

PART I

The return of forgotten
prisoners of war from
Russia and from the
Central Powers

Humanitarian diplomacy for prisoners of war: compassion, politics, and money

Abstract

This chapter asks why the repatriation of forgotten groups of prisoners of war, those from Russia and from the Central Powers, was internationalized through the arena of the Red Cross and of the League of Nations. It argues that the failure of successor states of the former European empires to repatriate their own citizens left international humanitarian organizations space for intervention. The ICRC and the LON both connected humanitarian aid to the war and its consequences, mixing compassion with anti-communism. By a joint cooperation, both organizations pioneered political and financial negotiations which saw ex-enemy states sitting at the same table and strengthened their role in international relations.

Keywords: humanitarian aid, prisoners of war, international organizations, repatriation, Fridtjof Nansen.

It is important to remember that since the beginning of the repatriation, the principle has been strictly observed that only prisoners who express the desire to return to Russia will be brought back. Those declaring that they would not return to Soviet Russia would be entitled to remain in Germany, regardless of the conditions that would be imposed by the authorities.
—de Watteville to the ICRC¹.

The miserable conditions and the difficult repatriation of prisoners of war was a *cause célèbre* of reformist and humanitarian circles. During the Great War, numerous eyewitnesses produced pamphlets and gave public speeches where they denounced cases of mistreatment and abuses, in breach of international humanitarian law.² The Red Cross delegates were among the few to possess the “full

¹ Archives of the International Labour Organization (AILO), R102/2, de Watteville to the Commission for missions, October 26, 1921, translated from French.

² Heather Jones, “A Missing Paradigm? Military Captivity and the Prisoner of War, 1914-1918,” in Matthew Stibbe (ed.), *Captivity, Forced Labour and Forced Migration in Europe during the First World War* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 11–48.

picture,” as they accessed internment camps on all fronts, they gathered precious data, and they interacted with several authorities and with POWs. Based on its full-hand experience, the organization pressured the belligerent nations to show compassion by starting repatriation plans before the ratification of peace treaties, at least for the most fragile categories. The appeal only had a limited impact and left millions of men waiting for the end of the war to repatriate.

The Red Cross was quick to realize that the Armistice signed on November 11, 1918 would maybe end warfare but not violence. Even if prisoners of war should have been immediately repatriated, the reality was different: their nationality and place of internment determined whether they would be repatriated in a few weeks, in a few months, or in a few years. While the Allied and Associated Powers hastened to organize repatriation plans for their interned soldiers, they postponed the repatriation of POWs from the defeated powers until after the ratification of the peace treaties.³ For the latter group, repatriation varied according to the places of internment: prisoners of war detained in the West, particularly in France and in Great Britain, were allowed to return to their homes in Central and Eastern Europe from 1919 to 1920. Those in the East –namely prisoners of war from Russia and from the Central Powers, who were detained in Germany and in Russia, respectively– experienced a much longer captivity which, for the least fortunate, ended in 1922.⁴

Chapter 1 deals with the reasons why the repatriation of forgotten groups of prisoners of war was internationalized through the arena of the Red Cross and of the League of Nations. In contrast, the Labour Organization did not play a part in this story, as it made clear that the question exceeded its mandate.⁵ The chapter starts by setting the context on the politics of captivity and on repatriation. It then

³ Article 221 of the Treaty of Versailles, June 28, 1919, “the Allied and Associated Governments reserve the right to make the repatriation of German prisoners of war or German nationals in their hands conditional upon the immediate notification and release by the German Government of any prisoners of war who are nationals of the Allied and Associated Powers and may still be in Germany”.

⁴ Martyn Housden, “When the Baltic Sea was a ‘Bridge’ for Humanitarian Action: The League of Nations, the Red Cross and the Repatriation of Prisoners of War between Russia and Central Europe, 1920–22,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 61–83. Hazuki Tate, *Rapatrier les prisonniers de guerre : la politique des alliés et l'action humanitaire du Comité international de la croix rouge (1918-1929)* (Dissertation: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2015).

⁵ The ILO played no role in the repatriation of POWs. It only stumbled into the question in the fall of 1921, when the *Fédération Internationale Syndicale*, based in Amsterdam, lobbied for the Labour Organization to protect a group of former Russian POWs who refused to be repatriated from Germany and Czechoslovakia back to Russia. This group, who still lived in captivity, despite the fact that they stopped being military men, lamented a disparity of salary with other workers outside the camp. AILO, R102/2, Letter by Oudegeest to BIT, September 5, 1921. AILO, R102/2, Comité Executif de la Conférence des Membres de la Constituante de Russie, sous-section des prisonniers de guerre et des internés, mémoire sur les prisonniers de guerre et les internés russes à l'étranger par Joseph Minor, October 24, 1921.

singles out each organization, the ICRC and the LON, in order to explain why they engaged in repatriation plans for prisoners of war. This is instrumental to examining the nature of their joint programs, as well as the interplay of the political and financial negotiations that followed. Through the case study of prisoners of war, we start observing the multiple ways and overlapping reasons why international humanitarian organizations and their agents alternatively constructed them as victims, as dangers, and as harbingers of peace. We also have a better understanding of the specific geopolitical and ideological context which made international humanitarian organizations opt for framing aid as a non-political entity. What the Red Cross and the League of Nations learnt with prisoners of war would soon be transferred to the protection of Russian refugees.

1.1 The politics of captivity and repatriation

During WWI, out of 71 million conscripted men, an estimated number of 8 to 9 million were captured, for the greater part at the beginning of the war on the Eastern front.⁶ Not only combatants, but also enemy aliens experienced internment.⁷ As the literature argues, during the Great War, captivity was embedded in military and political strategies.⁸ Holding an enemy soldier increased the chances of victory, as a fewer number of combatants were sent to the battlefield. Captured soldiers could contribute to war economies by means of labor on the home front, in agriculture and factories, or behind the trenches.⁹ Furthermore, the conditions of detention varied, depending on the resources of the capturer, the geography of captivity, the

⁶ Heather Jones, "Prisoners of War," in 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. Iris Rachamimov, "World War I – Eastern Front," in Jonathan Franklin William Vance, *Encyclopedia of Prisoners of War and Internment* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2000).

⁷ Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War: 1914-1918* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2010). Matthew Stibbe, *Civilian Internment during the First World War: A European and Global History, 1914–1920* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2019). Daniela L. Caglioti, *War and Citizenship: Enemy Aliens and National Belonging from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁸ Rotem Kowner and Iris Rachamimov (eds), *Out of Line, out of Place: A Global and Local History of World War I Internments* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

⁹ Gerald H. Davis, "Prisoners of War In Twentieth-Century War Economies," *Journal of Contemporary History* 12, no. 4 (1977): 623–634. Gerald H. Davis, "The Life of Prisoners of War In Russia, 1914-1921," in Samuel R. Williamson Jr. and Peter Pastor (eds), *Essays on World War I: Origins and Prisoners of War* (NYC: Columbia University Press, 1983): 163–196. Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999). R. A. Radford, "The Economic Organisation of a P.O.W. Camp," *Economica*,

development of the hostilities, as well as the military rank and the nationality of the prisoner.¹⁰

With the end of the war approaching, the repatriation of prisoners of war should have been a natural step.¹¹ However, as historian Richard B. Speed writes, “repatriation, which was envisioned as a simple, straightforward, humanitarian act, was subject to complex and powerful political forces.”¹² The repatriation of Allied POWs, some of whom had already been exchanged during the war, was quickly put into motion, along the stipulations of The Hague Conventions and by means of clauses included both in the General Armistice of November 11, 1918 and in the Versailles Peace Treaty with Germany, signed on June 28, 1919.¹³ This was made possible through bilateral agreements as was the case for the one signed between Great Britain and Russia and thanks to the work of the Berlin-based Inter-Allied Commission for POWs established in April 1919 within the framework of the Peace Conference.¹⁴ The commission, composed of a representative from France, Italy, Japan, Great Britain, and the United States, was charged with examining “measures appropriate to ensure the repatriation of German prisoners and to the questions raised by the captivity in Germany of Allied and Associated nationals who have been repatriated.”¹⁵ After an initial reluctance to repatriate prisoners

New Series 12, no. 48 (1945): 189–201. Peter Gatrell, “Prisoners of War on the Eastern Front during World War I,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 3 (2005): 557–566.

¹⁰ Neville Wylie, *Barbed Wire Diplomacy: Britain, Germany, and the Politics of Prisoners of War, 1939–1945* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Sarah Kovner, *Prisoners of the Empire. Inside Japanese POWs Camp* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020).

¹¹ Iris Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2002). Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la Grande Guerre: humanitaire et culture de guerre, 1914–1918: populations occupées, déportés civils, prisonniers de guerre* (Paris: Ed. Noësis, 1998). Bruno Cabanes, *La victoire endeuillée: la sortie de guerre des soldats français, 1918–1920* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

¹² Speed, *op. cit.*, 170.

¹³ Speed, *op. cit.*, 171, 174. “After the conclusion of peace, the repatriation of prisoners of war shall be carried out as quickly as possible.” Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its Annex: Regulations Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The Hague, October 18, 1907, Article 7. “Immediate release of all Allied prisoners of war and interned civilians, without reciprocity,” General Armistice, November 11, 1918. “The repatriation of prisoners of war and interned civilians shall take place as soon as possible after the coming into force of the present Treaty and shall be carried out with the greatest rapidity,” Treaty of Peace, June 28, 1919, Part IV, art. 214.

¹⁴ Great Britain also engaged in transporting Russian refugees from camps in Denmark, Holland, Belgium, and Switzerland. The National Library of Norway (ANB), Ms. fol. 1988, F8D-F8X, Accord entre la RSFSR et la Grande Bretagne sur l'échange des prisonniers, conclu à Copenhague le 12 septembre 1920, signé par James O'Gready pour la Grande Bretagne et Maxim Litvinoff au nom du Gouvernement des Soviets.

¹⁵ Minutes of the Supreme Council, Vol. XVI, Secretary's notes of a conversation of the Foreign Ministers, held in M. Pichon's room at the quay d'Orsay, Paris, on Saturday, April 26, 1919, at 3:00

of war who were exploited as cheap labor, France, Great Britain, and the United States authorized their return before the peace treaties were ratified.¹⁶ In reality it took much longer: as historian Heather Jones writes, German POWs repatriated from Britain towards the end of 1919, whereas those in France left in 1920, as they were employed to demine the battlefields, despite this activity being in breach of international law.¹⁷

Far more dramatic were the conditions of prisoners of war from the defeated powers who were detained in Central and Eastern Europe, and in Russia. At first, peacemakers disregarded the repatriation of Russian POWs detained in Germany, as they should have returned after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed between the Central Powers and Russia on March 3, 1918. However, while the respective Red Cross societies organized the first repatriations, the situation quickly changed.¹⁸ During the last months of the war, Germany proved reluctant to repatriate Russians, as they were pivotal in agriculture and in the war effort.¹⁹ In turn, Russia attempted to enlist prisoners of war from the Central Powers in the Red Army to fight in the civil war and, when it did them send back, it selected those who had been won over by Bolshevism.²⁰ Against all the odds, prisoners from the Central Powers in Russia began spontaneous travels home, while further waves benefited from the repatriation plans organized by national committees whose work though was restricted to European Russia, as the territories east of the Urals were under the control of the White armies or the Allies.²¹ A much smaller number of Russians were repatriated from Germany.²²

Clearly, prisoners of war were trapped in a highly ideological context, where “... the Bolsheviks, the White armies, and the Entente all attempted to use [them] for

p.m., 142. David Hunter Miller, *My Diary at the Conference of Paris [1918-19]* (New York: printed for the Author, 1924).

¹⁶ Speed, *op. cit.*, 174–175. Brian K. Feltman, *Stigma of Surrender: German Prisoners, British Captors, and Manhood in the Great War and Beyond* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Heather Jones, *Violence against Prisoners of War In the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁸ RCICR, Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer, “Le rapatriement des prisonniers du front oriental après la guerre de 1914-1918 (1919-1922),” 26, no. 309 (1944): 700, 700–729.

¹⁹ Speed, *op. cit.*, 170.

²⁰ Ibid., 170–171. Arnold Krammer, “Soviet Propaganda among German and Austro-Hungarian Prisoners of War In Russia, 1917-1921,” in Williamson Jr. and Pastor (eds), *op. cit.*, 239–264.

²¹ Reinhard, Nachtigal, Lena Radauer: *Prisoners of War (Russian Empire)*, in 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08.

²² Reinhard Nachtigal, “The Repatriation and Reception of Returning Prisoners of War, 1918-1922,” in Stibbe (ed.), *op. cit.*, 157–184.

their own end in the context of the unfolding Russian Civil War.”²³ When Germany was eventually ready to repatriate Russian POWs, not out of humanitarian compassion but because the ongoing blockade complicated feeding plans, the Allies stopped the process, fearing that the repatriates would enlist in the Red Army, and instead attempted to instrumentalize the repatriation to strengthen the White armies.²⁴ However, the Allied interest for Russian prisoners of war proved short-lived: a few months later when it was clear that the Red Army was about to win, the Allies left the responsibility of feeding, clothing, and sheltering POWs to local German authorities.²⁵ From the other end of the captivity, POWs in Russia, particularly those who were in Siberia and Turkestan, experienced dramatic political changes. As historian Gerald H. Davis writes, “... when the tsarist government collapsed, the POWs, being wards of that government, were utterly helpless. When revolution swept across Russia, it pervaded the prisoners’ lives. When civil war divided and confused the Russian people, it drew Russia’s captives into its many conflicts. When foreign states intervened, prisoners of war became engaged in many capacities on every side.”²⁶

The political context was volatile, at times for the better. In March 1920, the Conference of the Ambassadors, the inter-Allied body of the Entente, allowed the liberation of prisoners of war of all nationalities detained in Siberia. This was much-awaited news that did not tackle, however, a crucial question: who would organize and finance the repatriation? On paper it was the responsibility of the prisoners’ governments for which they had fought and endured years of captivity, but the successor states were in dire conditions, with the exception of Germany which was relatively quick in collecting the necessary funds. Russia was undergoing a civil war, and the states that emerged from the collapse of the German and the Austro-Hungarian Empire prioritized demobilization and postwar reconstruction over the return of their former combatants. To make things worse, already during the early phases of spontaneous and organized repatriation, Central and Eastern European states had shown a preoccupation with the political inclination of their returning compatriots, some of whom had been won over by Bolshevism during the Russian captivity, for which they were put into “a political and physical quarantine” at home.²⁷

²³ Oxana Nagornaja, “United by Barbed Wire: Russian POWs in Germany, National Stereotypes, and International Relations, 1914–22,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, no. 3 (2009): 475–498, 490.

²⁴ Speed, *op. cit.*, 172.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 173. Nachtigal, *op. cit.*, 169.

²⁶ Davis, “The Life of Prisoners of War In Russia, 1914–1921”: 163–164.

²⁷ Nachtigal, *op. cit.*, 161. On the funds from the German government to be used for the repatriation of POWs, see Feltman, *op. cit.*, 154–155.

1.2 The Red Cross and prisoners of war in peacetime

Faced with a political vacuum, the Red Cross entered the scene and eased the dialogue between ex-enemy states. In spring 1920, the ICRC, which had considered Russia “responsible for the delay in bringing back to their homes thousands of Russian citizens,” was ready to negotiate.²⁸ Russia declared itself to be ready too, despite being suspicious of the real motives behind the actions of Western institutions. Hence, the ICRC organized a conference in Berlin in April 1920, where Germany and Russia signed an agreement for the reciprocal repatriation of prisoners of war and interned civilians. The two countries also committed to feeding the repatriates on their way home, while it fell to the Red Cross to negotiate the transit and transport of POWs across Central Eastern Europe.²⁹ As the number of Russians in Germany was higher than the number of Germans in Russia, the ex-citizens of Austria-Hungary would also be repatriated.³⁰ Moreover, Germany entrusted the Red Cross to control the cost that non-German POWs engendered in terms of bathing, disinfection, and feeding, as advanced money should be paid back.³¹

The choice to mandate the Red Cross with the repatriation of POWs might appear somehow natural. Yet, we need to take a few steps back to more fully grasp its significance. One of the oldest and well-known humanitarian organizations, the ICRC had been created in the mid-nineteenth century to assist and protect the wounded and sick on the battlefield. Its founding myth recounts that the Swiss citizen, Henry Dunant, reached northern Italy in 1859 to discuss with Napoleon III about his possessions in French Algeria and coincidentally witnessed the suffering of the soldiers at the bloody battle of Solferino.³² Faced with the lack of medical

²⁸ ACICR, B MIS 33.5.15, ICRC to Bagotky, delegate of the Russian Red Cross in Moscow, January 2, 1920.

