

MEMORY OF THE WORLD REGISTER

Archives of the International Prisoners of War Agency, 1914-1923

Ref 2006-15

PART A – ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

1 SUMMARY

August 1914. The world went to war and, for 52 months, the human race was torn apart by brutality, violence and unspeakable suffering.

At the heart of Europe - at least that is how Stefan Zweig described it - the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also became involved in the war. With disproportionate ambition for such a small, 10-member institution, but with a global network created over the previous 50 years, its aim was to relieve the suffering – death, bereavement, imprisonment, deportation, separation, destruction of the socio-economic environment, poverty, hunger and cold – inflicted on the infinite number of war victims – disabled survivors, prisoners of war, deported civilians, bereaved families, refugees, hostages and victims of retaliation.

The archives of the International Prisoners of War Agency (IPWA), a body created by the ICRC during the early days of the war, bear witness to the scale of the suffering endured by victims of the war across the world. Seven million soldiers were taken prisoner, many civilians were interned on enemy soil and millions more endured military occupation by the enemy or fled from combat zones and occupied territories.

The task of the IPWA was to re-establish contact between people who had been separated by the war. It carried out pioneering work in civilian protection. Its archives illustrate its efforts to humanize prison conditions and make it possible to follow individually the tragic fate of two million victims from all continents. The database it created is enormous for its era and inspired the ICRC's working methods in later conflicts, from the Second World War to Rwanda, including Algeria in between.

The IPWA's substantial archives open up new perspectives for the study of international relations from a humanitarian action point of view. The information on individuals, meanwhile, is an invaluable source for researchers of family history and genealogy, the sociology of captivity and the experiences of prisoners.

The sheer volume of these archives, some of which are exhibited at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum (MICR), is such that they form an impressive museum collection, symbolic of an event that shaped the modern world.

2 DETAILS OF THE NOMINATOR

2.1 Name (person or organization)

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), jointly with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum (MICR), Geneva.

2.2 Relationship to the documentary heritage nominated

The ICRC is the owner of the collection, which is managed by the Archives Division.

The MICR is the custodian of part of the collection, which is displayed in its permanent exhibition.

2.3 Contact person(s)

- Martin Morger
- Roger Mayou

2.4 Contact details (include address, phone, fax, email)

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3 IDENTITY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

ACICR, CG1, Archives of the International Prisoners of War Agency, 1914-1923, 400 linear metres

3.2 Description

3.2.1 Description

3.2.1.1 Context

On 21 August 1914, three weeks after the war broke out, the ICRC, which had been founded in 1863, decided to create the International Prisoners of War Agency (IPWA) in Geneva.

International humanitarian law (1864 and 1906 Geneva Conventions, 1899 and 1907 Hague Conventions) still did not assign to the ICRC a role in the protection of prisoners. However, throughout the conflict, the IPWA took initiatives that went beyond the provisions of the existing Conventions to support prisoners of war (soldiers), imprisoned medical workers and different categories of civilian victims (interned civilians, civilian refugees, civilians living under military occupation). The 1914-1918 war was the first to ignore the distinction between non-combatants and combatants and saw the emergence of the notion of civilian refugees.

The IPWA acted in two ways: firstly, on the diplomatic front, it offered the warring parties its interpretation of current law and negotiated intergovernmental agreements designed to improve and humanize the treatment of these different categories of war victims. Secondly, it worked at an individual level in order to re-establish the links between persons separated by the war, particularly between prisoners or civilian refugees and their families.

Its role was ground-breaking at the time insofar as it formed a bridge between the war ministries of opposing countries, between national Red Cross societies and between prisoners and civilian refugees and their

families. The IPWA archives today bear witness to these efforts that were made for the humanitarian protection of these different categories of Great War victims.

3.2.1.2 Description of the collection

The IPWA collection (CG1) consists of two sets of archives totalling 400 linear metres. The first comprises the general archives linked to negotiations conducted by the IPWA and originating from the managing bodies of the Agency itself, its civilian and medical department and its department of the central powers' armies. These are preserved by the ICRC Archives Division. The second set is made up of individual data concerning the efforts to re-establish links between prisoners and their families; it is exhibited at the MICR.

General archives:

Series CG1A contains the archives of the IPWA managing body, which concern negotiations aimed at improving general captivity conditions: treatment of prisoners, notification of their place of captivity, internment in neutral countries and repatriation of seriously ill or injured prisoners. It mainly comprises correspondence with the national authorities of the belligerent states and with other humanitarian organizations, notes, prison camp visit reports and press cuttings.

