

International Committee of the Red Cross

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Summary

This article seeks to analyze how the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the oldest existing humanitarian organization, coped with the outbreak of the First World War and its aftermath. By using innovative methods of work and by deploying an important diplomatic activity, the ICRC managed not only to help victims for whom it had a legal mandate (wounded soldiers, prisoners of war), but also to assist new categories of conflict affected people thanks to its extended humanitarian role.

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Introduction

At the outbreak of the Great War, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) had already been operating for over fifty years. The organization had been founded in February 1863 at the instigation of five Geneva citizens, among them [Henry Dunant \(1828-1910\)](#). As Dunant had recommended in his famous work, *A Memory of Solferino*,¹ the organization's purpose at the time was to promote the creation of a national society for relief to wounded soldiers in each country (the future [Red Cross](#) Societies). In the event of war, these civil Societies would come to the aid of wounded military personnel and would stand by to back up the medical services of the armed forces. Once those Societies had been set up, the ICRC acted as intermediary and kept them informed as to how the work of the Red Cross Movement was progressing. At the same time, the organization approached governments to establish the 1864 Geneva Convention, which granted wounded and sick soldiers neutral status, as it did [hospitals](#) and ambulances, thus protecting both military victims of war and

those assisting them. The ICRC also continued to promote laws and regulations with a view to constantly adapting the new humanitarian laws to the changing realities of war such as brought about by technological innovations. Lastly, since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, the ICRC had not only been helping wounded soldiers, but also prisoners of war by gathering information on their circumstances to pass on to their families. Although international in name, the ICRC was actually a local philanthropic association, quite inexperienced and, above all, small in size (with only ten members in August 1914). The First World War and its aftermath caused lasting and major change at the ICRC and began to develop it into what it is today.²

The International Prisoners-of-War Agency

The organization's transformation was indeed unparalleled, especially in terms of personnel. Less than two months after the outbreak of hostilities, ICRC staff increased twelvefold. By the end of 1914, some 1,200 people were working for the institution, mainly in the International Prisoners-of-War Agency, which it set up on 21 August 1914. Over the course of the war, some 3,000 people came to work for the Agency, whose role, like that of its forerunners,³ was to restore links between members of families separated by war. It was structured according to national sections as the various countries entered the war.⁴ There were also specialized sections for civilian victims and medical staff in captivity. The Agency approached the belligerent parties and National Red Cross Societies to obtain information on the individual [prisoners](#) or 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 6 million index cards (concerning some 2.5 million people), a card-index 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.⁵ 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 of the various subsequent military occupations on both the [Western](#), [Eastern](#) and [Balkan](#) Fronts. From the

Agency's inception, one of the ICRC's members, Dr. [Frédéric Ferrière \(1848-1924\)](#), ran a special section in the organization whose work was to respond to enquiries specifically concerning civilian victims (deportees, hostages and people living in occupied territories).

The Agency was initially operated by volunteers. The members of the ICRC – who were also members of Geneva's elite – mobilized their relatives and friends to go through the growing piles of mail and both reply and enter the data on index cards. But it did not take long for paid employees to be recruited to keep up with this enormous task. The Agency was not the only humanitarian organization active in [Switzerland](#) during the First World War. According to the ICRC, in 1916, in Geneva alone there were some fifty groupings (almost 170 in Switzerland as a whole) working for the civilian or military victims of the conflict.⁶

Humanitarian Diplomacy

In addition to information-gathering, the ICRC intensively lobbied the countries at war. The aim was first and foremost to obtain authorization for ICRC representatives (called “delegates”) to visit prisoner-of-war camps.⁷ The organization began inspecting internment camps in [Germany](#), the [United Kingdom](#) and [France](#) in January 1915. All main belligerents eventually granted permission for this. The ICRC dispatched a total of fifty four missions to visit 524 prisoner-of-war camps in Europe and others in [Turkey](#), North Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and [Egypt](#)) and Asia (Siberia, [Burma](#), [Japan](#) and [British India](#)). To avoid their being used for [propaganda](#) purposes, the reports on these visits were submitted to the governments concerned. They were also published and sold.⁸

The ICRC also discussed with the detaining powers the treatment received by prisoners of war and tried, for example, to oppose reprisals inflicted on them – a problem which, together with the notion that reciprocity should guide the detention of enemy captives, was ever-present throughout the war and a cause of constant concern to the ICRC. From October 1914 onwards, the organization also sought the exchange of seriously wounded and sick prisoners for their repatriation or at least their hospitalization in a [neutral](#) country. With the blessing of the Swiss government⁹ and after receiving permission from Germany and France, convoys of wounded prisoners began crossing Swiss territory from Konstanz to Lyon and from Lyon to Konstanz. Such exchanges also occurred through other neutral States (for instance the Netherlands), but without the support of the ICRC.