²⁹ ANB, Ms. fol. 1988, F8x, Accord entre la RSFSR et l'Allemagne au sujet du renvoi dans leur patrie des prisonniers de guerre et civils des deux côtés, conclu à Berlin le 19 avril 1920, signé par Stücklen, Administration Central du Gouvernement aux affaires des prisonniers de guerre et des civils, et Kopp, représentant de la RSFSR à Berlin. ANB, Ms. fol. 1988, F8x, Accord supplémentaire entre la RSFSR et l'Allemagne sur la rentrée dans leur patrie des prisonniers de guerre et internés conclu à Berlin le 7 juillet 1920 signé par Stücklen et Kopp. In July 1920, it was decided that a mission in Berlin and one in Moscow would defend the interests of POWs and interned civilians in both countries.

³⁰ Archives of the League of Nations (ALON), R1574, Une mission du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge pour les prisonniers russes en Allemagne, 40.4388.2792.

³¹ ACICR, B MIS 33.5/389 bis, Nansen to Ador, May 3, 1920. ACICR, B MIS 33.5/E.N., Mémorandum à la Société des Nations sur l'état actuel de la question du rapatriement des P.G. russes en Europe occidentale; allemands, autrichiens, hongrois, tchèques, polonais, roumains, Tchécoslovaques en Russie et en Sibirie, May 12, 1920.

³² Recent work has proved that, even without ever possessing a formal territorial empire, colonialism permeated the history of Switzerland through ideas, practices, representations, and knowledge.

aid in wartime, Dunant suggested the creation of national relief organizations, affiliated to the armies, and the organization of a congress where an international common ground would be discussed and agreed upon.³³ Dunant's ideas were welcomed by the Genevan aristocracy which, inspired by the reformist movement *Réveil* based on an intimate relationship with God, had already created local philanthropies including the Society of Public Utility. Moreover, the same social group had lost its political power as a result of the Radical Revolution of 1846 in favor of lower classes: lawyers, doctors, or university professors hoped to regain political influence by engaging in international humanitarian aid.³⁴

In 1863, the International Committee for the Relief of the Wounded was created, followed by the signing of the First Geneva Convention in 1864 (Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field). The Convention decided that any wounded or sick soldier would be assisted disregarding his nationality according to the principle of impartiality. It equally claimed that the healthcare staff on the battlefield and in the hospitals would be neutral, protected by what would become the emblem of the Red Cross, a red cross on a white flag. Legally, the ICRC is neither an inter-governmental nor a non-governmental organization but situates itself between the two; it is grounded on Swiss Civil Law and receives its mandate from the signatory governments. As for its structure, the ICRC had a president in command and a Geneva-based Committee where decisions were made, and it was composed of a few professionals coopted among the Genevan élites. An increasing number of national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies were scattered globally and met for international conferences every four years.³⁵ Financially, the ICRC survived and still does so on the annual contributions by states and on private donations.

The outbreak of WWI made the Red Cross grow exponentially.³⁶ Due to the immense humanitarian needs that the conflict brought, the organization extended

Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné (eds), *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Barbara Lüthi, Francesca Falk, and Patricia Purtschert, "Colonialism without Colonies: Examining Blank Spaces in Colonial Studies," *National Identities* 18, no. 1 (2016): 1–9.

³³ Henry Dunant, *Un Souvenir de Solferino*, 1863.

³⁴ Herrmann, *L'humanitaire en questions*, 25–58. Daniel Palmieri, "An Institution Standing the Test of Time? A Review of 150 Years of the History of the International Committee of the Red Cross," *International Review of the Red Cross* 94, no. 888 (2012): 1273–1298.

³⁵ Herrmann, *L'humanitaire en questions*, 36–37.

³⁶ Cédric Cotter, (*S'*)*Aider pour survivre: Action humanitaire et neutralité suisse pendant la Première Guerre mondiale* (Chêne-Bourg: Georg, 2017). François Bugnion, "Genève et la Croix-Rouge," *Colloque historique et al., Genève et la paix – acteurs et enjeux: trois siècles d'histoire: actes du Colloque historique tenu au Palais de l'Athénée, les 1-2-3 novembre 2001* (Genève: Association "Genève: un lieu pour la paix," 2005).

its work from the wounded and the sick to the assistance of prisoners of war and interned civilians, anticipating the codification of international humanitarian law.³⁷ It also weaved diplomatic relations between enemy states, sent its delegates to check the conditions of the prisoners of all fronts, and set in motion efforts to expedite the exchange of wounded and invalid POWs. Such an expansion was in part the result of its visionary president, Gustave Ador, a Swiss politician who served as a member and the president of the Swiss Federal Council between 1917 and 1919 and who acted as the third president of the ICRC from 1910 to 1928.³⁸ The ICRC's major achievement during the war was the creation of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency which established contacts between prisoners of war and their families through the exchange of letters, postcards, parcels, and cash.³⁹ Due the multiplication of missions across Europe, a Commission of missions (*Commission des missions*) was created to coordinate the work of the delegates.⁴⁰ More generally, at the end of the war, "the aim of the International Committee of the Red Cross [was] to maintain the fundamental and unchanging principles which [were] at the basis of the Red Cross organization, that [was] impartiality, political, religious and economic independence, the universality of the Red Cross and the equality of its members."⁴¹

With regard to prisoners of war, before 1918, the Red Cross had already engaged in a few exchanges and repatriations, by opening roads and feeding points throughout Europe, and by facilitating the spontaneous returns of ca. 10,000 POWs.⁴² Towards the end of the War In Europe, the ICRC adopted two parallel strategies. At the diplomatic level, it sent an appeal to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies explaining the conditions of Austrian and Hungarian POWs in Siberia, and it pressured for the liberation and repatriation of prisoners of war of all nationalities. On November 25, 1918, Eduard Frick, the general delegate for the repatriation of POWs, also opened a direct communication channel with the French government, stressing that 200,000 Russian POWs in Germany were awaiting repatriation. This

³⁷ Matthew Stibbe, "The Internment of Civilians by Belligerent States during the First World War and the Response of the International Committee of the Red Cross," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 1 (2006): 5–19. Geoffrey Best, *Humanity in Warfare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

³⁸ Frédéric Barbey, *Un homme d'état suisse: Gustave Ador: 1845-1928* (Genève: Edition J.-H. Jeheber, 1945).

³⁹ Stibbe, "The Internment of Civilians by Belligerent States during the First World War," 10. L'Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre. Le CICR dans la Première Guerre mondiale (Genève: CICR, 2007).

⁴⁰ Brigitte Troyon and Daniel Palmieri, "The ICRC Delegate: An Exceptional Humanitarian Player?," *International Review of the Red Cross* 89, no. 865 (2007): 97–111.

⁴¹ See Article 3 of *La Croix-rouge internationale: le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et les Conférences internationales*, 5th edition, (Geneva: ICRC, 1925): 67.

⁴² ACICR, *Rapport Général du Comité International sur son activité du 1912-1920 présenté à la Dixième Conférence internationale de la Croix-Rouge* (Genève): 111–116.

brought the immediate unblocking of a contribution of 500,000 French francs to be used for their relief. At a practical level, the ICRC continued to organize the repatriation of small groups of prisoners of war and sent its delegates in Europe and beyond to collect information, check their conditions in the camps, and make preliminary arrangements to repatriate them.⁴³

The frantic activities undertaken by the Red Cross at the end of the war might let us picture a solid organization. Nothing was further from this. Despite its wartime expansion, peacetime hit the ICRC hard: not only it had meager financial resources, but it also acted in a highly competitive field, where an increasing number of humanitarian organizations alleviated the suffering of postwar societies, stricken by epidemics, forced migration, and famine.⁴⁴ This explains the timing of the 174th circular which was addressed to all the signatory states of the Geneva Convention on November 27, 1918, only a few days after the General Armistice in Europe. Faced with the changed circumstances of the postwar period, "...the international committee wondered how its work should change and what task it would now have to perform".⁴⁵

The language of the 174th circular is highly gendered. The ICRC self-represented as a powerful masculine agent, which dispatched letters to the families, shared information with national institutions, and checked that prisoners would be fairly treated. The organization acted like a loving mother too, who, alongside images of the Christian *pietas*, "soften[ed] the evils of war," by offering protection to frail men. Poignantly, what the Red Cross allowed to itself, being both strong and caring, it denied to the beneficiaries of aid, who emerged most and foremost as powerless victims. The combatants were "unfortunate people, whom a perfected medical art no doubt wrestle[d] from death" only to be left "mutilated and often reduced to impotence." Prisoners of war were mutilated, helpless, disabled, and exposed to epidemic diseases, while civilians were widowers, orphans, and parents who could

⁴³ RCICR, Cramer-Frick, *op. cit.*, 702–703.

⁴⁴ Gerald H. Davis, "National Red Cross Societies and Prisoners of War In Russia, 1914–18," *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 1 (1993): 32, 31–52. Irène Herrmann, "Décrypter la concurrence humanitaire : le conflit entre Croix-Rouge(s) après 1918," *Relations internationales* 151, no. 3 (2013): 91–102. Davide Rodogno, "The American Red Cross and the International Committee of the Red Cross' Humanitarian Politics and Policies in Asia Minor and Greece (1922–1923)," *First World War Studies* 5, no. 1 (2014): 83–99. Lowe, "Humanitarianism and National Sovereignty." On American organizations, Patenaude, *op. cit.* Little, *op. cit.* Davide Rodogno, "Beyond Relief: A Sketch of the Near East Relief's Humanitarian Operations, 1918–1929," *Monde(s)*, no. 6 (2014): 45–64. Jaclyn Granick, "Waging Relief: The Politics and Logistics of American Jewish War Relief in Europe and the Near East (1914–1918)," *First World War Studies* 5, no. 1 (2014): 55–68.

⁴⁵ RCICR, *La mission du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge pendant et après la guerre*, 174^{ème} circulaire, signed by Edouard Neville, Adolphe D'Espine, Dr. F. Ferrière, and Alfred Gauthier, Geneva, November 27, 1918.

not rely on their husbands, fathers, and sons.⁴⁶ Here, we start to see that the Red Cross instrumentalized cultural constructions of masculine strength and feminine nurture to legitimize its activities against the setting of the postwar struggle for authority in the international humanitarian realm.

The 174th circular hinted a crucial actor of our book, the delegate.⁴⁷ During the Great War, the ICRC, which had previously only a few chances to be operational, expanded beyond all expectations. Between 1914 and 1918, 41 delegates were sent to all fronts, and their number increased to 110 in the postwar period.⁴⁸ These delegates—all men with a few exceptions—put on hold their personal lives and professions, where they acted as physicians, engineers, or professors, or members of the Swiss army, to engage in humanitarian aid.⁴⁹ After the end of the war, their work ranged from the fight against typhus to feeding programs addressed to hungry children, and from the exchange of prisoners of war to the protection of refugees.⁵⁰ Upon selection, delegates normally signed a contract and received a pamphlet where the organization's principles were explained; they were asked to contain expenses, to maintain neutrality, to act confidentially, and to avoid divulging any aspects of their work.⁵¹ The vagueness of the instructions, the personalities

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ The ICRC has a track record of delegates publishing memoirs. One of the most famous is by Marcel Junod, *Le troisième combattant: De l'ypérite en Abyssinie à la bombe atomique d'Hiroshima* (Genève: Comité International de la Croix-Rouge, 1989).

⁴⁸ Delegates were sent to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871, after the insurrection in Bosnia-Herzegovina of 1875 with the creation of the Montenegrin Red Cross and with the relief provided to refugees, and during the Balkan wars of 1912-1913. Troyon and Palmieri, *op. cit.*, 98-99.

⁴⁹ During the interwar period, there were only four women members in the ICRC Committee: Pauline Chaponnière-Chaix, Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer, Suzanne Ferrière, and Lucie Odier. While men were appointed as members of the ICRC on the basis of their professional achievements and humanitarian feelings, three of the four women were related to men in the organization; the exception was Pauline Chaponnière-Chaix. Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer was married to Eduard Frick, the general delegate to the repatriation of POWs; Suzanne Ferrière was the niece of the celebrated Dr. Frédéric Ferrière; and Lucie Odier was the niece of Eduard Odier, the vice-president of the ICRC. While these women possessed skills in nursing, social work, diplomacy, and women's work, and were zealous, committed, and polyglot, they had a hard time having their voices and opinions heard and taken into consideration in the organization's meetings. In contrast, from the mid-nineteenth century, women played increasing and sometimes leading roles within other contemporary international organizations. For the four women bios, see Diego Fiscalini, *Des élites au service d'une cause humanitaire: le Comité International de la Croix-Rouge* (Dissertation, Université de Genève, 1985): 134, 142, 162, 225.

⁵⁰ For a list of the principal delegates of the ICRC between 1918 and 1925, see *L'expérience du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge* (CICR, Geneva, 1925): 54-60. The same formula is used in every contract between the ICRC and its delegates. ACICR, B, MIS 33.1 box 16, Officiers G, Gallati, Convention entre le CICR et Monsieur Gallati concernant sa première mission en Allemagne, June 7, 1920.

⁵¹ I developed the case of Montandon in the following article, Piana, "The Dangers of 'Going Native'".

of the delegates, and the slowness of the correspondence created space for abuses. For instance, in 1919, George Montandon, a physician and an ethnographer, was charged to organize the repatriation of prisoners of war from Siberia.⁵² While on a mission, he found it perfectly reasonable to undertake unofficial anthropological research and to collect objects, thanks to which he later boosted his academic career.⁵³ Once back to Geneva, Montandon even published his mission's report, which was meant for the ICRC only.⁵⁴ Understandably, the situation created a huge embarrassment within the organization. It was only after the end of WWII that the Red Cross became more systematic in the selection and in the preparation offered to its agents: a first manual containing precise instructions was published in 1953, and, since the 1970s, delegates had been receiving codified training, which would better equip them for the challenges ahead.⁵⁵

When the Red Cross distributed the 174th circular in November 1918, little did it know that the most pernicious competition would emerge within the Red Cross movement. One of the unexpected consequences of the war effort was the expansion of several national Red Cross Societies, which had been pivotal in assisting military and civilians thanks to the financial resources of their respective governments. The most important one was the American Red Cross (ARC), which had undertaken massive relief work across Europe. It is no surprise then that the seeds of dissensus germinated precisely within the ARC, which overtly criticized the ICRC for its inefficiency and provincialism. After months of rumors and talks, the disagreement became evident to all, when, in April 1919, on the occasion of the Cannes conference where national Red Cross Societies discussed questions of public health, a brand-new organization, the League of Red Cross Societies (LRCS), was created.⁵⁶ Henry Davison, the former president of the War Council of the American Red Cross, acted as executive chairman, and David Henderson, a British Lieutenant

⁵² On Montandon's mission, Blaise Hofmann, *Bolchévisme, droit humanitaire, dollar et paix des vainqueurs: l'organisation du rapatriement des prisonniers de guerre centraux détenus en Sibérie après la première guerre mondiale, par la Mission Montandon du CICR (1919-1921), les Croix-Rouges nationales et la Société des Nations* (Dissertation: University of Lausanne, 2001).

⁵³ On anthropology, see Serge Reubi, *Gentlemen, prolétaires et primitifs: institutionnalisation, pratiques de collection et choix muséographiques dans l'ethnographie suisse, 1880-1950* (Berne: Peter Lang, 2011). Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2013). On his later life, see Marc Knobel, "L'ethnologue à la dérive: George Montandon et l'ethnoracisme," *Ethnologie Française*, nouvelle série, 18, no. 2 (1988): 107–113.

⁵⁴ George Montandon, *Deux ans chez Koltchak et chez les Bolchéviques pour la Croix-Rouge de Genève (1919-1921)* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1923).

⁵⁵ *Manuel du délégué* (Genève: Comité international de la Croix-Rouge, 1972).

⁵⁶ Now the League of the Red Cross Societies is the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Colonel, was appointed director-general.⁵⁷ Davison, who could count on the support of President Woodrow Wilson, believed that there was a need for “new blood, new methods, a new and more comprehensive outlook.”⁵⁸ To achieve this, in rupture with the Red Cross’s universalism, the LRCS would be composed exclusively of the Red Cross Societies from the victorious countries and was charged with coordinating and promoting health issues in peacetime.⁵⁹ Differently from the “custodians of the sacred fire,” the League was meant to be effective and business oriented.⁶⁰

How did the International Committee of the Red Cross react to the establishment of the League of the Red Cross Societies? The responses were mixed. A few in the Committee, the decision-making body, were in favor of a tighter collaboration with the Americans; yet the majority were against it—a dynamic which put the two organizations at odds.⁶¹ The effects were immediate. In February 1920, the LRCS wished to play a greater role in the humanitarian aid for prisoners of war, yet it seemed to be hindered by the ICRC’s monopoly.⁶² “It would almost seem that as soon as they [the ICRC] hear of our undertaking any activity, they immediately follow this up with independent action along the same lines,” said Henderson.⁶³ Soon enough, the two organizations realized that they lacked the necessary financial resources for major humanitarian interventions, as the LRCS only received a fraction of the American money that it was promised, and the ICRC was bankrupt in the first place.⁶⁴ It was precisely around the lack of money that the ICRC and the LRCS settled: a Mixed Commission (*Commission mixte*) came about to create a common ground and to normalize their relations.⁶⁵ All in all, the ICRC maintained

⁵⁷ *Proceedings of the Medical Conference: held at the invitation of the Committee of Red Cross Societies*, Cannes, France, April 1–11, 1919 (Geneva: The League of Red Cross Societies, 1919).

