

German Red Cross Activity in World War I

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Established in 1871 following the Franco-Prussian War and dissolved at the conclusion of World War I in 1918, the German Empire was a confederation of two dozen or so states. This federal structure allowed each constituent state retained partial sovereignty after becoming a part of the Empire. One salient aspect of this sovereignty was the continued independence of the numerous National Red Cross Societies throughout the empire's near-fifty-year existence.

Our discussion will begin with several general observations about the Red Cross' organizational structure during this period. This will be followed by an analysis of its self-conception prior to and following the outbreak of WWI. We will then provide a concise overview of Red Cross activities both domestically and internationally, with particular focus on its efforts to assist wounded soldiers and civil populations. To this end, we will explore five case studies that showcase specific Red Cross initiatives. Three of these will detail Red Cross activities during WWI: (i) in the city of Aachen, (ii) in the province of Brandenburg, and (iii) in the state Baden when it was a member state of the German Empire. Finally, we will briefly discuss the biographies of two outstanding Red Cross nurses who cared for German prisoners of war in Russia.

German Red Cross Societies at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century

The International Red Cross was founded in Geneva in October 1863. Before returning home, the Red Cross delegates who had gathered there were encouraged to promote the establishment of National Societies in their respective countries in order to imbue the nascent movement with a more global, universal character. The first delegate successful in this endeavor was the Swabian pastor Ullrich Hahn from Stuttgart, who persuaded King William I of Württemberg to support the foundation of a Red Cross Society (Württembergischer Sanitätsverein). Just weeks after the Geneva Conference the first National Red Cross Society came into being in November 1863 in the former Kingdom of Württemberg, one of the independent states in the German-speaking area, with Hahn serving as its chairman. In the years that followed, an increasing number of National Societies emerged in several sovereign states making up the German Confederation—in Oldenburg, Prussia, Hamburg, and Mecklenburg—thereby solidifying the movement's presence across the region.

In 1871, these sovereign states merged to form the German Empire with the Prussian King assuming the title of German Emperor. Since, however, the constituent states retained aspects of their former sovereignty, National Red Cross Societies continued to operate as independent entities. In fact, it was not until 1921 that these national societies unified to form the German Red Cross that we know today—a direct consequence of WWI.¹ The existence

1 There were two notable exceptions: (i) the absence of a National Society after World War II, when the German Red Cross was disbanded at the national level by the Allies, having been infiltrated by the Nazi regime, and (ii) the existence of two National Societies in West (est. 1950) and East (est. 1952) Germany.

of so many Red Cross Societies was deemed unnecessary following the fall of the German monarchies and the emergence of the Weimar Republic. Twenty-six autonomous national societies existed prior to WWI, which, despite their loose organization, had been involved in war relief services since 1869 under the Central Committee of German Red Cross Associations (*Zentralkomitee der deutschen Vereine vom Roten Kreuz*)²:

	Name	Location	Date of Foundation
1	Anhaltischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz ³	County of Anhalt	1868
2	Badischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Grand Duchy of Baden	1859
3	Bayerischer Landeshilfsverein vom Roten Kreuz	Kingdom of Bavaria	1866
4	Braunschweigischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Duchy of Braunschweig	1866
5	Bremischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Free Hanseatic City of Bremen	1868
6	Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz im Herzogtum Coburg	Duchy of Saxony-Coburg, later Saxony-Coburg and Gotha	1866
7	Landes-Männerverein vom Roten Kreuz in Elsass-Lothringen	Imperial Territory of Alsace-Lorraine	1891
8	Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz für das Herzogtum Gotha	Duchy of Gotha, later Saxony-Coburg and Gotha	1884
9	Hamburgischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg	1864
10	Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz im Herzogtum Hessen	Duchy of Hesse	1864

² See the monumental work edited by Ludwig Kimmle (1910); the first volume examines the origins and activities of each national society.

³ In Red Cross historiography, founding dates may vary depending on which event or predecessor organization is regarded as the origin of Red Cross activities.

	Name	Location	Date of Foundation
11	Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz für das Herzogtum Lippe	Principality of Lippe	1907
12	Lübeckischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Hanseatic City of Lübeck	1869
13	Mecklenburgischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Grand Duchies of Mecklenburg-Schwerin and Mecklenburg-Strelitz	1864
14	Meininger Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Duchy of Saxony-Meiningen	1901
15	Oldenburgischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Grand Duchy of Oldenburg	1864
16	Preußischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Kingdom of Prussia	1864
17	Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz Reuß <i>ältere</i> Linie	Principality of the Reuss Elder Line	1870
18	Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz Reuß <i>jüngere</i> Linie	Principality of the Reuss Junior Line	1866
19	Großherzoglich Sächsischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Grand Duchy of Saxony-Weimar	1869
20	Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz im Königreich Sachsen	Kingdom of Saxony	1866
21	Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz für Sachsen-Altenburg	Duchy of Saxony-Altenburg	1869
22	Schaumburg-Lippischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Principality of Schaumburg-Lippe	1870
23	Schwarzburg-Rudolstädtischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Principality of Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt	1870

