



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



International Tracing Service  
Inscribed on the International Register in 2013  
Memory of the World

ITS

International Tracing Service  
Service International de Recherches  
Internationaler Suchdienst

## ‘Humanity’s Ancestral Inheritance’: The International Tracing Service, 1942-2008

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“This is a service dedicated to millions of innocent victims of war, dictatorship and intolerance and to their families. We serve the dead and the living, men and women, adults and children, Jews and gentiles, we serve all nationalities, the Germans, the Czechs, the Dutch, the Poles, we serve concentration camp victims regardless whether they were social democrats, liberals, communists or gypsies. We serve- period!”<sup>1</sup> Hugh Elbot, the American director of the International Tracing Service, celebrated the agency’s new headquarters with these words in August of 1952 (ITS Digital Archives Doc. 82507500). From its origins in wartime Washington and London, through the Cold War to the present, the ITS has provided humanitarian aid and information services to a broad spectrum of individuals, governments and institutions.

The tracing service received recent media coverage because of widespread efforts to restore public access to its archive after almost 30 years. The extended inaccessibility and the Red Cross’ desire to operate the agency out of the public eye have obscured the organization’s history. However, the reopening of the archives to the public in 2008 has given scholars the opportunity to examine the tracing service’s institutional records, and consequently expand their studies to corollary archival collections in North America, Europe and Israel.<sup>2</sup> These initial studies demonstrate the significant impact that control over the agency- “humanity’s ancestral inheritance” as it was called it in 1980- had on postwar politics, society and culture.<sup>3</sup>

This inheritance was a response to the ever-growing European refugee crisis created by the Second World War. The United States Department of State discussed already in 1942 the need for an agency to locate, and where possible, reunite individuals missing as a course of the war. In Europe, several discreet organizations including the British Red Cross Society, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA), and Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, concurrently discussed tracing the missing and facilitating contact between displaced persons. In addition, the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF) included tracing in their plans for the relief and reconstruction of Germany.

The military authorities consulted with the aforementioned groups and the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva about tracing, and established the SHAEF Tracing and Locating Unit in the spring of 1945. The Allies tasked it with collecting

<sup>1</sup> ITS, *Allierte 52*: 20 August 1952 Elbot welcome speech to the new administrative building in Arolsen

<sup>2</sup> See Jean Marc Dreyfus, “À Bad Arolsen dans le forêt des archives nazies,” *La Vie des Idées*, (2008): last accessed 15 February 2012, [http://www.laviedesidees.fr/IMG/pdf/20080911\\_badarolsen.pdf](http://www.laviedesidees.fr/IMG/pdf/20080911_badarolsen.pdf); and Bernd Joachim Zimmer, *International Tracing Service : Von der Vermisstensuche zur Haftbescheinigung, Die Organisation eines « ungewollten Kindes » während der Besatzungszeit*, (Bad Arolsen: Waldeckischer Geschichtsverein, 2011.). In addition, Dreyfus has a forthcoming publication on French diplomats and the ITS. The author of this article is currently finishing a dissertation that examines how Western governments- Washington, Bonn, Paris, London and Jerusalem- and the Red Cross used the ITS to promote and legitimize political and cultural agendas in the post- World War II era.

<sup>3</sup> Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PA-AA), B85/ 1552, 02 April 1980 Minutes of the meeting of the International Commission of the ITS

nominal lists from concentration camps for later use in tracing activities at the national level. After the end of hostilities, the tracing unit took on a quadripartite character, and the military governments, who considered civilian searches a non-military operation, transferred its administration to UNRRA's Central Tracing Bureau under a mandate that included tracing and document collection. In 1946, the Allies moved the tracing bureau from near Frankfurt am Main to the Hessian town of Arolsen because it was roughly equidistant to all four zones of occupation and had intact infrastructure sufficient to accommodate the rapidly expanding agency.

UNRRA, like many relief agencies with an interim mandate, terminated its operations as planned in 1947, amid allegations of mismanagement of the tracing bureau. These two factors cast doubt onto the continuation of the operations. However, the Allies acknowledged the importance of the agency for the international community, and thus sought a different institution to supervise it. UNRRA's successor, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) eventually agreed to assume further responsibility. In 1948, the IRO centralized disparate local, national and international tracing efforts and reestablished the Central Tracing Bureau as the International Tracing Service.