⁵⁸ Letter, Davison Harvey Gibson, November 22, 1918, League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies archives, Geneva, quoted in Caroline Moorehead, *Dunant’s Dream: War, Switzerland and the History of the Red Cross* (London: HarperCollins, 1998): 259.

⁵⁹ Hutchinson, *The Champions of Charity*, 280. Julia F. Irwin, “Connected by Calamity: The United States, the League of Red Cross Societies, and Transnational Disaster Assistance after the First World War,” *Moving the Social* 57, no. 0 (2017): 57–76.

⁶⁰ John F. Hutchinson, “Custodians of the Sacred Fire: The ICRC and the Postwar Reorganisation of the Red Cross,” in Paul Weindling (ed.), *International Health Organisations and Movements, 1918–1939* (Cambridge; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 17–35.

⁶¹ Herrmann, “Décrypter la concurrence humanitaire,” 91.

⁶² ANB, Ms. fol. 1988, K1, Nansen overtar arbeidet (“Krifa”), legg 2, de Watteville to British Ministry in Berne, Geneva, February 18, 1920.

⁶³ ALON, R642, Henderson to Drummond, July 13, 1920, 10.5358.5358.

⁶⁴ Hutchinson, *The Champions of Charity*, 312. Herrmann, “Décrypter la concurrence humanitaire,” 96.

⁶⁵ ALON, R642, Relief work in Eastern Europe. Note presented by the Secretary-General and approved by the Council, June 21, 1921, C.71.M.91.1921.IV.

the role of principal intermediary within the Red Cross movement, since the LRCS failed to coordinate aid in Eastern Europe.⁶⁶ Later, the LRCS carved out its niche in the responses to natural catastrophes, in education, and training programs.⁶⁷

Taken together, the transition from war to peace, the crises within the Red Cross movement, and the fragility of postwar reconstruction shaped the context where the ICRC extended its mandate to prisoners of war. The organization did not waste time and drew a web of routes that connected Siberia and Turkestan with Central Europe through the Baltic region, the Black Sea, and via the city of Vladivostok. Yet, it soon realized that POWs would not be allowed to cross Central and Eastern Europe in both directions due to the outbreak of the Polish-Soviet War and because of the Russian Civil War.⁶⁸ The ICRC then privileged two routes: the first connected Europe with Russia through the Black Sea, bridging Trieste or Hamburg with Odessa or Novorossiysk; the second route crossed the Baltic Sea in both directions, connecting Estonia and Germany by boat and train. A third route would be opened by the flamboyant George Montandon, one which connected Europe with the Russian harbor of Vladivostok by sea.⁶⁹

In addition to managing logistics, humanitarian diplomacy was a matter of both politics and money.⁷⁰ The ICRC observed that overlapping political reasons hindered the repatriation of prisoners of war in the East, including successor states' broken finances, the uncertain status of Russia, the widespread fear of Bolshevism, and regional wars over the determination of states' borders. This explains why the organization acted in a semi-governmental capacity, restarting the dialogue between ex-enemy countries, which had not yet diplomatically recognized each other. Indeed, in early 1920, only Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania had officially recognized Russia, and the other way around. Western states would follow later.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Francesca Piana, "Humanitaire et politique, in medias res: le typhus en Pologne et l'Organisation internationale d'hygiène de la SDN (1919-1923)," *Relations internationales* 138, no. 2 (2009): 23–38. Kimberly A. Lowe, "The League of Red Cross Societies and International Committee of the Red Cross: A Re-Evaluation of American Influence in InterWar Internationalism," *Moving the Social* 57, no. 0 (2017): 37–56.

⁶⁷ Irwin, "Connected by Calamity".

⁶⁸ RCICR, Frick-Cramer, *op. cit.*, 706-707.

⁶⁹ ALON, R1574, Text of a letter from Nansen submitted to the LON, May 15, 1920, 40.4427.2792.

⁷⁰ See the dissertation by Sebastian Balzter; (aus Fulda), *Repatriierung 1920-1922. Zur Rückführung der Kriegsgefangenen nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, Magisterarbeit zur Erlangung des Würde des Magister Artium der Philologischen, Philosophischen und Wirtschafts – und Verhaltenswissenschaftlichen Fakultät der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität (Freiburg im Breisgau, 2003-2004).

⁷¹ Germany and Russia recognized each other in 1923; Austria in 1924; Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania in 1934. Jean-François Fayet, "En l'absence de relations diplomatiques et de puissance protectrice: la protection des intérêts soviétiques durant la période dite de transition," *Relations internationales* 143, no. 3 (2011): 75–88.

The ICRC equally needed financial support, which came less from European states, weakened by the war, and more from Switzerland, which did not participate in the hostilities. While, in the past, the Red Cross had feared for its independence and the Swiss government was concerned that the organization might challenge the country's neutrality, the aftermath of the war witnessed an alignment of interests.⁷² Hence, Switzerland asked the Supreme Economic Council, an Allied body whose task pertained to Europe's economic reconstruction, to use a small part of its budget for the repatriation of prisoners of war, as a much needed pathway towards the reconstruction of Europe. The small country also donated one million Swiss francs (approximately £48,000) to support the ICRC. Although the Supreme Economic Council did not approve the Swiss proposal, the request paved the way for the insertion of the question of POWs into the agendas of Allied and Associated governments. Moreover, in February 1920, the Supreme Economic Council agreed to relieve and repatriate westwards 2,500 Czechoslovakian civilians, as well as 6,000 POWs whom the Allied Powers had already interned in Vladivostok in 1918.⁷³

It was again the Supreme Economic Council that, on February 7, 1920, suggested the intervention of the League of Nations, particularly on behalf of prisoners of war at the hands of the Soviets.⁷⁴ "An organization on a considerable scale should be set up whose personnel [was] above suspicion of political or national motive, and which [had] behind it an authority sufficient to secure the willing cooperation of the various governments concerned." The League of Nations seemed to have "the necessary authority" to avoid being trapped in the problems that governments had undergone.⁷⁵ As Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer of the ICRC Committee correctly wrote, "the problem of the repatriation of prisoners of war could not be resolved quickly without an international action led by a neutral body, treating all interns on the same footing and without any political bias, nor any spirit of propaganda."⁷⁶ Was it wishful thinking? Now that we know the end of the story, it is easy to be assertive. Yet, contemporaries, or at least some of them, were skeptical. De Watteville, the secretary and delegate of the ICRC in Germany, cynically wrote that the League of Nations would need more than "platonic resolutions" to ensure Russia's participation in the general repatriation plan.⁷⁷

⁷² Herrmann, *L'humanitaire en questions*, 40–51.

⁷³ ALON, C1119, Siberian prisoners of war, folder 1, International Committee for Relief Credits, Austrian and Hungarian Prisoners of War, June 5, 1920.

⁷⁴ ALON, C1119, Siberian Prisoners of War, folder 1, Council Document No. 34, Repatriation of Prisoners in Siberia, Memorandum by the Secretary General.

⁷⁵ ACICR, B MIS 33.5.69, Memorandum on the question of the repatriation of German, Austrian, Hungarian, Romanian, Serbian, Czechoslovakian, and Polish prisoners of war, March 1, 1920.

⁷⁶ RCICR, Cramer-Frick, *op. cit.*, 702.

⁷⁷ ACICR, B MIS 33.5.141, de Watteville to Commission des Missions, Berlin, April 12, 1920.

By looking at the Red Cross alone, before examining the joint programs undertaken with the League of Nations, we have a sense of what protection meant for the oldest humanitarian organization in the specific context of the post-WWI period. Thanks to its wartime experience, the organization and its delegates had acquired sophisticated diplomatic skills, by which they negotiated with all the parties involved, including governments, the military, private organizations, and the representatives of civil society. The ICRC started protecting prisoners of war from the moment when the members of the Committee in Geneva used a red pencil to draw repatriation routes crossing the European continent to the moment when its delegates checked the number of prisoners of war entering the trains which would bring them home. Thinking about alternative routes when the old ones were not safe anymore and preparing the camp of Narva, as we will see in Chapter 2, was yet another way to protect POWs. Protection declined in manifold ways, some of which were specific to the Red Cross and its mandate, and some others which emerged from the collaborations and the encounters which happened along the way.

1.3 The League of Nations and the question of prisoners of war

“A new world” had just begun—this is what Léon Bourgeois, the French representative to the LON, announced at the first meeting of the organization, which took place on January 16, 1920 in Paris, days after the entering into force of the Covenant of the League.⁷⁸ The LON was only a few months into being when the Supreme Economic Council and the Red Cross lobbied for internationalizing the protection and repatriation of POWs. Humanitarian aid fell within its mandate. According to Article 23 of the Covenant, the LON was to “secure and maintain fair and humane conditions of labor for men, women, and children,” supervise “the execution of agreements with regard to the traffic in women and children,” and was called to “take steps in matters of international concern for the prevention and control of disease”; according to Article 25, it would “encourage and promote the establishment and co-operation of duly authorized voluntary national Red Cross organizations having as purposes the improvement of health, the prevention of disease and the mitigation of suffering throughout the world.”⁷⁹ However, the decision whether to engage in the relief and repatriation of POWs was anything but natural and rather resulted from internal negotiations and external lobbying.

⁷⁸ 1 League of Nations O.J. 13 1920. Procès-verbal de la Première Réunion du Conseil de la Société des Nations, tenue à Paris au Ministère des Affaires Etrangères le vendredi 16 janvier 1920.

⁷⁹ Covenant of the League of Nations.

Contrary to the hybrid status of the ICRC and to the tripartite nature of the ILO, the League of Nations was composed of states.⁸⁰ The first members were Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, the British Empire, France, Guatemala, Italy, Japan, Poland, Peru, Siam, Czechoslovakia, and Uruguay.⁸¹ More states would join in the following years, particularly Hungary (in 1922); Germany (in 1926 until 1933 when Hitler came to power; Turkey (in 1932); and the Soviet Union (in 1934 only to be expelled in 1939). As for its structure, the LON was composed of a permanent secretariat, chaired by Eric Drummond, a British diplomat who would be the first secretary of the organization from 1920 to 1933; by a Council that met four times a year, composed of a restricted number of permanent and non-permanent states, upon which fell the most important decisions concerning the activities of the organization; and by the Assembly, which met every September and in which each member state participated.⁸² Over time, special committees, commissions, and agencies would be created. This was the case for the Health Organization, the predecessor of the World Health Organization.⁸³ And this was also the case for the High Commissariat for Russian Refugees of the LON, which was created in September 1921 under the leadership of Fridtjof Nansen.⁸⁴

We have seen that the Supreme Economic Council pushed for the League of Nations to engage in repatriation plans for POWs. Yet, Gustave Ador, who was an experienced diplomat, did not hesitate to play the personal card. While inter-institutional negotiations were ongoing, Ador corresponded with Eric Drummond, calling for the LON's moral compassion and commitment to implement "the principle of justice between the nations." Ador even ventured to claim that the principles of peace and solidarity, upon which the LON was built, were the direct continuations

⁸⁰ For a classic study, see F. P. Walters, *A History of the League of Nations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952). The historiography of the LON is huge. Pedersen, "Back to the League of Nations." Some examples are Andrew Webster, "The Transnational Dream: Politicians, Diplomats and Soldiers in the League of Nations' Pursuit of International Disarmament, 1920–1938," *Contemporary European History* 14, no. 04 (2005): 493–518. Carole Fink, *Defending the Rights of Others: The Great Powers, the Jews, and International Minority Protection, 1878–1938* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Madeleine Herren, "Gender and International Relations through the Lens of the League of Nations (1919–1945)," in Carolyn James and Glenda Sluga (eds), *Women, Diplomacy, and International Politics* (London: Routledge, 2015), 182–201.

⁸¹ 1 League of Nations O.J. 12 1920.

⁸² G. F. Kohn, "The Organization and the Work of the League of Nations," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 114, no. 1 (1924): 5–77.

⁸³ Iris Borowy, *Coming to Terms with World Health: The League of Nations Health Organisation, 1921–1946* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

⁸⁴ Magaly Rodríguez García, Davide Rodogno, Liat Kozma (eds), *The League of Nations' Work on Social Issues: Visions, Endeavours and Experiments* (Geneva: United Nations, 2016).

of the Red Cross's efforts since 1863.⁸⁵ Advocacy bore fruit. There, the ground was favorable for programs which would foster cooperation as a foundation for world peace. In the words of the British social reformer, Rachel Crowdy, the head of the Social Section, "no effort [was] too great" to repatriate "wretched" prisoners of war.⁸⁶

In April 1920, the LON Council, which met in Rome, tackled the question of prisoners of war.⁸⁷ For the LON, protecting displaced former military men fell into the broader plans of postwar reconstruction and of international stability.⁸⁸ The organization decided to appoint a commissioner to elaborate measures for the relief and repatriation of POWs: the selected person should inquire, coordinate, and encourage the valuable work already being performed by governments and private voluntary organizations, especially the ICRC, report to the Council, and make any recommendations that he might consider desirable both in terms of action and credit.⁸⁹ Soon after, Drummond announced to Ador that the position had been offered to Fridtjof Nansen, who had accepted it and who hoped to rely upon the "advice, assistance, and cooperation..." of the Red Cross.⁹⁰ From the outset, thanks to a tight cooperation, the ICRC and the LON offered a unique arena to states, both members and non-members, as well as to private organizations, transnational networks, and experts to find a doable solution. The division of tasks was clear: while the LON would take charge of political and financial negotiations, the Red Cross would implement programs on the ground.

When he was appointed as high commissioner for POWs, Nansen was 60 years old. Decades earlier, he had explored the Arctic region and had engaged in neuro-anatomy and oceanography that consolidated his reputation as an explorer and a

⁸⁵ ALON, R642, Ador to Drummond, July 3, 1920, 12-5358.5358.

⁸⁶ ACICR, B MIS 33.5/251, Rachel Crowdy to Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer, London, April 29, 1920.

⁸⁷ 1 League of Nations O.J. 80 1920. Procès-verbal of the Fourth Session of the Council of the League of Nations, held in Paris on April 9, 10, and 11, 1920.

⁸⁸ Kimberly Lowe, "Reassessing the League of Nations' Humanitarian Assistance Regimes, 1918–1939," in James Retallack and Ute Planert (eds), *Decades of Reconstruction: Postwar Societies, State-Building, and International Relations from the Seven Years' War to the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 293–314.

⁸⁹ ALON, C1120, Registry, Sunderland House, Documents concerning Dr. Nansen's appointment as High Commissioner for prisoners of war and proposal League of Nations work toward prisoners of war repatriated from Soviet Russia, folder 1, Resolution of the Council.

⁹⁰ ACICR, B MIS 33.5.250, Drummond to Ador, April 28, 1920. See ALON, C1111, Correspondence with Cramer and Brunel, folder 5, Mémorandum à la Société des Nations sur l'état actuel de la question du rapatriement des P.G. russes en Europe occidentale, allemands, autrichiens, hongrois, tchèques, polonais, roumains, tchécoslovaques en Russie et en Sibérie, 14 May 1920. ALON, R642, Ador to Drummond, July 3, 1920, 12-5358.5358.

scientist.⁹¹ In keeping with the eclecticism that was inherent among the ruling élites, later in life, Nansen engaged in politics: he mediated the separation of Norway from Sweden; in 1906, he was appointed as Norwegian ambassador to England; and, in 1918, he served as one of the Norwegian representatives to the League of Nations. When he was contacted by secretary general Drummond to become the high commissioner for prisoners of war, Nansen did not have any previous experience in humanitarian aid.⁹² He accepted the task, thinking that it would be a short one; at the moment of his appointment, Nansen could not possibly have known that he would dedicate his last years to humanitarian work and refugee politics. Unsurprisingly, due to his active past, Nansen was not an armchair humanitarian: living in Lysaker near Oslo, not only did he regularly travel to Geneva, but he went to Russia, Greece, and Armenia, where major emergencies happened. From his trips, numerous books were published, including “Russia & Peace” in 1924, and “Armenia and the Near East” in 1928.⁹³

There is an aura of heroism attached to Nansen, which has been cultivated by a wealth of uncritical biographies.⁹⁴ To be true, Nansen was partially responsible for his own heroization. The high commissioner presented himself as a stubborn negotiator, a passionate advocate, and a selfless speaker who committed to protecting the needy, alongside cultural constructions of an active masculinity.⁹⁵ His discourses and actions were soaked in patriarchal notions of inequality, which stressed ideas of courage and of entitlement versus passivity and dependency. This clearly emerges in the talk entitled “The suffering people of Europe” that Nansen pronounced in Oslo when he accepted the Nobel Prize in 1922 for his humanitarian engagement, in which he emphatically wrote:

They call us romantics, weak, stupid, sentimental idealists, perhaps because we have some faith in the good which exists even in our opponents and because we believe that kindness achieves more than cruelty. It may be that we are simpleminded, but I do not think that we are dangerous. Those, however, who stagnate behind their political programs, offering

⁹¹ Francesca Piana, “Nansen, Fridtjof” in IO BIO, *Biographical dictionary of secretaries-general of international organizations*, eds. by Bob Reinalda, Kent J. Kille and Jaci Eisenberg, www.ru.nl/fm/iobio.