	Name	Location	Date of Foundation
24	Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz für das Fürstentum Schwarzburg-Sondershausen	Principality of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen	1898
25	Waldeckscher Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Principality of Waldeck	1871
26	Württembergischer Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz	Kingdom of Württemberg	1863

While, with the exception of the Grand Duchy of Baden, these *Landesvereine* (i.e., National Societies) were composed primarily of men, parallel female associations emerged in each German state; the first of which was founded by the Queen of Prussia in 1866. These women's associations soon outnumbered their male counterparts.

At the dawn of WWI, nearly one million members of both the men's and women's associations stood ready for deployment alongside 74,000 members of civil ambulance corps, 12,000 members of the Confraternity of Voluntary Male Nurses (*Genossenschaft freiwilliger Krankenpfleger*), and 2,000 members of Samaritan associations—organizations founded by Friedrich von Esmarch in 1882 that espoused Red Cross principles.⁴

Red Cross Spirit and Patriotism

Even more deserving of praise are the selfless efforts of those men and women who were unconcerned with their own privacy and convenience. Day and night, over the course of four and a half years, they devoted their entire being to charity. Indeed, they continue doing so in many places today. Whether in the calm of hospital rooms, in the drafts of vast railway stations, in the sweltering heat of kitchens, in the cramped quarters of offices, or in the dim light of sewing rooms—wherever the Red Cross emblem is visible, small groups of magnanimous men and women gather to relieve the ills of their fellow man. (Kimmle 1919: 7)

With this declaration, the chairman of the Central Committee of the German Red Cross Societies describes, in passionate terms, the spirit of the Red Cross movement from its inception in the 1860s, connecting it to the recent war. Nevertheless, this statement, made by one of the highest representatives of the German Red Cross should not obscure the fact that the majority of Red Cross members was dominated by fervent patriotism—often bordering

⁴ Figures indicated by Riesenberger (2022: 124). Ludwig Kimmle, the Red Cross Central Committee's chairman at the time, estimated that 400,000 members were involved in war-related activities (Kimmle 1919: 13).

on outright nationalism—and a thinly veiled enthusiasm for war. Dieter Riesenberger, the most prominent among recent historiographers of German Red Cross history, does not mince words. He quotes *in extenso* relevant appeals brimming with patriotic fervor and concludes:

Given the expressively patriotic and monarchist obsession of the Red Cross, it was self-evident that it would join in the common war enthusiasm. The Central Committee of the Red Cross and the Central Directorate of the Patriotic Women's Association issued an appeal to the Red Cross members and to the German population entitled "C'mon! C'mon! Come on to the voluntary war welfare of the Red Cross!" and called on the German people to support the fatherland in its "defense" and to strengthen the Red Cross in its national activity by active participation. (Riesenberger 2002: 125)

Furthermore:

In the four years of war, the Red Cross again and again assured, in appeals and opening messages, its devotion and readiness for action. It did not even shy away from insipidities, e.g. the Imperial Superintendent for Voluntary Nursing was named "General of the army of love." As in feudalistic times, the Patriotic Women's Association cultivated her profile as the "Empress's army." Already in 1915, the Red Cross raised the claim to be the army's backbone. (Riesenberger 2002: 126)

There are, however, signs of sober-mindedness. The Bavarian sculptor and Meissen designer Martin Wiegand created a figurine of a young girl dressed as a Red Cross nurse transporting wounded soldiers in a pushcart.⁵ Upon closer inspection, one realizes that each soldier is wearing the uniform of a different army; yet, all soldiers are cared for by the Red Cross, making this an early artistic representation of the Red Cross principles of neutrality and independence.



5 The figurine also indicates the inclusion of children in war publicity. While the forms of war propaganda that either target children or use them to convey a message—both within the German Red Cross and beyond—are only touched upon briefly, they merit their own more comprehensive study.

Domestic Activities

In terms of medical care, domestic war activities were in charge of the male medical units (*Sanitätskolonnen*) and the female nursing staffs (*Schwesternschaft*). For welfare matters and other non-medical services, it is in charge of the members of the men's and women's associations respectively.

Red Cross nurses formed the backbone of medical care in the war hospitals. The demand for nurses was extraordinary, especially during the war, and a solution was found in training assistant nurses (*Hilfsschwestern*). These nurses were not required to undergo the extensive training required for full nurses, which typically lasted several years, and instead completed a condensed program lasting only a few months. They served in war hospitals, on hospital trains, and, occasionally, on hospital ships alongside their colleagues from women's associations. They also took part in welfare efforts, staffing refreshment places at railway stations, working in sewing rooms, and later, as the war raged on, assisted in homes for war invalids and disabled veterans.