Throughout the war, the organization reminded the belligerent states of their obligation to abide by the treaties of [international humanitarian law](#), in particular the Geneva Convention, which had just been revised in 1906. For example, it strove to have detained medical staff

repatriated from France and Germany, as stipulated in the Convention.¹⁰ In its practical implementation, this process met with numerous obstacles and interruptions. Similar difficulties arose regarding the repatriation of Belgian medical personnel.

As a neutral organization¹¹ – and one which therefore would not be suspected of engaging in war propaganda for any party to the conflict – the ICRC forwarded numerous protests and allegations it received concerning violations of the Geneva Convention or of the 1907 Hague Conventions governing [naval warfare](#). The belligerents accused one another of shelling medical facilities and ambulances, seizing, attacking and torpedoing hospital ships, misusing the protective red cross and red crescent emblems for military purposes, etc. Given the number of violations of the Geneva Convention still pending, the 10th International Conference of the Red Cross proposed in 1921 that a special commission be set up and composed of representatives of six nations that had remained neutral during the war (Switzerland, the Netherlands, [Spain](#), [Norway](#), [Sweden](#) and [Denmark](#)) plus an ICRC representative.¹² This commission, however, which was to examine the complaints filed, never actually materialized.

Given the threat of widespread use of [poison gas](#) not only at the front but also – indeed primarily – behind the frontlines, the ICRC launched a solemn appeal to the belligerents on 8 February 1918 urging them to refrain from using “asphyxiant and poisonous gases.”¹³ While officially welcoming this initiative, the states concerned did not really respond to the ICRC’s exhortation and instead blamed their opponents for engaging in chemical warfare. It was not until the conflict had ended that the massive use of such [weapons](#) was finally outlawed. After the war, the ICRC continued its efforts, mainly through representations to the [League of Nations](#), to bring about an outright ban on gas warfare. It contributed directly to the drafting of the protocol for the prohibition of the use of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases and of bacteriological methods of warfare (also known as the Geneva Protocol) of 17 June 1925.

The war made evident the limits of humanitarian law regarding various aspects of captivity for prisoners of war. Throughout the conflict, the warring parties had to negotiate *ad hoc* agreements amongst themselves to bridge this gap in the law of war. The ICRC drew lessons from this gap and, even before the hostilities had ceased, started thinking about drafting of a new code to protect captured servicemen. These efforts resulted in 1929 in the adoption of the Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war.¹⁴

Relations with the National Red Cross Societies

The war did not affect relations between the ICRC and the various National Red Cross

Societies (or Red Crescent Society, in the case of the Ottoman Empire), which assisted the medical services of the various armies and ran the relief operations for prisoners of war. The ICRC continued to keep the Societies regularly informed about its own activities and those of their counterparts through its *Bulletin international de la Croix-Rouge*, which had been published since 1869. It had abundant correspondence with the Societies that acted as intermediaries between the ICRC and their respective governments. Complaints of violations of international conventions were communicated to the ICRC through the National Societies and were forwarded through their counterparts to the political and military authorities. Though these Societies acted with complete independence from the ICRC, it was nevertheless the ICRC that was in charge of officially recognizing any newly created or reconstituted National Society. Thus, at the beginning of the war, the ICRC announced that a Red Cross Society had been set up in [Luxembourg](#) as soon as Germany attacked [Belgium](#) and had immediately began work to deal with the emergency.¹⁵ The ICRC also protested vehemently – but in vain – against the dissolution of the Central Committee of the Belgian Red Cross by the occupying German authorities in April 1915.¹⁶

Women In Humanitarian Endeavour

For the ICRC, the First World War caused significant social upheaval with the arrival of [female collaborators](#) inside this heretofore male institution. In fact, of the 3,000 people employed by the International Agency, two-thirds were now women, who were mainly recruited as typists, one of the new professions that opened up to them. Women also moved into the organization's highest levels. In November 1918 the first woman was elected to the ICRC's governing body, the Committee itself. [Renée-Marguerite Cramer \(1887-1963\)](#) was already in charge of the Entente Department at the Prisoners-of-War Agency before she took her place on the Committee. Such an appointment was a first for any international organization. Despite the reluctance of some of its (male) members, the ICRC considered such changes inevitable given the change in mentalities that had resulted from the war. There were also several women in charge of Agency departments and others working in ICRC field operations. Though they represented only a tiny percentage of the whole, a precedent had been set.¹⁷

