mentioned in the minutes of the Agency's meetings and that each year began with a financial report. The Agency's finances were the responsibility of Alphonse Moynier, son of

³² ACICR, C G1 A 03-02.

³³ AIPG, meeting minutes of 18 December 1917.

the ICRC's former president. He managed the money that kept the tracing service going, and he processed incoming payments and forwarded to prisoners of war and interned civilians the money sent by family members. By 31 December 1918, the Agency had sent more than 17 million Swiss francs to these individuals. For funding, the Agency initially called on the Red Cross Societies, especially those that were directly involved in the conflict and thus were the first to benefit from tracing work. These Societies had a moral obligation to assume their share of the expenses incurred by the ICRC when it formed an information agency intended to help prisoners of war.³⁴ The ICRC issued two funding appeals to the Central Committees of the Red Cross Societies, in October 1914 and in February 1916. They responded "very generously with their subsidies."³⁵ The organization also received financial support from several governments, especially at the end of the war. Most of the Agency's funding, however, came from the general public. From its inception, the Agency regularly received unsolicited donations from around the world. As the war dragged on, the ICRC launched a financial appeal in 1918 to the Swiss people, while also embarking on a fundraising policy that targeted a number of Swiss businesses. The efforts met with success, as nearly a million francs were collected; these funds represented 80% of receipts in 1918 and ensured that all expenses for the year would be covered.

The ICRC was also able to generate income itself through various initiatives, some of which came from within the Agency. In the spring of 1916, Renée-Marguerite Cramer and a few members of the Agency staff produced a play called *Château historique*, performances of which brought in some 3,000 francs, a tidy sum at the time.³⁶ To the delight of philatelists, the ICRC sold the war envelopes, censorship seals and stamps that it accumulated thanks to the large amount of mail received every day. These "philatelic curiosities" were presented to collectors in a published catalogue. Unthinkable nowadays, reports written by ICRC delegates following visits to prisoner-of-war camps were published and sold, with the money going to tracing work.³⁷ The Agency also published postcards showing prisoner-of-war camps in Europe, Japan, Russia and Turkey. Between January 1916 and December 1918, the ICRC issued a weekly publication called *Les Nouvelles de l'Agence*. This bulletin, often illustrated with photos and maps, included a significant amount of information on prisoners of war and detained civilians of all nationalities. It reported on the ICRC's visits to prisoner-of-war camps and other initiatives – such as conferences between the opposing sides – aimed at improving the lot of war victims. The bulletin also analysed important official publications appearing in other languages that dealt with the issue of prisoners. Sold by the issue or by full-year subscription, the *Nouvelles* had 900 subscribers beginning in November 1916 and "covered its costs."³⁸

Apart from bringing in revenue – clearly modest, even if the actual figures are unknown – the ICRC's various publications illustrating the Agency's work would have another impact: that of heralding it beyond Geneva and the small circle of friends of the Red Cross. It is undeniable that this publicity for the tracing service³⁹ also benefited the ICRC's diplomatic efforts, in particular by giving it entrée into decision-making spheres in the belligerent States.

³⁴ This obligation was new, as it dates from the International Conference of the Red Cross in Washington in 1912 (resolution VI – Assistance to prisoners of war).

³⁵ CICR, *Rapport général du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge sur son activité de 1912 à 1920*, Geneva, 1921, p. 222

³⁶ AIPG, meeting minutes of 2/4 May 1916.

³⁷ The main purpose of publishing the ICRC's visit reports was to make the information available to the general public and thus to prevent it from being used for propaganda purposes by the warring States.

³⁸ AIPG, meeting minutes of 3/5 November 1916.

³⁹ Others will also take it upon themselves to highlight the work of the Agency, such as the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, who published a laudatory account of his visit to the Agency (*Le cœur de l'Europe ; une visite à la Croix-Rouge internationale de Genève*, Geneva, 1918).

The organization's success in raising money among private individuals is certainly also linked to the aura imparted by tracing work. The Agency's work was universally recognized when the ICRC won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1917.

h. After the armistice

This collection of minutes from the Agency's meetings ends on 11 November 1918, the date of the armistice on the western front. The Agency would continue to operate after this date, because the official end of hostilities did not mark the end but rather a ramping up of the ICRC's humanitarian work.