⁹² ACICR, B MIS 33.5.210, Baker to Dr. Rotten, April 26, 1920.

⁹³ Fridtjof Nansen, *Russia & Peace* (New York: Macmillan, 1924). Fridtjof Nansen, *Armenia and the Near East* (London: G. Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1928).

⁹⁴ Several biographies have been written on the work and life of Nansen. Fritz Wartenweiler, *L'aventure d'une vie: Fridtjof Nansen. Le Viking intrépide* (Genève: Ed. Labor et fides, 1962). Chr. A. R Christensen, *Fridtjof Nansen; a Life in the Service of Science and Humanity* (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1961). Tim Greve, *Fridtjof Nansen* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1973). Liv Nansen Høyer, *Nansen, a Family Portrait* (London; New York: Longmans, Green, 1957). Roland Huntford, *Nansen: The Explorer as Hero* (London: Duckworth, 1997).

⁹⁵ Carl-Emil Vogt, “Fridtjof Nansen et l'aide alimentaire européenne à la Russie et à l'Ukraine bolcheviques en 1921-1923,” *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps* 95, no. 3 (2009): 5–12.

nothing else to suffering mankind, to starving, dying millions – they are the scourge of Europe.⁹⁶

Far from being alone in fostering notions of active masculinity, Nansen also emerged as the ultimate champion in the League of Nations' circles. Why so? Why did the LON need a "hero" to act as the high commissioner? The inter-governmental organization attempted to politically instrumentalize Nansen's renown and commitment to secure governments' political, financial, and logistical support. This strategy became even more evident in the early 1920s, when signs of compassion fatigue were already on the horizon.⁹⁷ As we will see, there were dangers in such a construction: while other agencies were downplayed, international refugee work underwent a backlash when Nansen prematurely died in 1930.

1.4 The cooperation between the Red Cross and the League of Nations

Nansen's first move was to secure the cooperation of the Red Cross, which shared the information at its disposal.⁹⁸ There were 250,000 POWs from the Central Powers detained in Russia and the same number of Russian POWs kept in Germany.⁹⁹ In May 1920, to ease Nansen's work, Eduard Frick and Bernard Bouvier for the ICRC organized a conference in Berlin where representatives of Austria, Germany, Hungary, and Russia were in attendance.¹⁰⁰ Two issues were high on the agenda: whether prisoners of war would be free to decide where to repatriate and what would be the role of the Soviet government. If, on paper, all the governments were to "affirm their agreement on the fundamental principle that the prisoner of war [had] the right to be repatriated where he wishes[ed]," in practice this meant that those Russian POWs who did not want to repatriate to a communist country could

⁹⁶ Nobel lecture by Fridtjof Nansen, pronounced on December 19, 1922, translation (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1922/nansen/lecture/>, last seen November 6, 2020).

⁹⁷ Bertrand Taihe, "Horror, Abjection and Compassion: From Dunant to Compassion Fatigue," *New Formations*, no. 62 (2007): 123–136.

⁹⁸ ACICR, B MIS 33.5/389 bis, Nansen to Ador, May 3, 1920.

⁹⁹ ACICR, B MIS 33.5/E.N., Mémorandum à la Société des Nations sur l'état actuel de la question du rapatriement des P.G. russes en Europe occidentale; allemands, autrichiens, hongrois, tchèques, polonais, roumains, Tchécoslovaques en Russie et en Sibirie, 12 mai 1920. See also, ACICR, B MIS 33.5/537, Liste des pays qui ont encore dans leurs territoires un nombre assez considérable de Prisonniers de guerre étrangers, May 10, 1920.

¹⁰⁰ ACICR, B MIS 33.5.332, Frick to Nansen, May 15, 1920. See also, ALON, C1111, Correspondence with Nansen, folder 2, Baker to Nansen, May 15, 1920.

stay in Germany.¹⁰¹ The negotiations between Western institutions and the Soviet government turned out to be complex. On the one side, the ICRC described Victor Kopp, the Russian delegate, as a troublemaker, someone who was "...adept at constantly combining politics with the application of humanitarian principles."¹⁰² On the other side, Russia lamented that German POWs in Siberia were repatriated against their will and in favor of the anti-Bolshevik coalition.¹⁰³

To be true, most of the Red Cross documents produced in the early 1920s were soaked in anti-Bolshevism. In June 1920, the Red Cross delegate in Berlin, Bernard Bouvier, penned a long report where he made a direct connection between the bad living conditions of Russian POWs in Germany and the possibility that they might cause political "troubles." He reported that almost 70% of Russian POWs in Germany moved in and out of the camps to work on the surrounding farms. This allowed them to buy extra food as well as weapons that they might use in support of German communists. Hence, Bouvier deemed it necessary to buy extra flour and an increased portion of bread for the benefit of the incarcerated men so that they could have enough to eat. Moreover, he urged the Red Cross to be dissociated from any unwanted political actions that might happen.¹⁰⁴ Events had proved Bouvier's preoccupation right: the communist uprising in Berlin of January 1919, Béla Kun's regime in Hungary, the episodes in Vienna and Munich, in addition to the Bolshevik aspiration for world communism were looming realities.

Interestingly, Bouvier's description of POWs was in stark contrast to the discourse of helplessness and victimhood that emerged from the 174th Red Cross circular. In Bouvier's words, Russian POWs in German camps lacked "freedom, authority, and order," while they were social, political, and ideological threats that undermined the stability of Germany and, more generally, the peace on the continent.¹⁰⁵ According to the delegate, diplomatic negotiations and food distribution were necessary to neutralize the dangers spurring from the concentration of many former enemies, as well as to protect the integrity of fragile German institutions. The Red Cross needed protection too, as the organization should not be found responsible for the political troubles that POWs might cause. By examining side by side the gendered discourses that emerged from the 174th circular and Bouvier's report, we observe a key element of postwar humanitarian aid: the organization

¹⁰¹ ACICR, B MIS 33.5/670, Memorandum by Frick, May 24, 1920. AILO, R102/2, de Watteville, October 26, 1921.

¹⁰² ACICR, B MIS 33.5/915, Rapport de Monsieur Bernard Bouvier, membre du C.I.C.R. sur sa mission à Berlin, 16-22 mai 1920, June 1, 1920.

¹⁰³ ALON, R1702, de Watteville to Commission of missions, July 4, 1920, 42.5440.5213.

¹⁰⁴ ACICR, B MIS 33.5/915, Rapport de Monsieur Bernard Bouvier, membre du C.I.C.R. sur sa mission à Berlin, 16-22 mai 1920, June 1, 1920.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

and its agents saw no contradiction in referring to prisoners of war alternatively as innocent victims or potential dangers. They could be one or the other, or one and the other at once. Moreover, after being repatriated, prisoners of war could also integrate into their long-lost family, hence contributing to the processes of nation-building and postwar reconstruction.

Other actors framed POWs as both victims and dangers. In September 1920, Dr. Erich Wucher, a former POW who spent several years in captivity in the Siberian camp of Krasnoyarsk and a medical doctor by profession, stated that POWs from the Central Powers in Russia lacked food, shelter, and appropriate clothing. Many of them who had contracted typhus risked infecting civilians in Siberia, in Russia, and from there, in Europe.¹⁰⁶ In both reports, i.e., the one penned by Bouvier and the one penned by Wucher, POWs were told to be in danger and to endanger societies. While the threats were both real and exaggerated, once more humanitarian aid not only addressed the distress of victims but was also called upon to prevent the instability that poverty and suffering might cause. Spreading anxiety was yet another way to mobilize political and financial resources.

Meanwhile, it took a few weeks for the Red Cross and the League of Nations to agree on a division of tasks. The ICRC would continue directing general repatriation plans and monitoring logistics. It was responsible for protecting POWs in the trains, boats, and exchange camps.¹⁰⁷ “[Nansen] had entrusted to the competent hands of the International Committee everything connected with the organization of camps, the organization of train services, the exchange of prisoners, the keeping of the accounts to be presented to the governments whose prisoners were repatriated.”¹⁰⁸ As for the LON, it was in charge of diplomatic and fundraising campaigns.¹⁰⁹ The organization was expected to provide boats, food both during the trip and in the exchange camp, and to advance the money that non-German POWs would require.¹¹⁰ In the words of Lucien Cramer, a member of the ICRC Committee: “If the League of Nations was the financial backer of this considerable enterprise, the international committee for its part was the technical executor, since it agreed to

¹⁰⁶ ACICR, B MIS 33.5/2777, Rapport de l'ancien prisonnier de guerre, médecin autrichien, Dr. Erich Wucher, au Comité International de la Croix-Rouge Geneve, section de Berlin, Tiergartenstrasse, Vienne, 3 septembre 1920. It is useful to read the document from Wucher against the research carried out by Gerald H. Davis on the history of the camp of Krasnoyarsk. Gerald H. Davis, “Prisoner of War Camps as Social Communities in Russia: Krasnoyarsk 1914-1921,” *East European Quarterly* 21, 2 (1987): 147–163.

¹⁰⁷ RCICR, Cramer-Frick, *op. cit.*, 712.

¹⁰⁸ ALON, R642, Ador to Drummond, July 30, 1920, 12.5358.5358.

¹⁰⁹ ACICR, B MIS 33.5.1043, PV de la séance tenue le 21 juin 1920 au Comité International de la Croix-Rouge.

¹¹⁰ RCICR, Cramer-Frick, *op. cit.*, 712–713.

ensure the completion of the repatriation that it had carried out until then, with the only funds of the governments concerned.”¹¹¹

The collaboration between the two institutions went through shifts and turns. Frick of the ICRC expressed frustration to the LON for not providing the promised funds and for not covering the delegates’ salaries.¹¹² Another delegate, de Watteville, complained that Nansen took personal initiatives without previously consulting with the ICRC.¹¹³ Miscommunication reached its peak as soon as June 1920, when, according to de Watteville, Nansen was not aware that the British Ministry of Shipping had granted three boats to be used for the repatriation process. Of the three boats, one was under construction, while another was in Sicily.¹¹⁴ However, there were instances where the ICRC and LON successfully collaborated. Their respective officers in Geneva were in close contact. Frick was the general delegate for the repatriation of POWs at the ICRC as well as Nansen’s assistant at the LON: he reported to the ICRC and advised Nansen, building on the expertise that he had gained from the implementation of the ICRC’s early repatriation plans. One of Frick’s closest collaborators was de Watteville, based in Berlin. In addition to his work for both the ICRC and the LON, de Watteville was mandated to coordinate the purchase of goods and supplies for POWs in Siberia from Berlin during the winter of 1920–1921 under the humanitarian “flag” of the so-called “Nansen-Hilfe.”¹¹⁵ Moreover, the ICRC delegates sent on various missions in Europe and beyond worked for both organizations at the same time.

Due to difficult negotiations with Russia, in July 1920, Nansen went to Moscow.¹¹⁶ Different from the prevalent views in the West, Nansen supported Russia’s inclusion

¹¹¹ RCICR, Lucien Cramer, “L’achèvement du rapatriement général des prisonniers de guerre par le Comité International de la Croix-Rouge,” no. 41 (1922): 384.

¹¹² ACICR, B MIS 33.5.2814, Conférence du 12 octobre 1920 à la présence de Baker, Frick, Brunel, Sutter, Ehrenhold.

¹¹³ “It is absolutely necessary for us to maintain in Geneva the centralization of documents and their disposition, all the more so because if this were not the case, we would sometimes make false moves caused by ignorance of things we would like to be the first to know about [...]”. ACICR, B MIS 33, volume 5, Letter to de Watteville, June 18, 1920.

¹¹⁴ ACICR, B MIS 33.5.1040, de Watteville to Commission of missions, June 19, 1920.

¹¹⁵ The name, “Nansen-Hilfe,” was given by the ICRC delegate, Moritz Schlesinger. The so-called “Nansen-Hilfe” was established by Nansen thanks to the reports from the Scandinavian Red Cross societies (Danish and Swedish), the ICRC, and the YMCA, which had been active in Siberia since 1915. This organization aimed to reduce the mortality of POWs as much as possible, while waiting for the repatriation plans to be implemented. This occurred through the centralization of the work of all of the organizations that were active on behalf of POWs in Siberia and the distribution of foodstuff, clothing, and medical supplies during the winter of 1920–1921. ACICR, B MIS 33, volume 21, de Watteville to the Commission des missions, September 18, 1920.

¹¹⁶ On the encounter between Europeans and Americans with the political, ideological, and social experiments of interwar Soviet Russia, see the work of Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great*

in Europe as a stabilizer of peace, a position for which he was often accused of having pro-Bolshevik feelings.¹¹⁷ In Moscow, Nansen interacted with Georgy Chicherin, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, and Lev Kamenev, chairman of the Moscow Soviet and member of the Politburo. The high commissioner was preceded by his scientific fame—something on which the LON had staked upon his appointment. Kamenev even ventured a parallel between Nansen and the Soviet revolution: the energy that Nansen had put into his polar explorations was comparable to the energy that the Bolsheviks were putting into spreading communism internationally.¹¹⁸ However, there was more than admiration in Kamenev's words. First of all, the Soviets agreed to negotiate with Nansen in his personal capacity and not as a representative of the LON, an institution that they refused to recognize, as two of the League's member states, Britain and France, were supporting the counter-revolution. Moreover, international communism was not compatible with the nature of the LON, a league of capitalist powers that, on paper, promoted ideas of peace and security, but, in reality, favored only bourgeois states united in their hostility to the first workers' state.¹¹⁹ Second, the Soviet government wished to establish direct contacts with other governments on repatriating POWs. Therefore, while in Moscow, Nansen cabled all the interested governments in order to obtain authorization for continuing negotiations with the Bolsheviks.

1.5 Financial negotiations

While patient political negotiations between ex-enemy states were about to succeed, the question of money had not been settled yet. As Nansen knew that the LON could not pay for the repatriation plan, he thought of other possibilities.¹²⁰ Three

Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to Soviet Union, 1921-1941 (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹¹⁷ Nansen, *Russia & Peace*.

¹¹⁸ ACICR, B MIS 33.51619, Rapport sur la mission en Lettonie et Estonie par Frick, July 17, 1920.

¹¹⁹ An early study of the attitude of the Soviet government towards the institutions of Western liberalism refers to a "hostile boycott" for the period ranging between 1919 and 1934, when the Soviet government joined the LON. Christopher Osakwe, *The Participation of the Soviet Union in Universal International Organizations: A Political and Legal Analysis of Soviet Strategies and Aspirations inside ILO, UNESCO and WHO* (Leiden: Sijthoff, 1972). More recent research tends to attenuate the dichotomy between the two systems and rather stresses the connections and exchanges taking place, especially in the field of public health. Jon Jacobson, "The Soviet Union and Versailles," in Manfred Boemeke, Gerald Feldman, and Elisabeth Glaser (eds), *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 451–468.

¹²⁰ ALON, R1709, Summary of Dr. Nansen's accounts in respect of repatriation of war-prisoners 15/9 1920 – 31/12 1921. 42.17959.17959X.

main venues were mobilized: the International Committee for Relief Funds (hereafter Relief Funds), which covered repatriation expenses through the Baltic Sea; the ICRC, through states' contributions;¹²¹ and American organizations, grouped in the American Repatriation Committee that concentrated on repatriation plans from Vladivostok.¹²² Once in office, Nansen began lobbying the Relief Funds. The organization, headquartered in Paris and composed of Denmark, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Italy, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland, had been created to reconstruct postwar Europe. Nansen, who understood the conditions of displaced prisoners as an unexpected consequence of warfare, suggested that a small part of the money managed by the Relief Funds could be used for the repatriation of POWs. Not only had the high commissioner asked for £635,000, which corresponded to less than 2% of the total sum managed by the Relief Fund, but he also presented a detailed plan previously elaborated by a British expert.¹²³ William Goode, whom the plan was named after (the "William Goode scheme"), was a British representative at the Supreme Economic Council who designed the complex system for the appropriation of funds from the Relief Funds for the purposes of repatriation.¹²⁴

At first, the answer of the Relief Funds was negative. Nansen had to adapt the strategy: each state whose nationals were to be repatriated would independently apply for credits to the Relief Funds; moreover, the high commissioner made it clear that these credits were to be considered a loan.¹²⁵ Austria and Hungary applied for £200,000 each, while Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia applied for £70,000 each.¹²⁶ In order to maximize the chances of success,

¹²¹ Austria contributed £43,000, Czechoslovakia £6,000, Poland £1,000, and the Kingdom of the SHS £3,000. Moreover, the unofficial American representative to the Relief Funds, Mr. Logan, tried to get his government to contribute to the repatriation scheme. See ALON, C111, Miscellaneous correspondence, folder 6, Notes on repatriation of prisoners, July 30, 1920.

