

Expansion, Suspicion and the Development of the International Committee of the Red Cross: 1939-45

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The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has often been maligned for its actions, or lack thereof, during the Second World War. In particular the Committee has been criticised for its apparent inability to compromise its mandate to provide impartial and non-politicised relief. This article discusses some of the problems of this interpretation of ICRC history by showing that, contrary to the image of the ICRC as a “well-meaning amateur”, the Committee responded to the challenges of the Second World War with a series of bold initiatives that were crucial to the organisation’s long-term development. Not only did these initiatives improve the success of the ICRC’s humanitarian mission, but they also stand as testament to an organisation that, though devoid of diplomatic status and political power, was able to conduct its work whilst being restricted by the policies of belligerent governments and the physical dangers of total war.

The experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) during the Second World War was one of tireless effort in the face of adversity. This adversity took many forms. In addition to the problems of carrying out humanitarian operations in a time of war, the ICRC’s work was also made difficult by the numerous restrictions — imposed both by its own statutes and the belligerent nations — under which it was permitted to operate. Since its inception in Geneva in 1863 the ICRC has pursued its mandate to bring succour to victims of war by strict adherence to its core principles of neutrality and impartiality when dealing with belligerents.¹ Although its dedication to neutrality in theory guaranteed trust and co-operation from the belligerents during the Second World War, it was difficult to reconcile the Committee’s humanitarian mission with the bellicose intentions of the Axis and the Allies. Moreover, unlike the British, or indeed, the Germans, the ICRC had the unenviable task of pursuing its already difficult mission from the position of a neutral, non-government entity, devoid of diplomatic status and, in British eyes, possessed of dubious intentions.

This article examines not only why British suspicions of the Committee were aroused, but also the steps the ICRC took in response to this problem. In order to understand these issues it is necessary to focus first on the man who, as the ICRC’s chief innovator and *bête noire* in Whitehall, was both the source of many of Geneva’s problems and, paradoxically, the spearhead of the Committee’s development during the Second World War: the vice-president and unofficial “foreign minister” of the ICRC, Carl J. Burckhardt.²

¹ *Statutes of the International Committee of the Red Cross*, Article 4.

² For a more thorough analysis of Burckhardt with emphasis on his relationship with the British Government, see J. Crossland, “A Man of Peaceable Intent: Burckhardt, the British and Red Cross Neutrality during the Second World War”, *Historical Research*, forthcoming.

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In the eyes of those who knew him at the time and in the eyes of many historians since, Burckhardt, a Basel-born academic of conservative right-wing background, was far from the archetypal “good Samaritan”. Although deeply concerned with the state of Europe and its people, he was vain, ambitious, prone to depression and, in the words of one contemporary, he was less a humanitarian, than he was a “grand politician”.³ The genesis of the latter character trait lay in Burckhardt’s pre-war experience as League of Nations High Commissioner to Danzig, a post which he assumed after stepping down from his first appointment at the ICRC in 1937.

As H.S. Levine has noted, it was in Danzig that Burckhardt, through his role as intermediary for the various parties involved in the running of the “Free City”, was drawn into a world of mediation and peace feelers.⁴ These initiatives were of both German and British origin. The former usually emanated from Burckhardt’s old friend the German Secretary of State Ernst von Weizsäcker, often with the connivance of another acquaintance, the German Consul in Geneva Wolfgang Krauel.⁵ British overtures towards Burckhardt primarily came from Lord Halifax and his Under-Secretary R.A. “Rab” Butler.⁶ Burckhardt’s prestige rose during the pre-war months as his mediation role took on more importance. In addition to his political relations with the Wilhelmstrasse, Burckhardt was also used as an intermediary by both Anthony Eden and Hitler in August 1939.⁷ These political activities should have ceased on the outbreak of hostilities in September and Burckhardt’s subsequent return to the ICRC as a “neutral” philanthropist. In a clear breach of ICRC neutrality, however, Burckhardt continued his peace discussions throughout the Phoney War and with the knowledge of many in Whitehall.

The British Ambassador in Geneva, David Kelly, for example, reported to the Foreign Office in July 1940 that Burckhardt had not only abused his privilege of neutrality to present peace feelers on behalf of Göring, but also had similar peace-seeking conversations with two Gauleiters, a German general and Weizsäcker. The awareness of many in Whitehall of this conduct, not least Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden, understandably proved detrimental to Burckhardt’s image in the eyes of Britain’s new anti-appeasement order.⁸ This perception of Burckhardt was not without

³ This character sketch has been cited by most historians from Paul Stauffer’s critical biography of Burckhardt, *Zwischen Hofmannsthal und Hitler: Carl J. Burckhardt : Facetten einer aussergewöhnlichen Existenz* (Turtleback, 1991). For further discussion of Burckhardt’s character see H.S. Levine, “The Mediator: Carl Burckhardt’s Efforts to Avert the Second World War”, *Journal of Modern History*, Vol.45, 3 (1973), pp. 439-455; C. Moorehead, *Dunant’s Dream: War, Switzerland and the History of the Red Cross* (London, 1998), pp.386-391; J.C. Favez, *The Red Cross and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1999), pp.284-85.

