

ICRC activities during the Second World War

A group of researchers in the United States who have set themselves the task of locating the fortunes deposited in Swiss banks by victims — mostly Jewish — of Nazi persecution have laid their hands on a series of documents originating from the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the American intelligence service which was the predecessor of the CIA. These documents, bearing dates in 1944 and 1945, contain allegations concerning individuals who worked for the ICRC during the Second World War.

The ICRC intends to shed all possible light on these allegations, which cast aspersions on the organization's activities in aid of victims during World War II. Its archivists are working hard to this end. Meanwhile, the Review is publishing a preliminary note on the subject drawn up by the ICRC Press Division.

The ICRC infiltrated by the Nazis?

The press has recently published extracts from documents kept in the files of the US intelligence service (Office of Strategic Services, predecessor of the present CIA) calling into question the actions of delegates who were working for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) at the time of the Second World War.

Two kinds of allegation were made:

- illicit dealings in funds or valuables looted from victims of Nazi persecution,
- espionage and even infiltration of the ICRC by agents of Nazi Germany.

The ICRC took these accusations very seriously and immediately started an investigation in order to shed light on them.

Although there has not yet been time to study all the available documentation, the following details can already be given:

I. Illicit dealings in looted funds or valuables

The US documents and research in the ICRC archives have shown that a former ICRC delegate named Giuseppe Beretta was implicated by the Turkish police in a case of illicit dealings.

Giuseppe Beretta, who entered the service of the ICRC on 10 February 1943, was first of all based in Izmir (Turkey). He was in charge of organizing food supplies for people in the Greek Aegean Islands, who were then suffering from a terrible famine. In August 1943, he was transferred to Istanbul, where his task was to forward relief to Italian prisoners of war in India. In January 1945, he was placed under investigation by the Turkish police, on suspicion «*of having acted against the provisions of the law on the protection of Turkish currency and of having imported certain goods without declaring them to customs*» (letter of 12 March 1945 from the Turkish Embassy in Bern to the ICRC). After the investigation, he was obliged to hand over to the police 710 gold coins deposited in a strongbox rented in his name at the *Deutsche Orient Bank* in Istanbul. He was then immediately recalled to Geneva, where he arrived on 12 February 1945. On the following day he tendered his resignation, which was accepted forthwith. At the explanatory meeting held a day later (14 February), Beretta declared that the 710 gold coins had been given to him by a Hungarian journalist named Willy Goetz-Wilmos, residing in Istanbul. According to a report filed by a US intelligence agent, Goetz-Wilmos was in fact a German working for the Gestapo. Beretta denied all the other charges levelled against him, and at the present stage of our research there is no proof that he did indeed misuse the ICRC mail to transfer funds or valuables to Switzerland, although this cannot be absolutely ruled out.

In a note dated 23 March 1945, Colonel Brigadier Roger Masson, head of the Swiss Army Intelligence Service, intervened on behalf of Giuseppe Beretta, requesting the ICRC to treat the case with «*benevolent understanding*». This will perhaps suggest that Beretta might have had some connection with the Swiss Army Intelligence Service, but we have as yet been unable to find any proof of this.

To the best of our knowledge, Beretta was neither charged nor convicted in Switzerland or in Turkey in connection with these extremely regrettable events. However, several employees of the *Deutsche*

Orient Bank were arrested, and Beretta's name was mentioned during their trials.

II. Charges of espionage

Other recently published US documents call into question the actions of ICRC delegates based in North Africa, and also in Naples and Marseilles.

The central figure in this set of charges is one Jean-Robert or Jean-Roger Pagan (the first name differs from one document to another), who worked for the ICRC from March 1941 to March 1942. At that time, he was employed in the colonial service of the Central Agency for Prisoners of War in Geneva, which dealt with the correspondence of prisoners from the French colonies. Pagan left the ICRC of his own accord in March 1942 and settled in North Africa, where he had occasional contacts with several ICRC delegates and more frequent contacts with one of them, Georges-Charles Graz, Director of the Agency, who carried out a mission in Algeria from April to October 1943 and was a former schoolmate of his.

Pagan was arrested on charges of espionage in October 1943, was subsequently convicted and was executed by firing squad in December 1944. During his interrogation, he gave the names of the delegates with whom he had been in contact, including that of Georges Graz, who was held for questioning for four days by the French police before being released and allowed to return to Switzerland.

We are not aware of any other delegates having been questioned in connection with this affair, but the possibility cannot be ruled out, as our research is as yet incomplete.

In any event, these recently published documents give rise to the following comments:

(a) Of some 50 people whose names are mentioned in the documents, 21 of whom are said to be representatives of the «International Red Cross», only 16 were permanent or temporary staff members of the ICRC. The other individuals mentioned — indeed those against whom the most serious allegations have been made — did not work for the ICRC.

(b) The author of the memorandum of 4 February 1944 confuses Dr Paul Burkhard, a physician who was an ICRC delegate in Naples, with Professor Carl J. Burckhardt, a well known historian and diplomat,

former League of Nations High Commissioner in Danzig, a member of the ICRC and Chairman of the Joint Relief Commission of the International Red Cross. It is undoubtedly this confusion that has led the author of the memorandum to conclude that the «International Red Cross» had been infiltrated up to the level of its governing bodies, but it also demonstrates his meagre knowledge of the ICRC.