Medical care and public welfare assignments were central responsibilities of Red Cross personnel. Given the substantial financial demands necessary to sustain humanitarian services, securing public and private funds required the development of innovative strategies. Lotteries were organized, patriotic postcards were sold, and donation stamps were introduced, the proceeds of which benefitted the Red Cross. National and regional appeals for money were initiated alongside charity balls and bazaars. The range of initiatives was as diverse as their implementation. For instance, the appeal for gift parcels resulted in significant logistical problems in their handling, storage, and distribution. These efforts were driven by the prevailing patriotic sentiment atypical not only for Red Cross members but also for the general population.⁶

Case studies—National Societies, Provincial Chapters, Local Chapters

Baden

The Grand Duchy of Baden was one of the federal states that formed the German Empire in 1871. It boasted one of the strongest Red Cross traditions in Germany, dating back to 1859. That year, Grand Duchess Louise founded the nursing staff of Baden (*Badische Schwesternschaft*). After the establishment of the Red Cross, the *Badische Schwesternschaft* adopted the role of the National Society of the Grand Duchy—the only example in which the women’s association, rather than the men’s, was recognized as the National Red Cross Society. It was not until 1871 that the two associations merged into the Red Cross of Baden. The Grand Duchess not only founded this association but also actively participated in its work, placing her reputation and authority at the disposal of the Red Cross.⁷

The day following the mobilization, a war committee was formed in Karlsruhe, the capital of the Grand Duchy. Although Louise had not been the reigning grand duchess since 1907, she retained a seat in the central bureau of the committee, which was overseen by her lord chamberlain, Richard von Chelius (*Kriegstätigkeit* 1921: 21). This committee was structured to preemptively anticipate the demands of the war. There were eight departments in addition to the central bureau, each with its own staff and its own office: (i) military hospitals, (ii) transport facilities, (iii) depots and donations, (iv) cash policy, (v) an enquiry office, (vi) a relief office,⁸ (vii) accommodation of sick people, and (viii) human resources, the latter divided into separate departments for men and for women.

6 Many of those Red Cross activities are discussed by Stefan Schomann in his books, based on personal testimonies and presented in a narrative style for a broad audience, in commemoration of the centenary of the Red Cross in Germany (Schomann 2013).

7 The history of this nursing staff, from its foundation up to the end of WWI, is discussed in detail by Lutzer (2002).

8 Ludwig’s doctoral dissertation (1918) explicitly addresses the activities of this department between 1914 and 1917.

These departments planned and coordinated a wide range of activities both behind front lines and within the Grand Duchy itself.⁹ Red Cross personnel were responsible for transporting the sick and wounded, managing refreshment stations, and assisting in convalescent homes and hospitals, where they providing support to overworked nurses, allowing them to the opportunity to recover. They helped hospitals organize their accommodations and established sewing groups that produced clothes for patients in military hospitals (Ludwig 1918). Various tracing services were established, one to survey patients in Baden's hospital and another to provide families information on missing and wounded individuals. Additionally, mobile war libraries funded through specific donations were established in 1916 (*Kriegstätigkeit* 1921: 76).¹⁰



▲ *Hospital train*

Hospital Train E, run by the Baden Red Cross, deserves particular mention. Managed by the Mannheim Red Cross chapter (*Das Rote Kreuz Mannheim* 1934: 25), the second largest town in Baden at the time, this train was equipped to transport seriously injured soldiers from the front lines to hospitals located in the rear or back home. Comprising thirty-six cars, including

9 The report on Baden's wartime activities (*Kriegstätigkeit* 1921) provides a detail description of the various areas of operations.

10 This often overlooked detail in war history was recently discussed by Schrödel (2017).

those for kitchens, storage, and sleeping quarters, the train was designed to carry 288 patients in addition to a staff of four doctors, thirty-six male paramedics, eleven female nurses, one bookkeeper, one fitter, and kitchen staff—the usual composition of hospital trains during WWI (Kimmle 1919: 25–26). Operating from September 1914 to January 1919, it traversed various fronts in both the west and east, including Alsace, Flanders, Transilvania, Serbia, Macedonia, and Latvia. In total, it transported an excess of 18,000 sick and wounded individuals, with official figures recording 17,834 Germans and 898 enemy soldiers. The train completed 345 journeys, covering approximately 130,000 kilometers (*Kriegstätigkeit* 1921: 33).

Brandenburg

The former province of Brandenburg, while not identical in dimensions to the modern German state of Brandenburg, was the heart of the Prussian kingdom, with the capital of the Reich, Berlin, located within its borders. It is therefore unsurprising that Brandenburg was home to one of the densest network of Red Cross men's and women's associations in Prussia. Additionally, the Prussian Red Cross, which included the provincial chapter of Brandenburg, was the largest and most influential Red Cross Society among the German states. By virtue of his office, the President of the Prussian Red Cross was also the chairman of the Central Committee of the German Red Cross Societies.