⁴ Levine, “Mediator”.

⁵ E. Weizsäcker, *Memoirs of Ernst Von Weizsäcker*, trans. J. Andrews (Chicago, 1951), p.146; *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series C, vol.6 (hereafter DGFP) Krauel To Weizsäcker, 30 January 1937, doc.165, pp.352-53; Weizsäcker Memorandum, 29 January 1937, doc.163, p.350.

⁶ *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939* (Hereafter DBFP) Series 3, vol.5, Record of Conversation between Halifax and Burckhardt, 21 May 1939, doc.580, pp.628-629. Butler continued to discuss peace with Burckhardt after war had been declared — P. Padfield, *Hess: The Fuhrer’s Disciple* (London, 1991), p.124.

⁷ I. Kershaw, *Hitler* (Abridged version, London, 2008), p.495; DBFP, Series 3, vol.6, Makins Minute on Conversation between Burckhardt and Hitler, 14 August 1939, no.659, p.693.

⁸ The National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter TNA/PRO) FO 371/24407 – Kelly to FO, 8 July 1940; TNA/PRO/PRO/1/400/8 – Summary of Principle Peace Feelers, Sept 1939-March 1941.

consequences for the ICRC as a whole. Owing to Burckhardt's position as vice-president, the view of him being pro-peace, possessed of "independent views" and, in the words of one Foreign Office official, "not a strong anti-Hitlerite",⁹ led many in Whitehall to question both the ICRC's activities and its key principle of neutrality. This invariably led to problems of communication and understanding between Whitehall and Geneva on matters that should have been humanitarian, rather than political.

For example, following the fall of France in June 1940 and the subsequent emergence of a crisis in POW welfare, the hitherto stable relations between the ICRC and the British government reached their nadir.¹⁰ This was to the detriment of approximately 40,000 British POW captured during the summer, who were in desperate need of stable supply lines for the Red Cross parcels that served to supplement their rations. In order to deliver these parcels successfully, good relations were required between the Foreign Office's Prisoner of War Department (PWD), the War Office's Directorate of Prisoners of War (DPW), the British Red Cross (BRC) — who were responsible for packing the parcels — and the ICRC, which was tasked with supervising the parcels' journey through Continental Europe and into the camps.

Despite the gravity of the situation, co-operation between the aforementioned parties was so poor that over the winter of 1940/41 Whitehall, the BRC and the ICRC all came under scrutiny from both the public and parliament for their collective mishandling of the affair.¹¹ During meetings in December 1941 between the ICRC and British officials it was concluded that, although the damage done to transport infrastructure was a major problem, the lack of co-operation between the British and the Red Cross, both in Geneva and London, was an important factor in exacerbating the POW crisis.¹² The impact of Burckhardt's political activities on this lack of co-operation is perhaps best evidenced by the fact that the underlying cause of the problem in British-ICRC relations in 1940 was a misinterpretation, and perhaps suspicion, by the British of the Committee's neutrality, engendered largely by Burckhardt's peace activities.

Throughout the POW crisis British government officials had great trouble reconciling the fact that the ICRC performed humanitarian tasks on behalf of *all* prisoners and victims of war, rather than just British ones. The Committee's conduct in this matter was in accordance with its principles of neutrality and impartiality which had been codified in the Geneva Convention of 1929.¹³ Despite their knowledge and ratification of the Convention, this basic ICRC principle was seldom recognised or understood by British officials, some of whom chose instead to interpret the Committee's willingness to serve in the interests of the enemy as either favouritism or, worse yet, collusion.

⁹ TNA/PRO/FO 371/20756 – Strang Minute, 5 February 1937; TNA/PRO/FO 371/20756 – Berne to FO, 6 February 1937.

¹⁰ For discussion on the handling of the POW crisis by the British Government and the ICRC see A.J. Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity* (Chapel Hill, 2005), ch. 1; D. Rolf, "Blind Bureaucracy": The British Government and POWs in German Captivity, 1939-45" in B. Moore and K. Fedorowich, eds, *Prisoners of War and Their Captors in World War II* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 47-67.

¹¹ Rolf, "Blind Bureaucracy", pp.50-54.

¹² TNA/PRO/FO 916/113 – Minutes of ICRC Meeting with British Government Departments, 9-10 December 1941.

¹³ *Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field. Geneva, 27 July 1929, Article 1.*

The head of the PWD, Sir George Warner, was a main progenitor of this viewpoint. Not only was he averse to the ICRC's plans to send relief to French POW interned in Vichy, but he also felt that the Committee were amateurs whose operations would soon be brought, perhaps willingly, into Berlin's sphere of influence.¹⁴ Although Warner's pre-war experience as Ambassador in Switzerland contributed to his view that Switzerland would inevitably be swallowed by the Reich, he had also, notably, been a party to Burckhardt's peace feeler initiatives in Danzig.¹⁵ Furthermore, as late as 1944, Warner was advising his Foreign Office colleagues that Burckhardt was too politically-minded for a man in his position and was possibly even pro-Fascist.¹⁶ It is highly likely, therefore, that Warner's view of Burckhardt contributed to his perception of the ICRC as being politically and practically unreliable at a time when trust between Geneva and Whitehall was essential.