The reorganization and change in administration significantly impacted the agency's mandate, effectively repurposing it to serve broader political agendas. It ended Soviet participation in operations due to Moscow's unwillingness to recognize the IRO, a circumstance that had previously excluded Red Cross participation in the Central Tracing Bureau. Moreover, it resulted in American dominance in policy formation and increased collaboration with German authorities at a crucial juncture in the Cold War, thereby exacerbating growing tensions between the humanitarian mandate and the political agendas of Western governments. These factors definitively shaped the organization's path in the following decades.

When the IRO took over the tracing service, it reached an agreement with the Western Allies to either terminate operations and establish a research institute around the archive, or transfer them to a more permanent organization. Under heavy pressure from the international community and victim groups to continue operations, the Allied Military Governments and successor Allied High Commission for Germany explored several options, including the Red Cross and United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees. However, these inquiries foundered by late 1950 in part over concern, especially on the part of Washington, that the neutrality and universal service mandates of non-governmental, humanitarian organizations would negatively impact refugees from Eastern Europe, or even that Soviet Union might gain control of the archive itself. They also could interfere with American agencies' use of the archive for refugee programs, which included anti-Soviet propaganda.

Two additional factors informed the decision by the Allied High Commission to directly operate the ITS until they could decide upon its ultimate fate. First, American budget cuts and waning inquiries for direct tracing led to the termination of these activities in 1949, though child tracing continued until 1951. Second, primary function of the agency had become certifying claims and issuing death certificates for social welfare and indemnification programs that benefitted the victims of National Socialist persecution. For this reason, the Western Allies deliberated as early as 1947 a possible German takeover of the tracing service. At the encouragement of French and American government representatives, the nascent Federal Republic of Germany offered to take over the ITS, thus sparking tense negotiations on ultimate control over the organization and its archive.

Ultimately, none of these plans came to fruition. In February 1955, various controversies from public distrust of West Germany, to a Council of Europe takeover of operations, and the nationality of the future director compelled the West German request to the Red Cross to administrate the agency. The scheme also allowed the Federal Republic to fulfill its war burden of guaranteeing the continuation of the ITS. It also presented the Red

Cross, according to the Israeli Foreign Office, a means by which to deal with an “internal crisis” over its future and role “in present world conditions.” Earlier concerns over the organization’s neutral and universal mandate dissipated, as Geneva assured Washington uncontested ownership and access to the archive, and to continue policies of limiting information exchanges with Moscow and its allies.<sup>4</sup> This solution proved acceptable to all parties and the Bonn Accords transferred the ITS to the administration of the Red Cross on May 5, 1955, under the control of an eight nation International Commission.

Owing to the longstanding view that the ITS was a relic of immediate postwar relief efforts and thus an interim organization, the Bonn Accords stipulated quinquennial review of operations and the question of the agency’s ultimate fate. In 1960, the governments of the International Commission, including new member Greece, agreed to extend the Bonn Accords without amendment because of the continued need for access to the archive for West German indemnification programs. At this stage, the International Commission projected the agency’s termination date of 1968, which incorporated the West German projections for final payments following multi-lateral agreements to compensate the victims of National Socialism.

The ratification of international indemnification laws preceded a distinct shift in the work of the tracing service after 1960. Certification of compensation cases constituted its primary activity, but as the political, cultural and social landscapes of Europe changed, it took on new activities. Accession of documents and information exchanges continued, and even occurred with Eastern European countries, especially Poland. However, the agency also began providing documentation for ongoing trials of perpetrators and suspected collaborators in the Nazi regime’s war crimes, including the 1968 investigation of West German President Heinrich Lübke.<sup>5</sup>

By the late 1960s, the organization’s broad operations justified its continued existence. However, the International Commission and Geneva could reach no consensus on the extension of the Bonn Accords in 1965 because of discord over Yugoslavia’s application to the Commission and the expected termination of indemnification payments in approximately 1968. After three years of operating without any legal framework, in 1968 the Red Cross and governments of the International Commission accepted an amendment to the original agreements that indefinitely extended Red Cross administration ITS. Moreover, they also agreed that no additional countries could join the Commission, despite the easing relations between East and West.

