

Cooperation between the ICRC and the tracing services of the newly independent States of the former Soviet Union

by **Violène Dogny**

The 25th International Conference of the Red Cross stressed the importance of tracing, asking “all the National Societies to carry out to the best of their capacity the role which they are called upon to play as *components of the international network for tracing and reuniting families*”.¹

In addition to many other radical changes, the break-up of the Soviet Union into 15 separate and independent States brought with it the independence of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of those States which then had to shoulder responsibility for new areas of activity, such as tracing, in order to maintain the momentum of humanitarian work that had been carried out for decades.

The Soviet Red Cross tracing service, which was based in Moscow and assisted individuals throughout the world from 1945 onwards, was transformed into the Tracing and Information Centre of the Russian Red Cross following the break-up of the USSR, and thereafter replied only to

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¹ Paragraph 3 of the Conference's resolution (XVI) on the role of the Central Tracing Agency and the National Societies as concerns tracing and reuniting families (author's italics).

requests from persons residing in the Russian Federation. For cases involving the other 14 countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States — and indeed any other country in the world — the Russian service would from now on have to work through the tracing service of the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society concerned. The tracing centre thus saw a gradual reduction in its workload, though it did not simply abandon the non-Russian cases with which it was dealing at the time.

The National Societies of the other newly independent States experienced the reverse, having to set up tracing services and go to tremendous effort to bring themselves up to international level, acquiring the expertise needed to meet the expectations not only of their fellow citizens but of tracing services throughout the international Red Cross and Red Crescent network.

Such tasks were something quite new for these National Societies because they had never been involved in Soviet Red Cross tracing work, in contrast to the National Societies in the Western world which work closely with their regional Red Cross branches. In the USSR, it was Moscow that contacted the local authorities or archives for the information needed to trace people or documents, for at that time it was compulsory for every individual, whether a Soviet citizen or not, to be registered in official, centralized records.

Owing to the extent of the territory covered, to the nature of the services it was able to offer and the network of contacts with whom it dealt directly — some as far away as East Germany — and to the State archives that it inherited, the Soviet Red Cross tracing service itself constituted a mini-network within the wider network of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Today, the Russian Red Cross tracing centre remains the nexus for a steady flow of information concerning Soviet citizens. Many cases are resolved without leaving the boundaries of the former Soviet Union.

The main types of cases handled and priorities in processing them

The public in the West are not fully aware of the fact that the majority of the cases dealt with by the tracing services of the 15 National Societies of the former Soviet Union, and of those moreover of Central Europe, concern the victims of the Second World War and its aftermath. In what used to be the USSR, there is more to the word “aftermath” than elsewhere in Europe, since a wave of repression struck both returning civilians who had been deported by the Germans and soldiers returning from the front,

and that a relative abroad could mean a person's being excluded from the Party, losing his job or his home, or being sent to the *gulag*, to cite just some of the more visible penalties.

It goes without saying that the regions worst affected by the Second World War are also those whose tracing services receive the greatest number of applications from victims who, today, because of their age, require urgent action.

Finding out what happened to those who disappeared

The fate of those who disappeared during the Second World War has not been discovered in all cases. Today, access to declassified archives (from the KGB in particular) and the fact that it is now possible to trace relatives living in foreign countries have awakened hopes that for far too long had to be repressed.

For example, although the majority of the soldiers and deportees who failed to return in 1945 may be considered dead even though no graves have been found for them, some nevertheless managed to slip free of the net. Though this could have happened in only an infinitesimal number of cases, that fact has not prevented the theoretical possibility from frequently engendering the hopeful myth about the father who went to America where, of course, he now lives as a millionaire. Cases of this nature, some disguised in more subtle camouflage, also make up a good part of the requests with which the tracing service dreads having to deal.

Certificates entitling the bearer to compensation

The tracing services issue a wide variety of certificates to people who survived the Second World War. These enable them to apply for compensation in cash or in kind, usually meagre but taking on considerable importance for the recipients given the region's acute economic difficulties.