Although the BRC and the ICRC were eventually able to get the parcel situation under control, British mistrust of the Committee endured beyond the 1940 POW crisis and spread to other departments in Whitehall, in particular the Ministry of Economic Warfare (MEW). As in the case of George Warner, there were underlying factors that contributed to the MEW's suspicions of the ICRC. As enforcers of the blockade of Europe — which in mid-1940 had become the most important means by which the British could continue to wage war — the MEW was opposed in principle to any modifications to the ICRC's already restricted relief plans. Under pressure to succeed, the head of MEW Hugh Dalton embarked on a campaign to make the Ministry "more combative, more true to its name".¹⁷ Inevitably, this objective clashed with the intentions of the ICRC, which constantly pursued new and more expansive means of delivering relief supplies and POW parcels in response to the growing scale of the conflict. The subject of whether the MEW's principles were justified is beyond the scope of this article. Of pertinence here is that as much as the blockade was part of the British "total war" effort, the MEW had a more malevolent, and often unjustified, cause for rejecting and inhibiting the ICRC's relief schemes.

When, for example, in 1940 the Committee agitated for a new type of Red Cross parcel for the benefit of French POWs, the MEW took a line similar to that held by the PWD. The Ministry argued that any deliveries by the ICRC to the French would constitute nothing short of Geneva handing supplies to the enemy, who would in turn take credit, in the eyes of the public, for distributing the food to the prisoners.¹⁸ The view that the ICRC was, at the very least, susceptible to influence from Berlin or, at the very worst, in outright collusion with the enemy occupation forces formed the basis for

¹⁴ TNA/PRO/FO 916/2587 – Syers to Warner, 21 June 1940; Warner Minute, 3 June 1940; Warner Memo, 11 June 1940.

¹⁵ TNA/PRO/FO 371/24530 – Warner's Political Review of Switzerland, 4 January 1940; DBFP, Series 3, vol.2 – Warner to Halifax, 5 September 1938, doc.775, p.242; Appendix IV, Stevenson to Strang, 8 Sept 1938, p.689.

¹⁶ TNA/PRO/FO 371/39852 – Warner to Cadogan, 10 May 1944.

¹⁷ The MEW's initial problems in enforcing the blockade in 1940 led to a wave of public and parliamentary criticism. This in turn led to a tightening of blockade policy in the weeks after the fall of France – W.N. Medlicott, *The Economic Blockade, vol.1*, p.48; H. Dalton, *The Fateful Years: 1931-1945*, ed. B. Pimlott (London, 1957), p.334.

¹⁸ TNA/PRO/FO 837/1218 – MEW Minutes, 10 August 1940; *Report on the activities of the International Committee of the Red Cross during the Second World War* (hereafter ICRC Report) vol.3, p.30.

this argument. The “collusion” view was especially widespread at the MEW during the ICRC’s 1941/42 campaign to ship relief supplies to the civilian population of Greece.

In May 1941 the head of the ICRC’s delegation in Athens, Robert Brunel, sent an emotional report to Geneva stating that owing to a lack of food Athens had become a “pure hell, a valley where reigns the harshest grief and the blackest misery”.¹⁹ He requested that Geneva petition the MEW for an immediate lifting of the blockade in order to ship basic staples like wheat and milk into the occupied territory. Having procured 100 tonnes of milk from the American Red Cross warehouses in Egypt, the Committee cabled the MEW on 19 June requesting permission to despatch the goods to the Greek port of Piraeus. The problem with this proposal was that, owing to transport difficulties, the actual movement of supplies would have to be conducted by the Italian Red Cross which, along with the Italian and German occupation forces, agreed to organise the distribution of the goods to the Greek population.²⁰ Unsurprisingly, the MEW took this as confirmation of its suspicions, first raised in France, that the ICRC was too willing to work with the Axis and so rejected the appeal on security grounds.²¹

This initial assessment of how, and why, the ICRC intended to conduct the Greek relief operation persisted for some time in Whitehall. In subsequent appeals for increased wheat shipments, the MEW’s response was to opine that the ICRC was acting under pressure from the Axis occupation forces, which only wanted more supplies despatched to Greece so they could steal them.²² In addition to the view that the ICRC’s role was, in effect, facilitating the occupation, the MEW also viewed the Committee’s actions as a criticism of British policy. This opinion of the ICRC as troublemakers became widespread when — with the help of intense public pressure from the United States and elsewhere — the British were forced to give permission grudgingly for the Committee to send a supply-laden ship, the *Kurtulus*, to Piraeus in October 1941.²³ Although the Foreign Office thought the idea good for publicity purposes, for the MEW agreement to the *Kurtulus* plan was the opening of a Pandora’s Box that would eventually lead to the unravelling of the entire principle of blockade.²⁴ Annoyed at the ICRC for its role in the *Kurtulus* affair and still highly suspicious of its intentions in Greece, the MEW sought to prevent the Committee planning any more relief schemes by manoeuvring to have the Swedish Red Cross replace Brunel’s delegation as co-ordinators of the Greek relief campaign.