▲ Food being prepared for the wounded

At the war's conclusion, the chairman of the provincial Red Cross chapter, former medical general Arthur Hering, submitted a report detailing the war activities of 138 medical units.¹¹ His observations are applicable for other provincial chapters. In said report, Hering explains that medical units operated either in the rear or back home, as they were prohibited from operating in active combat zones. He also alludes to the fact that many members of the medical units were conscripted into military service, expressing hope that their medical training as Red Cross members would prove valuable even in this capacity. The units operating in the rear—3,807 medics in Brandenburg—were primarily tasked with accompanying hospital trains, providing assistance while aboard, and rendering first aid to those needing it. They also aided in field hospitals established behind front lines.



▲ Refreshment point where supplies were prepared and distributed

¹¹ Male medical units were, at the time, distinct from women's associations.

Many Red Cross personnel—both men and women—served in their home regions, where they cared for sick and wounded soldiers arriving at or passing through railway stations. They also treated refugees escaping the war’s devastation. Throughout the conflict, they provided various services near railway stations, including refreshment rooms, casualty stations, and sometimes even full-fledged casualty wards to handle urgent cases.

Arthur Hering specifies that during the war, a total of 1,921 entrainments passed through Brandenburg’s railway stations, transporting 2,644 officers, 439,341 soldiers, and 11,900 refugees, all of whom received assistance from the Red Cross units (Hering 1919: 6). Red Cross units were simultaneously tasked with recruiting and training new nurses. Units hosted their staff in the central offices of the Imperial Superintendent and Military Inspector for Voluntary Nursing, as well as their depots located in or near the capital. At the end of the war, Arthur Hering, president of the Brandenburg Red Cross chapter, proudly recorded the significant number of his chapter’s members decorated with national or Red Cross donors, including the Iron Cross, various classes of the Red Cross medal, and non-Prussian decorations.

Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle)

Situated at the far western edge of the German Reich, just a stone’s throw from her border with Belgium and the Netherlands, stood Aachen, a city of 150,000 inhabitants. Known in French as Aix-la-Chapelle, Aachen played a central role in the military operations and, consequently, in the medical and welfare efforts for sick and wounded soldiers. The Red Cross units deployed in Aachen were so active from the outset of the war that, after just one year, a nearly 150-page report was compiled documenting their extensive efforts and administrative preparations (Schweitzer 1916). To support their work, Aachen’s mayor provided them a suitable building and a committee composed of representatives of Aachen’s Red Cross chapter, Red Cross medical units, and the Red Cross women’s association was formed. This was the first and only time during the war that all three organizations operated under the same name. The role of the women’s association is evident in the composition of the central committee of the common association, which consisted of six members—two men and four women—including mayor’s wife, who oversaw the central depot for bandaging material. Given the sheer volume of matters requiring its attention, the committee convened daily.

Fundraising was one of the Red Cross’ key activities. By the very end of 1915, Aachen had collected 500,000 Deutsche Marks (approximately 3,000,000 Euros today). In addition to regular donations, the committee organized special “donation days” that coincided with the emperor’s and empress’ birthdays as well as the anniversary of the war’s outbreak.

At the onset of the war in 1914, the Red Cross operated eighteen military hospitals with more than 500 beds, a number that increased to thirty-nine in 1915. The Red Cross was responsible for organizing medical care as well as Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish pastoral care for patients. Red Cross women distributed food and gift parcels not only at Aachen’s two railway

stations but also at the station of Kinkempois near the Belgian city of Liège. A dedicated group handled the provisioning of hospital trains, many of which passed through Aachen on their way back to Germany from the western front.

Many wounded soldiers were transported to military hospitals in Aachen after the first skirmishes in Belgium to recover from their injuries. While the number of inquiries into the fate of these soldiers naturally increased with the number of wounded soldiers, no one could provide definitive answers about their whereabouts or condition. In response to this growing need, the Red Cross established an inquiry office at its Aachen headquarters, which, quite remarkably, began operations just one day after its establishment thanks to volunteers who offered whatever free time they had after completing their other professional duties.

Voluntary Health Services Abroad



▲ *La Capelle Field hospital*

While the majority of Red Cross activities during WWI took place on the home front, we observe a wealth of activities organized abroad, such as in the case of Baden's hospital train. Red Cross efforts extended across multiple fronts—in the west, southwest, east, northeast, and southeast—as well as in the rear of these battle fronts. Red Cross volunteers often worked side by side with domestic and international Red Cross personnel. *Unter dem Roten Kreuz* (1919) provides a detailed account of German Red Cross missions throughout Europe,

including those in Belgium, France, Serbia, and Bulgaria, as well as Red Cross activities in German colonial holdings in Southwest Africa and East Asia, which were inevitably drawn into the conflict following the events in Europe. Here, we limit our discussion to those in southeastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire.

Southeastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire

During World War I, the relations between the German and the Ottoman Empire strongly intensified—political relations as well as the relations between the two national relief societies of both countries, the German National Red Cross Societies and Ottoman Red Crescent Society (*‘Osmānlı Hilāl-ı Aḥmer Cem‘iyyeti*).¹²

The German Central Committee and its chairman Ludwig Kimmle decided to maintain field hospitals in Ottoman territories to provide medical assistance. In December 1914, the first mission organized by the Central Committee departed for the eastern Anatolian city of Erzincan. A team of five doctors, six female and five male nurses operated a field hospital that could accommodate 260 sick and wounded soldiers. All of the doctors and male nurses were from Prussia while the six female nurses were from Coburg. After five months, however, the team was forced to relocate the hospital to Istanbul, where they continued their work in a former Italian military hospital.

Half a year later in May 1915, a second mission comprising five doctors, ten female nurses, and ten male nurses was dispatched to Istanbul. They established themselves at the French school Sainte Pulchérie, founded in 1846 and still in operation today, where they maintained a field hospital until 1916. Some members returned to Germany whereas others remained and joined others serving in the aforementioned Italian war hospital, which continued operations until the end of the war. When German Emperor William II visited Istanbul in October 1917, he requested that the German Red Cross nurses give him an account on their work. A third mission composed of three doctors, six male nurses, and four female nurses was deployed to Bagdad in 1916, where they served until the city was occupied by British forces in early 1917.

Prisoners of War and Tracing Services

One of the most important Red Cross activities was caring for German POWs. At the beginning of the war, the Central Committee of the Red Cross, in collaboration with the Prussian War Ministry, established several POW committees. These committees were responsible for organizing a tracing service for missing soldiers while and providing assistance to prisoners. The wide scope of their responsibilities required them to form four separate branches: one in Hamburg for German prisoners in Russia, another in Cologne for those in Great Britain, and a third in Stuttgart for prisoners in France.

12 This section focuses on how German Red Cross Societies and Ottoman Red Crescent cooperated during WWI (Liebner 2023).

Conditions in Russian POW camps were notoriously poor. Approximately 2.5 million prisoners were housed there, including 160,000 Germans, 2.1 million Austro-Hungarians, and 50,000 Ottomans and Bulgarians (Wurzer 2006: 97). Most of these camps were located in the interior and eastern regions of the Russian Empire. POWs were cramped into dilapidated wooden structures or in underground huts where they suffered from malnutrition and inadequate medical care.

The diary of the Swedish Red Cross nurse Anne Linder offers a poignant account of life of Russian POW camps (Olsson 2021). Linder was one of than seventy Swedish Red Cross volunteers who cared for German and Austro-Hungarian POWs.¹³ In the winter of 1915, she set out for Russia from Stockholm, returning in July 1920. Despite her grueling daily routine, she meticulously kept a diary in which she detailed the often disastrous conditions of camps, the consequences of forced labor, the outbreaks of epidemics, the cruelty of guards, and the problems she encountered in her dealings with obstinate authorities. Yet, she also describes the joy that her visits afforded prisoners, especially when she distributed the donated items she had brought along with her, even if only a small sum of money. Linder also dutifully forwarded news of these soldiers to their families back home. These visits were a ray of hope in the prisoners' grim daily routine, and earned her the nickname *angel* among prisoners—a term immortalized in Olsson's 2021 book *Prisoners of War and Their Angels*.

