

BOOKS AND REVIEWS

THE CENTRAL TRACING AGENCY OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS ¹

As extensive as it is detailed, Mr. Gradimir Djurović's study of the Central Tracing Agency, from its distant beginnings to the present day, is of immense value and has the merit of filling a great gap. In fact, no one previously had given such a conspectus of the development of the Agency in its historical context, showing us all the stages of this long journey, the many achievements in the field of humanitarian law and, a no less important aspect, the continual evolution of its work methods.

Mr. Djurović describes the first Agency in Basle, set up by the International Committee of the Red Cross during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. This first improvised Agency quickly left behind it the inevitable phase of groping and enlarged and strengthened its work, which already contained in embryo the future activities of the Central Tracing Agency.

The author then proceeds with a very pertinent analysis of the organization and achievements of the International Prisoners of War Agency which, under the auspices of the ICRC, was in operation throughout the First World War. Without then being able to invoke the legal grounds on which the Central Prisoners of War Agency was later based, the 1914-18 Agency developed its methods of investigation and registration, quickly extended its field of intervention, and, to some extent, created a humanitarian doctrine which is still remarkably up-to-date.

Mr. Djurović then devotes a considerable section of his work to the Central Prisoners of War Agency, set up by the ICRC from the very beginning of the Second World War, and to the enormous amount of work which befell the Agency during the years 1939-45.

The Central Prisoners of War Agency has continued to function without a break since 1939, accomplishing work of increasing complexity,

¹ Gradimir Djurović: *L'Agence centrale de recherches du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge*. Preface by Jacques Freymond, former Vice President of the ICRC. Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1981. 300 pp. (in French).

resulting from the numerous conflicts of all kinds which have succeeded one another during these last three to four decades. Since 1960, it is known by its new name of Central Tracing Agency. Despite these successive changes in name, the present Agency, as is apparent from Mr. Djurović's comparative study, in fact remains faithful to the spirit which moved the pioneers of Basle. Now, as then, the Agency's prime duty is to endeavour at all costs to put an end to the moral suffering, the anxiety, which tortures families who are ignorant of the fate of those dearest to them.

Initiated without legal foundation, the Agency, whose beneficial rôle has the backing of the Red Cross movement and is recognized by the international community, has been underpinned, since 1929, by the provisions of the Geneva Conventions, enlarged in 1949 and supplemented by the 1977 Protocol I. These provisions, for the most part based on the Agency's observations and experiences, are the legal grounds for the Agency's existence and work.

Confronted as it is day after day with all the moral suffering engendered by situations of conflict of increasing complexity, and being brought into close contact with the most painful realities of the individual cases it deals with, the Agency has always had to carry out its work unceasingly and endeavour to find new ways of fully accomplishing its mission. It continues doing so today. Its efforts to that end constitute a valuable contribution to affirming and developing humanitarian principles.

Thanks to the work of Mr. Djurović, readers will be able to understand the very life of the Agency, to distinguish its key elements and to follow the thread of continuity in the very fabric of its evolution. The author's greatest merit, all things considered, is surely to have brought out the perennality of the Agency throughout the history of a world thrown into confusion by the increasing pace of profound change.

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