

Broadcasting in the service of the International Committee of the Red Cross

*SIXTEEN YEARS OF ACTIVITY AND DEVELOPMENT
OF " RADIO-INTER-CROIX-ROUGE "*

The broadcasting activity of the International Committee of the Red Cross started sixteen years ago in a Europe which had been half destroyed by the war. It was in fact on May 2, 1945, that the first lists of names of French deported, to be liberated in Germany and who were returning home via Switzerland, were read out at Radio-Genève on the national Sottens programme.

A week later on May 10, the ICRC was allotted three hours of wireless time on the Swiss Short-Wave Service of Schwarzenburg and on the Prangins transmitter. It was then a question of communicating as quickly as possible all information concerning the fate of captives, which the delegates of the ICRC or other organizations passed on to the families of the large number of prisoners of war, deported and civilian workers whom the allied forces were liberating as they advanced into Germany. In three months, 15,000 names were broadcast in eleven languages.

From September 1945, the broadcasting activity of the ICRC was chiefly concerned with prisoners and internees of the opposing side held in France, Belgium, Italy, China, Japan and in Africa, who found themselves deprived of all news of their families.

This humanitarian service, which had thus been started, was to expand rapidly. Between May 2, 1945 and December, 1948 during the course of more than 5,000 transmitting hours, information concerning over 600,000 individual cases belonging to more than twenty different nationalities, was sent out over *Radio-Inter-Croix-Rouge*.

Thus, under the pressure of events and in a manner which had as yet been completely unexplored, the ICRC was to take possession of a new medium enabling it to pursue and accelerate one of its most important special activities under extremely confused conditions. From the beginning it had benefited, on the one hand from the

widest and most understanding support of the authorities and organizations concerned and, on the other hand, from the assistance of private organizations and of various governments, which had appreciated the value of this method of information.

The authorities of several countries together with such organizations as the World Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations, the World Council of Churches, the Society of Friends (Quakers), Caritas and the American Joint Distribution Committee soon contributed towards lightening the burdens of the ICRC. Nevertheless the Committee entirely financed its own programmes until October 1945 (amounting to a sum of about 60,000 francs for approximately 900 transmitting hours) and subsequently took on all the expenses resulting from broadcasts aimed at tracing children dispersed throughout Europe.

When going back to the origins of *Radio-Inter-Croix-Rouge*, one should pay tribute to the good-will of the Swiss authorities and bodies, whose support was all the more necessary in view of the fact that the legal bases for the action of the ICRC did not exist, broadcasting in Switzerland being a prerogative of the Swiss Broadcasting Service. The Postal, Telephone and Telegraph Services and the Military Department (the ICRC was authorised to make use of a transmitter belonging to the "national redoubt" and worked on a wave-length belonging to the Swiss pool) also played an important rôle. Furthermore, a report written in 1945 by Mr. R. de Reding, Secretary-General of the Swiss Broadcasting Service, in agreement with the directing staff of Radio-Genève and Mr. G. Rothen, Director-General of Radio-Suisse S.A., stressed all that was required to be done and the openings which were offered.

Mr. de Reding stated in particular : " It is of the utmost importance to allocate to the ICRC in time of war wave-lengths which have been decided upon for its various branches. These channels should be protected against jamming by international law, to prevent the action of the ICRC from being obstructed. . . . Whether the transmitters are the property of the ICRC or whether they are only rented by it, whether they are in Switzerland or on foreign territory, international agreements should in all cases give them protection against the risks of war. Be that as it may, the ICRC must at all times be in a position to make use of the following services from

Geneva to every part of the world : 1) telegraph, 2) one-way telephone (a reply demands the possession of transmitters at the places of reception), 3) transmission by teleprinter, 4) broadcasting, 5) reproduction.”

The writer of the report, after having described the necessary technical equipment, was then anxious to ensure the best possible reception conditions for messages sent out by the ICRC. He hoped, in particular, for the conclusion of international agreements so that ICRC transmissions could be received in all circumstances.

Mr. de Reding's brief notice was to be the beginning and also the basis for numerous studies and representations which were to be spread out over a period of 17 months and which notably led on March 21, 1947 to a precise definition being made of the ICRC's position regarding the allocation of a wave-length.

The ICRC then informed the International Telecommunication Union of its intention of “utilizing wireless methods in a permanent manner for the purpose of spreading and safeguarding the charitable principles of the Red Cross whose guardian it is.” The ICRC in its letter to the ITU, after having defined its position, expressed the wish to be able to benefit on a permanent basis from the wave-length which it was using at the time.

The Swiss delegation which took part in 1948 in Atlantic City in the first post-war international telecommunications conference, undertook to submit this request.