¹²² The following societies were part of the American Repatriation Committee: ARC, Friends Service Committee, Relief Committee for Hungarian Sufferers, Relief Committee for Austrian War Prisoners, Federal Council, the Churches of Christ, Joint Distribution Committee, National Catholic War Council, YMCA, and National Lutheran Council. ALON, C113, Folder 3, The present situation with regard to repatriation of prisoners of war, report by the Secretary General, February 16, 1921. Gaston Lichtenstein, *Repatriation of Prisoners of War from Siberia; a Documentary Narrative* (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1924).

¹²³ ALON, R1702, Copy of a cablegram received from William Goode, July 21, 1920, 42.5656.5213.

¹²⁴ ALON, C111, Correspondence with Nansen, folder 3, Notes on the use of the International Relief Credits for repatriation of prisoners of war. Undated report.

¹²⁵ ACICR, B MIS 33.5.1735, Repatriation of prisoners of war, Geneva, July 28, 1920. ALON, C111, Miscellaneous correspondence, folder 6, Crowdy to Baker, May 26, 1920.

¹²⁶ ALON, R1703, Draft telegram from the Secretary-General to the lending governments represented on the International Committee on Relief Credits, Paris, 42.5218.5214. The Relief Funds proposed

Nansen did not leave anything unplanned and relied on the financial expertise of two British experts, Thomas Lodge and John Hamilton, who worked under the auspices of the LON. Lodge was the first to be hired: a former Secretary of the Ministry of Shipping for the United Kingdom, who was based in Paris to be close to the Relief Funds.¹²⁷ It was Lodge who wanted Hamilton, a civilian, as a collaborator, this time not in Paris but in London to be close to both the British government and the LON. Lodge and Hamilton acted as a link between the governments represented in the Relief Funds and the governments whose ex-soldiers needed to find their way back home.¹²⁸ They were to keep track of the money used for the repatriation of POWs and to verify that the money provided by each country and spent by Nansen was proportional to the number of POWs from that same country, especially since the nationality of prisoners was sometimes difficult to determine.¹²⁹

It was mainly due to the business and shipping expertise of Lodge and Hamilton that the work was carried out efficiently.¹³⁰ It was no coincidence that Goode, Lodge, and Hamilton were all British, as Great Britain was central to the postwar liberal international order. Another prominent British citizen at the LON Secretariat was Philip Baker (later Noel-Baker after marrying into the Noel family).¹³¹ A member of the British delegation at the Paris Peace conference, Noel-Baker became one of Nansen's closest and most reliable collaborators.¹³² In addition to the expertise of its British collaborators, Nansen hoped that they would ease the participation of the British government into the repatriation scheme. Yet, it proved more complicated than expected. The British government claimed that the Relief Funds was not the adequate institution for fundraising, as, contrary to Nansen, it saw no connection between repatriating prisoners and the reconstruction of Europe. Not only France agreed with the British, but such positions had spillover effects on other countries, which froze their contributions and decided to negotiate directly with the LON. Fortunately, Lord Arthur Balfour, then President of the LON Council, Robert Cecil,

that the sum requested was to be divided among the interested governments as follows: Denmark £35,000, France £115,000, Great Britain £225,000, Holland £55,000, Italy £87,000, Norway £35,000, Sweden £35,000, and Switzerland £48,000. ALON, C113, Folder 3, The present situation with regard to repatriation of prisoners of war, report by the Secretary General, February 16, 1921.

¹²⁷ ALON, R1705, Cable Drummond to Buxton, July 31, 1920, 42.5850.5850.

¹²⁸ ALON, C1113, Correspondence with Baker, folder 9, Repatriation of Prisoners of War by the Secretary General of the LON. Undated document.

¹²⁹ ACICR, B MIS 33 volume 20, Rapport sur la conférence tenue à Londres, les 19 et 20 août 1920.

¹³⁰ A special account was created at Lloyds Bank and entitled "Dr. Nansen's Prisoners' Repatriation Account." ALON, R1704, Nansen to Chamberlain, London, August 21, 1920, 42.6169.5214.

¹³¹ Philip Noel-Baker Biographical (http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1959/noel-baker-bio.html, last seen August 8, 2015).

¹³² ALON, C1111, Correspondence with Dr. Fridtjof Nansen (Mr. Baker), folder 2, Further note for Dr. Nansen, undated.

and Drummond, unblocked the situation and pushed the British cabinet to release the money.¹³³ The British government then promised the sum required provided that other European countries covered the balance. It also asked that the tensions existing between the former Central Powers and Russia owing to the signing of the exchange agreement be satisfactorily settled.¹³⁴ The French and Italian representatives had to consult their governments and hope that a favorable decision would be made.

Although five governments adhered to the scheme, the money was still insufficient to guarantee the return of POWs before the coming winter. Hence, Nansen decided to wait for the French and Italian governments to gather in October 1920, and appealed for funds to private associations, the Young Men's Christian Association and the Swedish Red Cross, due to the work that they were already implementing for POWs in Siberia. In the meantime, France granted the sum provided that all of the French POWs in Russia were released—something that Nansen ensured took place. Italy did not pay the promised money and obliged Nansen to issue a further appeal—this time addressed to Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Japan, and Spain. Worse than this, Italy's decision made it impossible for Nansen to receive the second half of the British contribution.¹³⁵

The financial side of humanitarian aid was well articulated. Nansen, supported by the LON Council, tried to push governments to unfreeze their contributions and to adhere to his plan, and, at the same time, asked the British government to urge the French and Italian parliaments to allocate the funds. The high commissioner also played the American card. "If only America could step in and save the situation, and again show the world that there [were] still men with human feelings and not merely politicians left, well, that would give some faith in the future."¹³⁶ While writing these words, Nansen was probably bearing in mind that the American Relief Administration, headed by the charismatic figure of Herbert Hoover, was carrying out relief operations on a large scale in several Central and Eastern European countries. In the early 1920s, this semi-governmental organization represented the other side of so-called American isolationism and was greatly involved in Europe.¹³⁷ Although Hoover had already expressed sympathy for the work undertaken by Nansen, he did contribute to the Relief Funds.¹³⁸

¹³³ ALON, C1111, Correspondence with Dr. Fridtjof Nansen (Mr. Baker), folder 2, Baker to Nansen, July 15, 1920.

¹³⁴ ACICR, B MIS 33-5.1735, Repatriation of Prisoners of War, July 28, 1920.

¹³⁵ ALON, C1113, Folder 3, The present situation with regard to repatriation of prisoners of war, report by the Secretary General, February 16, 1921.

¹³⁶ ALON, C1111, Correspondence with Nansen, folder 3, Nansen to Logan, August 1, 1920.

¹³⁷ Patenaude, *op. cit.*

¹³⁸ ALON, C1111, Correspondence with Cramer and Brunel, folder 5, Cable Hoover to Nansen, July 2, 1920.

Again, the United Kingdom made an intervention that had important consequences. In August 1920, the British government eventually agreed to grant 50% (£113,000) of the promised contribution in cash under the same condition: that other governments would supply the money that they had promised.¹³⁹ After months of negotiations, these were the final figures connected with the financing of the repatriation plans in cash: Denmark contributed £35,000, France £115,000,¹⁴⁰ the United Kingdom £113,000, the Netherlands £44,591, Norway £35,000, Sweden £35,893, and Switzerland £45,641. Three countries also contributed in kind: Denmark provided £26,250, Norway £17,500, and Sweden £15,000. The total amount was £324,625.¹⁴¹ Moreover, the American Repatriation Committee made a special contribution of £112,500 toward the expenses of two steamers for the repatriation of POWs from Vladivostok. The sum collected was used for the purchase and forwarding of food, the sanitary installations in the camp of Narva in Estonia, the insurance of ships upon agreement with the British Ministry, and the expenses connected with the ICRC activities, namely camp administration, the expenses of delegates, and sending a delegation to the Black Sea. There was a balance of £142,164 to be used for hiring ships until February 1921, the running expenses of ships, and sanitary installations in Riga. Although the original amount needed for the repatriation of POWs was estimated at £635,000, Lodge stated that the final sum used would not exceed £420,000. With the two additional British and French contributions, the repatriation plans could be carried out and successfully completed.

Thanks to the success of both the diplomatic and financial negotiations, the repatriation plans for POWs were successful. A map (fig. 1), produced by the LON, shows, between 1920 and 1922, thanks to the work of the ICRC and the LON, the cooperation of governments, and the relief operations undertaken by many private, voluntary organizations, nearly 427,886 POWs of 26 different nationalities were eventually repatriated.¹⁴² Of these, 406,091 were repatriated through the Baltic Sea and exchanged through the camp of Narva in Estonia; 12,191 went through the Black Sea; and 9,604 went through Vladivostok.

¹³⁹ ALON, C1111, Correspondence with Nansen, folder 3, Statement regarding the money promised by the various countries for the repatriation of prisoners of war by Nansen, August 17, 1920.

¹⁴⁰ ALON, C1116, Untitled Dossier, Statement showing present position of contributions.

¹⁴¹ ALON, C1113, Correspondence with Baker, folder 3, Gorvin to Nansen, Paris, May 30, 1921. ALON, C1113, Folder 3, The present situation with regard to repatriation of prisoners of war, Report by the Secretary General, February 16, 1921.

¹⁴² ALON, R1703, Nombre total des prisonniers de guerre rapatriés par la Haut-Commissaire de la Société des Nations avec l'assistance du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge de mai 1920 à juillet 1922, C.585.1922.42.22952.511213.



Fig. 1. Total number of prisoners of war repatriated by the International Committee of the Red Cross and by the League of Nations. Courtesy of the United Nations Archives at Geneva.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ ALON, LON Picture StR Cab3 Dr1 fol 9 OKS.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has proved why the repatriation of forgotten categories of prisoners of war—POWs from Russia detained in Germany and POWs from the Central Powers detained in Russia—moved from the national to the inter-governmental realm. Since their respective governments did not have the means to organize or to pay for the return of their citizens, in early 1920, the Red Cross was asked to intervene. While the expertise of the ICRC made the extension of its wartime mandate pretty “natural,” other reasons contributed to it: the organization wished to reinforce its role in the Red Cross movement and to strengthen its authority in post-war international relations. To this end, the League of Nations appeared to be a strategic ally. The organization, which had just become operational and which needed to prove itself, chose the repatriation of POWs as its first humanitarian programs, drawing on its members’ moral compassion and political responsibility, and bridging them to larger postwar reconstruction plans. The cooperation between the two organizations was successful, while it shaped each of them in specific ways: the ICRC continued to rely on the work of the Commission of missions and the LON appointed the *ad hoc* high commissioner.

This chapter offers a first analysis of the gendered discourses and representations which emerged from institutional documents and private correspondence exchanged between the “headquarters” and “field.” The Red Cross referred to itself as both a masculine-driven agent and a caring loving mother towards needy prisoners of war, whereas the beneficiaries of humanitarian protection ranged from being helpless victims to looming dangers, or vectors for postwar reconstruction. Similar discourses were formulated by the League of Nations, which appointed Nansen not because he had any experience in international relief but because his fame would help to convince the Soviets to collaborate. Nansen effortlessly bought into the perceived benefits of the self-heroization and put his fame to a greater use, which came at the expense of many other agencies. A plethora of individuals also start making their way into this story, from the Red Cross delegates to British shipping and financial experts, proving that manifold professional skills were involved in the repatriation plans.

Both organizations, their signatories and member states, cared about repatriating prisoners of war as much as they wished to instrumentalize humanitarian aid to strengthen the anti-communist coalition. The most alarming fear was that Russians in Germany might support German communists, that POWs from the Central Powers returning from Russia would bring communism to the heart of the continent, and that repatriated Russians would join the bolsheviks. This chapter claims that the specific context in which the ICRC and the LON operated explains why they stressed the non-political nature of their humanitarian programs. In the

case of POWs, claiming to be non-political allowed ex-enemy states to sit at the same table and made Nansen's trip to Moscow possible, when many other Westerners could not. At the same time, the non-political discourse weakened both the ICRC and the LON in their diplomatic and financial negotiations, since other topics, including disarmament and collective security, were considered more important. All in all, humanitarian aid molded the ICRC and the LON institutionally, created the ground for a diverse expertise to flourish, and laid the impromptu foundation for practices and policies soon to be transferred to Russian refugees.

Crossing Narva: the exchange of prisoners of war at the Estonia–Russia border

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the exchange of prisoners of war from Russia and from the Central Powers thanks to the naval bridge connecting Russia and Germany in the Baltic Sea. It pays attention to the preparation and running of the exchange camp in Narva, on the Estonia–Russia border, where Red Cross delegates interacted with representatives of local and international organizations, the local staff, and repatriated POWs. It examines the daily practices of protection and gendered constructions. It shows that civilians were at times exchanged alongside POWs.

Keywords: Narva, camp, exchange, encounters.

We appeal to the International Red Cross for urgent remedial
action in order to free our comrades from distress.
—A group of prisoners of war passing through Narva to
the attention of the Red Cross in Geneva.¹

In the spring of 1920, Fridtjof Nansen was busy in securing governments' financial and political support to repatriate prisoners of war, while the Berlin-based delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross was mediating between ex-enemy states. Meanwhile, on April 22, 1920, Eduard Frick, the general delegate to the repatriation of POWs at the ICRC, contacted Estonia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs with a precise request: he wished to use the fortress of Ivangorod –which sits on the homonymous river across from the city of Narva, meters away from the newly established border with Soviet Russia– to host prisoners of war from the Central Powers travelling home from Siberia². Built in the fifteenth century by Ivan the Great to guard against Germanic invasions, later conquered by Sweden only to be won back by Peter the Great, the fortress of Ivangorod, which is nowadays a

¹ AICRC, MIS 35.5.278, Forwarded to the Committee of the intern. R. C. in Geneva, Major F., 28/VII 20.

² ACICR, B MIS 35.5.6, Délégué général du CICR à monsieur le ministre des Affaires Etrangères de la République Esthonienne, April 22, 1920.

museum in the Leningrad region in Russia, offered ideal conditions: it was large enough to accommodate hundreds of men; it was protected by massive walls and towers, and its only entry allowed the control of the movements of people and goods.³ Moreover, the Narva region was well connected by trains and boats westward to Central Europe and eastward to Russia, a condition which would ease the exchange of prisoners of war.

Frick's request found responsive ears⁴. Estonia, which had just become independent, was undergoing a difficult post-imperial transition; by agreeing on the humanitarian plan, its new institutions hoped to strengthen their position in world politics.⁵ Indeed, the Great War period had been particularly tumultuous for the small Baltic state. The rivalry between Germany and Russia and the Russian Revolution had created unexpected opportunities: after two centuries of Russian domination, in February 1918 Estonian nationalists proclaimed the independence. This was short-lived, as the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed on March 3, 1918, allowed Germany to occupy the Baltics, while only a few months later the General Armistice in Europe allowed Russia to take the region back. By then, Estonian nationalists embraced the armed struggle against the Russian invaders in what would be known as the Estonian war of independence. To gain support, the Estonian delegation attended the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and pressured Western states to recognize the country's independence, while it appealed for military and financial support.⁶ Since Western states still hoped that Russian imperial borders would be restored and paid little attention to the Estonian cause, the Baltic state signed the Peace Treaty of Tartu with Russia on February 2, 1920, by which they mutually recognized each other.⁷

Chapter 2 adopts the prism of the Red Cross and of its delegates to examine the implementation of the repatriation plan for prisoners of war, connecting the decision-making process in Geneva to the operations in the Baltic region and in

³ Kevin O'Connor, *The History of the Baltic State* (Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 2015).

⁴ Francesca Piana, "L'Estonie et l'échange des prisonniers de guerre entre Allemagne et Russie, 1918-1922," *Revue d'Allemagne et des pays de langue allemande* 52, vol. 2 (2020): 317-340.

⁵ Vahur Made, "La conception estonienne de la politique étrangère et des relations internationales," *Revue internationale et stratégique* n°61, (2006): 175-86. For humanitarian aid and national reconstruction, see Davide Rodogno, Shaloma Gauthier, Francesca Piana, "Shaping Poland: Relief and Rehabilitation Programmes Undertaken by Foreign Organizations, 1918-1922," in Bernard Struck, Jakob Vogel and Davide Rodogno (eds), *Shaping the Transnational Sphere: the Transnational Networks of Experts (1840-1930)*, 259-278. Kind-Kovács, *op. cit.* Klaus Richter, *Fragmentation in East Central Europe. Poland and the Baltics, 1915-1929* (Kettering: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁶ Charlotte Alston, Piip, Meierovics & Voldemaras, *Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania: Makers of the Modern World* (New York: Haus Pub., 2011): 71-74, 102.