The minutes of the MEW’s discussions on this issue reveal the depth of mistrust that underlay this proposal. In comparing the ICRC to the Swedish Red Cross, it was thought that the latter would not only be more resistant to Axis influence, but would also provide the British with more accurate information of the real conditions on the ground in Greece — which, the Ministry believed, the ICRC was dramatising.²⁵ In a

¹⁹ Moorehead, *Dunant’s Dream*, p.393 citing Brunel Report to ICRC, 30 May 1941. For discussion of the famine in Greece during the war see M. Mazower, *Inside Hitler’s Greece: The Experience of Occupation 1941-44* (New Haven, 1993), ch. 3.

²⁰ ICRC Report, vol.3, p.451; TNA/PRO/FO 837/1230 – Geneva to MEW, 19 June 1941.

²¹ The MEW eventually backed down from its refusal under pressure from the Greek Ambassador in London and agreed to a one-off shipment – TNA/PRO/FO 837/1230 – MEW to Berne, 3 July 1941, Simopoulos to Dalton, 16 July 1941.

²² TNA/PRO/FO 837/1230 – FO to Canea, 1 May 1941.

²³ A. Durand, *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross: Sarajevo to Hiroshima* (Geneva, 1984) p.496.

²⁴ TNA/PRO/FO 837/1232 – FO to Camps, 19 September 1941.

²⁵ TNA/PRO/FO 837/1235 – MEW Minutes, 15 February 1942; FO to Stockholm, 27 February 1942.

further effort to discredit the ICRC and in doing so push the Swedish option, the MEW sought evidence of the Committee's duplicity. The Ministry not only requested an investigation into its suspicion that Geneva was passing shipping intelligence to the Germans, but it may also have been involved in the wider efforts of the Foreign Office to censor the Committee's use of the Swiss diplomatic bag, a practice that had been authorised by Whitehall in 1939.²⁶

These actions, combined with the move to push the ICRC out of Greece in favour of the Swedes, indicates that the MEW did not trust the ICRC to conduct relief operations on a scale greater than simply supplying POW camps. As much as this view may have been justified by the amount of goods seized under ICRC supervision — which was in fact little different from the amount seized under Swedish auspices²⁷ — the attitude of the MEW towards the ICRC during the war's remaining years indicates that its efforts to "rein in" the Committee in Greece were but one facet of a wider campaign by Whitehall to curtail and control the growth and expansion of the ICRC's relief activities.

It is notable that Burckhardt was frequently the instigator of the Committee's new relief schemes which, owing to their expansionist nature, became the bane of the MEW. As part of the proposal for increased shipping to Greece, for example, Burckhardt organised a relief body to cater specifically for civilian needs: the Joint Relief Commission (JRC).²⁸ As has been suggested by one of his colleagues at the JRC, Burckhardt's primary motivation for championing this new project was personal prestige. He certainly wanted to make sure that his name, and the name of no other ICRC officials, was on agreements made with the British over JRC schemes.²⁹ The problem was that, owing to British perceptions of the Committee and Burckhardt's involvement in these new schemes, British agreement was seldom forthcoming.

For example, The ICRC's attempt to expand both the capacity and the autonomy of its parcel-carrying ships was an on-going source of grievance for the MEW, the Admiralty and the Ministry of War Transport. In early 1942 the MEW's response to the proposal for the new Red Cross "White Ships"³⁰ was to warn other departments in Whitehall against supporting the proposal, raising the old fear that such an expansion would only favour the supply of non-British POWs. On these grounds the MEW resisted the ICRC's proposals for over six months until, finally, the Foreign Office — under pressure from public outcry over the blockade regulations in Greece — approved

²⁶ TNA/PRO/FO 837/1223 – MEW to IRB HQ, 30 March 1942; Archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva (hereafter ICRC) D-EUR/GB1-22 – Haccius to Roberts, 29 April 1942; ICRC G85/1047 – Huber to Halifax, 20 September 1939.

²⁷ TNA/PRO/FO 837/1214 – Washington to MEW, 27 March 1943. Refugees from Greece who had arrived in Egypt in early 1943 estimated that up to 40 per cent of supplies were still being requisitioned by the occupation forces for the benefit of the army. The MEW confirmed later that same year that supplies of wheat and pulse were still being "pilfered" – TNA/PRO/FO 837/1215 – Lord Selbourne to Archbishop of Canterbury, 1 June 1943.

²⁸ TNA/PRO/FO 916/113 – Minutes of ICRC Meeting with British Government Departments, 9-10 December 1941. For details of the formation of the JRC and its activities see Durand, *History of the International Committee*, pp.470-482.

²⁹ Burckhardt was particularly anxious to keep the delegate Lucie Odier from having any "onus" in JRC schemes. – ICRC/CO2/1.925 – Minutes of ICRC meeting, 26 June 1941; TNA/PRO/FO 916/113 – Burckhardt to Roberts, 22 December 1941. For account of Burckhardt's motivations for forming the JRC see Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, p.386 citing interview with Maître Lalive.