After a considerable amount of negotiation, the Swiss delegation succeeded, thanks to the efforts made by Mr. Paul Borsinger, then Director of the Swiss Short-Wave Service, in obtaining from the general Assembly of the International Conference at Mexico in February 1949 a favourable decision which has remained unchanged since and which constitutes the legal basis of the ICRC's broadcasting activity. By this it is authorised to broadcast six hours each day in normal times and twelve hours daily under exceptional conditions.

It is interesting to point out in connection with this decision, which was greeted with acclamation, that the granting of the facility to utilize a specially-allotted frequency is a notable exception in favour of the ICRC. In fact, both the United Nations and Unesco broadcast on frequencies which are lent to them on certain

occasions by the national broadcasting institutions, and do not possess their own wave-length. The ICRC thus finds itself placed on the same level in this field as a sovereign State.

This exceptional concession however entails certain obligations such, for example, as the regular employment and in its own name of its own frequency, so that other States do not consider it to have become obsolete, thus considering that they would have the right to claim to use it.

A difficult question of usage was thus raised. As soon as the transmissions to prisoners of war, interned civilians and missing persons began to decrease, the ICRC was anxious to reduce the considerable expenses involved in its broadcast service. It was in fact a question of retaining the technical resources placed at its disposal without incurring the expenses involved in continuous usage, which, by itself would have assured the normal payment of essential installations.

For this it was necessary to reach agreement with the Postal, Telephone and Telegraph Services, the Swiss Broadcasting Service and above all with Radio-Genève. Negotiations which had already been started ended in June 1950 with the signing of an agreement with the last-named foundation, relative to the establishment of an autonomous office for the transmission of broadcasts and to the technical methods of broadcasting to be allocated to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

By the terms of this agreement, this Office should send out 26 annual transmissions on a 15-minute basis, and 260 copies and translations of these, the ICRC being the sole judge of the substance of these broadcasts, Radio-Genève, for its part, supplying offices, studios and the necessary technical equipment.

These agreements were renewed without any major alterations in 1953, 1957 and 1958 ; the last agreement, which was signed in September 1958, benefiting from the accumulated experience of 13 years' work, really constitutes the working broadcasting instrument of the ICRC, that is to say, its Broadcasting and Television Office at Radio-Genève (BTO).

It is worth pausing at the period of eight years between the original Convention of 1950 and the instrument which was agreed

in 1958, if only to take note of the expansion of *Radio-Inter-Croix-Rouge* and of the importance of some of its interventions. Certain events which took place during this period can best illustrate the experience which was thus obtained : these relate in particular to the events in Hungary and at Suez.

From October 27, 1956, in view of the complete breakdown of normal postal, telegraphic and telephonic communication with Hungary, the broadcasting service of the ICRC immediately organized transmissions in French, German, Hungarian and Russian recalling the fundamental principles of the Geneva Conventions, giving details of relief, which was beginning to find its way to Hungary and reporting the despatch of the first delegates of the ICRC to Budapest.

On Friday, November 2, by reason of the events at Suez, similar transmissions were put on the air in French, English and Arabic, then in French, Arabic and Hebrew for the Near East.

Some of these broadcasts during the period of crisis deserve recalling. One should in particular mention those of November 7 and 8, 1956, which were devoted to a solemn appeal for a truce (Art. 15 of the First Geneva Convention of 1949) recorded in nine languages and sent out from some thirty European stations.

A telegram by the President of the ICRC announcing the sending of a column of 15 lorries from Vienna to Budapest was transmitted on November 9 and picked up by about ten stations.

The messages which were then put on the air by *Radio-Inter-Croix-Rouge* covered the principal phases of the humanitarian aid which was brought by the ICRC : organization and distribution of relief, movements of delegates, reminders of the Geneva Conventions and family messages, of which 27,000 were transmitted from November 15, 1956 to January 31, 1957 on Hungary's behalf.

Broadcasts to the Near East consisted of several series recalling the essential principles of the Geneva Conventions, of news concerning the despatch and arrival of relief supplies and the actions of the ICRC in North Africa.

An enumeration of broadcasts in 1957 gives an interesting indication of the way in which the office's activities had developed. Its maximum obligations for the year consisted in the sending out

of 26 broadcasts on a 15-minute basis, namely a total of 6½ hours and 150 recordings totalling 37½ hours.

The report states that at the end of the year " the broadcasting output for 1957 exclusively representing the thought, the action or the presence of the ICRC " reached a total of 118 transmissions of 15 minutes each and 253 recorded broadcasts of the same duration. If one adds to these figures 26 reports sent out in Spanish and 20 transmissions produced and put on the air on behalf of humanitarian institutions under the auspices of the ICRC, one reaches a total of 130 broadcasts and of 278 recordings each of 15 minutes.

During that period the Max Huber Studio was inaugurated at Radio-Genève known as the " groupe Croix-Rouge ", consisting of a reception room, offices, a studio and a control room with the most up-to-date reproduction and recording equipment.