Repatriating Prisoners of War

The Armistice of November 1918 by no means left the ICRC with nothing to do. On the contrary, the organization plunged into a major humanitarian operation: repatriating prisoners of war. The ICRC had already made a public appeal in 1917 for as many prisoners as possible to be returned home, beginning with those who had endured the longest period of captivity.¹⁸ This humanitarian proposal was innovative on two scores. First, it called for

unconditional release and return (i.e. not in the form of an exchange) while the fighting was still continuing. Second, it concerned able-bodied prisoners rather than only the sick and wounded, as had been the case hitherto. But the most interesting aspect of this appeal was without doubt its sheer pragmatism. The war would inevitably come to an end and the ICRC anticipated the problems that would arise – particularly in terms of logistics and other practicalities – upon the sudden release of millions of prisoners. It therefore proposed that the gradual repatriation of prisoners begin immediately. Although the ICRC's idea was welcomed and diplomatic negotiations were opened between the belligerents, its practical implementation never came about.

When the fighting finally stopped, the ICRC found itself dealing with three categories of prisoners of war: those belonging to the Allied Powers, to the Central Powers and to [Russia](#). The organization was not asked to take action on behalf of Allied prisoners, since the Armistice contained provisions for their immediate repatriation. The situation of the Central Power prisoners depended on whether they were being held by the Allies or by the Russians. The ICRC interceded in the [peace conference](#), urging that Austro-German military personnel held by the Entente be allowed to return home without delay. Despite the ICRC's insistence, the repatriation of [German prisoners](#) did not commence until the autumn of 1919 and the operation proceeded without any direct ICRC action.

The organization's involvement was therefore essentially confined to the Austro-German prisoners of war held in Russia and the Russian prisoners of war in the hands of the 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](#). The ICRC embarked on large-scale relief operations to help these former prisoners of war, backed by public appeals for aid. The most pressing aim was to bring the states holding prisoners and those through which they could travel to realize the urgent need to find means of evacuation. Delegates were therefore dispatched to gather information in Berlin, Prague, Budapest and Warsaw and subsequently in Turkey, southern Russia and the Caucasus, the Far East and Siberia in March 1919. Once there, the delegates opened an office and built up contacts who could advance the ICRC's aims at both the political and logistical levels.

When it proved impossible to achieve a concerted general plan for repatriating prisoners, the ICRC was obliged to come to their aid more directly. As far as the Russian prisoners who had remained in Germany were concerned – the largest group of all – the organization negotiated with the Inter-Allied Military Control Commission to establish the principle that their return would take place irrespective of whether the prisoners chose to be repatriated in the Soviet or anti-Soviet territories. Indeed, the ICRC made its assistance conditional on strict adherence

to this principle of neutrality. It also wanted the repatriation of the Russians to be linked to that of the Central Power prisoners in Russia and Siberia. This desire, which was inspired by a humanitarian concern for reciprocity, was also prompted by practical and economic reasons, i.e. that the transports be fully loaded in both directions.

In addition to its presentations to the Allies, the ICRC began negotiations with the German and Soviet governments. A German-Soviet agreement was signed regulating the repatriation of prisoners from Germany and prisoners from the former Central Powers being held in the former Russian Empire. To this end, the ICRC was given full authority by both states (which were soon joined by [Austria, Hungary](#) and the Ottoman Empire) to negotiate and organize the practicalities in agreement with the transit states (such as Japan and Finland). Land and sea repatriation routes were organized. These various routes, along which the ICRC set up transit camps, were operational as of spring 1920 and continued to function until 30 June 1922, which marked the official end of the ICRC's repatriation operations. It is estimated that the ICRC enabled almost 500,000 former prisoners of war to return to their native countries.¹⁹

Conclusion: A Changing ICRC

Quite apart from the benefits reaped, this repatriation marked a crucial stage in the history of the ICRC for various reasons. First, it allowed the organization to deploy staff abroad on a large scale and, in some instances, permanently, through the various missions or delegations in Central or Eastern Europe, the Near East and the Far East. This geographical expansion helped accelerate the organization's transformation from a local philanthropic association to a humanitarian institution of truly international scale in terms both of its ideal of the universal nature of Red Cross values and of the practical responsibilities it shouldered beyond Geneva. Secondly, this expansion of the ICRC's field operations was accompanied by a change in the organization's mandate in practice, if not yet in official policy. In response to the suffering it witnessed at the scene of operations, the organization developed a range of new activities in fields in which it had not hitherto been involved – or at least not to any great extent.

