

ARE THE ARCHIVES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR STILL USEFUL ?

The Central Tracing Agency preserves, in Geneva its archives and card-indexes of the First World War with the greatest care. It is not a question of their being museum pieces which are kept for their historic interest, but on the contrary are documentary material of great practical usefulness, consulted almost daily.

In fact the Central Agency still receives on an average some 500 inquiries each year referring to the 1914-1918 war. For example, the " Deutsche Dienststelle West " has written to it to obtain, on behalf of former prisoners of war, certificates of captivity or statements establishing proof that their present disabilities are due to ailments which they suffered during their captivity, or of wounds received during fighting preceding their capture.

The attestations which the Central Agency is in a position to provide, in so far as it possesses the necessary information, can enable the persons concerned to draw a larger old-age pension.

In the same way, former German interned civilians, having for the most part belonged to the merchant marine, submit requests for certificates of internment or hospitalization.

The Agency's documentation, however, on interned civilians is more limited.

If requests from Germany are proportionally the most numerous, the Central Agency also deals with cases of former prisoners of war of civilian internees of the 1914-1918 war, originating from other countries, and which are submitted to it in particular by the Ministry of Ex-Servicemen in Paris, the Ministry of Pensions in London, the Yugoslav Red Cross, etc.

Due to the time which has passed since the First World War and to destruction during the conflict of 1940/45, the documentation which the Central Agency possesses is of the utmost value. In-

dividual documents in fact were often lost during the war or destroyed in bombardments. Furthermore, in many countries, the official archives relative to former prisoners of war of the first war were also destroyed.

Therefore, in certain cases, the Central Agency remains for ex-servicemen, the only possibility of substantiating their statements and also of improving their material situation to some extent in their old age.

THE NEW AFRICAN STATES AND THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS

Since the Geneva Conventions were signed on August 12, 1949, the International Committee of the Red Cross has endeavoured to make these texts universal since they constitute the basis of humanitarian law. Recently, it has put the emphasis on their dissemination in Africa because, in the critical phase which this continent is going through, it seems particularly desirable that all African states feel themselves bound by these treaties.

However, a problem arises when the country concerned has previously been under Colonial administration : Is the State which has recently acceded to independence bound by the international acts of the Power which was previously exercising sovereignty over its territory ?

Certain treaties of a political nature, such as alliances, obviously lose their validity in the newly independent State, but other conventions of public or general interest can remain valid. In the ICRC's view, this is the case with the Geneva Conventions to which the governments have acceded in the interest of all people placed under their sovereignty. If these people accede to independence, they will be at a disadvantage if the Geneva Conventions are no longer applicable to them. The latter must therefore retain their validity.