Grave-preservation certificates

These are issued for families wishing to visit the graves of relatives who died beyond national borders. The individuals concerned are usually quite elderly, so haste is required if this is to be accomplished in time. Certificates drawn up by the Red Cross and confirming that the grave has been preserved entitle the claimant to a priority visa, sometimes free of charge. These cases usually involve the graves of soldiers killed on foreign soil during the Second World War or civilians taken as forced labour to Germany or territories under German control. These two categories are

precisely those in which the age of the applicants requires their cases to be handled without delay, so that they can have their wishes fulfilled while they are still alive. The ICRC has made every effort to make the newly formed tracing services of the former Soviet Union aware of the urgency of this matter.

Forwarding Red Cross messages

Freedom of movement in the newly independent States has brought a new wave of people fleeing the more recent conflicts. Former Soviet citizens or refugees from distant war-torn countries, these people are victims of the legal vacuum inherent to emerging States. They frequently ask for help from the region's tracing services as their families have been split up and this is the only way to restore contact. The Movement's tracing network has experienced a surge in requests from such people, in particular for the Red Cross message service.

Additional functions expected from the tracing services

The Stalinist purges were also responsible for the disappearance of a large number of people and today attempts are being made to shed light on these cases. Surviving victims entitled to compensation or simply to rehabilitation call upon the tracing services, who listen more sympathetically to them than do the authorities, and provide them with guidance.

The tracing services are now involved in issuing burial certificates for civilians who died after the Second World War. This new type of certificate also entitles the bearer to a preferential visa, enabling him to visit, at reduced cost, the grave of a loved one situated in a newly independent State with which as yet no intergovernmental agreements on such matters have been signed.

Though this service is humanitarian in nature (acknowledging as it does both that families separated from their dead by borders recently grown tighter bear no responsibility for this situation and that the cost of visas is prohibitively high) this work does not fall within the traditional Red Cross mandate. Overwhelmed by a growing number of requests, some tracing services have taken steps to withdraw from this activity, with the consent of their country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Others are still seeking solutions satisfactory to all parties, though such a service cannot simply be abandoned unilaterally, while the consulates concerned have not yet found a suitable substitute.

Cooperation between the ICRC and the tracing services of National Societies in the countries of the former Soviet Union

At the 24th International Conference of the Red Cross (Manila 1981), the Movement realized that it had to be able to depend on a sturdy network made up of all the National Society tracing services. It therefore gave the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency a mandate to act as coordinator and technical adviser, to harmonize the working principles and methods, and to train the staff needed.

As a result, the Agency initiated a plan of action in 1993 to enable the 14 tracing services of the newly independent States, no longer covered by the tracing service in Moscow, to continue assisting both former Soviet citizens and the Movement's other tracing services.

The first phase of this programme, begun in 1993, comprised the following:

- assessment of the potential and needs of the Russian Red Cross tracing service, which had been the backbone of the network in the Soviet Union since 1945;
- assessment of the potential and needs of the tracing services being set up or still to be set up in the 14 other newly independent States;
- training.

Despite the immense size of the territory covered and the need to keep in closer contact with the tracing services having a heavy workload, the ICRC was able to conclude this initial phase in late 1995. Basic training was given gradually and lasted into 1997 owing to staff leaving and being replaced by people completely new to the system or by people who had trained another National Society.

Evaluating the Russian Red Cross tracing and information centre

The Russian Red Cross tracing and information centre must be considered the model for the newly independent States. Not only does it have the benefit of more than 50 years' experience, it also maintains the following:

- a centralized, alphabetically arranged card-index of names listing all citizens of the former Soviet Union about whom a case has been opened since 1945 (3 million individual cards);
- a card-index with the names of children — orphans, runaways or the children of victims of repression — taken into institutions throughout the USSR (4 million individual cards);

- a card-index of the names of people evacuated in 1941, largely to the republics of central Asia and Siberia, as the *Wehrmacht* advanced (4.5 million individual cards);
- an index of Soviet citizens deported to Germany as forced labour (700,000 individual cards).