The new agreement which had been concluded between the ICRC and Radio-Genève which took into account the experience of more than ten years and especially the technical development and broadcasting terminology, was much more simple and clearer than its predecessors. This agreement also offered the opportunity of carrying out a reorganization.

" So that transmissions such as those of the Red Cross may reach the largest possible public," the head of the broadcasting section of the ICRC writes in a report in January 1956, " it is not sufficient to be in a position to broadcast. One should to a certain extent also create a public for oneself and make it accustomed to one's presence. The perfecting of listening conditions is in fact no less important than that of transmission. Furthermore, the means at one's disposal should be continuously being tested and in order to check their effectiveness the support of distant listeners is indispensable. The transmission of news and broadcasts of a technical character make up a whole in the sense that their double action always tends to animate, perfect and, so to speak, impose the system of communication which is thus offered to the ICRC." ¹

It is in this context that one should examine the principal tasks of *Radio-Inter-Croix-Rouge*.

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¹ See *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, " La Radiodiffusion au service de la Croix-Rouge " by Mr. G. Kuhne, January 1956.



In English

**TEST BROADCASTS FROM THE RED CROSS STUDIO
AT RADIO-GENÈVE**

In French





In German

In Arabic



The chief of these tasks are the " test broadcasts " of the service, whose rate was increased in 1960 to four series each year, that is to say, from 12 to 48 hours on the air. These have three objects : a) to prevent the right of usage of the Inter-Croix-Rouge frequency from lapsing ; b) to establish a geographical time-table for the best reception conditions for transmissions to certain areas in the European zone, a time-table varying with the solar cycle, and c) to give the National Red Cross Societies the opportunity of organizing and practising reception from Geneva.

It is hardly necessary to emphasize the importance of training, both in transmitting and in reception, if one wishes to be prepared for broadcasting in cases of emergency. It is no less essential to make continuous use of the Red Cross frequency in order to prevent advantage being taken of its abandonment by any other service : " squatters " are numerous and one knows at present of more than a dozen such on the 41.6 m wave-band allocated to *Radio-Inter-Croix-Rouge*.

Finally, test broadcasts are valuable, not only because they enable useful assessments of range and audibility to be made, but also because they ensure the Red Cross having contact with a network of collective units in all languages, which is something which only the largest foreign stations can allow themselves.

As regards the subjects which are transmitted, the substance of these programmes consists of official communiqués of the ICRC, notices drawn up by the information department or by the heads of services of the ICRC, and finally of enquiries and communications of the Central Tracing Agency.

Within the framework of these last transmissions which deal today above all with the tracing of missing persons, *Radio-Inter-Croix-Rouge* was able to record a " successful outcome ", that is to say, that one family found one of its own members. This would seem to be a somewhat meagre result, if one did not realize that it was a question of hopeless enquiries in which all the efforts, which had been made by specialists of the Agency, and of many other institutions, had failed to achieve any result.

It goes without saying that, if there are important news, as was the case when medical teams were sent to the Congo, these are given priority of transmission within the framework of the test broadcasts

In principle, it is then a question of programmes of Red Cross topicality and it has been proposed, since in future there will be four test series available each year, that these should be entirely allotted to a succession of short talks on the essential Red Cross principles, of which the Red Cross is the guardian.

No other broadcasting station could be more suitable for such programmes as *Radio-Inter-Croix-Rouge*, which would not prevent it from doubling the number of its transmissions and even of quadrupling it by presenting these talks in the ICRC broadcasts on the Swiss Short-Wave Service in Spanish, Arabic and English.

Finally, mention should be made of its so-called technical activities, such as the "transcription service" and "radio telephotography". The first of these consists in recording information which has been picked up from an official bureau. This information is listened-in to and transcribed by a specialist service working in liaison with the directing staff of the Central Tracing Agency. It was in this way, for example, that in 1954, when certain transmitting stations of the People's Republic of China gave out the names of some prisoners captured on the Korean front, recordings were made in Hong Kong, sent to Geneva by air, transmitted and placed in the Central Agency's card-index.

This method of procedure has very probably been employed to render most useful service. The same can also be said of the radio telephotographic section, which enables the reception of the transmission to be made of photographic copies of original official documents several thousands of miles distant.

But, as one can see, a large proportion of the activities of *Radio-Inter-Croix-Rouge* is reserved for information broadcasts. In this connection one should mention a certain number of international transmissions which include the participation of foreign broadcasting services.

Some of these broadcasts take place on fixed dates : thus each year the Presidents of the two International Red Cross institutions are asked to give New Year messages for broadcasting and also for publication in the Press. In 1961, the message of the President of the ICRC, who was the only one to speak, was adapted in 22

languages, in addition to the original one in French recorded by Mr. Léopold Boissier.