³⁰ The term "White Ships" was used by the ICRC delegate Marcel Junod to describe the Committee's fleet – M. Junod, *Warrior Without Weapons*, (Geneva 1951), pp.175-183.

the creation of the ICRC's new fleet. The approval, however, was given with the qualification that non-British POW would not be the first to benefit from the expansion of the ICRC's capabilities.³¹

The ICRC's solution to the problem of bringing relief supplies into concentration camps was another area the British viewed with suspicion. The camps had not seen an ICRC inspector since 1936, and the situation for the prisoners was worsened during the war by Hitler's "Night and Fog" decree of 7 December 1941. This ordered that the inmates be invisible to the outside world, and, with their names unknown, they were deprived of the rights granted to prisoners by the Geneva Convention. The prisoners were, therefore, receiving neither Red Cross parcels nor visits from ICRC and Protecting Power camp inspectors. The Committee's initial response to this was a confusing and poorly executed series of fruitless *démarches* — an approach that was typical of the ICRC's efforts during the early war years to obtain concessions from Berlin.³² By July 1943, however, the ICRC had adopted a more practical approach to this problem in the form of one of its most adroit and creative ideas of the entire war: the Concentration Camp Parcel Service (CCPS).

Run under the auspices of one of Burckhardt's colleagues from the JRC, Jean de Schwarzenberg, the CCPS was a name-collecting program. In the months prior to the organisation being made official, Schwarzenberg had pioneered a system whereby each parcel in a delivery run had an attached receipt on which additional prisoners' names and addresses could be written before being sent back to Geneva for onward transmission. As Schwarzenberg himself admitted, "it was something of an adventure, since we were departing from the traditional basis of our work as defined by the Conventions".³³ This unorthodox method of prisoner information collection led to the positive identification of many more prisoners and, inevitably, a need to expand the ICRC's capacity to deliver parcels into the camps that held them. This need brought the problem of blockade regulations once more into consideration.

The MEW were, naturally, weary of the ICRC's pleas for more foodstuffs to be sent into the occupied territories. This was in no small part due to the fact that in order for the scheme to work the ICRC had to rely on a practice that was anathema to Whitehall: close co-operation by ICRC delegates with the Germans. As the historian of the ICRC and the Holocaust, Jean-Claude Favez, has argued, much of the CCPS's early success was due to the head of the ICRC's delegation in Berlin, Roland Marti, being able to negotiate successfully with camp commandants. These agreements were not always honoured, but those that were provided an invaluable lifeline for the prisoners. Amazingly, there were even instances in which the German authorities helped the ICRC by on-forwarding parcels intended for those who had been transferred to other camps.³⁴ In August 1943, encouraged by this co-operation from the Germans, the ICRC's delegate in Washington, Alfred Zollinger, sent a request to the MEW for more concessions to blockade restrictions on bulk parcels. In reply Zollinger was told that although the Ministry realised "that these prisoners are suffering exceptional privation

³¹ ICRC Report, vol.3, p.142; ICRC/G85/1048 – MEW to Burckhardt, 30 June 1942.

³² The ICRC sent requests for information on the camps to the German Foreign Office and the German Red Cross, which by this time had become a fully Nazified organisation. Consequently, the requests were refused. Durand, *History of the International Committee*, pp.579-582.

³³ Favez, *The Red Cross and the Holocaust*, p.95, citing Schwarzenberg Memoir in ICRC/G3/26F/DAS; ICRC Report, vol.3, p.365.

³⁴ Favez, *The Red Cross and the Holocaust*, p.96.

and in many cases must deserve exceptional sympathy”, they would have to give him a “particularly painful” refusal.³⁵ Despite these difficulties, by the war’s ends the ICRC had delivered 1,112,000 parcels to concentration camp inmates, many of whom would have perished without the crucial supplementation to their increasingly meagre rations.³⁶

There were two reasons for Whitehall’s obstinacy on the issue of the CCPS. The first was that the scheme was incompatible with the British “total war” strategy, from which developed Whitehall’s policy of “victory before relief”.³⁷ The second reason was that the scheme did not directly benefit British POW. This attitude was still evident as late as 1944/45 when, in a repetition of their policy on French POW in 1940, the Foreign Office and the MEW opposed the ICRC’s plans for a new POW parcel route via the Baltic on the grounds that it would initially only benefit American POW.³⁸ As far as Whitehall was concerned, ICRC expansion was viewed as not only dangerous in terms of it empowering an organisation viewed as being politically unreliable, but it was synonymous with retraction of services for British interests. This attitude inhibited Burckhardt’s plans for expansion and destroyed any remaining platform from which already precarious British-ICRC relations could be rebuilt.

Contributing to the poor relations between Geneva and Whitehall was the fact that neither side was inclined to back down, even slightly, from its principles. Despite having received countless rejections, throughout 1943 and 1944 the ever-emboldened ICRC sent a barrage of pleas and requests to the MEW for relief for Belgium.³⁹ At the same time the Ministry came under increasing pressure from influential figures in the United States, which in general was showing support for a more flexible blockade policy. Although internally the combination of these two factors led some at the MEW to describe the dogma of blockade as causing “growing embarrassment”⁴⁰ the Ministry remained openly defiant. Consequently, the MEW’s hostility towards the ICRC’s efforts to break down the blockade grew to new heights during 1943, and by the end of that year the MEW’s policy was to reject anything emanating out of Geneva.