Since no individuals were ever registered on the basis of their national or ethnic origin, these indexes cannot be divided up and transferred to the tracing services of the newly independent States. Moreover, in view of the costs involved and — let us not forget — the age of surviving victims of the Second World War, computerizing the indexes would probably be completed too late for the potential beneficiaries of these services. To access the archives concerned, therefore, the tracing services of other National Societies must contact the Russian Red Cross centre.

Though the Soviet archives were systematically centralized by Moscow during the Stalinist period, this was less the case from the 1960s onwards. When the Soviet Union broke up, the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States decided that all the Soviet archives would remain on the territory where they were and be accessible to all the former republics.

To enable the Russian Red Cross tracing and information centre to continue playing the key role which had fallen to it, it proved essential for the ICRC to provide financial support at a time when the National Society was facing unprecedented financial difficulties. It was even necessary to provide emergency support in order to avoid the total collapse of the tracing centre and the resignation of its experts, whose salaries in 1994 did not even meet the minimum subsistence requirement.

Evaluating the tracing services of other National Societies

Between 1993 and 1995, missions were carried out to the 14 National Societies of the newly independent States to familiarize the ICRC with their needs, potential and working environments. Factors peculiar to the region concerned were also studied in order to define the content of the courses needed.

Four one-week training seminars were then organized in Tashkent (1993), Kiev (1994), Moscow (1994) and Tbilisi (1995), bringing together representatives of the National Societies in each region.

The topics covered were wide-ranging, from administrative structures to partners available inside and outside a country's borders and on to the

means with which the work might be carried out. Management techniques — the same as those taught to tracing services throughout the Movement — and a study of particular cases peculiar to each region formed the core of the material.

None of the Russian Red Cross tracing and information centre's half century of experience has gone to waste. Indeed, if the ICRC has been able to carry out its training mandate to the full, providing tailor-made courses, it is thanks to close collaboration with the centre. Only recently established in the region, the ICRC found it difficult to grasp local realities and lacked case studies which would be of use in the specific context of the former Soviet Union. Finally, the quality of the translation into Russian of the teaching material improved as soon as it was carried out by skilled translators, used to handling professional jargon.

In order to ensure that there would be no interruption in the work being performed jointly with tracing services already operational, a second phase was simultaneously launched. It consisted of the following:

- monitoring the development of the newly created tracing services;
- financial support;
- organization of round-table meetings.

Monitoring the development of the newly created tracing services

The range of activities required for this region and the features peculiar to it are too vast for them all to be dealt with and absorbed within the course of a single one-week seminar. It is, in fact, only after basic training has been given that the actual value of the work and the need to be flexible and have a consultant available become apparent. The actual processing of cases is more complex than it appears, in particular when one considers that each little piece of paper can represent a human tragedy. Cooperation has therefore included missions to provide teaching aimed at studying and, if necessary, reorienting actual cases and checking that objectives were being met. Until 1997, each tracing service was visited annually to stimulate its development.

Publicizing the new service was likewise a concern. The public had to know both that the National Society had taken over from Moscow and what it did. Particular emphasis was therefore placed on learning the art of reporting and its use in preparing annual reports, keeping statistics, etc.

Finally, in order to consolidate essential knowledge about the service's work, the ICRC prepared a guide drafted in Russian and highly specific to the region, presenting the standard working procedures.

In 1995, the ICRC shared its appraisal of the tracing services' development with the presidents of the National Societies. They were sent a letter listing both the weak and strong points and making recommendations. As a result, it was possible to take measures to facilitate the work and assist those responsible for it.

Financial support

In view of the urgent need to ensure the survival of the tracing services, the ICRC added financial assistance to its traditional mandate to train and coordinate. Three-year partnership agreements containing a series of one-year programmes were signed in 1995. They define the operation and set out annual objectives, the means available to meet them and the respective undertakings of the ICRC and the National Societies.