⁷ David S. Foglesong, "The United States, Self-Determination and the Struggle against Bolshevism in the Eastern Baltic Region, 1918-1920," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 26, no. 2 (1995): 107-144.

the fortress of Ivangorod⁸. The chapter starts by explaining how the Red Cross delegates prepared Ivangorod for the humanitarian operation, in cooperation with a plethora of other agents. It then takes a close look to the articulation of the practices of protection for POWs throughout the whole repatriation process and inside the camp, where the unexpected presence of women and children demanded some adaptation. A focus on both the agents and the practices allows illuminating the gendered discourses that they produced on themselves and on each other. From this close approach, the exchange camp of Narva appears to be a space where POWs were both assisted and controlled; despite the attempts to isolate the camp from the surrounding region, many interactions happened across its walls.

2.1 Preparations

After the Allies authorized the transit of POWs through the Baltic Sea, the ICRC negotiated with the countries of departure, transit, and arrival about the use of existing infrastructures, i.e., camps, trains, and boats. In the spring of 1920, Germany and Russia agreed to organize trains and transport POWs from internment camps to the borders. Russian POWs detained in Germany traveled by train northbound to the city of Stettin, where they were hosted in camps and embarked on boats directed to Narva; from there, they would board Russian trains, which had been used for the transport of POWs from Russia. In the opposite direction, prisoners of war from the Central Powers detained in Siberia and Turkestan traveled towards Moscow and St. Petersburg and, from there, to Narva, with a frequency of a train every two days, or to the Finnish camp of Björkö with a train per week.⁹ As their travel was longer, POWs from the Central Powers stayed a few days in the exchange camp of Narva before they embarked on boats to Germany. Once repatriated, they fell under the authority of their respective governments.¹⁰ From 1920 to 1922, the ICRC dispatched its delegates across the whole region.¹¹ Many were in Berlin; others were in Swinemunde and Stettin, where prisoners of war embarked and disembarked; others traveled through Germany to visit camps and organize convoys; more delegates worked in the exchange camps established in Estonia, Finland, and Latvia.¹²

⁸ Martyn Housden, "When the Baltic Sea was a 'Bridge' for Humanitarian Action". Tate, *op. cit.*

⁹ ACICR, B MIS 35-5.27, Interdulg Narwa by Ehrenhold, May 26, 1920.

¹⁰ ACICR, B MIS 33-5.536, Missions & Postes du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge s'occupant des Prisonniers de Guerre, 10/11.5.1920.

¹¹ Peter Huber and Jean-François Pitteloud, "Une puissance protectrice inédite: la « mission » Wehrin du Cidr à Moscou (1920-1938)," *Relations internationales* 143, no. 3 (2011): 89–101.

¹² Ibid., 720–721. ACICR, MIS B 33-5.538, Missions & Postes du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge s'occupant des prisonniers de guerre.

Looking specifically at the maritime route, boats were chartered to go back and forth between Stettin, Narva and Tallinn, Riga (Latvia), and Björko. Since Germany could only provide four boats, the LON called upon the technical expertise of British Lieutenant Colonel L. E. Broome who, in the summer of 1920, developed a plan according to which ex-German ships would be provided to British firms, alongside the economic reparations imposed on Germany and as compensation for the ships that had been destroyed during WWI.¹³ British firms would then use German ships (their number would be increased to 16) to carry cargo and, incidentally, to transport POWs across the Baltic Sea, under the supervision of the British Military Mission in Germany and the Maritime Service of the Reparation Commission.¹⁴ The ICRC and the LON delegated to the German Maritime Authority the adaption of trains and boats to the needs of POWs: dormitories, kitchens, and infirmaries were created, which benefited from electricity and heating as well as from regular delousing.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the ICRC negotiated with the Estonian government.¹⁶ During the Paris Peace Conference, the Baltic state had already offered freedom of movement through its ports and guaranteed that the Narva region would be militarily neutral until January 1, 1922.¹⁷ Once independent, the country wished to “...render any possible service for international peace and cooperation,” in the words of Ants Piip, the important Estonian lawyer, diplomat, and politician who participated in the Paris Peace Conference and who was a member of the Estonian delegation to the Tartu peace negotiations.¹⁸ This proved true for the exchange of POWs: not only did the ICRC use the fortress of Ivangorod for almost two years, but it was also assisted by several institutions: the Estonian Army, the Health Section of the War Ministry, and the Estonian Red Cross helped prepare the fortress; local authorities and the military hospital in Narva treated sick POWs.¹⁹

However, Ants Piip’s position reached no unanimity. The Estonian Ministry of Interior expressed a “strong opposition,” as the fortress could have been transformed into a quarantine station for Estonian returnees from Russia since

¹³ On British naval interests in the Baltic region, see David G. Kirby, “A Great Opportunity Lost? Aspects of British Commercial Policy toward the Baltic States, 1920–1924,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 5, no. 4 (1974): 362–78. Annex III of Part VIII of the Versailles Treaty.

¹⁴ ALON, C119, Siberian prisoners of war, folder 1, Note on the Shipping Requirements for the Repatriation of Prisoners of War by Nansen.

¹⁵ RCICR, Frick-Cramer, *op. cit.*, 714.

¹⁶ ACICR, B MIS 35.5/13, Letter to Frick, April 27, 1920.

¹⁷ Alston, *op. cit.*, 84.

¹⁸ ACICR, B MIS 35.5/158, Piip to Drummond, June 23, 1920.

¹⁹ ACICR, MIS B 35.5/1121, Ehrenhold to ICRC, June 27, 1920.

typhus was rampant.²⁰ Indeed, at the end of WWI, Estonia, which counted a bit more than one million inhabitants, was a crossroad of migrations.²¹ Nearly 40,000 Estonians, mainly agricultural colonists and a few war refugees, returned from Russia according to the stipulations of the Treaty of Tartu;²² and 20,000 Russian refugees, civilians displaced by the Russian Civil War, and the followers of white general, Nikolai Yudenich, crossed the border to find asylum.²³ For a few months, former prisoners, Russian refugees, and Estonian returnees happened to live side by side in (self)organized camps in the Narva region²⁴.

This, coped with the widespread fear of communism, explains why the Estonian government advanced a few reasonable conditions. The ICRC was meant to notify “the arrival of the transports with the indication of the number of prisoners” in order not to affect the country’s transport system.²⁵ It was responsible for detecting prisoners of war who were sick with typhus and transferring them to the hospital in Narva.²⁶ To that end, a sanitary cordon was specially built around the fortress, for which the Geneva-based organization agreed to pay.²⁷ Last, the Red Cross engaged to make special arrangements for Russian POWs who, won over by Bolshevism, had fought in the Polish-Soviet War. On their way back to Russia, this special group of prisoners of war were not allowed to stop in Estonia, as local authorities had concerns regarding the country’s national security.²⁸ Internal political tensions, yet not connected to the exchange of POWs, proved the concerns of the Estonian

²⁰ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.27, Interdulag Narwa by Ehrenhold, May 26, 1920. ACICR, MIS B, 35.5/613, Dessonaz to ICRC, November 15, 1920.

²¹ Dariusz Stola, “Forced Migrations in Central European History,” *The International Migration Review* 26, no. 2 (1992): 324–341.

²² Out of 200,000 Estonians in Russia, 106,000 submitted formal requests to repatriate and 81,027 were authorized, yet only 40,000 repatriated. Helen Rohtmet, “The Significance of Ethnicity in the Estonian Return Migration Policy of the Early 1920s,” *Nationalities Papers* 40, no. 6 (2012): 895–908.

²³ On minority politics, see Kari Alenius, “Under the Conflicting Pressures of the Ideals of the Era and the Burdens of History: Ethnic Relations in Estonia, 1918–1925,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 35, no. 1 (2004): 32–49. Kari Alenius, “Estonian Anti-Semitism in the Early 1920s,” *Zeitschrift Für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 54, no. 1 (2005): 36–55.

²⁴ Piana, “L’Estonie et l’échange des prisonniers de guerre”: 333–338.

²⁵ ACICR, B MIS 35.5/9, Ministre à Monsieur Frick, April 24, 1920.

²⁶ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.6, Délégué général du CICR à monsieur le ministre des Affaires étrangères de la République Esthonienne, 22 avril 1920.

²⁷ ACICR, B MIS 35.5/11, Frick à Monsieur le ministre de la Guerre de la République Esthonienne, April 26, 1920.

²⁸ ANB, Ms. fol. 1988, K1, Nansen fil Drummond (Folkeforbundet London), Report no. 1 on the repatriation of prisoners of war by Nansen, May 8, 1920.

government to be real; in December 1924, the Estonian communist party was strong enough to organize a (failed) *coup d'état*.²⁹

In April 1920, the ICRC appointed and officially accredited delegate Otto Ehrenhold “to make all the necessary arrangements with the authorities and competent persons, to make all the necessary expenses.”³⁰ It is essential to reiterate that the Red Cross had no previous experience in building a camp, as it was normally the task of the detaining powers alongside the stipulations of international humanitarian law. This means that Ehrenhold had no precedent and enjoyed a great freedom: he immediately recruited 40 Estonian laborers from Narva, who repaired and furnished the buildings destroyed by the war of independence with doors, windows, tables, chairs, as well as electricity and a phone; and he ordered that the camp’s muddy winter soil be compacted in order to build tents, where prisoners of war could be hosted, and to install moving kitchens where food could be prepared.³¹ The postcard (fig. 2), where we recognize the signature of Major Siegrist for the Red Cross, who soon would take over Ehrenhold’s job, beautifully illustrates how the fortress of Ivangorod was transformed during the time of the exchange plan.

From the many letters and reports that he wrote, we easily understand that Ehrenhold did not work in isolation. Carl Hahn, representing the German office for interned prisoners of war and civilians, assisted the Red Cross in the registration processes and in keeping finances in order.³² The ARC, which had previously conducted anti-typhus and child relief programs in the Baltics, helped disinfect the camp, installed showers with hot water, and prepared delousing stations.³³ The Swedish Red Cross provided medicine and winter clothing.³⁴ And the YMCA dispatched two officers.³⁵ During the two years of the humanitarian operation, there was a steady turnover of delegates. Concentrating solely on the fortress of Ivangorod, Ehrenhold was followed by Lieutenant Colonel Hartmann, Major Siegrist, the one who took the

²⁹ Maurice Carrez, “L’année 1917 en Estonie : entre exaltation patriotique et conflits sociaux,” *Cahiers d’histoire. Revue d’histoire critique* 137 (2017): 75–90.

³⁰ ACICR, B MIS 35/5/8, Instructions for Ehrenhold signed by Frick, April 24, 1920.

³¹ ACICR, MIS B 35.5/1121, Ehrenhold to ICRC, June 27, 1920.

³² ACICR, B MIS 35.5/12, Certificat pour Monsieur Carl Hahn, April 26, 1920. ACICR, MIS B 35.5/385, Letter to Dessonnaz, August 25, 1920. See also ACICR, B MIS 33.5.1619, Rapport sur la mission en Lettonie et Esthonie par Frick, July 17, 1920.

³³ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.5, ICRC to Kinowes of the ARC, May 17, 1920. Minaudier, *op. cit.*, 250. On the US government and institutions, see Patenaude, *op. cit.* Griffante, *op. cit.*

³⁴ ACICR, 35.5/150, Carl (prince de Suède et président de la Croix-Rouge Suédoise) et E. Stjernstedt (secrétaire general) to ICRC, June 21, 1920.

³⁵ More generally, Harald Fischer-Tiné, Stefan Rolf Huebner, and Ian R. Tyrrell (eds), *Spreading Protestant Modernity Global Perspectives on the Social Work of the YMCA and YWCA, 1889-1970* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2022).

photograph, Major Ehrard Richter, and Georges Dessonnaz.³⁶ Dr. Woldemar Lange and Dr. Léon Rusca took care of medical work, organized the infirmary, handled the anti-epidemic work, and performed the inspections and disinfection of the POWs and civilians.³⁷ Félix Fabel and N. Fein acted as deputy delegates, while N. Ramseyer and G. Tschan worked as interpreters.³⁸



Fig. 2. Postcard illustrating the fortress of Ivangorod in Estonia. Courtesy of the International Committee of the Red Cross Archives.³⁹

As we started to see in Chapter 1, the ICRC delegates were selected because of their professional and personal skills. For instance, Georges Dessonnaz was chosen on account of his previous humanitarian mission and because he spoke Russian, since his mother was a native from Narva.⁴⁰ The mission in Estonia would allow him to later

³⁶ ACICR, B MIS 33.5/1040, de Watteville to the Commissions des Missions, June 18, 1920. ACICR, B MIS 35, Instructions for Dessonnaz, September 29, 1920.

³⁷ L'expérience du Comité international de la Croix Rouge en matière de secours internationaux, 57–58.

³⁸ ACICR, B MIS 33.1, box 18, Délégations du Comité International de la Croix Rouge.

³⁹ ACICR (DR), Post World War I – Narva, Ivangorod fortress. ICRC transit point for Russian prisoners of war repatriated from Germany and German prisoners of war coming from Russia, 1921, V-P-HIST-03054-06

⁴⁰ In 2017, the artist, Agnès Geoffray, inaugurated an exhibit entitled, “Temporary Shelter,” in which she created a dialogue between a photo album that Georges Dessonnaz created on his stay in

assist Russian refugees in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and Bulgaria, as well as needy Ukrainian children.⁴¹ Yet, in Narva, Eduard Frick particularly selected Swiss military men, as they were deemed to infuse humanitarian aid with “discipline, method, and command.”⁴² He also expressed a preference for delegates from the higher ranks of the Swiss army, as he feared that prisoners of war would feel demeaned to receive orders from the lower ranks. Two elements emerge from these examples: the Swiss army had historically served as a basis of cooptation for many delegates, giving further evidence of the tight collaboration of the military and the humanitarian world; rather than marking a caesura between wartime and peacetime practices, the example of Dessonaz suggests that lessons were learnt, and experiences were transmitted from one emergency to another. What significantly changed was the geopolitical and ideological context where the Red Cross happened to intervene.

2.2 Practices of protection

Formally, the Red Cross delegates began protecting POWs in German and Russian internment camps, as well as in the trains and in the boats that brought them home across the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. As Frick-Cramer recollects, “the delegate was responsible for his convoy and had the duty to formally oppose any examination or arrest of any member when crossing the border.”⁴³ The delegate’s status gave him both privileges and responsibilities: for instance, he could refuse that local authorities and the military interfered with his protection activities, yet he was also expected to verify that only the prisoners of war whose names were on the lists would be transported. No prisoner of war was allowed to leave the convoy, as this immediately would lead to the loss of humanitarian protection and to the risk of being arrested by the local police⁴⁴.

The exchange camp was still being prepared as the first convoy of Russian prisoners of war left Stettin for Estonia on May 6, 1920, while the first exchange through Finland took place 15 days later, when the Finnish camp of Björkö was completed.⁴⁵ From the opposite side, prisoners of war from the Central Powers traveled by train to Narva, and, from the roadstead, walked a few kilometers to the fortress of Ivangorod,

Narva and other photographs held in the collections of the *Collection iconographique vaudoise* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLHvefT3nsY>, last seen June 8, 2023).

⁴¹ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.181, de Watteville to Commission des missions, June 18, 1920.

⁴² ACICR, B MIS 33.5.1619, Rapport sur la mission en Lettonie et Esthonie par Frick, July 17, 1920.

⁴³ RCICR, Frick-Cramer, *op. cit.*, 716, footnote 1.

⁴⁴ Piana, “L’Estonie et l’échange des prisonniers de guerre”: 330–333.

⁴⁵ ALON, R1709, Rapport de la mission du CICR à Berlin pour la liquidation du rapatriement, April 12, 1922, 42.20070.19014.

with invalids transported by track. The Red Cross delegates were quick to realize that Germany and Russia mobilized uneven resources. In Germany, local authorities provided food to, deloused, registered, and gave an identity document to Russian prisoners of war, while the ICRC organized feeding plans during the boat trip.⁴⁶ A rational system was put in place to make sure that repatriation would run smoothly. The authorities attributed a number to each camp and drew by lot the order of repatriation, whereas the delegates verified the number of internees.⁴⁷ In the camps, profession and regions of origin shaped the operations: “mechanics, blacksmiths, locksmiths, and miners” were prioritized in the spirit of postwar reconstruction, in addition to POWs who did not work and who had experienced a longer captivity.

For prisoners of war traveling from Russia, the ongoing civil war complicated their trip and further undermined their health and safety. This is something that the ICRC became acutely aware of when the first exchanged prisoners of war coming from Russia, who stayed in Narva for a few days waiting to join their homes in Central Eastern Europe, wrote hand-written letters and reports to their attention. We do not know whether the ICRC delegates urged them to write these reports or whether former prisoners of war took the initiative. However, the non-negligible number of hand-written documents, the majority in German, stocked at the archives of the ICRC, and the density of the information provided suggest the reasons behind this: the first convoy of prisoners of war felt responsible for the brothers in arms who were still waiting to be repatriated; they expressed outrage for the numerous abuses that they had to endure in breach of the rules of law; and they wanted to reiterate their strong anti-communist credo.