The ICRC’s appeals in September 1943, for example, for concessions to ship medical supplies to wounded and sick military personnel initially failed even to garner a response from the MEW.⁴¹ When, finally, responses were made, the Ministry’s officials could scarcely conceal their exasperation. This was particularly evident in the impatient tone the MEW’s Joint-Director, Lord Drogheda, took in his correspondence with Burckhardt, and the MEW’s note to the US Embassy that they no longer had any intention of “entering into any detailed argument” with the ICRC on the matter of relief for Belgium.⁴² This antipathy reached its pinnacle in the new trade agreement brokered

³⁵ ICRC/G85/1048 – MEW to Zollinger, 18 August 1943.

³⁶ ICRC Report, vol.3, pp.335-336.

³⁷ For the declaration of this policy see Winston Churchill, “The Few” speech to the House of Commons, 20 August 1940 – The Churchill Centre and Museum, London: Cabinet War Rooms Museum <<http://www.winstonchurchill.org>> (accessed 21 May 2009).

³⁸ TNA/PRO/FO 916/943 – Minutes of War Office Meeting, 29 July 1944; TNA/PRO/WO 193/344 – Minutes of British Chiefs of Staff Meeting, 3 August 1944.

³⁹ ICRC Report, vol. 3, pp.372-374.

⁴⁰ Medicott, *The Economic Blockade*, vol.2, pp.612-614. There was also pressure from the émigré Allied Governments based in London – TNA/PRO/FO 837/1214 – MEW Minute, 11 April 1943.

⁴¹ ICRC Report, vol.3, p.129.

⁴² TNA/PRO/FO 837/1225 – Drogheda to Burckhardt, 16 November 1943, MEW to US Embassy, 6 October 1943.

between the blockading authorities and the Swiss Government in December 1943, which included a clause stating that the Swiss were not to approve any more exports on behalf of the ICRC without the prior agreement of the Allies.⁴³

The MEW's impatience with the ICRC can perhaps be understood. The prediction of one Ministry official that any concessions towards the ICRC would only lead to Whitehall being "bombarded with a series of piece-meal suggestions to admit food through the blockade",⁴⁴ did come true. However, the underlying nervousness over ICRC/Axis collusion that contributed to Whitehall's negative attitude towards Geneva was, at best, unreasonable. Not only had the ICRC proved its worth in its role as provider for Allied POWs, but its efforts in Greece were impartial and the MEW's insinuation that the goals of the Axis occupation forces coincided with those of the ICRC were based on flawed reasoning. Consequently, British suspicions of the ICRC's delegates on the ground continued and, in keeping with Whitehall's overall policy of containing the ICRC's expansion, British intelligence began from early 1942 onwards to regularly screen and, where necessary, monitor, ICRC delegates.⁴⁵

The irony of the British scrutiny at this time was that Burckhardt — having been further empowered in late 1942 by the ill-health of the ICRC's president Max Huber — was endeavouring to improve both his image and that of the ICRC in the eyes of Whitehall.⁴⁶ Burckhardt's first step was to become involved in the Shackling Crisis of 1942/43, a series of reciprocal breaches of the Geneva Convention in which the British and the Germans shackled thousands of their POWs.⁴⁷ From the outset the British were weary of Burckhardt involving himself as a mediator.

The new Ambassador in Berne, Clifford Norton, went so far as to warn his colleagues not to trust Burckhardt's reports on the situation as they had been mostly drawn from his German contact in Geneva, Wolfgang Krauel.⁴⁸ Churchill, no doubt recalling Burckhardt's peaceable endeavours, intimated that any form of Swiss mediation, by either Burckhardt or the Swiss Government in its capacity as Protecting Power, was "only a step to mediate peace".⁴⁹ Despite this opposition, Burckhardt persisted, and with the help of Roland Marti he was able to gain insight into the views of many on the Wilhemstrasse who supported his efforts to mediate.⁵⁰ It was owing in no small part to Burckhardt's use of these contacts that he was able to arrange in

⁴³ Medlicott, *The Economic Blockade*, vol.2, pp.514-515. For further details see Report on the activities of the Joint Relief Committee during the Second World War, pp.20-26.

⁴⁴ TNA/PRO/FO 837/1223 – MEW Minutes, 17 March 1942.

⁴⁵ This practice may have begun in December 1941 when Burckhardt was followed by British agents on his way to London – N. Wylie, *Britain, Switzerland and the Second World War* (Oxford 2003), p.296. The first screening was of a Swiss national proposed as a new ICRC delegate in Malaya in January 1942 – TNA/PRO/FO 916/309 – Haccius To Satow, 5 January 1942.

⁴⁶ Although not officially made president of the ICRC until 1 January 1945, Burckhardt assumed effective control of the Committee in October 1942 – ICRC/C14 – Minutes of Central Commission Meeting, 4 November 1942; Durand, *History of the International Committee*, p.590.

⁴⁷ For discussion of the Shackling Crisis see S.P. MacKenzie, "The Shackling Crisis: A Case-Study in the Dynamic of Prisoner of War Diplomacy in the Second World War", *International History Review*, Vol. 17 (1995) pp.78-98; J.F. Vance, "Men in Manacles: The Shackling of Prisoners of War, 1942-1943", *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 59, 3 (1995), pp.483-504.