The ICRC's missions and delegations, which had originally been set up to help prisoners of war awaiting repatriation, soon became involved in distributing supplies to starving civilians, particularly in defeated countries such as Austria and Hungary. 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 the early 1920s. In view of the disastrous [nutrition](#) and 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 to combat epidemics. Such a bureau was established in Vienna in the summer of 1919 and Dr. Ferrière was placed in charge. 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 third countries.

Together with its repatriation activities, this diversification of the ICRC's activities entailed a need for greater funding and staff that the organization – which had once again become a very small body of about 100 people at the end of the First World War – was unable to cover on its own. Therefore, it had to seek partners, the second major change in the ICRC's *modus operandi*. Though it had already established numerous contacts with other Swiss and non-Swiss organizations since its inception in 1863, most of the latter were part of the individual Red Cross national societies, or the “Red Cross constellation”. During the inter-war period, the ICRC worked together with much more heterogeneous bodies as well as with international organizations such as the International Labour Office and the League of Nations. Cooperation was no longer limited to an exchange of [correspondence](#); it mainly involved working together in the field on behalf of people affected by conflict.

A veritable form of inter-organizational and transnational cooperation arose during the first half of the 1920s to cope with the aftermath of the war; about 25 percent of the ICRC delegates active in the field were also employed by other humanitarian organizations and were mandated to be employed by other agencies as well as the ICRC. At the political level, this partnership enabled the ICRC to contend with competition in the humanitarian field, since new actors (such as the League of Red Cross Societies, the League of Nations and the American Relief Administration) were now also claiming their place on the international charity scene.

The final innovation was that the immediate post-war period saw the ICRC mandate in connection with armed violence other than international wars. Whereas the organization had initially been created to operate solely in connection with conflicts between major European powers, from the end of the First World War it also started to assist people affected by internal troubles (in Russia, Silesia and the [Ukraine](#)) and in [revolutionary](#) unrest such as the 1919 upheavals in Hungary. On that occasion, for the first time in ICRC history, the organization obtained permission to visit detainees who were not prisoners of war but political inmates, a precedent which was later put to good use in connection with civil wars, such as in [Ireland](#).²⁰

The 1914-1918 war thus had a profound impact on the ICRC as regards both its policy and the ways in which it subsequently acted to help conflict-affected victims. It can be said in conclusion that, whereas before 1914 the ICRC merely made pronouncements about war, as of August 1914 it was invariably present in the field.

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Notes

1. Dunant, Henry: *Un souvenir de Solferino*, Geneva 1862. [↑](#)
2. On the work of the ICRC during the First World War, cf. Durand, André: *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross. From Sarajevo to Hiroshima*, Geneva 1984, pp. 31-96; Hinz, Uta: *Humanität im Krieg? Internationales Rotes Kreuz und Kriegsgefangenenhilfe im Ersten Weltkrieg*, in: Oltmer, Jochen (ed.): *Kriegsgefangene im Europa des Ersten Weltkriegs*, Paderborn 2006, pp. 216-236; Jones, Heather: *Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War*, Cambridge 2011. Recently Cotter, Cédric / Herrmann, Irène: *Hilfe zum Selbstschutz: Die Schweiz und ihre humanitären Werke*, in: Rossfeld, Roman / Buomberger, Thomas / Kury, Patrick (eds.): *14/18: Die Schweiz und der Grosse Krieg*, Baden 2014, pp. 240-265 deals with the role of the ICRC in Switzerland's humanitarian diplomacy. [↑](#)
3. The ICRC had already established Prisoners-of-War Agencies in 1870-1871 (Franco-Prussian War), 1877-1878 (Russo-Turkish War) and in 1912-1913 (Balkan Wars). [↑](#)
4. Fourteen national sections were set up by the Agency: Franco-Belgian, British, Italian, Greek, American, Brazilian, Portuguese, Serbian, Romanian, Russian, German, Bulgarian, Turkish and Austro-Hungarian. [↑](#)
5. Bludnikow, Bent: *Denmark during the First World War*. In: *Journal of Contemporary History* 24/ 4 (1989), pp. 683-703. [↑](#)
6. ICRC, *Les œuvres de guerre en Suisse*. In: *Nouvelles de l'Agence international des prisonniers de guerre* 30 (1916), pp. 389-397. [↑](#)
7. In addition to the ICRC, visits to prisoner-of-war camps were also conducted by neutral protecting powers (Spain, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the Holy See and the United States until 1917) or by the Young Men's Christian Associations. [↑](#)
8. ICRC, *Documents publiés à l'occasion de la Guerre*. 24 series, Geneva March 1915 - January 1920. [↑](#)
9. There was a strong interaction between the ICRC and the Swiss government during the First World War to the benefit of both. The ICRC used the Swiss diplomatic services to obtain sometimes confidential information on belligerents or passports for its delegates. The Swiss authorities used the ICRC's reputation and the work done by the International Prisoners-of-War Agency to bolster their foreign policy and their public image. The ICRC president, Gustave Ador (1845-1928), had close relations with the Swiss Foreign Affairs Minister, Arthur Hoffman (1857-1927). When Hoffman had to resign in June 1917, he