These adaptations were sent out to 70 different countries, which a large number reported as having transmitted on December 31 or January 1.

The broadcast of May 8, the annual tribute to the Red Cross, which, apart from being the oldest regular international transmission, benefits from unique broadcasting facilities in the world, thus showing the universality of the Geneva institution.

All types of broadcasts and all methods were employed for this transmission which Radio-Genève carried out single-handed for nine years. It was not until 1958 that the participants came to its relief by accepting to produce the central part of the programme in turns. In 1959 on the occasion of the Centenary of Solferino, Italy organized the initial part of this broadcast which was transmitted by 53 countries in five continents. The programme was offered by France in 1960, by Belgium in 1961, the Principality of Monaco will offer it for 1962 and Switzerland for 1963, the year of the Red Cross Centenary. The programme for 1964 has been offered by Austria.

In 1961 the transmission of the programme of May 8 was even wider than in the preceding year : 23 countries by direct broadcast and 57 countries by re-broadcasts, in other words a total of 80 stations in five continents. In the same year it achieved a record in having the co-operation of 74 countries.

As regards television, the activities of the BTO have been noticeably extended since May 8, 1955, when a production by the Romande television service, under the auspices of the European Broadcasting Union, was shown on the screens of a dozen countries. Thus in 1960, films were shown on Agadir, on the repatriation of Koreans in Japan as well as the film-strips, " SOS Congo " and " Operation Congo ". The sub-editing and the transmitting of the two latter by the BTO were effected in complete liaison between the ICRC, the Swiss Red Cross and the Swiss Television Service. It is to be hoped that this first realization may be followed by many others in order to improve, within the limits of the available resources, propaganda in favour of the Red Cross which the ICRC is trying actively to amplify.

The *Revue internationale* has on several occasions referred to Red Cross broadcasts in Spanish and in Arabic.¹ The first to be produced especially for Spain and Latin America were started in 1952 and consist of talks relative to the international life of the Red Cross and to various important activities of the ICRC. These have roused considerable interest.

Encouraged by these requests, the ICRC decided in 1957, thanks to the Swiss Short-Wave Service, to address itself also to the Arabic-speaking countries. Within the framework of the broadcasts in that language, copies of which are in addition sent to the broadcasting services of the Near and Middle East and North Africa, the ICRC Broadcasting and Television Office took the opportunity of asking a number of leading personalities of the Arab world to express their views on humanitarian thought and action.

In order to stimulate interest in the Red Cross idea and in its principles throughout this area and to draw attention to the ICRC broadcasts, the subject, the conditions and the prizes for a competition, for which the closing date was the end of March 1961, were put on the air on October 15, 1960. A total of 130 entries from fifteen different countries were submitted to the ICRC.

Finally, broadcasts in English were made in November 1960 with a view to explaining to the general public the position, the principles and the action of the ICRC.

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The experiment carried out more or less fortuitously in 1945 by the International Committee, seems today to have achieved results surpassing all expectations and all plans which had been considered at the time, and taking into account the means which are available, these are more than encouraging: a short Continental wave-length and six hours of an Inter-continental frequency in times of crisis, the carrying out of information broadcasts to five continents as well as transmissions to groups of countries for which, in view of

¹ See June and September 1957 (English Supplement, October 1957) and especially November 1958 (English Supplement, same month : " ICRC radio broadcasts ").

the vast distances or illiteracy, broadcasting constitutes one of the most effective methods of information and the carrying out of test broadcasts whose effect on the European public has been greater than was expected and which have directly benefited the National Red Cross Societies.

The establishment of a Red Cross studio at Radio-Genève has enabled the ICRC to fulfil its object which was " to utilize broadcasting methods on a permanent basis for the purpose of propagating and safeguarding Red Cross principles of which it is the guardian " and also, in cases of conflict, " to hasten the transmission of official information to the belligerent governments on the one hand and on the other hand to put prisoners of war in touch with their families."

The above can be considered to be the main achievements of *Radio-Inter-Croix-Rouge*, soon approaching its seventeenth year.

It is certain, however, that a lot still remains to be done in the field of Red Cross radio communication.

Traditionally established broadcasts should never be abandoned, but extended wider by making use of topical items of interest for broadcasting on behalf of the Red Cross. The final object of the ICRC in this sphere is to be able to have radio conversation with the National Red Cross Societies or the official governmental offices which are empowered to have dealings with the ICRC. At the moment all ICRC programmes should be unified as far as possible and be directed in the transmission of Red Cross principles. Co-operation between the ICRC and Radio Television should be strengthened to collect documentation on the actions of the ICRC in distant countries, as well as spreading its work in sound and vision.

Let us hope that, in drawing up its future plans, the ICRC never loses sight of the fact that the instrument which it possesses must be constantly perfected, less for propaganda purposes than for the object of giving aid and assistance in times of conflict.

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