It faced two main tasks: repatriating prisoners of war and providing relief for civilians in the defeated countries. As early 1917, the ICRC launched a public appeal to allow as many prisoners of war as possible, sick or not, to be gradually returned home. Anticipating the eventual end of the war, the ICRC had taken stock of the largely logistical and material needs that would arise with the release of millions of captives. This idea was not acted on before the armistice, however. It was only when the war had drawn to a close that the ICRC was able to take concrete measures aimed at helping prisoners of the Central Powers and Russia.⁴⁰ The ICRC interceded at the Peace Conference, urging that Austro-German military personnel held by the Entente Powers be allowed to return home without delay. The organization was able to visit some of those prisoners in northern France, although this sort of authorization remained the exception. Despite the ICRC's urgent representations, the repatriation of German prisoners did not commence until the autumn of 1919, and the operation proceeded without any direct ICRC action. Most of its efforts were spent on Austro-German prisoners of war held in Russia and Russian prisoners of war held by the erstwhile Central Powers. Those prisoners were officially released following the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty but were, in fact, left completely to their own devices amidst the political turmoil that prevailed in Central Europe and Russia. At best, they vegetated in makeshift camps situated in countries that were undergoing serious social and economic crises and were unable to feed them. At worst, they tried to make their own way home, a perilous undertaking that often ended in tragedy. The ICRC embarked on large-scale relief operations to help these former prisoners of war, backed by public appeals for aid. The ICRC also had to identify possible evacuation routes. Delegates were therefore dispatched to gather information in Berlin, Prague, Budapest and Warsaw, and subsequently to Turkey, southern Russia and the Caucasus, but also to the Far East and Siberia in March 1919. Once there, the delegates opened an office and built up contacts that could advance the ICRC's aims at both political and logistical levels. Land and sea repatriation routes were organized and transit camps were set up. This system was put to use from spring 1920 until 30 June 1922, the date that marks the official end of the ICRC's repatriation operations and the closure of the Agency.⁴¹ It is estimated that the ICRC enabled almost 500,000 former prisoners of war to return to their native (and, in some cases, completely new) countries.

Initially created to provide relief for the prisoners to be repatriated, the ICRC's missions and delegations very quickly took on other tasks. Often working in countries left economically devastated by the war, the ICRC fed civilians who had been suffering food shortages. Special attention was devoted to children in this relief work and, together with the Save the Children Fund, the ICRC co-founded the International Save the Children Union (ISCU). In view of the disastrous health-care situation in Eastern Europe and the risk of the spread of contagious diseases (particularly typhus), the organization also suggested that a central bureau be set up

⁴⁰ The ICRC did not intercede for Allied prisoners, whose prompt repatriation – within one month – was provided for in the Armistice agreements.

⁴¹ The last entry in the Agency's minutes dates, in fact, from 30 December 1919. Its work was subsequently taken up by the Committee, as seen in the minutes of this body's meetings.

to combat epidemics. It was established in Vienna in the summer of 1919 and Dr Ferrière was placed in charge. Medical assessments were carried out in neighbouring countries. The ICRC also assisted Russian and Armenian refugees, particularly through its delegations in Constantinople and Athens. In addition to helping provide supplies, this also involved interceding to help refugees emigrate and settle in other countries. During the interwar period, social and political turmoil in a number of States turned into full-fledged revolution or civil war. Departing from its traditional role of only aiding victims of interstate warfare, the ICRC in 1919 began visiting people detained for political reasons or in the context of internal wars. In 1921, the organization obtained a legal mandate from the International Conference of the Red Cross to also provide aid to victims of this form of armed violence.

i. Conclusion

The First World War radically and permanently changed the ICRC. The small philanthropic association that had been tucked away in its small offices in the summer of 1914 was forced to rethink its role in the midst of the worldwide cataclysm that was unfolding. Until then the ICRC had pondered warfare; from that point onward, it had an active role to play. The transformation was rapid: in only a few months, the ICRC shed its identity as a volunteer group and turned into a major international organization working directly with victims on the ground. The war and the post-war period anchored the little Geneva-based group on the global scene for the first time. The transformation not only affected the way the ICRC worked – it also changed its mind-set. It took an interest in the suffering of other victims of war and of its aftermath. The objects of its new concern were civilians mainly but also all anyone affected by political violence. The organization expanded its scope of work (detainee visits, food distribution and medical services) and emerged with a new identity. The Committee members, idealistic in the value they attached to law and international agreements, were disabused by the brutality of the conflict taking place under their gaze and by the failure of the warring parties to comply with humanitarian principles. When the war ended, the ICRC would draw on its experience to revise and expand the corpus of legal instruments. This work led directly to the adoption of the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War in July 1929.

Born at a time of utopian charities in the nineteenth century, the ICRC was fundamentally transformed following the events in Sarajevo. Many aspects of this metamorphosis remain intact today, 100 years after the Agency was first set up.

MEETING MINUTES OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRISONER-OF-WAR AGENCY

The minutes of the Agency's meetings comprise two ledgers measuring 38 x 26 cm. On the edge of the ledgers appear the sequential numbers 7 and 8, which indicate their place in the series of meeting minutes.⁴² The first ledger covers the meetings held between 21 August 1914 and 8 September 1917; the second, meetings between 10 September 1917 and 30 December 1919. The ledgers are handwritten. With several exceptions, the minutes were taken by Paul Des Gouttes (1869-1943), who was the ICRC secretary-general from 1910 until 1918 when he became a member of the Committee. Printed or typed documents have been inserted or glued in the two ledgers. We have only reproduced those needed to understand the minutes.