was then replaced by Ador. The fact that Ador, while becoming a Swiss Minister, decided to stay on as the ICRC president reinforced the links existing between Switzerland and the Geneva organization. ↑

10. ICRC, Renvoi du personnel sanitaire, Interprétation des articles 9 et 12 de la Convention de Genève du 6 juillet 1906. 7 décembre 1914, in: Actes du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge pendant la Guerre 1914-1918, Geneva 1918, pp. 19-20. ↑
11. About the “swing” notion of neutrality for the ICRC during the First World War, see Herrmann, Irène / Palmieri, Daniel: Genève, ou la neutralité 1914-1945. In: Chassaingne, Philippe / Largeaud, Jean-Marc (eds.): Villes en Guerre, Paris 2004, pp. 218-228; Herrmann, Irène / Palmieri, Daniel: Humanitaire et massacres: L'exemple du CICR (1904-1994), in: Semelin, Jacques / Andrieu, Claire / Gensburger, Sarah (eds.): La résistance aux génocides. De la pluralité des actes de sauvetage, Paris 2008, pp. 237-245. ↑
12. ICRC, Dixième conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge tenue à Genève du 30 mars au 7 avril 1921. Compte rendu, Geneva 1921, pp. 50-54. ↑
13. ICRC, Appel contre l'emploi des gaz vénéneux. 6 février 1918, in: Actes du Comité 1918, pp. 73-75. ↑
14. Wylie, Neville: The 1929 Prisoner of War Convention and the Building of the Inter-war Prisoner of War Regime. In: Scheipers, Sibylle (ed.): Prisoners in War, Oxford 2010, pp. 91-108. ↑
15. ICRC, Fondation de la Société luxembourgeoise de la Croix-Rouge. 162me circulaire, 14 octobre 1914, in: Actes du Comité 1918, p. 17. ↑
16. ICRC, Protestation contre la dissolution du comité central de la Croix-Rouge de Belgique. 164me circulaire, 8 mai 1915, in: Actes du Comité 1918, pp. 25-27. ↑
17. Palmieri, Daniel: Guerres, humanité et féminité. Le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et les femmes (1863-1965), in: Delaunay, Jean-Marc / Denéchère, Yves (eds.): Femmes et relations internationales au XXe siècle, Paris 2006, pp. 189-199. ↑
18. ICRC, Appel en faveur du rapatriement des prisonniers de guerre. 26 avril 1917, in: Actes du Comité 1918 pp. 45-46. ↑
19. ICRC, Rapport général du Comité international sur son activité de 1912 à 1920, Geneva 1921, pp. 111-129; ICRC, Rapport général du Comité international 1923, pp.77-134. ↑
20. Palmieri, Daniel: An Institution standing the Test of Time? A Review of 150 Years of the History of the International Committee of the Red Cross, in: International Review of the Red Cross 94/ 888 (2012), pp. 1273-1298. ↑

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- [1914-1918 war: International Prisoners of War Agency \(International Committee of the Red Cross\) \(Online Exhibition\)](#)
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- [History of the ICRC \(International Committee of the Red Cross\) \(Article\)](#)
- [ICRC in WWI: overview of activities, 2005 \(International Committee of the Red Cross\) \(Article\)](#)
- [The Laws of War. Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, Geneva Conventions and Miscellaneous Treaties, Conventions and Agreements \(The Avalon Project\) \(Database\)](#)
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Key Person(s)

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Title

International Committee of the Red Cross

Author(s)

[Daniel Palmieri](#) and [Irène Herrmann](#)

Article Type

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Classification Group

Regional Thematic Article

Articles That Link Here

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