

What the World Knew: How the Red Cross Failed Europe's Jews & American POW's

In the 1990's, after decades of trying to conceal its failures during [World War II](#) and the [Holocaust](#), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) finally opened its archives and allowed researchers access to documents illustrating the organization's shortcomings.

The Red Cross was a crucial source of information about the treatment of civilians and POW's in [Europe](#) during the war; however, the "eyes" of the Western world in German-occupied territory often proved myopic. Abuses went unreported or were minimized. Whereas the U.S. government has maintained that it did not know what was happening and thus could not act, the Red Cross' position was that it could not act even about incidents of which it was aware.

In what was the standard response to criticism of the ICRC, Roger Du Pasquier, Head of the Information Department, explained:

No relief action of any sort by the Red Cross in Germany or the occupied territories could have been undertaken without the approval of the authorities....Conforming to the letter, if not to the spirit of the Geneva Conventions...the Nazi government permitted the ICRC and its delegates to act on behalf of the several millions of prisoners held in the Stalags and Oflags. It refused, however, to allow any intervention on the part of the Red Cross in the concentration camps....In the face of such an obstinate refusal which covered up the horrifying reality, about which one was then ill-informed, the ICRC certainly could have made itself heard; it could have protested publicly and called on the conscience of the world. By doing so it would, however, have deprived itself of any possibility of acting in Hitler's Empire; it would have deliberately given up what chances there still remained to it to help, even in a restricted manner, the victims of the concentration camp regime. But, above all, it would have made it impossible for it to continue its activity on behalf of millions of military captives. For the Nazi leaders viewed this activity with suspicion which they would have ruthlessly suppressed on the slightest pretext.

The Red Cross did much good work, but it often failed POW's as miserably as it did the inmates of [concentration camps](#). The organization's options were limited by the [Nazis](#), but the idea that it therefore had no moral responsibility to speak out on behalf of the latter because it threatened the good work it was able to do for POW's is, in retrospect, obscene.

Morality aside, it is simply false to say the ICRC was "ill-informed" about the "horrifying reality of the camps." The American Red Cross files contain a collection of newspaper

clippings that indicate it was well aware of events in Europe. Here are a few of the headlines of those stories

- "25,000 Jews Seized In Southern France," (*New York Times*, August 28, 1942);
- "Jewish Children Interned by Vichy" (*Chicago Sun*, August 31, 1942);
- "35,000 Jews Executed in Five Polish Towns," (*New York Herald Tribune*, March 21, 1943);
- "50,000 Jews Put In Nazi Prison 'Die Like Flies,'" (*Washington Times Herald*, September 3, 1943);
- "50,000 Jews Dying In Nazi Fortress," (*New York Times*, September 3, 1943);
- "Nazi Slayings Near 250,000," (*Baltimore Sun*, September 22, 1943);
- "Poles Report Nazis Slay 10,000 Daily," (*Washington Post*, March 22, 1944);
- "1,000,000 Hungarian Jews Face Massacre, Hull Says," (*Chicago Sun*, July 15, 1944).

The Red Cross knew about the [Nazi atrocities](#) as early as August 1942. In February 1945, the President of the Red Cross wrote to a U.S. official: "Concerning the Jewish problem in Germany we are in close and continual contact with the German authorities." The fact that the head of the Red Cross would use the Nazi phraseology -- "the Jewish problem" -- may also be an indication of the organization's attitude that Jews were more of a problem than a people who were being annihilated.

The Red Cross also knew about crimes against POWs, but did little to publicize them. One might have thought the U.S. government would have an interest in fomenting anger toward the Germans, and would have broadcast stories of mistreatment of soldiers, but officials took the opposite tack. Virtually all the information made public about POWs emphasized their welfare. For example, a December 17, 1944, *Washington Post* headline was reassuring: "Nazis Play Fair in Prison Camps, Families Told." This news came from the director of POW relief of the ICRC. He told the *Post* the Germans "have endeavored to accord the same standards of treatment to American and British prisoners that were set up in the Geneva Convention."

The ICRC maintained that there was no inequality of treatment of Jewish prisoners, for example, though the organization did acknowledge that [Jewish POWs](#) were sometimes segregated. The ICRC visited [Stalag VII-A](#) on January 27, 1945, for example, and reported that 110 American Jewish POWs had been segregated but said they were not otherwise mistreated. The Red Cross accepted the Nazi contention that such actions were permissible under Article 9 of the Geneva Convention, which provides that belligerents shall not house prisoners of different **rac**es or **nati**onalities together.

A representative of the International Red Cross who visited Stalag IX-B briefly mentioned that the Germans selected American POWs they thought were Jews and put them in a separate barracks. The report said "no other discrimination was made against them." In fact, perhaps as many as 120 Jews -- along with about 330 non-Jews -- were sent to a slave labor camp associated with [Buchenwald](#). That camp, [Berga](#), had the highest fatality rate of any camp where American POWs were held during the war (20 percent).

The American Red Cross, meanwhile, adopted the attitude that it should not do

anything to upset families; therefore, its *Prisoner of War Bulletin* was filled with glowing reports of POW camps, letters from cheerful prisoners and photos of happy Americans. But those who returned home came back with a different account of life in a POW camp.

Sources: Copyright Mitchell G. Bard. *Forgotten Victims: The Abandonment of Americans In Hitler's Camps*. CO: Westview Press, 1994.