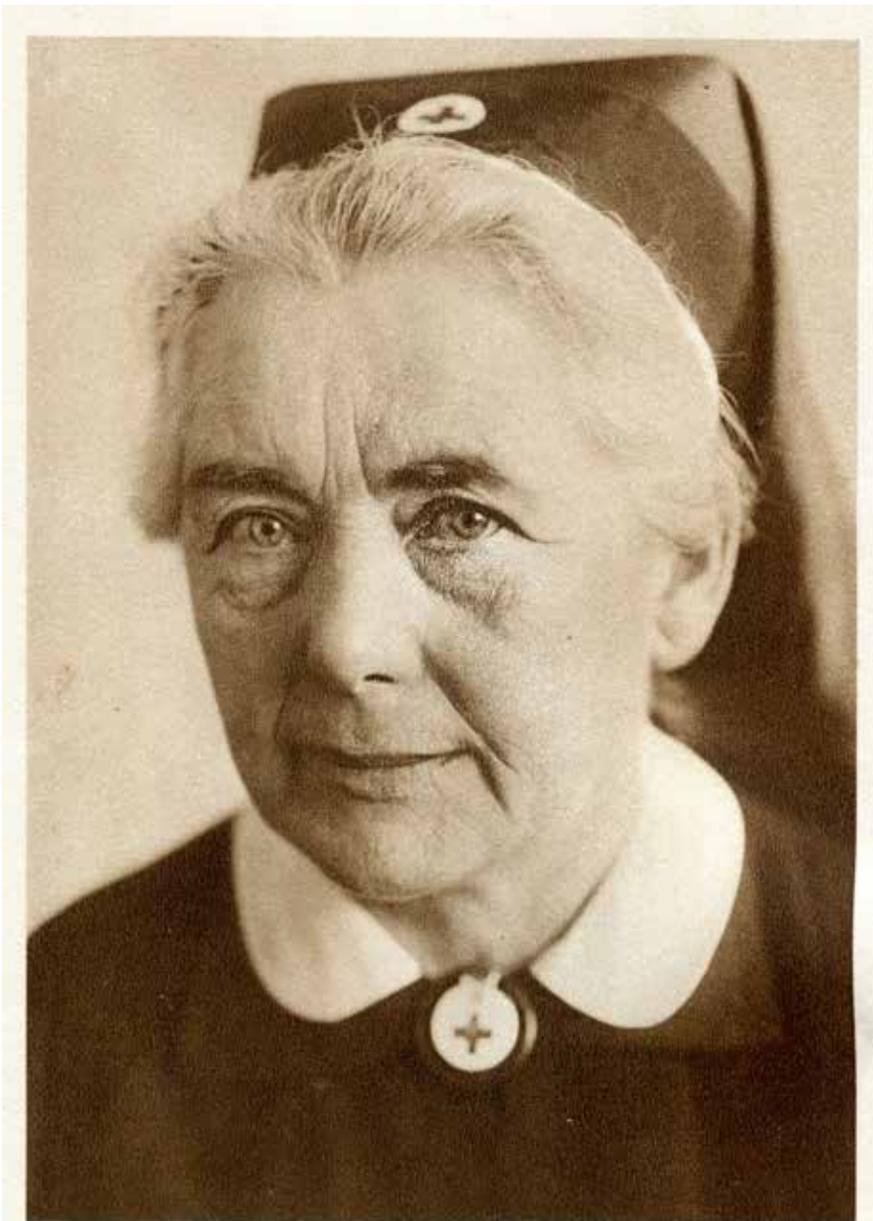
In addition to representatives of the Swedish and Danish Red Cross Societies, who were authorized to care for German POWs, Russian authorities allowed German nurses to visit Russian camps to inspect the conditions of their compatriots. In return, Russian nurses were permitted to visit Russian POWs held in the German Empire. The German nurses who visited these camps witnessed firsthand the appalling conditions in which prisoners were kept. They saw how the emaciated prisoners were nonetheless forced to perform heavy labor, such as clearing virgin forests, constructing railways, working in mines and ordnance factories, and draining the flood plains of the Volga River.

Two of these German nurses, Mathilde von Horn and Anne-Marie Wenzel, kept a diary of their experiences. One of them published her daily following the example of Elsa Brändström (1929), whom she had met. Both were decorated with the Florence Nightingale Medal¹⁴ by the International Committee of the Red Cross for their commitment to serving POWs as well as with honors and distinctions from other countries. Although both von Horn and Wenzel were highly esteemed within the Red Cross Society, they have largely faded from memory today.¹⁵

13 The most renowned of these nurses was Elsa Brändström, who also documented her time in Russia (Brändström 1929). Revered as the Angel of Siberia (Engel von Sibirien), she became an iconic figure in Germany's collective memory.

14 Anne-Marie Wenzel received said medal in 1920, the first time it was ever awarded, while Mathilde von Horn was awarded it in 1929.

15 *Der Spiegel* published an obituary when Anne-Marie Wenzel passed away in 1962.



◀ Anne-Marie
Wenzel

Anne-Marie Wenzel.

Anne-Marie Wenzel (1869–1962)

Anne-Marie Wenzel was born in Letschin, northeast of Brandenburg.¹⁶ At the age of twenty-one, she moved to Berlin to complete her nursing training. She initially worked as a nurse at the municipal hospital in Frankfurt am Main before transferring to the German Hospital in the Italian city of San Remo. Wenzel was fond of traveling and had a thirst for education, especially in art history. In addition to German, she was fluent in English, Italian, and French. She later worked as a private nurse, accompanying wealthy patients on their journeys to Great Britain, France, Italy, and the United States.

Wenzel first worked in various field hospitals in Flanders and Belgium during WWI, including one in Kortrijk. At the end of 1915, the Red Cross approached her with an offer to travel to Russia as part of a delegation from the War Ministry to care for POWs there. Despite initial doubts about whether she would be up to the challenge, she ultimately accepted the assignment and, albeit with some interruptions, remained in Russia from 1916 to 1921.