Series CG1B contains the archives of the managing body of the civilian and medical department. These archives concern, on the one hand, diplomatic negotiations aimed at the repatriation of captured medical staff in application of the Geneva Convention and, on the other, those designed to improve the protection and treatment of civilians interned in enemy countries or living under military occupation (right to correspond with their home country and to receive aid, and the repatriation of civilians who could not be mobilized).

Series CG1C contains the archives of the managing body of the department of the central powers' armies. These include both general files on the captivity conditions of prisoners of the central powers and individual named files created following requests for information or assistance for German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war. These individual files particularly contain original letters addressed to the Agency by prisoners' families.

Series CG1A to CG1C are in bundle form and constitute a total of 20 linear metres.

Archives relating to efforts to re-establish links between persons separated by the war:

These are individual data files: firstly, 400,000 pages of lists of prisoners' names, submitted by the belligerent states during the conflict and, secondly, index files featuring the names of prisoners, created by the IPWA on the basis of these lists. These files comprise two types of named index cards: some that refer to the lists and others which summarize the inquiries made by the IPWA. At the request of families who had lost contact with a husband, son or brother, the IPWA made enquiries to determine whether the person had been taken prisoner or had died on the battle field. These files contain a total of 7 million index cards containing the identities of 2 million people (see the photographs of the lists and index cards in Annex 1).

Series CG1D to CG1G contain lists and files concerning soldiers of the armies of the central powers and the Entente, and interned or refugee civilians (see list in Annex 2).

They make up a total of 380 linear metres and are exhibited at the MICR.

3.2.1.3 Inventory

Annex 2 contains a basic inventory of sub-collection CG1 (sub-series level). A more detailed article-by-article inventory that conforms to the ISAD(G) standard of the International Council on Archives is currently being drawn up.

3.2.2 History of the conservation of the IPWA archives

The IPWA was closed down on 31 December 1919. Its archives have always remained the property of the ICRC, which has frequently used them in order to provide former prisoners and their heirs with proof of their captivity.

Since 1988, the prisoner lists and files have been kept at the MICR, where they form part of the permanent exhibition. As a result, each year tens of thousands of visitors (120,000 in 2005) are able to see for themselves the scale of captivity during the First World War and the amount of work carried out by the Agency. According to a survey of visitors (*Etude du profil et des appréciations des visiteurs du MICR*, Haute Ecole de Gestion de Genève, 2004), the IPWA archives are the museum's most memorable exhibit. Their sheer volume and the way they are presented in the museum mean that they are truly monumental and spectacular (see the DVD about the MICR and the MICR catalogue, Annexes 3 and 4).

3.2.3 Analysis of physical condition

An analysis of the physical state of preservation of the IPWA archives was carried out in 2000 by Andrea Giovannini, curator and restorer of the SCR (Swiss association of conservation and restoration), whose report emphasizes the worrying state of certain seriously damaged parts of the collection. As a result, the ICRC Archives Division prepared a strategy to protect the collection, which particularly involved an immediate improvement of the climatic conditions and reconditioning of the documents. This strategy, which is currently being implemented, is aimed at the preventive, definitive preservation of the collection, as well as its broad communication to the public by means of digitization (see management plan in Annex 5).

3.2.4 Visual documentation

A photographic record, a DVD about the MICR and the museum catalogue are contained in Annexes 1, 3 and 4.

3.2.5 Bibliography

Becker Annette, Oubliés de la Grande Guerre. Humanitaire et culture de guerre 1914-1918. Populations occupées, déportés civils, prisonniers de guerre, Paris (Noesis), 1998.

Clouzot Etienne (dir.), *L'Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre: Genève, 1914-1918*, Secheron-Genève (SADAG), 1919.

Stibbe Matthew, "The Internment of Civilians by Belligerent States during the First World War and the Response of the International Committee of the Red Cross", in *Journal of Contemporary History*, No. 41, 2006, p. 5-19.

Hinz Uta, *Gefangen im Grossen Krieg, Kriegsgefangenschaft in Deutschland, 1914-1921*, Essen (Klartext Verlag), 2006

3.2.6 Names, qualifications and contact details of experts

Bernard Delpal

Professor of modern history (University of Lyon III), researcher at the CNRS, lecturer at the University of Geneva and the Laval University in Quebec, expert in captivity during the two world wars.

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4 JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION/ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

4.1 Authenticity

There is absolutely no doubt that these archives are authentic. They were produced by the ICRC as part of its activities and have always remained in its ownership. The ICRC uses the prisoner lists to provide former prisoners and their heirs with certificates proving that they were held captive and the legal validity of these certificates is recognized by the states.