In a long report, written by two prisoners of war, Rudolf P., an Austrian citizen, and Rudolf B., a Hungarian citizen, we read about the long marches that they endured to reach the place of internment where nothing had been prepared to host them and where they had to build the tents and huts. Food provisions were lacking, and insufficient for invalid and sick POWs “As a result of poor heating of the infirmaries, malnourishment and wholly inadequate care during the typhus epidemic of 1919-1920, cases of facial erysipelas and gangrene increased in virtually epidemic fashion...” The lack of communication with their families also impacted the mental health of interned men and the cases of breakdowns increased. Further abuses happened during the long repatriation route. In their own words,

Against the order of the Russian government of 4. April 1920 that no difficulties be put in the paths of prisoners of war bound home by any authorities, it was tolerated by Russian

⁴⁶ RCICR, Frick-Cramer, *op. cit.*, 716–718.

⁴⁷ ACICR, B MIS 33.5.538, Missions et postes de CICR s'occupant des prisonniers de guerre, May 10-11, 1920.

authorities that all along the train, through the various international compartments, the traveling prisoners of war be hauled out and their documents /: certificates of invalidity, and the equivalent:/ taken away... The following circumstance, moreover, is typical of the departure process: all transports arriving in Moscow and henceforth in Petersburg will be submitted to arbitrary inspection in which the prisoners of war are divided into the 3 groups [...] k—counterrevolutionary, i—indifferent, r—revolutionary. The prisoners of war designated with k and all officers are held back irrespective of the state of their health. According to all that has been said, Russian communism, which sails under the flag of a universal love of mankind, is for the prisoners of war denoted by the words corruption, cold, hunger, and death.⁴⁸

Through this example, despite being portrayed as non-political, the repatriation of formerly fighting men was rather highly political in the eyes of both Russian authorities and repatriated POWs. The ongoing political tensions were confirmed in another letter addressed to the ICRC. Passing through Narva in July 1920, German corporal Karl S., previously detained in the Tashkent region, reported that, in late 1918, prisoners of war were pressured to mobilize in favor of the communist forces. While some of them went along and embraced the struggle, others, himself included, tried to resist. For instance, the POWs in his internment camp voted on a resolution, according to which “the mobilization of the prisoners of war was protested and it was stated that former prisoners of war could only join the Red Army voluntarily but could not be forced to do so.”⁴⁹

In another dramatic letter, Hans S. recounted the travel of nearly 500 invalid prisoners of war, almost all of them over 40 years old, who left Petropavlovsk, in Eastern Russia, directed towards St. Petersburg on their way to Estonia. The journey took nearly three months because the train was first delayed, then stopped, and prisoners of war, despite being invalid, were obliged to work in a cannery. When a new order came that authorized the POWs to continue their trip, only a smaller number continued, 40 out of 500. Eventually, the remaining men were authorized to travel to Moscow and crossed the borders by means of a provisional “prisoner-passport” on their way home.⁵⁰

Reaching Narva might have been a moment of relief. Once in the camp, prisoners of war underwent a codified *iter*: they were counted, deloused, fed, clothed,

⁴⁸ ACICR, MIS B MIS 35.5/135, Handwritten document by Rudolf P., fluv. i. k. k. I. R. 75, Salzburg, Stanffenstr. 17, and Rudolf B., Captain zug. d. Gstbe. III. Honoed Distrikt, Command.—Hungary, Narva July 2, 1920. See also the memoirs by the Austrian Pow Gustav Krist confirms this information. *Prisoner in the Forbidden Land* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938).

⁴⁹ ACICR, MIS B MIS 35.5/279, Handwritten document ‘Bericht’ by Karl S., July 25, 1920.

⁵⁰ ACICR, B MIS 35, Transport d’invalides Petropawlowsk-Petrograd-Narwa, by Hans S., November 18, 1920.

lodged, and registered. Daily practices of protection were implemented by local personnel, including guards, nurses, cooks, and secretaries, whereas counting and registering fell under the responsibility of the delegates and of national authorities.⁵¹ First, the delegate and Hahn for the German government double-checked the number of POWs and crossed them off the lists prepared upon embarkation and disembarkation, to make sure that nobody had escaped. Next was the sanitary and hygienic treatment, which was essential to contain epidemics. POWs were directed towards collective showering and were provided with soap, trimmers, and clean towels.⁵² In the camp there were also pit latrines and lavatories.⁵³ Meanwhile clothes were disinfected through delousing machinery using hot air, while the luggage was stored in a separate room until the moment of departure. Prisoners of war were then distributed in buildings and unheated tents where they were given beds, often without mattresses and bedding. Food distribution closely followed: delegates bought food locally or arranged for it to be sent to Narva and decided on the diet.⁵⁴ Since former combatants had experienced huge deprivation, the food ration was slowly increased not to stress their bodies. It contained 750 grams of bread, 500 grams of meat or fish, 125 grams of fat, 200 grams of wheat, 500 grams of potatoes or rice, and 25 grams of coffee.⁵⁵ To complement the food portion, the YMCA distributed chocolate, sugar, and cigarettes.

After meeting the essential needs began the most difficult task: registration.⁵⁶ International and national officers in Narva interviewed prisoners of war and verified the correspondence between the place of repatriation and the nationality that they had declared upon entrance.⁵⁷ To do so, we might imagine that the ICRC delegates often looked at a map of Central Eastern Europe whose borders had been recently redrawn. On more than one occasion, the ICRC delegates declared that "... the austrian and hungarian prisoners include many people of roumanian,

⁵¹ ACICR, B. MIS 35.5/27, Interdulag Narwa by Ehrenhold, May 26, 1920.

⁵² ACICR, B MIS 35.5.5, Ehrenhold to Kinower, April 21, 1920

⁵³ ACICR, B MIS 35.5/27, Interdulag Narwa by Ehrenhold, May 26, 1920.

⁵⁴ RCICR, Frick-Cramer, *op. cit.*, 716.

⁵⁵ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.217, Quantité de vivres nécessaires au ravitaillement des prisonniers de guerre centraux pendant leur voyage de la frontière russe a la frontière de leurs pays respectifs, July 29, 1920.

⁵⁶ Tate, *op. cit.* 310–315. On questions of belonging and identify, see Simone Attilio Bellezza, *Tornare in Italia: come i prigionieri trentini in Russia divennero italiani (1914-1920)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016). Simone Attilio Bellezza, "Choosing Their Own Nation: National and Political Identities of the Italian POWs in Russia, 1914-1922," in Judith Devlin, Maria Falina, and John Paul Newman (eds), *World War I in Central and Eastern Europe: Politics, Conflict and Military Experience* (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018): 119–137.

⁵⁷ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.27, Interdulag Narwa by Ehrenhold, May 26, 1920.

polish, check, jugoslaves and other nationalities, who's home will not be within the borders of the present austrian and hungarian states."⁵⁸ De Watteville wrote that,

A Hungarian may, for example, announce himself as a Romanian on arriving at the [Narval] camp, be recognized after examination by the competent Stettin Commission, as a national of Czecho-Slovakia, and then at the border, it is established that he is actually Hungarian. These cases occur frequently.⁵⁹

Understandably, the registration was a source of tension. The first preoccupation was financial: not only Germany, through Hahn, called for a correct use of financial resources, but all the governments whose nationals were to be repatriated reiterated that they would pay only for their own citizens.⁶⁰ The ICRC, which was almost bankrupt, could not make mistakes. The second concern pertained to the fear of communism. On paper, it was up to former prisoners of war to decide whether they wanted to repatriate or to stay behind. And yet, the reality on the ground was more complex. If the ICRC took for granted that prisoners from the Central Powers would want to repatriate from communist Russia, it expected that Russian POWs in Central Europe would sign a form in which they declared that they wished to return out of their own free will.⁶¹ In a few cases, the ICRC encouraged Russian prisoners of war who had married German women to locally integrate.⁶² Interestingly, when it came to challenging the Soviet power, the Red Cross proved ready to derogate to the prevailing organizing principle of postwar international relations, according to which the alignment of ethnicity with nationality guarantees world peace.

Another typology of documents helps grasp the practices of protection that the Red Cross put in place: statistics. The delegates kept detailed accounts and lists about mostly anything that was happening during the exchange plan. So we read about the names of the boats which were chartered back and forth through the Baltic Sea; we are told about how many trips each of them took. Numbers continued to be a testament of the Red Cross delegates' work inside the camp, as well as of the lived experience of POWs. By looking at the number of calories that they were given, we have a sense of their diet. By counting the beds, we can easily say that, more

⁵⁸ ACICR, MIS B 33.5/912, Report no. 1 on the repatriation of prisoners of war by Nansen to Drummond, May 28, 1920.

⁵⁹ Tate, *op. cit.*, 314. ALON, C1112, de Watteville to Bonner, May 21, 1921.

⁶⁰ ACICR, MIS B 35.5/230, les demandes adressées par les différents représentants allemands, autrichiens, hongrois et des soviets sont les suivantes par Frick, May 20, 1920. Ivan Volgyes, "Hungarian Prisoners of War In Russia, 1916-1919," *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 14, no. 1 (1973): 54–85.

⁶¹ ALON, C1111, Correspondence with Cramer and Brunel, folder 5, Une mission pour le Comité International de la Croix-Rouge pour les prisonniers de guerre en Allemagne. Undated report.

⁶² RCICR, Frick-Cramer, *op. cit.*, 718.

than often, Narva was overcrowded. Statistics emerged as a permanent element of postwar humanitarianism. Figure 3 illustrates the boat trips in the Baltic Sea, the number and nationality of the exchanged prisoners of war, as well as the number of civilians.

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Copie der Transportlisten vom Interdulg Narwa. Kpf. Zivilgefangene.

No.	Monat: Tag:	Demerfer	Total	Dtsch	Dtsch Ugat.	Ung.	Tsch.	Polen	Ru- mänen	S d S	Ita- liener	Div.	Män- ner	Frau- en	Kin- der
1	Mai 18.	Ceuta	624	398	62	74	36	26	18	10					
2	" 18.	Aamot	532	379	129	15		3	5			1 Türke			
3	" 24.	Kiew	497	492	5										
4	" 26.	Ceuta	915	410	109	186	114	58	28	7	3				
5	Juni 1.	Aamot	595	345		180	48	8	17	1	1				
6	" 4.	Rügen	796	286	146	375	3	5	1	89		1 "			
7	" 5.	Kiew	643	148	172	236	6	35	23	13	10				
8	" 7.	Ceuta	830	184	165	197	64	22	37	43	3	7 Juden	139		
9	" 11.	Regina	539	138	123	158	5	10	8	2		2 "	40	35	18
10	" 13.	Aamot	638	189	106	218	48	56		37			1	1	8
11	" 14.	Rügen	489		157	139	43	16	31	37	6		24	16	8
12	" 16.	Kiew	640	51	152	322	53	4	22	18			12	11	4
13	" 19.	Ceuta	294	87	5	175	37	3	25	25	3		14	16	5
14	" 20.	Regina	340	69	3	151	39	11	15	18	4		14	11	5
15	" 26.	Rügen	742	138	188	161	107	42	35	22	1		43	4	4
16	" 28.	Kiew	668	145	10	128	114	1	74	77	2		38	38	41
17	Juli 3.	Ceuta	807	526	61	8	87	25	18	19	12		34	18	4
18	" 4.	Lisboa	671	35	39	225	122	33	68	22	5	87 T.	18	8	4
19a	" 5.	Lisboa	387	128									38	30	81

MIS 35.5/154. Copie des Transportlisten vom Interdulg Narwa, June 16, 1920.

Fig. 3. Copy of the transport list from Interdulg June 16, 1920. Courtesy of the International Committee of the Red Cross Archives.⁶³

Despite being rather pragmatic men, the Red Cross delegates occasionally paid attention to the mental health of POWs. They hoped that the beauty of the fortress of Ivangorod would contribute to their healing in view of reintegrating the roles of sons, husbands, and fathers. They also organized recreational activities. An orchestra formed in Tashkent in Uzbekistan, and composed of 30 Austrian, Czech, and Hungarian POWs, organized a concert where it played Brahms and Grieg; a Polish tenor sang Rigoletto; and a dancer, a painter, and a magician also performed. On Christmas Eve of 1920, the Red Cross organized a dinner and a dance around a festive tree; on December 26 of the same year, the YMCA organized a small party for the prisoners who arrived the day before from Russia, giving them some

⁶³ ACICR, B MIS, 35.5/154, Copie des Transportlisten vom Interdulg, Narwa, June 16, 1920.

chocolate as a present.⁶⁴ It was believed that keeping spirits high was beneficial to the returning men.

2.3 Practices in becoming

Practices of protection were not fixed but becoming. A few months after the beginning of the exchange, ICRC delegates started leaving on regular inspection trips. From the outset, it appeared that the exchange camp was often overcrowded: in August 1920, it hosted 3,000 persons, while the normal capacity of the camp was 1,200.⁶⁵ This was a problem, as the presence of many POWs jeopardized practices of protection, since food and sleeping places were insufficient.⁶⁶ However, the biggest concern pertained to the dire sanitary conditions and to the risk of epidemics.⁶⁷ A report written by the medical delegate, Dr. Lange, stresses a disheartening truth: no prisoner could be forced to bath or delouse. Dr. Lange observed that the weakest and sickest POWs, those who more likely than not were carriers of diseases, often refused to undress due to the cold Baltic weather. Moreover, only one-fifth agreed to have their clothes disinfected and not all of the clothes were properly washed, as heavy, thick coats or blankets could not go through delousing machines. It was not uncommon that POWs found lice infected with typhus on their bodies only a few hours after showering.⁶⁸ The gravity of the situation can be measured by Dr. Lange being ready to discontinue his work, had the camp not been reorganized, as he did not want to be considered responsible for an epidemic outbreak.⁶⁹ The most immediate measure was the construction of a hospital within the camp.

In the fall of 1920, another major problem materialized: boats had a hard time coming closer to the coast and disembarking POWs due to the heavy sea in winter-time. To avoid POWs waiting on the boat's deck in the cold, rain, and snow, Major Siegrist designed an alternative route where travel by railway was preferred to sea transport; moreover, the harbor of Tallinn, which was bigger than the one of

⁶⁴ ACICR, B MIS 35, Rapport du camp de passage Narva, décembre 1920 par Dessonnaz.

⁶⁵ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.366 bis, Résumé du rapport demi-mensuel du Major Siegrist, August 16, 1920.

⁶⁶ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.395, Rapport au Comité International de la Croix Rouge, mission de Berlin, par Capitaine Berdez, August 28, 1920.

⁶⁷ ACICR, B MIS 33.5.2809, Rapport sur la mission du ICRC chargée d'assister à la conférence de Kowno du 12 au 14 septembre 1920, d'inspecter les camps de passage du ICRC en Lituanie et en Estonie, déléguées Edmond Boissier et Otto Ehrenhold.

⁶⁸ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.409, Traduction du rapport du Dr. Lange au chef du camp de Narva, September 21, 1920.

⁶⁹ ACICR, B MIS 35.5/544 bis, Légende pour l'hôpital projeté par Dr. Lange. ACICR, B MIS 35.5/596, Rapport sur l'activité du camp du 1 au 31 octobre 1920 par Dessonnaz, November 6, 1920.

Narva, offered adequate space for maneuvering. Russian trains transporting POWs from the Central Powers would arrive, as before, in Narva. Following the normal procedures, POWs would be cleaned, deloused, and fed in the fortress. Meanwhile, the trains would be disinfected and then transport POWs to Tallinn, where they were embarked directing for Stettin.⁷⁰ In general, the transport system was far from efficient: Russian trains were often late to the embarkation point only to see that the boats had already gone; 280 trips took place across the Baltic Sea in both directions which could have reduced to 201, had the trains arrived on time.⁷¹

We should not forget that, at the time of the exchange, regional wars for the determination of states' borders in Central and Eastern Europe complicated the movements of people. Returning POWs "competed" over the use of trains with Russian military who were called to serve in the war against Poland.⁷² A few months later, the ICRC exchanged Bolshevik troops that had fought against Poland and had turned out to be disarmed in German camps. To do so, it mediated between Estonians and Russians: the former authorized the transport on the condition that the Bolsheviks took down the "red badges"; the latter stressed that they were not POWs but soldiers returning from internment. It required the mediation of the ICRC to ease the tensions between Estonia and Russia and move on with the transport.⁷³

There is at least another adaptation that, at first, took the ICRC by surprise: among the exchanged persons were civilians, difficult to recognize due to the mixing and matching of civilian and military clothing. For instance, at the end of July 1920, the boat, *Ceuta*, transported 735 POWs of different nationalities and 445 civilians, of whom 443 were Germans.⁷⁴ As historian Martyn Housden writes, German civilians constituted the largest number; born in Russia from German colonists who had moved east in the nineteenth century to find available lands, they decided to return "home" as they felt increasingly unwelcomed in Russia.⁷⁵ Furthermore, among the exchanged civilians was a high number of women—who had married POWs from the Central Powers—and their small children.⁷⁶ The ICRC

⁷⁰ ACICR, B MIS 33.5.2462, *Projet d'organisation pour le rapatriement des prisonniers de guerre par l'Esthonie durant l'hiver*.

⁷¹ RCICR, Frick-Cramer, *op. cit.*, 714.

⁷² ACICR, B MIS 35.5.513, Dessonnaz to ICRC, October 5, 1920.

⁷³ ACICR, B MIS 35.5/616, Dessonnaz to ICRC, November 15, 1920.

⁷⁴ ACICR, B MIS 35.5/258, *Interdulg befördert durch "Ceuta" nach Stettin* by Siegrist.

⁷⁵ Housden, "When the Baltic Sea was a 'Bridge' for Humanitarian Action": 75.

⁷⁶ On gender and captivity, see Fabien Théofilakis, "La sexualité du prisonnier de guerre Allemands et Français en captivité (1914-1918, 1940-1948)," *VING Vingtième siècle: Revue d'histoire* 99, no. 3 (2008): 203–219. Lisa M. Todd, "The Soldier's Wife Who Ran Away with the Russian": Sexual Infidelities in World War I Germany," *Central European History* 44, no. 2 (2011): 257–278. Iris Rachamimov, "The Disruptive Comforts of Drag: (Trans)Gender Performances among Prisoners of War In Russia, 1914–1920," *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 2 (2006): 362–82. Brian K. Feltman,

then hastily adjusted the practices of protection, by providing special food provisions for babies and toddlers, and by equipping boats and trains with powdered milk and lining.⁷⁷ Inside the camp, women and children were normally hosted in brick buildings instead of in tents, and they underwent separate delousing procedures.⁷⁸ As it had been the case in wartime, where the lines between the military and civilians were blurred, as it was also in peacetime.⁷⁹

Last, proof of the embeddedness of the exchange camp in the surrounding territory is the many transactions that happened between returning men and the local population. Items, including sausages and cigarettes, were sold at high prices to prisoners of war who walked into the fortress; wood and other material were stolen from the fortress by means of holes opened in its walls. To this, the ICRC reacted by increasing the number of guards. Yet, it soon realized that containment measures had little effect, as it was often some of the camp's employees who let people into the camp after the lights went out.⁸⁰ From these petty transactions, it appears that prisoners of war were better off in the camp than the Estonian population living in Narva, where food was scarce and expensive. Hence, the fortress of Narva Ivangorod emerges as a space of exception—where a specific legal system was applied and where peculiar practices of protection were put in place—as well as a space of manifold movements and interactions.

2.4 Encounters in the camp

The history of humanitarian aid is one of persons crossing paths, talking, and observing each other. The fortress of Ivangorod was a crossroad for international officers, national representatives, military authorities, local staff, and repatriated prisoners of war and civilians. Some of the actors left written and visual sources

“‘We Don’t Want Any German Off-Spring After These Prisoners Left Here’: German Military Prisoners and British Women in the First World War,” *Gender & History* 30, no. 1 (2018): 110–130. Lena Radauer, “Wedding the ‘Enemy’. Unions between Russian Women and ‘German’ Prisoners of the First World War,” in Adrienne Edgar and Benjamin Frommer (eds), *Intermarriage from Central Europe to Central Asia: Mixed Families in the Age of Extremes* (University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 255–280.

⁷⁷ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.223, de Watteville to Commission des missions, August 4, 1920.

⁷⁸ ICRC Archives (ARR), Après-guerre 1914-1918 – Narva, forteresse Ivangorod. Station de passage du CICR pour les prisonniers de guerre russes rapatriés d’Allemagne et les prisonniers allemands venant de Russie, September 1920, V-P-HIST-03050-23.

⁷⁹ ACICR, B MIS 33.5.141, de Watteville to Commission of missions, Berlin, April 12, 1920.

⁸⁰ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.673, Rapport du camp de passage Narva décembre 1920 par Dessonnaz, January 5, 1921.

behind, which makes it easier to account for their voices. Many more appeared, as in a watermark, in the words or in the statistics written by the Red Cross delegates.

As we have started to see, the Red Cross delegates were in the privileged position to leave a wealth of sources. A common narrative emerges: the delegate who overcomes obstacles, takes risks, and shows perseverance, for which he mobilizes professional skills, as well as Christian and Swiss values. Delegates were often overworked, busy from early morning to midnight, with barely any time for themselves; being in Narva represented a break not only from their professions but also from their families, whom they did not bring along.⁸¹ Only Dessonnaz traveled with his wife Zénaïde, who assisted him on a voluntary basis and, later on, with the title of “assistant delegate.”⁸² Differently from the other delegates, the couple did not stay in the camp of Narva but rented a hotel room, where there were no windows nor electricity, and where the mattress was “hard as stone.”⁸³ In a personal letter, Dessonnaz shared details about his life on mission. Writing about the heavy workload, he reported:

I have to tell you that I'm not complaining about it at all, because the work is interesting since it's varied. We see a bunch of persons, some thank you, others ye... at you perfectly, it's charming! There are heads that we would like to hang, others to kiss (obviously I am talking about women's heads!). It's a real cinema.⁸⁴

Estonian authorities and civilians emerge as both cooperative and competitive from the archival sources. The Red Cross and the League of Nations often praised the enlightened attitude of Estonia's authorities which had authorized the exchange. Throughout the two years, Estonian institutions offered logistical, medical assistance, and they guaranteed the cooperation of its institutions. However, the Red Cross delegates did not spare harsh words of criticism. To de Watteville, it was “impossible to get anything in Estonia without giving bribes,” suggesting the existence of a widespread system of corruption.⁸⁵ Dessonnaz complained that the local population would steal anything, even the iron steps from the trains which transported prisoners of war.⁸⁶ These episodes reiterate the civilizing posture of the Swiss institution, for which Estonia occupied a middle position between the superior West and backward Soviet Russia.

⁸¹ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.123, de Watteville to Commission of missions, July 10, 1920.

⁸² Troyon and Palmieri, *op. cit.*, 106–107.

⁸³ ACICR, B MIS 35.5.518, Personal letter from Dessonnaz to Oberholzer and Temmel, November 17, 1920.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ ACICR, B MIS 35.5/159, de Watteville to Commission of missions, July 13, 1920. ACICR, B MIS 35.57694, Dessonnaz to ICRC, December 11, 1920.

⁸⁶ ACICR, B MIS 35.57694, Dessonnaz to ICRC, December 11, 1920.

The Red Cross had a similar ambivalent attitude towards the representatives of the governments whose nationals were repatriated. According to Dessonnaz, it was important “to be armed with a universal mistrust not only vis-à-vis the Russian representatives but also the Estonians and with most of the Germans.”⁸⁷ For instance, Hahn was accused of favoring the interests of the German government and to lack neutrality in his actions.⁸⁸ These rivalries convinced Dessonnaz of the necessity to hang the Red Cross logo—a red cross on a white flag—over the camp’s entrance in order to make sure that prisoners of war should be grateful to the Geneva institution and not to the German mission.⁸⁹ Other tensions also emerged from the difficult cohabitation of many institutions in such a close space.⁹⁰ During an inspection trip, Captain Berdez for the ICRC wrote that “the German organs, the YMCA and our mission [were] in rivalry.”⁹¹ The Red Cross lamented that the ARC had promised hygienic material that it was unable to deliver and that a large truck used for the transport of sick prisoners of war was taken away with no explanation.

While the Red Cross delegates intermittently interacted with national and international institutions, it was with prisoners of war that they lived shoulder to shoulder. The fact that many POWs left detailed documents behind, where they recounted the most difficult and delicate moments spent in captivity, suggests that a relationship of trust was built between the two groups. And yet, the Swiss delegate and the returning prisoner could not have experienced warfare more differently. During the war, the delegate, who was a citizen of a neutral country, did not fight, and neither experienced the trenches, the surrender, or internment; he did not fear for his family, waiting for letters that took weeks to arrive; he did not have to fight for his own survival.⁹² The delegate’s wartime “inactivity” stood in sharp contrast to the combatant’s masculinity, patriotism, and sense of sacrifice. During the repatriation plan, the Swiss delegate regained his masculinity and sense of purpose by assisting needy men, who depended on foreign relief, were tired,

⁸⁷ ACICR, MIS B 35-5/385, Letter to Dessonnaz, August 25, 1920.

⁸⁸ Ibid. See also ACICR, B MIS 33-5.1619, Rapport sur la mission en Lettonie et Esthonie par Frick, July 17, 1920. “It must be emphasized more and more on each occasion that our interdulags are not German camps and that, on the contrary, the proportion of Germans who pass there is low. The presence of a Soldatenheim is not admissible unless he is absolutely subordinate to the delegate of the C.I.C.R. and that he also deals with all nationalities”.

⁸⁹ ACICR, B MIS 35, Report by Dessonnaz, August 4, 1920.

⁹⁰ ACICR, B MIS 33-5.1619, Rapport sur la mission en Lettonie et Esthonie par Frick, July 17, 1920. ACICR, B MIS 33-5/1707, Baker to Cramer, July 20, 1920.

⁹¹ ACICR, B MIS 35-5.395, Rapport au Comité International de la Croix Rouge, mission de Berlin, par Capitaine Berdez, August 28, 1920.

⁹² Pålvi Conca-Pulli, *Soldats au service de l'ordre public: la politique du maintien de l'ordre intérieur au moyen de l'armée en Suisse entre 1914 et 1949* (Neuchâtel: Université de Neuchâtel, 2003).

undernourished, and anxious.⁹³ However, returning prisoners of war were not simply helpless victims. The report-writing suggests that some denounced abuses in captivity and on the repatriation route; others showed camaraderie towards their fellow soldiers; the majority wished to prove their anti-communist credo. These examples prove that gendered constructions were not fixed but becoming constantly mobilized, (re)negotiated, and, at times, instrumentalized.



Fig. 4. Photograph of the local staff in Narva. Courtesy of the International Committee of the Red Cross Archives.⁹⁴

There is at least another actor who is worth mentioning, the local staff. It would be interesting to know how the local staff perceived the chaotic interactions of so many men, women, and children in the camp or how they navigated the babble of languages. Did they consider the Red Cross delegates to be hierarchical or cooperative? From the evidence (or the lack thereof) that we have, delegates were certainly dismissive. At the beginning of the exchange, we are left to know that they employed six guards, six persons, including nurses, to supervise the delousing procedures

⁹³ Elsa Brändström, *Among Prisoners of War In Russia & Siberia* (London: Hutchinson, 1929).

⁹⁴ AICRC (ARR), Post World War I – Narva, Ivangorod fortress. Personnel working at ICRC transit point for Russian prisoners of war repatriated from Germany and German prisoners of war coming from Russia, July 1920, V-P-HIST-03058-23.

and to provide medical assistance, one cook and four kitchen helpers, and three secretaries. The number of the local staff decreased in time. However, no contracts are left, no letters written by the members of the local staff are to be found. If it were not for a few scant references and for a photograph (fig. 4), we would be left with the wrong impression that the ICRC delegates worked in a vacuum.

How can it be explained that the local staff were almost erased from the records? This was due to a combination of gender, class, and racist biases. It is possible that international officers dismissed mundane practices of care, since they were implemented by persons with little or no education, and who probably did not speak foreign languages.⁹⁵ We cannot exclude that the delegates extended a certain civilizational posture towards the Estonian local staff too, on the account that some of them might have participated in illicit exchanges of items across the fortress's walls. With regard to women, either cooks or nurses, their feminine occupations *de facto* subordinated them to the professionalism of the men in the mission. The Red Cross delegates did not come even remotely close to acknowledge that, without the local staff, there would have been no exchange, let alone did they realize that foreign relief perpetuated a gendered, classist, and racialized view of the world.

2.5 Conclusion

At the end of the exchange, a total of 251,703 Russians repatriated from Germany, including 198,486 POWs, 41,712 internees of the Red Army, as well as a number of Estonians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Poles, Austrians, Czechoslovakians, and Hungarians. From the opposite side, 154,388 POWs from the Central Powers were repatriated from Russia, with Austrians, Czechoslovakians, Hungarians, Germans, Polish, Rumanians, and Yugoslavians being the largest groups.⁹⁶ The humanitarian operation impacted the main actors involved in specific ways. Regarding Estonia, in October 1922, politician Jaan Tõnisson expressed joy that “[his] homeland had served as an intermediate point, where after a long and painful captivity each prisoner felt free again and with joy and often with tears in his eyes went to his beloved

⁹⁵ ACICR, B MIS 33.5/785, Wildbolz à la commission des missions du CICR au sujet de la situation de la mission du C.I.C.R. auprès des camps de p.g. russes en Allemagne, May 26, 1920.

⁹⁶ ALON, R1703, Rapport du Dr. Nansen, haut-commissaire de la Société des Nations sur le rapatriement des prisonniers de guerre soumis au Conseil le 1 septembre 1922, 42.22952.5213. Austrians, 16,961; Americans, 7; Armenians, 2; Belgian, 1; British, 20; Bulgarians, 50; Czechoslovakians, 27,961; Danish, 14; Estonians, 11; French, 8; Germans, 33,903; Greeks, 4; Hungarians, 36,097; Japanese, 1; Italians, 1,417; Latvians, 11; Lithuanians, 11; Polish, 7,961; Rumanians, 18,140; Russians, 55; Swedish, 18; Swiss, 1,162; Turks, 113; Ukrainians, 134; Yugoslav, 11,159; total, 154,388.

homeland.”⁹⁷ At the end of the exchange, the ICRC donated delousing machines and other material to the Estonian government, which used them to bath Estonians coming from Russia and Russian refugees.⁹⁸ The repatriation of POWs was pivotal to present the newly Estonian state as a reliable partner in the eyes of the West as well as to strengthen internal state-building processes. Estonia became a member of the LON in 1921.

For the ICRC, which was experiencing harsh competition both from within and outside the Red cross movement, returning POWs was pivotal to strengthening its political authority and to restoring its finances. As for the LON, participating in the planned migration of POWs allowed testing the extent of its newly established mandate and of its power in inter-governmental diplomacy. Interestingly, forms of cooperation and competition were not mutually exclusive. In the summer of 1922, announcing the imminent end of the exchange plan, the ICRC sent a letter to the LON where it reiterated that its delegates should be thanked for the success of the operation.⁹⁹ At the letter’s receiving end, the LON wanted to avoid that “the respective roles of the C.I.C.R. and the League should be depicted in exactly the light in which they [were] depicted in [the] letter”; Nansen was then pressured to act in advance and thank the ICRC, hence implying that the LON had had the operation’s lead.¹⁰⁰ All of these looked like void ploys for an operation that was indeed co-directed.

By looking at humanitarian diplomacy and at mundane practices of protection in the fortress of Ivangorod and in the surrounding region, we start observing a multiplicity of actors, the overlapping discourses that were forged on themselves and on the “other,” and the different meanings that they attributed to the space where they operated. This book claims that the actors which participated in the exchange plan were far more diverse than what the literature has so far acknowledged: ICRC delegates, humanitarians from other organizations, representatives of national (military) authorities, members of the local staff, and POWs need to be studied in the same framework if we want to form a sounded idea of their experiences.

While the archival sources at my disposal do not allow exploring agencies evenly, they suggest how the encounters are rich in analytical possibilities. The ICRC delegates self-represented as being in command, alongside an active masculinity, yet they at times lingered in describing the nurturing practices that they were called to perform. As for POWs, they were alternatively depicted as weak and dependent on foreign aid, carriers of political and epidemiological threats, or as vectors of postwar reconstruction. From the reports penned by returning POWs

⁹⁷ ACICR, MIS B 35.5/1123, Tönnisson to Ador, October 2, 1922.

⁹⁸ ALON, R1705, Brunel to Nansen, March 21, 1922, 42.19666.5896.

⁹⁹ ALON, R1703, Paul de Gouttes to Nansen, July 19, 1922, 42.22139.5213.

¹⁰⁰ ALON, R1703, Letter to Baker, August 1, 1922, 42.22139.5213.

who were stationed for a few days in Narva, we see how they capitalized on these constructions to receive additional protection. Far from being passive, POWs often felt responsible for the fellows still in Russia, lobbied for their liberation, and, in doing so, they prepared to return to their families. With regard to the local staff, in addition to providing evidence of its crucial work, this book starts unpacking the discriminations which contributed to its marginalization. All in all, the internationally managed exchange of forgotten groups of POWs through Estonia turned out to be a laboratory to test innovative humanitarian policies and practices. A number of factors, if not a favorable context, were decisive for its success. This explains why the experiment was extended to the protection of Russian refugees a few months later, yet with far more mixed results.