Assistance adapted to the needs of each tracing service has been provided in the form of equipment, operating costs and expenditure. For example, the tracing services are equipped with computers and photocopiers, almost all provided by the ICRC. This has made it possible to remain transparent in terms of accounting vis-à-vis the ICRC's donors. However, the partnership period, originally set at three years and already coming to an end in 1998 for some tracing services, must be continued. The cost of a tracing service can be borne by a National Society only if the National Society is itself financially autonomous. The ICRC must therefore go on financing the tracing services of the former Soviet Union until other solutions are found.

Today, for example, the tracing services of Lithuania and Latvia are being financed by the British Red Cross while the ICRC remains responsible for managing the partnership programmes and agreements. The German Red Cross has also financed equipment for the tracing services of the Ukraine and the Russian Federation.

Organizing meetings

As shown above, the tracing services benefited early on from the help of Red Cross partners and some from further afield. To cement this partnership, the ICRC has since 1996 organized annual round tables to enable all the officials from the tracing services of the former Soviet Union to meet, recount their experiences and discuss common problems. Though the first round table was more like a course — with speakers from ICRC headquarters in Geneva and the tracing services of the German, American and Polish National Societies — the one held in 1997 was already taking

on the aspect of a forum, with debates and resolutions adopted by professionals able to take an active part rather than merely listen.

The fruits of cooperation

Above and beyond the training of specialists — one of the ICRC's responsibilities under its mandate — this partnership has prevented the demise of the tracing services for reasons of an essentially financial nature. Undeniably, their existence has also helped to boost the image of the National Societies which, for lack of funds, have been forced to reduce their activities though the situation in which their countries found themselves actually required the opposite. The National Society of the USSR had processed tracing requests for 50 years and it was unthinkable that this activity should be abandoned. Even the delays experienced in 1992 and 1993 owing to the transfer of responsibilities to the new Societies posed tremendous difficulties for those who had made the requests — not surprising when one considers that the benefits made possible by Red Cross certificates, though meagre in Western terms, bring significant improvements to what is a very low standard of living.

The ICRC's financial support served to strengthen the commitment of qualified employees at a time when salaries were plunging in the National Societies even more than elsewhere. That support also made it possible to provide basic equipment for offices that sorely needed it. Thus, many tracing staff have expressed the personal and professional satisfaction of being able to help people at a time when public services in general were declining.

The needs in Russia and throughout the region were enormous, and setting up and developing tracing services and training specialists to run them made sense only if there was continuity and ongoing financial support. Today, the 15 tracing services are all active and almost all stand on a sound basis. In 1998, they will continue receiving financial assistance though teaching support may be withdrawn.

In the midst of a period of learning, the tracing services have managed — with hardly any snags — to cope with a large increase in their workload. The anniversary and commemoration of the end of the Second World War (known here as “the Great Patriotic War” and hence having strong connotations as concerns its heroes and victims) revived memories of those who disappeared without trace and thus a fervour to start searching for them again. During the same period, the implementation of Soviet-German agreements led to the granting of further compensation for the

victims of Nazism. Once again, the tracing services had a role to play in advising applicants or issuing certificates to the rightful claimants.

In addition, without teaching support from the ICRC, those running the tracing services have started to train National Society branches in the field of tracing. Little by little, an internal network is being established. Some branches are now able to issue certain types of certificate, thus taking a considerable load off the shoulders of the central service.

The indirect beneficiaries should also be mentioned: foreign tracing services that have come to appreciate the performance of the region's tracing services, which provide them with high-quality information. These National Societies have been able to follow the development of the tracing services of the former Soviet Union thanks to information provided by the ICRC.

From the outset of the partnership programme, the ICRC had to teach the tracing services to work at a different pace, with new technologies, while discovering a hitherto unknown world. It did this while endeavouring to avoid putting the staff under undue pressure. The ICRC also had to adapt to working within the constraints of an environment little known to it. The benefits gained from overcoming the many obstacles will be of lasting use to all parties involved.