The ITS continued its mandated activities of document collection and humanitarian aid- answering individual inquiries and indemnification claims- under new director Albert de Cocatrix during the 1970s. He also expanded access to the archive for historians and historical scholarship. However, a worldwide shift in data-privacy legislation, internal financial difficulties, and an increasing backlog of inquiries triggered a reevaluation of the agency’s mandate, and even its right to exist (*Daseinsberechtigung*), in the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>6</sup> De Cocatrix’s successor, Philipp Züger, and members of the International Commission thus reinterpreted the Bonn Accords and decided to pursue humanitarian activities as defined in

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<sup>4</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, RG 466 HICOG Bonn Classified General Records, 1953-1955, Box 233 Folder 572.1 Red Cross – International Tracing Service 1953-1955, 4. February 1955 Confidential from Dowling to Dulles regarding a possible takeover of the ITS by the Red Cross

<sup>5</sup> Bundesarchiv Koblenz (BAK), NL Lübke, see miscellaneous correspondence dated between June 1965 and March 1966 regarding the examination of documents from the Buchenwald concentration camps held at the ITS to ascertain German President Heinrich Lübke’s knowledge of and complicity in Nazi crimes.

<sup>6</sup> PA-AA, B85/ 1551, 08 February 1978 report from West German Representative to International Organizations in Geneva Rudolf Jaestadt to the Foreign Office and embassies at Moscow, Warsaw and Prague

1955, allowing for historical inquiries only in cases because the ITS found itself increasingly under “moral or political pressure” to undertake such work.<sup>7</sup>

The orthodox interpretation of the tracing service’s *raison d’être* and data-privacy laws consequently created a shroud of secrecy around the agency in the 1980s. The ITS continued operations, but earlier accessibility and the relative transparency in operations evaporated. These circumstances alarmed the international community. As awareness of the Holocaust and desire for information about it grew, several non-governmental groups, such as the German Studies Association and the Conference for Jewish Material Claims against Germany lobbied the Red Cross to reopen the archive. These petitions fell on deaf ears. The end of the Cold War, scrutiny on compensation and restitution programs, and ever-decreasing numbers of Holocaust survivors served as a catalyst for more vigorous debate on the status of the ITS in the 1990s.

In the past decade, German debates on the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and diplomatic efforts, led by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, spurred renewed media attention on the tracing service and the inaccessibility to its collections.<sup>8</sup> International efforts finally succeeded in restoring access to the archive in 2007. As the Red Cross withdraws its longtime administration of the International Tracing Service in 2012, it is clear that the agency has finally begun to realize the original plans envisioned by the Western Allies and West Germany of becoming a research institution of international repute.

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<sup>7</sup> PA-AA, B85/ 1644, 08 May 1981 minutes of the meeting of the International Commission for the ITS, comments of ITS Director Philipp Züger

<sup>8</sup> German Bundestag, Protokoll 14/7: 14. Wahlperiode; Ausschuß für Kultur und Medien; (23. Ausschuß); Wortprotokoll der 7. Sitzung; (öffentliche Anhörung); des Ausschusses für Kultur und Medien am 03. März 1999; and German Bundestag, Wortprotokoll der 11. Sitzung des Ausschusses für Kultur und Medien; am 20. April 1999; all available at [www.bundestag.de](http://www.bundestag.de). Frank-Uwe Betz, “Das andere Mahnmal,” *Die Zeit*, May 19, 2005; „NS-Archive für Wissenschaftler offen,” *Der Spiegel*, May 17, 2006; Roger Cohen, „U.S.-German Flare Up over Vast Nazi Camp Archives,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2006. Roger Cohen, “60 Years after the War, a Fight for Victims’ Files,” *The New York Times*, February 18, 2006. 60 Minutes. “Hitler’s Secret Archive.” CBS News. <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=2972691n> (last accessed February 15, 2012)