THE INTERNATIONAL PRISONERS-OF-WAR AGENCY
The ICRC in World War One
In August 1914 the world went to war, and for 52 months humanity was torn apart by brutality, violence and suffering. Death, grieving, imprisonment, separation, deportation, famine and cold, and the destruction of the socio-economic environment, were inflicted on countless victims of war – mutilated survivors, prisoners-of-war, deported civilians, mourning families, refugees, hostages and victims of reprisals.

List of prisoners-of-war.
List of Afghan prisoners-of-war in German hands. These prisoners were captured at La Bassée on the Western front on 20 December 1914 and held in the camp at Wünsdorf bei Zossen before being transferred to Göttingen camp.

**International Prisoners-of-War Agency**

In the *Heart of Europe*, as the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig described it, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also went to war – in the humanitarian field.

The ICRC had been the promoter of the 1906 Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field, but in 1914 the organization only had about ten members, and no mandate to protect displaced persons or prisoners-of-war. But in the 50 years following its inception in 1863 it had won the confidence of governments and played a part in the creation of over 50 Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies throughout the world. On the strength of this support, its ambition was to extend its humanitarian action to as many victims as possible, and throughout the conflict it took initiatives to relieve their suffering.

The ICRC established the International Prisoners-of-War Agency in Geneva on 21 August 1914. Its role was to restore contact between people separated by war – prisoners-of-war, civilian internees, and civilians in occupied territories – and it recruited hundreds of volunteers.

The Agency’s archives testify to the extent of the suffering. Seven million military personnel were taken prisoner. Civilians in enemy territory were interned en masse, and millions of others were subjected to military occupation or fled the area of fighting and the occupied territories.
These archives provide an insight into the ICRC’s efforts to humanize conditions of detention and to provide a means of tracing the fate of each of the two million victims, who came from every continent. The wealth of the Agency’s archives opens up new prospects for studying international relations from the humanitarian viewpoint. The individual data are an invaluable resource for researching family history and genealogy and for research on the sociology of captivity and the experiences of prisoners.

Part of these archives is on display in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum. In terms of volume, this is both an impressive exhibit and emblematic of the founding event of the contemporary world.

**Globalization of war and humanitarian action**

The Great War had momentous consequences for the world and world history by virtue of the scale of the arena of operations (mainly Europe, but also the Middle East, the Far East and Africa), the number of warring parties (44 States and their colonies by 1918), the mobilization of the colonies and the involvement of the entire civilian population. A total of 65 million men served their countries, and nine million of them were killed in action.

The Agency’s archives reflect this global aspect of the 1914-1918 war. It negotiated with all of the belligerents, particularly on the protection of enemy civilians on their territories. ICRC delegates visited prisoner-of-war camps, not only in Europe but also in Africa and Asia. The prisoners-of-war and civilian internees were housed in camps or worked in labour detachments – in factories, on farms or in mines.

After declaring war on Germany on 3 August 1914, Japan attacked the German possessions in China and the Pacific. This list of prisoners-of-war was published by the Japanese imperial information office for prisoners-of-war in June 1917.
The data covers two million prisoners from across the world: the Agency’s archives contain 14 country card indexes – American, Austro-Hungarian, Brazilian, British, Bulgarian, Franco-Belgian, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian and Turkish. These card indexes also contain information on military personnel from the colonies (including Senegal and India) and from the European provinces of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires (Czech and Polish in particular).

The prisoners belong to a wide range of categories – military personnel, medical personnel, civilians, etc. and include such illustrious prisoners as a certain Captain Charles de Gaulle, who fell into German hands in Verdun in 1916.

The ICRC constantly affirmed its neutrality and the universal ideal of humanitarian action: the humanitarian camp has no homeland, and in wartime charity is not confined to the poor alone – it becomes universal.

List of German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners-of-war in the hands of the Japanese.

Extract from the French army file: this is the card of Private Brahma Camara (the German abbreviation “Gem.” stands for “Gemeiner Soldat”), a Senegalese soldier of the 251st Battalion, 1st Company, who was captured by the German army. “P90722” is the serial number of the list in which this prisoner is mentioned.
The typing department was in the Palais Electoral and employed about 100 persons. It worked for all sections of the Agency, making cards, copying lists and printing circulars and lists of missing persons.

The Agency set up an index of missing persons, classified by regiment and company, to help trace missing soldiers by means of enquiries among their comrades.

When an index card was removed from its box, e.g. to compare it with other information, it was replaced temporarily by a longer card, containing the main data from the original.

French Section – The Franco-Belgian card index comprised two and a half million enquiry and information cards. It had 40 staff.
Lists of prisoners and prisoner files

The Agency negotiated with the belligerent States on the transfer of information on individual prisoners: lists of prisoners who had been captured or changed camp and replies to requests for information filed by the relatives of missing persons. On the basis of the information it received on prisoners, and requests from families for information, the Agency then drew up a file containing an index of names for each national army.

These files together contain six million index cards, providing the basis for tracing two million prisoners. Some of the national files, such as the Russian file, which the Danish Red Cross was in charge of drawing up, are incomplete. This is also the case with the Italian and Austro-Hungarian files, since Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire exchanged their lists without going through the Agency. The Agency also created a file on civilian internees.

This database was sizable for the time and formed the basis for the working methods that the ICRC employed later, in particular during the Second World War, the Algerian war and the genocide in Rwanda.

Extract from the Romanian file:
Mrs Florica Andreescu, who is in the Olt district, under Austro-Hungarian occupation, sends a message to her husband Gheorge J. Andreescu, who is in Iași, in the small part of Romania that is still free: “We are all well.”

Death notice of an Algerian prisoner-of-war who died in captivity, sent to the Agency by the POW camp in Darmstadt (Germany).
Diplomatic activities

During the First World War, the ICRC made diplomatic representations, both to obtain authorization for its delegates to carry out inspections and to improve conditions of detention. The organization carried out 54 itinerant missions, visiting 524 camps. It also negotiated with the belligerents on the treatment of prisoners in camps and labour detachments, the repatriation or internment in a neutral country of prisoners who were seriously ill or had been wounded and were incapable of taking up arms again, and the repatriation of prisoners.

Example of a delegate’s report on a visit to a POW camp detailing detention conditions: food, hygiene, medical care, work, correspondence, recreational activities and religious services.
Restoring and communicating part of the memory of World War One

Measures have been taken to improve the physical conservation of the Agency’s archives, since the paper that was used at the time was of poor quality and very acidic, and turns yellow with time. Furthermore, some of the records were damaged by water in the interwar years, and this caused micro-organisms to develop. They will thus have to be dusted, the rust stains caused by paper clips will have to be cleaned, and the records where the paper has crumbled will have to be strengthened with a paper backing.

Once they have been restored and digitized, the Agency’s archives will be accessible to a wide public without the risk of damage by repeated handling. In the meantime, requests for information on persons who were the victims of armed conflict during the 20th century can be submitted to the ICRC through its website (http://www.icrc.org/eng/contact-archives).

The archives of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency in figures

400 linear metres, including:

20 linear metres of general records recounting the activities of the Agency;

2,413 volumes of information provided by the belligerents: lists of prisoners, lists of persons who died in combat or in captivity, investigation reports, lists of persons repatriated, etc.:

600 000 pages;

5,119 card indexes, containing a total of six million cards.
Director of the Entente Section, Renée-Marguerite Cramer, who later became a member of the ICRC.
On 19 June 2007, UNESCO decided to add the archives of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency to the Memory of the World Register, created to prevent collective amnesia, promote the conservation of archive and library collections throughout the world and ensure that they are disseminated as widely as possible.