

### **New access rules open the archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross to historical research and to the general public**

In July 1995 the ICRC's Executive Board asked the Archives Division and the Directorate for International Law and Policy to draw up new rules governing access to ICRC archives. On 17 January 1996 the ICRC Assembly adopted the text submitted by them and instructed the Archives Division to organize a consultation system for the institution's public archives.

The ICRC decided to allow greater access in view of the exceptional public interest in the archives of an organization which has been active in connection with most of the conflicts of the last hundred and thirty years. It is also responding to the requirements of historians and the desire of institutions such as the Yad Vashem World Centre for Teaching the Holocaust, in Jerusalem, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, and the Centre for Contemporary Jewish Documentation, in Paris, to supplement their own archives. The ICRC would also like to provide access to people seeking biographical data or accounts regarding individual victims of conflict.

When it departed from the traditional rules on its archives, which allowed access only in exceptional circumstances, the ICRC considered various possibilities for new regulations. It referred to the law governing archives in a number of European countries, including Switzerland, and to the rules in force in the democratic States in general. For access to its "general" archives, it opted for a protective embargo period of fifty years, in line with legislation in the above-mentioned countries. They all apply a similar time limit to diplomatic archives, to which ICRC records are comparable.

The ICRC referred to the same legislation for personal data contained in the files of the Central Tracing Agency and for the personal files of its employees, and decided on an embargo period of 100 years. It will

nevertheless authorize indirect access — i.e., through an archivist — to biographical data dating back more than fifty years.

As soon as the new rules were adopted, the ICRC opened a reading room for researchers wishing to consult its archives. (In the first nine months of 1996, the reading room was used by researchers for some 100 working days. In the same period, the archivists and those responsible for historical research replied to almost 200 queries.) The room provides six work places and is open to the public on Mondays and Tuesdays, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (other weekdays upon request). Readers are asked to announce their visits and to complete the registration formalities usually required in public archives. Access to the reading room is free of charge. At the same time, a new rule stipulates that any historical research carried out by ICRC staff on behalf of third parties will be subject to the payment of a fee.

Under the new arrangements, the ICRC gives historical researchers access to a set of general archives measuring almost 500 linear metres and covering the history of the ICRC from 1863 to 1946, with some series extended to 1950.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the complete minutes of the Committee's own plenary meetings and those of the commissions set up by it, there are three sets of files worthy of particular mention.

First are the archives covering the founding of the Red Cross and of the International Committee itself (1863-1914) plus the archives of the Basel Agency, set up during the Franco-German War of 1870-1871, and the archives of the Trieste Agency, formed at the end of the Balkan conflict (1875-1878) which, with Russia's intervention, initiated the decline of the Ottoman Empire.

Then there are the archives from the First World War, consisting almost exclusively of files accumulated by the International Prisoners-of-War Agency, which, like the Basel and Trieste agencies, was a precursor of the Central Tracing Agency.

Among the archives covering the build-up of tension that led to the outbreak of the Second World War and the consequences of that conflagration, a number of sets deserve special mention. For the period between the two world wars, these documents provide insight into developments

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<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 558, for the list of archives open to the public.

in the law, including the preparation of the 1929 Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war and the failure of the “Tokyo draft”, drawn up to protect the civilian population. They also illustrate the new tasks in the realm of coordinating humanitarian action that began to fall to the ICRC.

The main set concerning the Second World War begins with the conflict in Abyssinia (1935-1936) and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). These chiefly describe the intense activity for the protection of prisoners of war, the relief operations and the steps taken and setbacks suffered in the endeavour to protect civilians.

Other sets of archives, also governed by the new rules, are not open for direct consultation by the public. They total some 2,000 linear metres of papers and card files, all subject to a consultation embargo of 100 years. Prominent among these are the monumental archives constituted during the First and Second World Wars by, respectively, the International Prisoners-of-War Agency and the Central Agency for Prisoners of War.<sup>2</sup> A second series, containing personal data and covering a more modest 100 metres of shelf space, consists of all the files on the ICRC’s staff. Such files have been kept only since about 1930.

It should be pointed out that, contrary to common belief, archives are not the same as documentation centres; that is to say, their *raison d’être* is to serve as the ‘memory’ of the organization that created them rather than to assist outsiders seeking information. On the other hand, it is no exaggeration to say that a historian engaged in archival research may discover as many facts that he was not looking for as those that he had set out to establish.

We can safely say that this is so in the case of the ICRC archives and that the research now made possible by the new *Rules governing access to the archives of the ICRC* will help considerably to amplify the perception of the ICRC’s history in its first hundred years.

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<sup>2</sup> Exhibited at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum.