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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

In November 1918, when the first world war came to an end, some 6.9 million servicemen were sitting in enemy prison camps, at least 750,000 had died in captivity and roughly one million had been released or exchanged as invalids. Conditions varied from camp to camp and from country to country, with soldiers captured on the Western Front generally faring better, and facing lower mortality rates, than their counterparts on the Eastern, Italian and Balkan Fronts. However, military prisoners were not alone in experiencing the hardships and cruelties of life behind enemy lines; the war also led to the internment and/or deportation of several hundred thousand civilians, including women and children, thus setting a trend which was to be repeated, on an even larger scale, during the second world war. Gustave Ador, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) indeed singled out the treatment of civilian POWs as a particular cause for concern at a conference of neutral Red Cross societies held in Geneva in September 1917.

Civilian internment is a novel feature of this war; international treaties did not foresee this phenomenon. At the start of the war it seemed logical that enemy civilians might be retained as suspects; a few months should have been enough to separate the chaff from the wheat. [But now] we have to add to the number of civilian internees those deported into enemy territory as well as the inhabitants of territories occupied by the enemy. These civilians have been deprived of their liberty and their treatment hardly differs from that of prisoners. After three years and more of war, we demand that these different categories of civilian detainees should become the object of special consideration and that their situation, which in some respects is even more cruel than that of military prisoners, should be properly discussed before the fourth winter of the war.1

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Ador’s concerns were shared by many other delegates at the conference. Civilian prisoners, it was pointed out, had fewer rights than combatants, and were especially vulnerable to reprisals and counter-reprisals. In some cases they had no contact with their families for months or even years, and their dependants were not entitled to government financial support. Furthermore, getting hold of accurate and impartial information about the number and treatment of civilian detainees proved to be much more difficult than obtaining information about the welfare of military prisoners. Propagandists on both sides went to great lengths to obscure the true nature of life inside the internment camps, while making highly contentious claims and counter-claims, so that, as with atrocities in Belgium and elsewhere, the ‘truth’ about civilian internment itself became a new object of international dispute and conflict.3 For humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross, on the other hand, the difficulty lay not only in gaining access to prisoners, so that objective reports could be written, but also in ensuring that such reports did not further inflame wartime hatreds and therefore do more harm than good to the prisoners themselves.

This article sets out to examine how this problem was addressed by the ICRC and related agencies acting on behalf of civilians interned or deported by belligerent states during the course of the first world war, with particular reference to the situation in Europe. The bulk of the archival evidence is drawn from the records of the ICRC’s International Prisoner of War Agency (Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre), founded in Geneva in August 1914 to co-ordinate the international relief effort for POWs. The Agency’s files, with the exception of records relating to individual prisoners, have recently been opened for scholarly use. They include reports written by ICRC inspection teams after tours of camps in belligerent countries, the proceedings of the above-mentioned conference in September 1917, private correspondence between ICRC representatives and other humanitarian relief agencies, and the general account which the ICRC gave of its activities during the war for its 1921 conference. The work of neutral embassies, national Red Cross societies and private philanthropic organizations in London and Berlin on behalf of prisoners of war is also considered, but the primary emphasis is on the ICRC.

The ICRC was established in Geneva in 1863 and aimed to provide humanitarian assistance to victims of war and natural disasters throughout the world. Its founder, Henri Dunant, was especially concerned to promote minimum standards for the treatment of wounded soldiers and prisoners captured on the battlefield. Important landmarks in this sense were the signing of the Geneva convention in 1864 (revised in 1906) and the Hague conventions of 1899 and 1907. The ICRC also encouraged (but had no power to enforce) reciprocal agreements between national Red Cross societies in relation to the delivery of mail, food parcels, clothes and medical supplies to military prisoners, and the

provision of accurate lists of who was being held and where. However, in 1914 there was still no formal protection in international law for civilians under enemy control, apart from a few vague references in articles 42 to 56 of the 1907 Hague convention (Part IV) to the rights of populations living in occupied territories. Over and above this, the preamble to Hague IV, known as the ‘Martens clause’, simply stated that:

In cases not included in the Regulations adopted by them, the inhabitants and belligerents remain under the protection and the rule of the principles of the law of nations, as they result from the usages established among civilized peoples, from the laws of humanity, and the dictates of the public conscience.4

The wording of this clause was of course wide open to abuse and misinterpretation. For example, it did not prevent the holding of male civilians of military age as prisoners of war at standards below those required for soldiers and other combatants. Still less did it prevent the widespread detention of civilians of all ages and both sexes as the war continued. Thus, according to ICRC estimates, 100,000 Belgian and French prisoners were forcibly deported to Germany between 1914 and 1918, and 100,000 Germans to Russia.5 In Germany the total number of civilian enemy subjects in military detention rose from 48,513 in June 1915 to 111,879 by October 1918, in spite of several waves of releases.6 The number of Serbs interned in the Habsburg lands and in Bulgaria is not known but was possibly even higher.7 In Britain 32,440 German, Austrian and Hungarian civilians had been arrested by November 1915, and 24,255 were still in internment camps at the end of the war.8 In France the authorities detained not only German, Austrian, Hungarian, Turkish and Bulgarian civilians, but also Czechs, Poles, Armenians and refugees from Alsace-Lorraine, in so far as they were suspected of harbouring pro-German, pro-Habsburg or pro-Ottoman sympathies. Around 60,000 people were interned at one time or another, according to the most recent estimates.9 In Romania about 5000 German and Austro-Hungarian civilians and 1000 Bulgarians were officially detained by the end of 1916, although the Bulgarian Red Cross insisted that a further 14,000 ethnic Bulgarians from the

5 Becker, Ouïlés de la grande guerre, op. cit., 233.
6 Speed, Prisoners, Diplomats and the Great War, op. cit., 216.
7 The ICRC estimated that ‘very large numbers’ of Serbs were deported during and after the campaigns of 1915 and 1916, but noted that these people ‘were not included in the lists sent to our Agency in Geneva’. Eventually the Bulgarians admitted to holding some 14,831 Serb civilians in September 1918. See Rapport général du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge sur son activité de 1912 à 1920 (henceforth Rapport général du CICR) (Geneva 1921), 137–8.
Dobruja region had been forcibly removed from their homes.\textsuperscript{10} Figures for civilian prisoners still held in Bolshevik Russia at the time of the Brest-Litovsk negotiations in early 1918 are not available, but according to the latest study the tsarist regime had deported and/or interned roughly 300,000 enemy subjects by the beginning of 1917, representing one half of the total enemy alien population of the Russian Empire. Years went by before the last of these internees were able to return home and some never did.\textsuperscript{11}

Finally, from 1914 several thousand Germans were held in British colonies and in areas occupied by Britain, including camps in the Transvaal, Egypt, Singapore, India and Palestine, where civilians were usually mixed with military prisoners. A smaller number of German civilians were also imprisoned by the French in Morocco, the Cameroons and Togoland. This was on top of the thousands of ‘enemy aliens’ detained in Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand and, after 1917, in the USA, China, Siam, Cuba, Brazil, Panama, Haiti and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{12}

Contrary to the belief of some international commentators, civilian internment was not an entirely new phenomenon in 1914. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries the Spanish in Cuba and the British in South Africa both carried out the mass detention of non-combatants in ‘concentration camps’. The Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913 also saw deportations and atrocities against civilian populations. What was different in 1914, however, was the sheer scale of the problem. Historians have identified several underlying reasons for this. One was the phenomenon of universal military service in continental European countries, transforming wars into mass confrontations between empires and nation states in which huge numbers of reservists were liable to be called up. Conversely, each ‘enemy alien’ in detention was one less recruit for the opposing army. Linked to this was the development of virulent war cultures in all belligerent states, with press campaigns against ‘spies’ and ‘saboteurs’ helping to reinforce popular prejudices towards immigrants and minority communities. Jews, Germans and other ‘alien’ nationalities deported from the western districts of Russia, even though many were Imperial Russian subjects, fell under suspicion for exactly these reasons, as did naturalized and non-naturalized Germans and Austrians in France, Britain, Australia, Brazil and (to a lesser extent) the USA.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} Rapport général du CICR, 138.
\textsuperscript{11} Eric Lohr, \textit{Nationalizing the Russian Empire. The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I} (Cambridge, MA 2003), 127.
However, ‘preventive’ detention and anti-alienism were not the only motives for internment. The Central Powers and Russia, where they ran occupation regimes, often seized and deported civilians for purely punitive reasons. This was the case, for example, with French nationals removed to Germany in retaliation for minor acts of resistance, and with Serbs deported to Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria during and after the campaigns of 1915/16.14 At other times propaganda also played a role, so that the arrest of ‘enemy aliens’ might be undertaken in order to highlight the alleged ill-treatment of prisoners by the enemy. The internment of British civilians in Germany in November 1914 was an example of this, although there were other motives here too, including the desire to divert public attention away from setbacks on the battlefield.15 Finally, the serious manpower shortages faced by countries like Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia after the first few months of the war were a further incentive to retain or deport enemy nationals as forced labourers to work in the war economy. As the labour historian Ulrich Herbert has noted, in Germany the conscription of foreign civilian workers, including several hundred thousand Poles and Belgians, was ‘of enormous economic importance, indeed virtually indispensable to the war effort’.16

While the motives behind civilian internment were varied and at times contradictory, however, there is no doubt that it represented a humanitarian crisis on a huge and unforeseen scale. This was a problem not only for the ICRC, but also for neutral governments which agreed to act as the representatives of particular countries for the duration of the war. For example, the USA acted for British interests in Germany and German interests in Britain until February 1917, when the Netherlands and Switzerland jointly took over from them. Likewise Spain acted for French, Belgian and Russian interests in Germany until November 1918, and Switzerland acted for German interests in France. However, the German military authorities denied Spanish officials access to the occupied parts of France and Belgium and to any civilian or military prison camps contained therein. This ban was also extended to the ICRC. Furthermore, neutral governments acting on behalf of particular countries

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could deal only with the larger issues concerning the treatment of enemy civilians. Enquiries about particular individuals were not within their remit, leaving families uncertain about the fate of their loved ones.

The increasing demand for information about lost or missing relatives led the ICRC to establish a civilian section of the International Prisoner of War Agency in October 1914. According to a report published in February 1915:

The Civilian Prisoners’ Bureau was set up within the Agency under the humanitarian principle which considers as prisoners of war all those, whoever they may be, held or interned as nationals of the enemy State. By extension, the Bureau has been led to deal also with persons retained in countries which have been invaded and who are hence virtually prisoners of war.17

At first the bureau was run by a small team of dedicated volunteers based at the private home of its director, Dr Frédéric Ferrière. Later it moved into the Musée Rath in Geneva, where it was housed alongside the other sections of the International Prisoner of War Agency, while retaining its own independent identity. By the end of 1914 the Agency itself had a staff of 1200, mostly volunteers — women and men — but also a few salaried officials. Its main task was to facilitate communication between prisoners and their families, and as such it handled up to 30,000 letters and postcards a day, largely sent via national Red Cross societies. After more than four years of war, this added up to 20 million items of post in total, on top of 1,884,914 individual parcels, 1813 collective relief packages and the equivalent of over 18 million Swiss francs in cash, all forwarded to prisoners and internees.18 The Agency also made regular visits to civilians and military prisoners detained in specific camps and detention centres. By the end of the war, 524 visits had been made to camps in 38 different countries, although this included some unavoidable duplication with the work carried out by the embassies of neutral powers such as the USA, Switzerland and Spain.19

Inspections of civilian camps took place alongside inspections of military camps, and indeed little distinction was made between the two in ICRC publications. The initial aim, of course, was to ensure that civilian POWs were treated in the same way as military POWs. Annette Becker in particular is somewhat critical of the ICRC’s efforts here. For instance, in her book Oubliés de la grande guerre, she cites a rather bland ICRC report on conditions in the Rastatt camp in Baden, where 10 French notables, including the mayors of Noyon and Roubaix and the préfet du Nord, Félix Trépont, were held together as hostages in a special cell which measured only 11 paces by 11 paces: ‘In 1916 these Red Cross officials had already seen a lot worse, and were

17 Durand, From Sarajevo to Hiroshima, op. cit., 85.
18 Figures in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum Guidebook (Geneva 2000), 68.
no longer able to appreciate the terrible fate [l’épreuve incroyable] that had befallen these notables during their deportation and incarceration in Baden-Württemberg.20

The ICRC was also insensitive to the particular sufferings of women, children and the elderly among those interned or deported, according to some critics. The Evian-based charity Secours aux rapatriés, which published a collection of photographs of French families expelled from the occupied zone in 1917, drew particular attention to this, accusing the ICRC of ‘exercising too much caution’ and of ‘being satisfied with too little’.21

However, the ICRC had an entirely different set of priorities from national organizations like the Secours aux rapatriés. It was a neutral body whose job was to provide accurate factual information as well as to ensure reasonable conditions in the camps in accordance with international conventions and the dictates of humanity. Much of the work of its inspection teams was spent in correcting sensational press reports about the treatment of civilian and military prisoners of war which only raised national hatreds and therefore paved the way for tit-for-tat reactions. This can already be seen in the careful wording of a report on a visit made by Edouard Naville and V. van Berchem in January 1915 to various prison camps in England.

There are more civilian prisoners than military prisoners [in England.] They number almost 20,000, although every week some are released, and now there are no longer any prisoners except men of military age. This is a very important point which should be emphasised in view of the large number of newspapers which are saying the exact opposite: [we repeat], there are neither any women nor any children being held in internment camps in England, only men are being detained. . . . Our view is that the German government and the families of the prisoners need not worry greatly [peuvent être sans inquiétude] about those who are being held in the camps in England.22

An excessive preoccupation with the negative experience of internees could often lead to reprisals and therefore be counter-productive both to international relations and to the interests of the prisoners, as US embassy staff in London were also keen to stress to British officials. At the end of November 1914, for example, a British foreign ministry representative noted a conversation with the American diplomat Chandler Anderson, who had visited various prison camps in Britain and Germany on behalf of the London embassy. Anderson wished to relay his private concerns to the Foreign Office about conditions in the Newbury camp in Berkshire (which was shut down shortly afterwards), but he was unwilling to go into print on these matters and was anxious not to offend his British hosts.

20 Becker, Oubliés de la grande guerre, op. cit., 56.
21 Ibid., 305.
He told me that he intended to make a report of a short and vague nature, saying that the Camp did not compare unfavourably with the German Camps for British prisoners. He was afraid to make a better report than this, because it would ultimately be contradicted by the people who were there; he did not like to make a worse report, because it would be misunderstood in Germany.\textsuperscript{23}

The US embassy in Berlin was at first equally cautious in its reports on the Ruhleben camp for British civilians, which had been established on a race-course near the town of Spandau. The first communiqué to the British government in November 1914, based on a visit by Edward Gaston to the camp, drew attention to some mild problems with diet and overcrowding but continued:

I should like to pay tribute to the Commandant of this Camp, Baron von Taube, in his friendly relations with the prisoners under his charge. This cordial attitude extends downwards, and the relations between the military authorities and their prisoners are especially good. If overcrowding could be remedied by the transport of some of the prisoners to similar quarters which exist in Spandau, there is little reason to believe that the condition of civilian prisoners should be otherwise than fairly comfortable for the winter.\textsuperscript{24}

Behind the scenes, however, Ambassador James W. Gerard's relationship with the German military authorities in Berlin was very bad, if we can believe the account given in his memoirs published shortly after the US entry into the war in 1917. There is no doubt, for example, that he grew to hate and despise General Friedrich, the officer in charge of the prisoner of war department within the Prussian Ministry of War, and the feeling was probably mutual.\textsuperscript{25} Among German officials Gerard had a reputation for being pro-British, while in Britain and the USA he was regarded as being dangerously pro-German, a charge he was always anxious to deny. To add to his difficulties, by 1916 his staff were increasingly at odds over the best way to proceed with camp inspections. As Joseph C. Grew, the embassy's First Secretary, later recalled:

We had a varying number of inspectors from time to time, made up largely of members of the Embassy staff... [but... no unity. Drs Taylor [and] McCarthy, experts in their profession at home [i.e. nutritionists], departed because they disagreed with Jackson, the head of our British bureau. Jackson's theory was that reports on camp inspections were wrong in principle, because they tended to stir up friction between the two Governments and therefore, through reprisals, hurt the prisoners more than helped them. If reports were made at all, he considered that all complaints should be omitted. We all disagreed with Jackson and felt, with Taylor and McCarthy, that a report should be a complete and true statement of the facts.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{23} Unsigned notes on a meeting with Chandler Anderson, received on 4 December 1914, in Public Record Office, Kew, London, FO 369/714. Also cited in Jahr, 'Zivilisten als Kriegsgefangene', op. cit., 316.
\textsuperscript{24} Gaston to Gerard, 14 November 1914, in ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} James W. Gerard, \textit{My Four Years in Germany} (London 1917), 105–37. See also Gerard to Ellis Loring Dresel, 29 August 1918, in Houghton Library, Cambridge, MA, Dresel Papers, b MS Am 1549 (141).
The Spanish embassy in Berlin faced even greater difficulties when it came to reporting ‘the facts’, given the repeated refusal of the German military authorities to allow its inspection teams access to prison camps in occupied France and Belgium. Spanish officials were, of course, well aware of the inadequacy of their relatively favourable reports on camps inside Germany, when they were not allowed to visit camps in the occupied regions. However, they also did not want to offend German officials to the extent that they might be denied access to camps inside Germany as well, nor did they want to encourage France to believe that reprisals against German prisoners might be justified. Delegates from the ICRC who visited Berlin on a fact-finding mission in early 1917 interviewed the Spanish ambassador and noted several causes for concern.

Spanish embassy officials have had the opportunity to visit the prisoners taken in April 1916 at Verdun, who were recently moved to camps [in Germany]. During all the time that these prisoners were held in the occupation zone [la zone des armées], they were not allowed to write to their families and their names did not appear on the lists [handed to the Spanish embassy]. ... The [Spanish] ambassador has protested about these violations against international conventions; but his protests have had no effect. The response is always the same: ‘military necessity’. Mr Saura also claims that the demolition work carried out on the Somme before the latest German retreat was carried out by French prisoners.27

In the meantime, while foreign diplomats and ICRC officials struggled to reconcile the twin demands of impartiality and concern to uphold international conventions, national Red Cross societies and private charities involved in relief work did not face these dilemmas to the same degree, although there is some evidence that they were aware of them. Elisabeth Rotten, a leading pacifist with Quaker connections and head of the Berlin-based Auskunft- und Hilfsstelle für Deutsche im Ausland und Ausländer in Deutschland, was adamant that personal feelings and national animosities could and should be kept out of humanitarian work and that efforts should be made to correct sensationalist newspaper reporting at all times. In a letter of March 1915 to Edouard Naville, the head of the ICRC inspection team, she praised the above-mentioned report on the British camps for its sober language and continued:

*We are grateful for the valuable support that you have thereby given to our ongoing efforts to establish reliable information, and hope that we may make public use of your announcement. We have been trying for a long time now to correct false reports in the Frankfurter Zeitung and other papers on the basis of our more authentic sources, but unfortunately mostly in vain. We are preparing a publication in which we attempt to portray the current situation in a more balanced and accurate manner, but sadly we have to assume that we will not reach a broad audience through this means.*28
Likewise, Rudolph Said-Reute, a Swiss German involved in private charity work among stranded Germans in London, wrote in a letter to the ICRC in September 1915 that ‘a rash and unbalanced verdict on the treatment of prisoners abroad . . . is likely to aggravate the tensions between nations in an undue fashion’. This was why he had been working to counter ‘false or exaggerated claims’ made by British refugees or ex-prisoners returning home from Germany.  

On the other hand, if reports strove too hard to be impartial, or if they appeared to omit certain unpleasant details for the sake of expediency, they were in danger of being dismissed by broad sections of the public, and by prisoners and their families in particular, as enemy propaganda. For example, when Herbert Bury, the Anglican Bishop for North and Central Europe, published a report on his visit to the civilian internment camp at Ruhleben in November 1916, he was accused repeatedly of having been ‘won over’ by the Germans, or of working directly for them, despite his repeated protests to the contrary. Lord Newton, the British government’s spokesman on prisoners of war, was even forced to issue a defence of Bury during a bad-tempered exchange in the House of Lords in February 1917.

He could not understand why this Prelate had been subjected to so much attack on the part of certain persons in this country. He went to Germany by permission of the German Government. He went to Ruhleben, lived in the camp, and was able to see conditions there. He reported exactly what he saw and was thereupon denounced as pro-German. If they could not believe what a Bishop said, if they could not get the truth even from a Bishop, whom were they to believe? [Laughter]

National Red Cross societies and private relief agencies were, of course, not expected to make political statements, nor were they accountable directly to MPs or electorates, which made their humanitarian work less fraught with political dangers. Unlike Bishop Bury or Lord Newton, they could never be accused, for example, of playing into the hands of the enemy. Indeed, they were even required (and in most cases were willing) to submit their reports and any other snippets of information they obtained to government or military censorship, thus removing from their shoulders the burden of deciding what to print. However, from time to time the Danish and Swedish Red Cross societies and the American YMCA organization became involved in prison camp inspections in places that the ICRC could not reach, especially in Russia and Germany, which meant that they, too, were drawn into the propaganda battles and personal dilemmas of the day, including the dilemma over how to phrase

29  Rudolph Said-Reute to the ICRC, 8 September 1915, in ACICR, C G1/475/l/G.
particular complaints so as not to offend any interested parties. This also creates problems for historians trying to establish what conditions were really like in particular camps. As Christoph Jahr has written:

\[\ldots\text{even apparently 'neutral' and therefore objective accounts cannot be taken as an absolute reflection of the facts.}\ldots\text{Personal likes and dislikes, failure to see through the clever tricks played by camp administrators, or fear of being used in the propaganda campaigns of one side or the other; these and other factors can all influence what is written in such reports, so that considerable care is needed when evaluating them.}\]

There was thus a constant tension between the principle of impartiality and the desire to promote more humane conditions for prisoners which was never really resolved by any of those involved in camp inspections during the war, whether operating through private welfare organizations, neutral embassies or international bodies like the ICRC and the YMCA.

Meanwhile, in 1916, as the war continued into its third year, the ICRC became increasingly concerned at the growing evidence of physical and mental ill-health among civilian and military POWs. Therefore much more of its energies were put into campaigning for the neutral interment and/or repatriation of prisoners through international agreement. The Vatican, too, was heavily involved in such campaigns, although there was little co-operation between the two organizations. In September 1917, for example, the Geneva conference of neutral Red Cross societies called for an end to retaliations against prisoners of war and for equality of status for civilian detainees. And in May 1918, shortly after the ratification of the second Berne agreement between France and Germany for the exchange of POWs, the ICRC issued a declaration in which it called for the release of all civilian prisoners and all military prisoners who had been detained for more than 18 months.

On one level the ICRC’s campaigns were quite fruitful, namely in persuading governments and national Red Cross societies to recognize the existence of so-called ‘barbed wire disease’, i.e. the symptoms of mental illness developed by some long-term prisoners. They were also partially successful in drawing attention to the particular plight of older internees, both civilian and military, who had been separated for long periods from their wives and children. For example, the May 1917 Franco-German convention (supplemented by a second agreement at Berne in April 1918) allowed for the gradual release of long-term military and civilian prisoners according to a new ‘head for head’ and ‘rank for rank’ formula, and for the exchange of all prisoners over 55, regardless of numbers, while the agreement between Britain and Germany at The Hague in July 1917 explicitly identified prisoners suffering from ‘barbed

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32 Davis, ‘National Red Cross Societies’, op. cit., passim.
35 The proceedings of the September 1917 Geneva conference can be found in ACICR, C G1/411/XII. See also the Manifeste du CICR relatif à l’accord sur le rapatriement des prisonniers et des civils, 15 May 1918, as reproduced in Becker, Oubliés de la grande guerre, op. cit., 392–3.
wire disease’ as being ‘suitable for internment in Switzerland or another neutral country’.36

But in other respects the ICRC was less effective. For example, in spite of its periodic appeals for the repatriation of civilian and wounded military prisoners, the first major bilateral exchange agreements were only reached in 1917 — through the mediation of neutral powers like Switzerland and the Netherlands rather than through the ICRC. Even more worrying, in both July 1917 and again in July 1918 the ICRC had to ask the Netherlands legation in Berlin for copies of the agreements signed between Britain and Germany at The Hague, underlining the fact that it was not represented or even considered as an interested party at international negotiations.37

Secondly, the ICRC failed to ensure universal compliance with the Geneva convention and other international treaties, and to abolish the practice of reprisals against prisoners, which was still in widespread use against civilians as well as military POWs in 1918. The ICRC was, of course, a private organization under Swiss law and could only make recommendations to governments, not enforce them. In practice, as Annette Becker argues, the belligerent states between 1914 and 1918 were more willing to accept the intervention of neutral powers like the American or Spanish governments than to respond to complaints from the ICRC. This in turn reflects the fact that civilian and military prisoners were often seen by governments and military leaders as hostages or bargaining chips, although, as we have already noted, there were other factors behind internment, including economic motives and the desire to punish or deter would-be trouble-makers within occupied countries.38 As late as October 1918, after more than four years of endless campaigning and the signature of several bilateral agreements, the Bulletin International des sociétés de la Croix-Rouge reported that the deportation and internment of civilians was still taking place.

Every week we are supplied with new lists, some of them relating to very particular groups: English civilians held in Finland, French, Italian, Belgian and Portuguese diplomatic personnel expelled from neutral Ukraine and interned in Germany, etc. . . . Some civilian detainees in Germany appear to have been transferred to prisons in Belgium and occupied France, where they can neither communicate with their families in unoccupied France, nor receive aid parcels, nor have visits from representatives of the neutral powers charged with their protection. We regret that up till now it has proved impossible to obtain any kind of information on the conditions these prisoners are being held in.39

36 Speed, Prisoners, Diplomats and the Great War, op. cit., 37–42. See also the text of The Hague agreement, 2 July 1917, in ACICR, C G1/411/IX. The Swiss physician Adolf Lukas Vischer, who worked for the Swiss embassy in London during the war and visited both civilian and military prisoners, became the world’s foremost expert on ‘barbed wire disease’. See his book Die Stacheldraht-Krankheit (Zurich 1918), also published in English as Barbed Wire Disease: A Psychological Study of the Prisoner of War (London 1919).
37 See e.g. Ridder van Rappard (head of Netherlands Legation in Berlin) to ICRC, 22 August 1917, in ACICR, C G1/411/IX; and van Rappard to ICRC, 3 August 1918, in ACICR, C G1/411/XXVII.
39 Bulletin International des sociétés de la Croix-Rouge, 196 (October 1918), 496.
A further weakness was that the ICRC increasingly diverged in its activities from national Red Cross societies, which were often directly involved in relief programmes and reciprocity negotiations of various kinds, but as advisers to their respective war ministries rather than as independent actors.\textsuperscript{40} This made it difficult for them to challenge their own government’s stance on the question of civilian prisoners, at least in the public arena, leaving the ICRC isolated and vulnerable.

In fairness to the ICRC, it had to seek to uphold humanitarian principles that were only valid if all governments complied; but if one refused, there was no longer an obligation on the rest. Difficulties were also caused by the difference in attitude of belligerent countries to their own subjects in captivity. Britain and Germany had the best record in terms of sending supplies to prisoners in enemy countries, followed closely by France. Here campaigns organized by prisoners’ families and backed by members of state and national parliaments helped to keep the issue of civilian internment in the public eye.\textsuperscript{41} The Russian and Austro-Hungarian governments, with over 2.5 million prisoners each, were unable to match the Western powers in terms of per capita spending on relief, especially as food was also desperately scarce in these countries. Nonetheless, they were willing to devote small sums of public money to subsidizing Red Cross visits and the transport of clothes, blankets and medical kits.\textsuperscript{42} By contrast, the Italian government refused outright to pay for adequate relief parcels to be sent to its military and civilian prisoners in Austria-Hungary and Germany, believing that harsh conditions would deter potential ‘cowards’ and ‘deserters’. As a result, 100,000 out of 600,000 died.\textsuperscript{43} The Serb and Romanian governments could hardly keep up with the number of their own subjects in enemy hands, especially after the experience of defeat and military occupation at the end of 1915 and 1916 respectively. The same applied to the Bulgarian government in respect to its nationals trapped in Greece and in the unoccupied parts of Romania.\textsuperscript{44}

Finally, even when bilateral agreements between belligerents were reached, national interest often came before concern for human rights. For example, when the acting president of the ICRC, Edouard Naville, wrote to the French President Raymond Poincaré in May 1918 to congratulate him on the signature of the second Berne agreement with Germany for the gradual repatriation

\textsuperscript{40} Davis, ‘National Red Cross Societies’, op. cit., 35 and 43–6.
\textsuperscript{41} In Britain a Ruhleben Prisoners’ Release Committee, supported by several MPs, was launched in February 1917. A useful set of leaflets on this organization can be found in the Liddle Collection, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, RUH 18. In Germany, the Hamburg Senate backed a similar campaign initiated by the families of German internees held in Britain. See the relevant documents in Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Senatskriegsakten, Lz1.
\textsuperscript{42} Rachamimov, \textit{POWs and the Great War}, op. cit., 164–71.
\textsuperscript{43} Giovanna Procacci, ‘Les causes de la forte mortalité des prisonniers de guerre italiens en Allemagne et en Autriche au cours des deux guerres mondiales’ in Caucaus et al. (eds), \textit{Les prisonniers de guerre}, op. cit., 125–35. See also idem, \textit{Soldati e prigionieri italiani nella Grande Guerra (con una raccolta di lettere inediti)} (Turin 2000).
\textsuperscript{44} Rapport général du CICR, 137.
of long-term military and civilian prisoners, the latter wrote back: ‘And may I beg to assure you that France, true to its traditions and its customs, will always be pleased when it is able to reconcile the necessities of national defence with the principles of justice and humanity. 45

This and other agreements did not stop France from continuing to hold several thousand German prisoners and civilian detainees until the signing of a definite peace treaty in June 1919, however, even though Germany was forced to release all of its remaining prisoners immediately after the November 1918 armistice. Here, presumably, ‘the necessities of national defence’ took priority over ‘the principles of justice and humanity’. Or, as the first postwar edition of the *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge* reported in January 1919, the armistice had dealt a double blow to German prisoners in France, reinforcing their position as pawns at the mercy of international developments while dashing their hopes of repatriation under the earlier Berne agreement.

Around 2,500 German civilians are still being held in captivity in France. Their complaints are numerous, and their situation has not only been aggravated by their strong feelings of deception, but also by the fact that their relief parcels have been stopped for several weeks now on the grounds that they are about to be released. The [International] Committee would like to see the universal adoption of the principle that ‘civilians should not be taken as prisoners of war’, but in the current circumstances it can do no more than rely on the clemency of the governments of the Entente. 46

Thus, to conclude, in spite of all its efforts, the ICRC was still nowhere near to reaching its goal of ensuring equality of treatment for military and civilian detainees by 1919, let alone securing the release of all non-combatants from internment. Overall, the world was a much harsher place by the end of the war, and there was little to celebrate in terms of progress towards a more universal understanding and acceptance of basic human rights, even if it is true, as Richard Speed has argued, that the 1907 Hague convention was ‘not a mere scrap of paper’ when it came to protecting the interests of military prisoners. 47

More specifically, international relief efforts concerning civilians in need of humanitarian assistance during and immediately after the war had been hampered by three main factors: first, the attitude of national governments and army commanders, who often treated civilian prisoners as ‘criminal suspects’ and forced labourers; second, the lack of any adequate protection in international law for civilians in wartime, whether this related to civilians imprisoned in enemy or occupied territories or civilians who had become refugees in foreign countries; and third, the failure of humanitarian and relief agencies themselves to agree on the principles by which they should proceed.

All three of these problems were addressed by Dr Frédéric Ferrière, the former head of the civilian section within the ICRC’s International Prisoner of War Agency, in a report published in 1923. The report continued:

46 *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, 1 (January 1919), 50.
While we cannot fail, as defenders of the humanitarian attitude of the Red Cross, to subscribe completely to the principles enunciated by the Tenth Conference [in 1921] that there should be no civilian prisoners other than those capable of bearing arms, those fit for military service in the strictest meaning of the phrase; that deportation of civilians must apply only to individuals who have committed offences which have been duly defined; that hostages should not be taken from among the civilian population; that reprisals should be strictly prohibited and that any State committing them would be committing a violation — yet we find ourselves obliged to admit that modern warfare is no longer war between armies but a struggle between nations and that in future wars the civilian population is likely to be spared as little as it was in the last.\textsuperscript{48}

Ferrière was right to be pessimistic. Only after the second world war, in which the Red Cross failed to prevent mass deportations and the deaths of over 40 million civilians, including six million victims of the Holocaust, did the UN finally acknowledge the need to protect the human rights of non-combatants during war by a new international convention — the Geneva Convention on Human Rights of August 1949.\textsuperscript{49} Even after this, as recent events in Bosnia, Rwanda, Somalia, Kosovo, Chechnya and elsewhere have shown, enemy civilians are still too often seen as legitimate targets, as ‘suspects’, as standard-bearers for the opposing side, and as objects for reprisals during wars and civil conflicts.

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\textsuperscript{48} Durand, \textit{From Sarajevo to Hiroshima}, op. cit., 88.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 89.