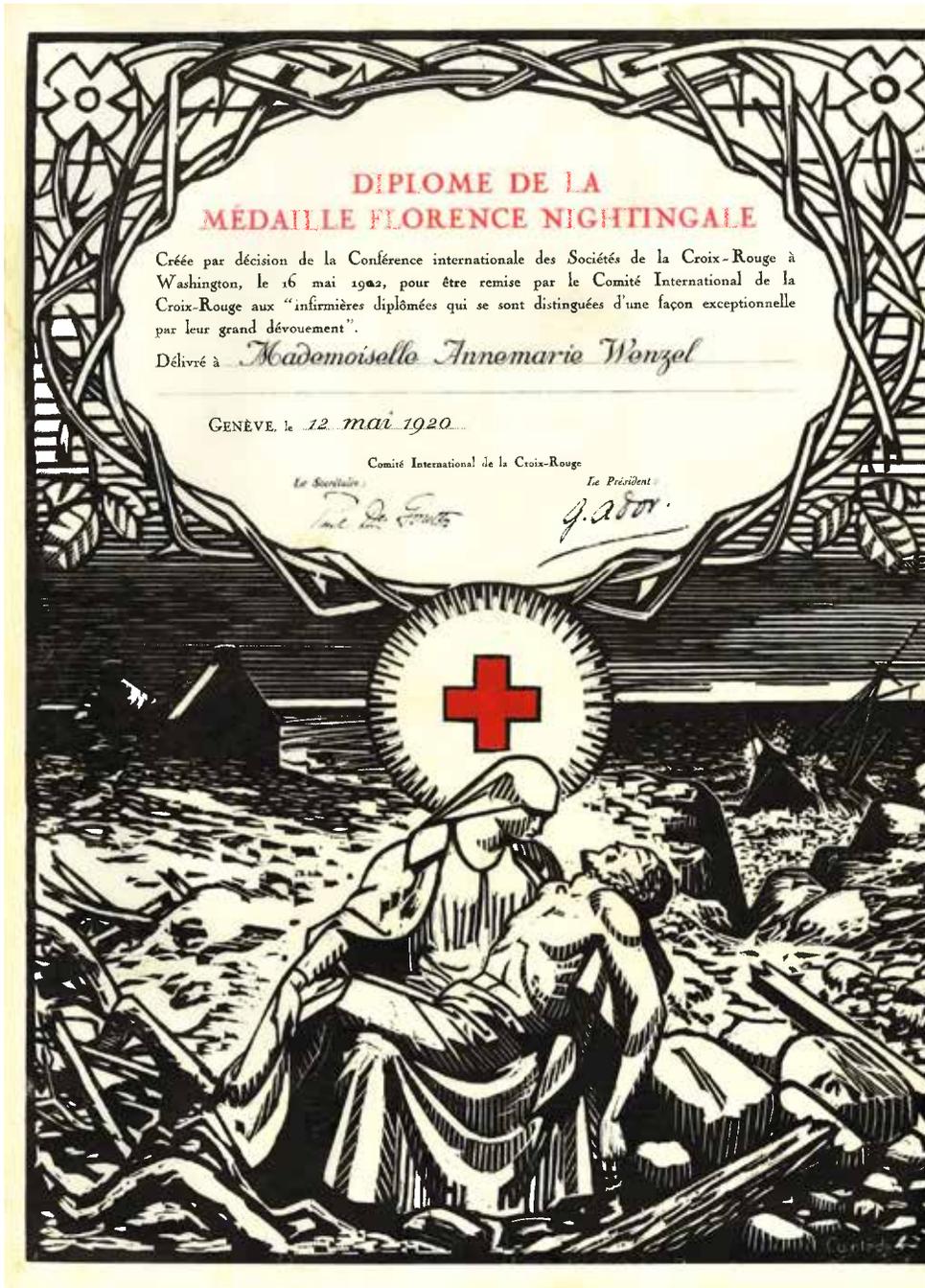
In the spring of 1916, Anne-Marie Wenzel traveled to St. Petersburg with five German and six Austrian nurses under the auspices of the Danish Red Cross. It was there that she first met Elsa Brändström, whose father had maintained a residence there while serving as Sweden's ambassador to Russia. Their paths would cross frequently over subsequent years. Brändström left a lasting mark on the forty-six-year-old Anne-Marie Wenzel, as evinced in her own writings:

I look up to this young blonde girl both with gratitude and amazement. She fearlessly traverses the sites of harrowing suffering, illness, and death, even contracting spotted fever herself. Indeed, her devotion will serve as a beacon for our own works. (Wenzel 1931: 12)

The purpose of this first journey was to identify all POW camps and gain an initial understanding of their conditions. Wenzel delivered first relief to the prisoners and collected messages from them to forward to their families back home. Also as part of her duties, she wrote reports for the Swedish and the Danish Red Cross, the War Ministries in Berlin and Vienna, and the German Empress, who, as patron of the Red Cross women's association, closely followed the activities of nurses in Russia.