4.2 World significance, uniqueness and irreplaceability

World significance:

The Great War, through the size of the area in which it was fought (Europe, Middle East, Far East, Africa), the number of belligerent states (44 states and their colonies in 1918), the mobilization of the colonies and the involvement in the war effort not just of combatants but also of the whole civilian population, had an immense impact on the world and its history. A total of 65 million men fought; nine million of them died in combat and seven million were taken prisoner.

The IPWA archives reflect the global character of the 1914-1918 war. The IPWA negotiated with all the belligerent states, particularly with regard to the protection of enemy civilians living in their territory. ICRC representatives visited prison camps not only in Europe, but also in Africa and Asia. Named records are held for two million prisoners from all over the world: the IPWA archives include 14 national files (Franco-Belgian, British, Italian, Greek, American, Brazilian, Portuguese, Serbian, Romanian, Russian, German, Bulgarian, Turkish and Austro-Hungarian). These files also contain information about soldiers from overseas colonies (Senegalese, Indian, etc.) and the European provinces of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires (Czech, Polish, etc.).

This individual data concerns prisoners from all social backgrounds and statuses – military, medical or civilian – whether famous, such as Captain Charles de Gaulle, who fell into German hands at Verdun in 1916, or unknown.

The ICRC constantly champions the universal ideal of humanitarian activity. It proclaims its neutrality because “the side of humanity has no homeland” (Annette Becker) and in times of war, when suffering, both physical and mental, becomes universal, charity does too: it tries to relieve the suffering of all victims, no longer just that of the poor.

Uniqueness and irreplaceability

During the conflict, only the IPWA kept detailed information about so many prisoners from so many different belligerent states. It received this information from the war ministries of the belligerent states, either directly or via national Red Cross societies.

The individual data on prisoners collected by the IPWA have remained living documents since the end of the First World War: they have been used to prepare captivity certificates at the request of former prisoners and they are still examined by descendants of numerous families who were separated and torn apart by the First World War. They form an individual database of exceptional significance for human history.

4.3 Criteria of (a) time (b) place (c) people (d) subject and theme (e) form and style

Time:

At the time, the Great War was considered to be an unprecedented event in history and one which could not possibly be repeated in the future. Since the 1990s, historiography has particularly shown the importance of its impact on subsequent wars and recent history. The 1914-1918 war, the first example of total warfare, marks the advent of a radical form of violence which had never previously existed, with a new level of brutality that affected millions of people. It is considered to be the founding moment of the 20th century and the event that shaped it.

The IPWA archives are a testimony, a “real-life” testimony, to this war. They reflect the horror of the conflict and reveal the individual stories and experiences of millions of prisoners. The author Stefan Zweig, on a visit to the Agency in 1917, said, “These documents contain more tragedy, more hardship and more magnanimity than will ever be found in any work by general administrative staff. This is the stuff of a great human epic (...). It is only by trying not to forget, not even for a moment, not even for a second, that we can do justice to ourselves and to the universe”.¹

Place:

Geneva, the home of the IPWA, became the destination of millions of letters and parcels sent from all over Europe, and even other parts of the world, and a crossing point in the repatriation of German and French prisoners during the hostilities.

However, the importance of the collection is universal on account of the number of countries concerned: ICRC representatives visited prison camps not just in Europe, but also in Africa and Asia. The IPWA negotiated with all the belligerent states and the prisoners listed came from all over the world.

People:

These archives contain the names of two million people of all different nationalities, ages and social backgrounds and testify to the diversity of their suffering and of their personal situations. These people were soldiers who died in combat, prisoners of war, captured medical staff, interned civilians, civilian refugees and people living under enemy occupation.

In Geneva, the IPWA had 500 staff members in 1918 and 1,200 at the height of the war.

Subject and theme:

In this dark chapter of history, when captivity became a mass phenomenon, the humanitarian action of the IPWA was truly innovative. Through its pioneering work, the Agency tried to discover the fate of missing persons and to reunite families. “In invisible waves, the fears, worries, desperate appeals and cries of terror of millions of peoples (sic) flood in here every day. In an invisible ebb, hope, comfort, advice and information flow out to these millions on a daily basis”.²

¹ *Le Coeur de l'Europe*, pp. 19 and 24, Paris-Geneva (Editions du Carmel), 1918.

² *Le Coeur de l'Europe*, p. 5, Paris-Geneva (Editions du Carmel), 1918.

The IPWA collection constitutes an extremely rich source of documents. The archives related to general negotiations shed light on numerous interesting questions: the violence of the fighting and the brutality suffered by civilians, the transformation of the concepts of victim and prisoner, the world of internment camps. They are also useful for the study of international relations from the point of view of humanitarian organizations, bringing a new perspective on contemporary history. The individual data, meanwhile, are a precious source of information, for example for researchers of family history and genealogy, the sociology of captivity or the experiences of millions of prisoners: this multitude of personal stories documents history.