⁴⁸ TNA/PRO/FO 32/10719 – Berne to FO, 10 March 1943. Norton was correct in this view – ICRC:G25/25/658 – Krauel to Burckhardt, 1 December 1942.

⁴⁹ TNA/PRO/PRO/3/363/2 – Churchill to Attlee, 11 October 1942.

⁵⁰ ICRC:G25/28/658 – Burckhardt to Marti, 2 November 1942; ICRC:C14 – Minutes of Central Committee Meeting, 21 December 1942.

November 1943 for a personal meeting with Ribbentrop, during which the German Foreign Minister agreed to remove the shackles from British and Commonwealth prisoners.⁵¹

In terms of the ICRC's more traditional roles, further efforts were also made to placate the British. The seeds of this were first sown by Burckhardt in the aftermath of his coolly received visit to London in 1941. Having reviewed Burckhardt's report on his meetings with the British, the ICRC leadership decided that the London delegation — "a post of the highest possible importance" — needed to be strengthened. Accordingly, the Committee chose to send the delegate Horace De Pourtales, a consummate English speaker, to join the ICRC's London operation as a liaison.⁵² He was later joined by another delegate, Nicholas Burckhardt, who, when in need of a recall to Geneva for personal reasons in February 1943, was replaced by Jean Cellier.⁵³

The ICRC, therefore, was shown as determined to increase and maintain the presence of its delegation in London. This was hardly the action of an organisation seeking to distance itself from British interests which, Burckhardt made clear to the MEW, would be best served by Whitehall's acquiescence to his plans for expansion of the Red Cross fleet.⁵⁴ The problem with Burckhardt taking this line was that by this time, and despite his efforts to prove the contrary, the view had solidified at the MEW that "the chief preoccupation of the International Committee is to get space for transport of goods for non-British prisoners".⁵⁵ This, combined with continuing reservations over the ICRC's neutrality, meant that in the final, desperate stages of the war, the British were still unwilling to fully cooperate with the ICRC.

In addition to the snub of the ICRC's proposed Baltic parcel route for American and British POW, Whitehall was also non-compliant in Alfred Zollinger's efforts to acquire trucks and railcars for the transport of relief supplies in 1944/45. Zollinger's request in February 1944 for 600 railcars from the Allies was rejected on the depressingly familiar grounds that the specific use of the wagons for Red Cross purposes could not be guaranteed in Nazi-held territory. This issue remained unresolved until D-Day, when Zollinger sent a second, related, appeal to the Allies, this time for the establishment of supply depots at certain POW camps. Despite encouraging replies from Berlin, this suggestion was also dropped by the Allies, as it "presented many administrative difficulties".⁵⁶

The question of more road vehicles for ICRC use was no less impeded. In May 1944 the Committee appealed to the Allies for trucks to aid in the distribution of parcels. Despite initial support by the Allies, agreement by all parties on the technical details was difficult to achieve, and it was not until 20 September that fifty American trucks arrived in Barcelona.⁵⁷ It took an additional three months for the heavily laden vehicles to reach the Spanish border, during which time a second consignment of twenty-three trucks arrived at Marseilles and a further fifty arrived at Toulon. In the end it was not until early 1945 — eight months after Zollinger's initial request — that the ICRC

⁵¹ TNA/PRO/WO 32/10719 – Berne to FO, 23 November 1943.

⁵² ICRC/C14 – Minutes of ICRC meeting, 2 February 1942.

⁵³ ICRC/G85/1049 – Chenevière to Norton, 22 February 1943.

⁵⁴ TNA/PRO/FO 916/333 – Burckhardt to Drogheda, 19 August 1942.

⁵⁵ TNA/PRO/FO 837/1224 – MEW to PWD, 6 August 1942.

⁵⁶ ICRC Report, vol.2, p.171-172; Report of the Activities of the British Red Cross during the Second World War (unpublished account held in BRC Archives), vol.1, pp.418-420.

⁵⁷ TNA/PRO/FO 916/944 – Washington to MEW, 21 August 1944.

received its full quota of trucks from the Allies, by which time the rail service between Marseilles and Switzerland had been stabilised.⁵⁸

Faced with the difficulties of dealing with the Allies on the question of relief during the war's final stages, an increasingly exasperated Committee turned to the very practice that the British had hoped to prevent: co-operation with the Germans. Burckhardt had always maintained good relations with German officials and Ernst von Weizsäcker recalled that it was in late 1942 — when Burckhardt's personal ambitions begin to shape ICRC policy — that he and Wolfgang Krauel began working with the ICRC on “guerrilla diplomacy” on behalf of concentration camp internees.⁵⁹ This collaboration was for the benefit of the CCPS, the success of which became an increasingly important priority for the ICRC as the war progressed and news of the Holocaust became more widespread. These concerns culminated in Burckhardt's well documented meeting with SS *Obergruppenführer* Ernst Kaltenbrunner on 12 March, which involved negotiations over the protection of concentration camp inmates and which, in its organisation and execution, bore all the hallmarks of Burckhardt's peace meetings during the war's early years.⁶⁰