⁴² The Committee's meeting minutes between 1863 and 1914 have been published: *Procès-verbaux des séances du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge, 17 février 1863-28 août 1914*, edited by Jean-François Pitteloud, with the collaboration of Caroline Barnes and Françoise Dubosson, Geneva, 1999.

The Agency's ledgers contain more than 650 chronological entries, each corresponding to a meeting of the Agency's heads of service or the Committee members.⁴³ Some take the form of a journal summarizing the key facts of that day.⁴⁴ In this edition, we decided to focus only on entries written during the war. The minutes thus begin on 21 August 1914, with the founding of the Agency, and end with the entry dated 7-12 November 1918, where the 11 November armistice is mentioned in red ink. Beginning with the subsequent entry, dated 13 November 1918, the Agency is already dealing with post-war issues, starting with the repatriation of prisoners of war. A total of 561 entries are included in this collection.

Insofar as possible, the original spelling and grammar are respected; we only corrected obvious mistakes and typographical errors. Some words remain illegible despite our best efforts;⁴⁵ we have indicated such words with square brackets, which we also use to show additions and corrections of errors, in form or substance, that we have made to the original text. The gaps resulting from the illegible words do not prevent a general understanding of the comments. We have also indicated obvious errors committed by the writer, rare as they are, or particularly convoluted turns of phrase. The reader may indeed be surprised by the presence of words that have fallen out of use in the French language. A number of helveticisms – or even "genevaisms" – were also penned by Des Gouttes.

We did not change the spelling of proper nouns, which is not always consistent in the entries. Whenever we were certain that one and the same person was being referred to, we listed the various spellings when the name first appears. When we encountered the names of "non-famous" tracing staff in the minutes, we added their first name whenever possible, by referring to an (incomplete) list of people working for the Agency;⁴⁶ this is often the only biographical information we have about these "shadow workers."

For those tracing staff who were well known, and for important foreign figures mentioned in the minutes, we included a very short biography in the footnotes whenever this was possible and such information was available. The footnotes – which could be usefully expanded – are also used to explain terms or events that are specific to the "Red Cross" world or that are connected to a given situation discussed in one of the entries. Whenever German towns are mentioned, we noted the state in which they were located at the time of the German Reich until the end of the First World War.

The minutes of the Agency's meetings offer a sort of overview of the ICRC's work during the Great War. A more complete picture is available by consulting the ICRC's general archives on the First World War,⁴⁷ together with the organization's publications that discuss, or date from, the time of this conflict.⁴⁸

⁴³ During the war, the Committee was, for all intents and purposes, synonymous with the Agency. It nevertheless continued to produce its own minutes, even though they were few (17 of them between the end of 1914 and 1919). Those minutes generally dealt with issues of staffing (appointments and resignations of Committee members) and finances. They are not included in this work. Likewise, beginning on 12 August 1918 (and until 11 April 1919), the Agency's (new) management board prepared its own meeting minutes; these documents are not included in this collection either.

⁴⁴ Because of this, the label *meeting minutes* for these two books produced by the Agency is not totally accurate. Still, they are in the ICRC's archives with the rest of the organization's meeting minutes.

⁴⁵ The author wishes to thank Irène Herrmann for her help in deciphering the manuscript, and Cédric Cotter and Jean-Luc Blondel for rereading the manuscript.

⁴⁶ This list is contained in the ICRC's publication *L'Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre, Genève, 1914-1918*, Geneva, 1919, pp. 113-122.

⁴⁷ These are the ACICR, C G1 and ACICR, A, CS (Committee – Secretariat) archives, which may be consulted by appointment in the reading room of the ICRC's public archives in Geneva.

⁴⁸ In addition to the previously cited *Bulletin international des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge* and the *Nouvelles de l'Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre*, the following works are also worth mentioning: CICR, *Documents publiés à l'occasion de la Guerre*, 24 series, Geneva, March 1915 – January 1920

Daniel Palmieri
ICRC

CICR, *Organisation et fonctionnement de l'Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre à Genève, 1914 et 1915*, Geneva, February 1915.

CICR, *Renseignements complémentaires sur l'activité de l'Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre à Genève en 1915 et 1916*, Geneva, March 1916.

CICR, *Actes du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge pendant la Guerre 1914-1918*, Geneva, 1918.

CICR, *L'expérience du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge en matière de secours internationaux*, Geneva, undated (but after March 1925).

CICR, *L'Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre, Genève, 1914-1918*, Geneva, 1919.

CICR, *Rapport général du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge sur son activité de 1912 à 1920*, Geneva, 30 March 1921.

CICR, *Rapport général du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge sur son activité de 1921 à 1923*, Geneva, 28 August 1923.

Durand, André, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross, from Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, Geneva, 1984, pp. 31-96.

MISSION

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence..



ICRC