(c) The author of the memorandum accuses ICRC delegates, especially Dr Paul Burkhard, the delegate in Naples, of having passed on information about the vessel *S.S. Canada*: «Late in December, the IRC headquarters in Geneva cabled IRC in Algiers details of an elaborate communication system for the Red Cross between North Africa and Southern Italy. A Dr Burkhard was designated as correspondent, and later as co-delegate of IRC for Southern Italy. Kuhne was told to get in touch with him. They were to work in prisoners' camps in Southern Italy. All of this would seem to be legitimate Red Cross activity. In addition, however, the cables set forth plans for an elaborate system of communications and the details for the use of a ship, the *S.S. Canada*, in terms scarcely necessary, it would appear, for ordinary or even extraordinary, Red Cross use. Inasmuch as Kuhne is already suspect, because of his associates, one inevitably questions the innocence of the plans. Since the date of the first cables, others of a similar sort, further elaborating the details, have passed.» «Enemy agents and the International Red Cross» (Memorandum of 4 February 1944, no author named, page 3).

The truth of the matter is that, in a letter dated 24 December 1943, the French Committee of National Liberation in Algiers requested the ICRC to notify the government of the Reich and the Italian Command of the commissioning of the hospital ship *Canada*, and communicated all the characteristics of the ship in accordance with the provisions of Hague Convention No. X of 18 October 1907. The French government subsequently asked the ICRC to send further notification about the ship on 25 November 1944.

(d) Similarly, the author of the report of 21 February 1944 accuses the delegate René Dechevrens, based in Tunis, of having communicated by telegram the names and addresses of two representatives («trustees») of German prisoners of war, namely Chief Corporal Fritz Winkelmann and Chief Corporal Karl Klingemann; the document further adds:

«The information regarding the fact that a German prisoner of war is a trustee in a prison camp seems to be of no possible use for the Red Cross, but distinctly of interest to the German Army.» (Report of 21 February 1944, page 6).

A check has shown that Corporals Winkelmann and Klingemann acted as representatives of German prisoners of war within the meaning of Article 43 of the Geneva Convention of 27 July 1929. It was the normal practice of the ICRC to mention the names of prisoners' representatives in its reports, since this information was in no way confidential.

Moreover, throughout the war the ICRC communicated to their States of origin and to their families the names, addresses and other particulars of millions of prisoners of war, not only German and Italian, but also Polish, French, Belgian, Dutch, Norwegian, Yugoslav, Greek, British, American, etc. By 1944, one had to be exceptionally ill-informed to be unaware of this.

(e) The other allegations concerning ICRC delegates are largely based on rumour. Certain delegates are declared to be suspect for the sole reason of having shared rooms with US officers at the Hotel Aletti in Algiers — a circumstance easily explained by the shortage of hotel rooms in a city suddenly promoted to the status of capital of Free France and headquarters of the Allied forces operating in the western Mediterranean.

In addition, with regard to some delegates, the documents merely mention that they should be placed under surveillance — and there is nothing surprising about this. It is indeed quite legitimate for a State at war to keep a watch on delegates who travel widely within the country and abroad, who have access to camps for enemy prisoners whom they are permitted to interview without witnesses and whose language they may be able to speak, who also have contacts with military authorities, who often have occasion to meet representatives of the enemy on cease-fire lines or in neutral countries, and so forth.

(f) We have no evidence that any highly-placed US authorities have attached to these reports the importance that certain organs of the press are seeking to ascribe to them today. In any case, neither the US nor the French government has shown any lack of trust in the ICRC.

III. General remarks

1. To sum up and at the present stage of our investigation, it would seem that the first case has all the hallmarks of a sordid affair. The ICRC severed relations with its delegate as soon as it learned of the facts and its attempts to clear up the matter were unsuccessful.

In the second case, it is already possible to refute the majority of the allegations of espionage and even of the infiltration of the ICRC by German agents; moreover, the author or authors of the recently published documents show total ignorance of the role and mandate of the ICRC and describe as espionage perfectly regular activities exercised openly, with the agreement or at the request of the allied authorities.

2. As stated above, the ICRC takes these accusations very seriously, even though, in one case at least, it is already evident that the acts of which certain delegates are accused are by no means as serious as some organs of the press make them out to be. The ICRC intends to shed light on the accusations levelled against it or against its former staff members, and we shall therefore continue our research and communicate the conclusions to the persons and organizations which have questioned us on this subject or have recently called into question the actions of ICRC delegates — in particular, the World Jewish Congress and Senator Alfonse D'Amato, Chairman of the US Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee. A mission to the US for this purpose is planned for early October.

3. It should also be borne in mind that during the Second World War the ICRC had over 3,000 employees in Switzerland, mostly assigned to the Central Agency for Prisoners of War and the Relief Division, up to 180 delegates posted at 92 delegations or sub-delegations in 61 different countries and several thousand locally recruited employees. On 30 June 1947, the Agency's files contained nearly 36 million index cards. By that date the ICRC had received over 59 million letters — mainly requests for information about prisoners of war or other missing persons — and had sent out over 61 million replies; ICRC delegates had paid more than 11,170 visits to camps for prisoners of war or civilian internees and had arranged for the delivery and distribution of 470,000 tonnes of relief supplies to prisoners of war and civilian internees — mostly in Germany — or the equivalent of about 90 million 5-kg parcels. The Joint Relief Commission had delivered and distributed some 165,000 tonnes of food, medicines and other relief supplies to people in need throughout Europe, while over 750,000 tonnes of food and other supplies had been distributed in Greece alone by the ICRC and the Swedish government.

ICRC Press Division