Aside from “guerrilla diplomacy”, the ICRC's delegates also sought cooperation from Germans on the ground during the tumultuous spring of 1945. Preying in no small part on the desire of many German guards to appear compassionate in the eyes of the war's victors, Roland Marti and his delegates in Berlin both brokered deals with German commandants and recruited SS soldiers for the purposes of guarding and unloading relief supplies.⁶¹ Marti's delegation was even able to gain German permission for US and British aircraft carrying supplies to land forty kilometres south of Berlin, an initiative that was crucial in supplying huge numbers of civilian refugees being force-marched through that area.⁶²

In marked contrast to this collaboration came a stinging rebuke by the ICRC toward the Allies. In a circular memorandum to its delegations in Allied countries, the ICRC declared that it:

[...] cannot but deplore in this connection that our request made already 18 months ago to British and American authorities for delivery of 600 goods vans or material for construction thereof in Switzerland, which we submitted foreseeing that serious transport situation was bound to arise sooner or later was not acceded to. Had this then been accepted situation today would not be as tragic.

In a final salvo the memo declared that the “ICRC must decline responsibility if proposal should for one reason or another not be put into practice”.⁶³ This declaration was followed on 22 February by a statement from the ICRC to all belligerents that despite the British wish for preference to be given to their own POWs, the Committee

⁵⁸ ICRC Report, Vol.3, pp.186-88.

⁵⁹ Weizsäcker, *Memoirs of Ernst Von Weizsäcker*, p.271.

⁶⁰ ICRC Report, vol.2, pp.620-623.

⁶¹ ICRC Report, vol.3, pp.90-92; Favez, *The Red Cross and the Holocaust*, pp.260-61.

⁶² TNA/PRO/FO 916/1181 – FO to Berne, 9 March 1945. For details on the forced evacuation of POW and concentration camps inmates by the Germans during the war's final months see J. Nichol and T. Rennell, *The Last Escape: The Untold Story of Allied Prisoners of War in Germany 1944-1945* (London, 2003).

⁶³ TNA/PRO/WO 193/343 – ICRC to ICRC London Delegation, 16 February 1945.

would begin pooling parcels for distribution to “any United Nations prisoners of war”.⁶⁴

This missive was the result of years of frustration in Geneva over the attitude of the British government towards its expansion. That it took so long for the ICRC to speak out in these terms is indicative not only of the Committee’s devotion to impartiality in dealing with belligerents, but also its dependence upon goodwill from the latter to succeed. Given that there was little goodwill in Whitehall towards either the ICRC or its vice-president and the schemes for improved relief he initiated, it is notable that the Committee was still able to provide in the final months of the war an invaluable lifeline to POWs and civilian victims of war.

The sight of the Red Cross trucks — dubbed the “White Angels” — was one of welcome joy to the POW who, in the winter of 1944/45, were forced by the Germans to march west through war-torn Europe. The representative of the prisoners at Stalag VIIA expressed his “most fervent thanks” for the efforts of the delegates, and Robert Gale at Stalag 357 described the arrival of the Red Cross as nothing less than a starvation-averting “miracle”.⁶⁵ A representative of the British POW scattered around Lübeck went so far as to write personally to the commander of the newly-arrived British occupation force praising the efforts of the ICRC’s delegate in Lübeck, Paul de Blonay, and requesting that he be retained as part of the occupation force’s relief strategy.⁶⁶

Ultimately, it was the welfare of these POW in Europe as well as the civilians starving in Greece and the Nazis’ most imperilled victims in the concentration camps that the ICRC endeavoured to assist by way of expanding its wartime activities. The British government, as masters of the blockade, were a necessary dynamic in the ICRC’s plans but, due to suspicions of Carl Burckhardt, and as a consequence the Committee as a whole, Whitehall failed throughout the war to find enough trust upon which to build a co-operative relationship with the ICRC.

The fact that despite this lack of co-operation the ICRC was able — with help from other anti-blockade campaigners and, on a micro level, the compliance of individual Germans — to conduct its expansion and pursue its goals stands testament to the Committee’s seldom recognised ability to adapt and respond to the horrors of the Second World War. This response, in the form of parcel delivery innovations like the CCPS and transport innovations like the “White Ships”, was an endeavour that helped shape the ICRC into its current role as the world’s most prominent humanitarian agency. As much as it proved a hindrance at the time, British obstinacy played a key role in prompting these achievements as it forced the Committee to continually adapt, improve and indeed, fight, for its own ideas and principles. As such, the difficult relations between the British government and the ICRC were ultimately beneficial for the latter’s long-term development.

⁶⁴ TNA/PRO/FO 1049/26 – ICRC to ICRC London, 22 February 1945. “United Nations” was a term first used to describe the Allies during the war.

⁶⁵ ICRC/G23/26F/109 – C.H. Burgess to Mock (ICRC delegate at Moosburg), 20 April 1945; S.P. MacKenzie, *The Colditz Myth* (Oxford, 2004), p.368.

⁶⁶ ICRC/G23/26F/109 – Captain Bauer to Lieutenant-Colonel Hoseason, 3 May 1945.

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