Form:

As part of its efforts to re-establish links between people separated by the war, the IPWA developed individual information management techniques and created an administrative system that became a reference point in all subsequent conflicts. Its files, containing 7 million index cards, constitute a huge database for its time.

4.4 Issues of rarity, integrity, threat and management

Rarity

Only the IPWA possesses such a large database on prisoners of the First World War and archived detailed information about so many prisoners from so many different belligerent states.

Integrity

The IPWA archives comprise 20 linear metres of general archives (CG1A, B and C) and 380 linear metres of individual data in the form of index cards and lists (CG1D to G).

In 1980, some of the files (British, Portuguese and American) and the file of the Swiss bureau of interned civilians were destroyed after being microfilmed. These microfilms have been preserved.

The majority of the items of correspondence that were collected during the inquiries conducted by the IPWA at the request of families who had lost contact with a loved one were destroyed at the end of the First World War. However, the results of these inquiries were written on cards that were inserted in the prisoner files and preserved.

Finally, some sections of the archives are seriously damaged. A strategy to protect the collection has been implemented (see management plan, Annex 5).

Threat

The survival of part of the collection is under threat. Measures have been taken to ensure its long-term preservation.

Management plan

This is contained in Annex 5.

5 LEGAL INFORMATION

5.1. Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

Archives Division
International Committee of the Red Cross
19, avenue de la Paix
CH – 1202 Geneva
www.icrc.org

5.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details, if different to owner)

International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum
17, avenue de la Paix
CH – 1202 Geneva
www.micr.org

The ICRC and MICR concluded a contract dated 12 March 1987 concerning part of the IPWA archives. “Deposit contract between the International Committee of the Red Cross (depositor) and the Foundation for the International Red Cross Museum (depository)” and its amendment No. 6 of 11 April 1989.

5.3 Legal status:

(a) Category of ownership

Property of the ICRC.

(b) Accessibility

In accordance with the rules of access to the ICRC archives (29 April 2004), the CG1 sub-collection is accessible to the public.

Currently, on account of the restrictions linked to conservation (the index cards are not attached to the files with a rod), the documents exhibited at the MICR are accessible to the public via the ICRC archivists who, upon written request, carry out research and prepare captivity certificates. There are plans to digitize the documents and publish them on the Internet and the inventories are currently being drawn up. This will facilitate the broad, direct communication of the documents to as many people as possible via the Internet without restrictions or charges.

(c) Copyright status

The ICRC owns the copyright on all the archived documents.

(d) Responsible administration

The ICRC Archives Division is responsible for the series CG1A, B and C.

The deposit contract stipulates that the International Red Cross Museum is responsible for the physical conservation and protection of part of the collection (i.e. series CG1D, E, F and G) from theft and destruction by water, fire, temperature, humidity, light and parasites.

6 MANAGEMENT PLAN

6.1 Is there a management plan in existence for this documentary heritage?

YES (see Annex 5)

7 CONSULTATION

7.1 Provide details of consultation about this nomination with (a) the owner of the heritage (b) the custodian (c) your national or regional Memory of the World committee

Owner: International Committee of the Red Cross

Custodian of part of the collection: International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, Geneva

Experts consulted: see 3.2.6.

PART B – SUBSIDIARY INFORMATION

8 ASSESSMENT OF RISK

8.1 Detail the nature and scope of threats to this documentary heritage

According to the latest knowledge, the environmental and physical conditions are suitable for the future preservation of the archives (see management plan in Annex 5).

9 ASSESSMENT OF PRESERVATION

9.1 Detail the preservation context of the documentary heritage

In 2000, the ICRC Archives Division asked Andrea Giovannini, curator and restorer of the SCR (Swiss association of conservation and restoration), to analyse the physical condition of the collection. He submitted two reports, in July and September 2000, suggesting measures to improve the preservation conditions. The ICRC Archives Division immediately implemented his proposals (see management plan in Annex 5).

PART C - LODGEMENT

This nomination is lodged by:

For the MICR:

Roger MAYOU, Director

For the ICRC Archives:

Georges WILLEMIN, Director

Geneva, 17 March 2006

List of Annexes (in French only)

Annex 1: Photographic evidence

Annex 2: Basic inventory of sub-collection CG1

Annex 3: DVD about the MICR

Annex 4: MICR Catalogue: *International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum*

Annex 5: Management plan

Annex 6: Experts' contributions