After resuming her work in the field hospital in Kortrijk, Wenzel was invited to undertake a second mission planned to last from May 1918 to August 1919. This assignment sought to secure prisoners' repatriation. Unfortunately, however, the political upheavals that overtook Russia led to Wenzel's arrest on suspicion for espionage. Unable to proceed beyond Omsk, she was forced to return home without having accomplished her objective.

¹⁶ Her biography largely follows the account found in Steinmetz and Steinmetz 2022: 283–286.



▲ Florence Nightingale Medal diploma awarded to Mademoiselle Anne-Marie Wenzel by the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva on May 12, 1920.

Wenzel left Hamburg for her third journey to Russia in June 1920. The steamer that had previously brought repatriates to Germany was scheduled to sail eastward once more, and Wenzel's assistance was sought once more to support ongoing repatriation efforts:

My first focus is to accomplish a task that has piqued my interested since I first became aware of it. The unfortunate conclusion of my second journey needs to be made up for. The sorrowful questions of family members back in Germany continue to haunt me ever so—"When will they come back? Why don't they come back? How will they come back?" The struggle to secure prisoners' return continues to this day. (Wenzel 1931: 99–100)

With the final vessel, Wenzel accompanied the last prisoners that could be reached back to Germany. Through her efforts, she helped a total of 20,000 men repatriate. Later, she published a book detailing her time in Russia, *Deutsche Kraft in Fesseln. Fünf Jahre deutscher Schwesterndienst in Sibirien (1916–1921)*. The book, based on her diaries, was first published in Potsdam in 1931, with subsequent editions following over the years.

Wenzel continued to work for the Red Cross after the war, though the specifics of her employment remain scarce. When searching for a residence for her retirement, she was assisted by Provost Eduard Juhl (1884–1975), who, in addition to being one of Elsa Brändström's German biographers, had been a member of the ministerial commission for POWs during WWI and, like Wenzel, had been temporarily interned in Omsk. In 1955, she settled in a Red Cross home in Marsberg, North Rhine-Westphalia, where she spent her remaining years. Former POWs continued to visit her throughout her life, several of whom she maintained correspondence with. On her ninety-second birthday, the local repatriates club made her an honorary member.

Mathilde von Horn (1875–1943)

General Matron (*Generaloberin*) of the Baden Red Cross nurses at the time, Mathilde von Horn was a member of the delegation dispatched to Russia in 1916 under the auspices of the Danish Red Cross and the War Ministry to care for German POWs.

The daughter of a Bavarian officer and descendent of the counts of Horn, Mathilde was born in 1875.¹⁷ She completed her nursing training at the Red Cross hospital in Karlsruhe, after which she worked at various hospitals in Baden and in Berlin before being appointed *Generaloberin* in Karlsruhe in 1913. At the onset of WWI, she was, together with 200 nurses over whom she had been appointed matron, deployed to the Eastern Front with the 14th Army Corps. There, she was assigned to a prisoner camp in Turkestan. German authorities placed considerable funds at her disposal, which she used to establish military hospitals and supply food, clothing, and medicine to those in need of them. The nurses were expected to keep a record of all prisoners' numbers, names, health conditions, and punishments imposed to them. These records were sent to the Danish Red Cross before being forwarded to the appropriate public authorities.

¹⁷ For Mathilde von Horn's biography, see Wolff (1997) and Enzel (2007).



◀ *Mathilde von Horn*

Von Horn spent nine months on assignment in Turkestan before returning home. However, she was redeployed in a war hospital in Niš in Serbia shortly after her return, after which she was assigned to Bulgaria and, once again, to Russia—albeit this time in the Caucasus. She was arrested in Baku on suspicion of espionage but was cleared after the Swedish Red Cross intervened on her behalf.

The decline of the German monarchies after the war—especially in Baden, where the Grand Duchess had been closely allied with the Red Cross—and the resulting social upheavals, including changes to the status of women, and therefore nurses, greatly troubled von Horn.



She was concerned about the future of her nurses in Baden and the continuation of their work (Enzel 2007: 429–432). Von Horn was forced to abandon her function as *Generaloberin* in 1932 because of declining health. She passed away in Karlsruhe in 1943.

The scope of relief work carried out by German Red Cross volunteers was so vast that we were able to touch on only a fraction of the countless efforts performed by thousands of volunteers to aid soldiers and civilians. One particularly salient aspect overlooked is how volunteers perceived their own experiences in the field. Many letters and diaries detailing nurses' work and the emotions they felt have been preserved in archives and, often in unabridged form, in the comprehensive account of the German Red Cross activities during WWI (*Unter dem Roten Kreuz* 1934). This encyclopedic volume was published in 1934, just one year after the rise of the Nazis and five years before the outbreak of WWII, when Red Cross activities were once again called upon.

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