



Danish Red Cross during the First World War



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Introduction

The First World War was indeed a watershed event that fundamentally transformed humanitarian action, not only in scale but also in organization and international coordination. It was during this tumultuous period that the Danish Red Cross (henceforth DRC), closely supported by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, rose to become one of the most active and strategically positioned humanitarian actors of the war.

This chapter examines the multifaceted role of the DRC during the First World War, with a particular focus on the DRC's efforts to alleviate the hardships of POWs on the Eastern Front. It argues that the DRC was much more than a national relief organization; it functioned as a vital operational extension of the broader international Red Cross network at a time when communication breakdowns, logistical constraints, and political fragmentation constituted serious hurdles humanitarian access.

By harnessing its POW bureau in Copenhagen, inspection missions, medical interventions, and large-scale correspondence system, the DRC played a decisive role in ensuring the survival of hundreds of thousands of prisoners, delivering life-saving assistance in one of the most formidable humanitarian challenges of the First World War.

Extensive humanitarian work during the War

The First World War unleashed an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, particularly in relation to the large-scale detention of POWs across Europe and the Eastern Front. It was against this backdrop that neutral countries, sometimes at a significant material cost to themselves, took it upon themselves to sustain communication, relief distribution, and medical assistance.

Denmark occupied a particularly significant position among these neutral actors, with both the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the DRC playing an integral role over the course of the First World War by providing various forms of humanitarian aid to POWs, thus saving thousands of lives. Numerous volunteers either participated firsthand in relief efforts or, alternatively, contributed indirectly through donations. The wartime government actively mobilized the humanitarian efforts of the Danish people to prevent Denmark from becoming entanglement in the conflict. In fact, this constituted Denmark's largest humanitarian undertaking to date.



▲ *DRC volunteers preparing and distributing relief parcels, 1916.*

The DRC was at the forefront of these efforts, carrying out extensive humanitarian work both within and beyond Denmark over the course of the war. Thousands of lives were saved, many of them POWs detained throughout the vast hinterlands of Russian Empire.

The scale of humanitarian work increased significantly during the war, when, as the conflict escalated, the number of neutral countries decreased. When the United States entered the war in April 1917, the DRC assumed the responsibility of serving as the protecting power for approximately 1.5 million Austro-Hungarian soldiers held in Russian POW camps. Their fate rested with the DRC until June 1918.

Denmark's neutrality and support enabled the DRC to carry out extensive humanitarian work during the First World War, among which included:

1. The dispatch of emergency aid in the form of ambulance units with doctors, nurses, medicine, medical equipment, and food supplies. This included assistance to Russia (1915–1918), Serbia (1915), Estonia (1919), Austria and Hungary (1919), and the Finnish Civil War (1918).

2. The initiation of efforts seeking to treat and care for sick and wounded POWs from the Eastern Front in 1917, undertaken at the behest of the International Committee of the Red Cross (henceforth ICRC) in Geneva. Two new camps were established: one in Horsørød in North Zealand for Russian POWs, and one in Hald near Viborg for their German and Austro-Hungarian counterparts.
3. The execution of extensive humanitarian work geared to POWs on the Eastern Front alongside international cooperation in this field. In coordination with the ICRC in Geneva, the work was organized within the DRC as a POW bureau consisting of five major units:
 - a. a correspondence department
 - b. a parcel department
 - c. a central office coordinating Red Cross delegations in St. Petersburg, Berlin, Vienna, and Paris
 - d. a central office for the dispatch of delegates
 - e. a book department (*bellibria*)
4. Hosting an international conference in Copenhagen in 1917 for the belligerent parties on the Eastern Front. This conference culminated in the adoption of common rules for the protection of and delivery of aid to POWs.

Work on the POW bureau in Denmark began on 3 October 1914, when the DRC received a telegram from the ICRC in Geneva urging it to establish an office for POWs on the Eastern Front. This naturally encompassed prisoners from Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Romania, and the Ottoman Empire.

There was a very concrete rationale behind the ICRC's request. At the outbreak of the war, the ICRC anticipated an unprecedented influx of POWs and, as such, recognized the need to establish a central coordinating office in Geneva. Yet while Switzerland lacked direct communication links to Russia, Denmark possessed a direct telegraph line from Copenhagen to St. Petersburg—a rare albeit strategically decisive communications channel. It was for this reason that the committee turned to the DRC, which responded in the positive without hesitation.

Two POW bureaus were therefore established sometime after the onset of the war. The first was run by the ICRC in Geneva for prisoners taken on the Western Front whereas the second was run by the DRC in Copenhagen for prisoners from the Eastern Front.

Involving at least 764 staff members, the DRC's POW bureau became the center of extensive humanitarian work. Unsurprisingly, the workload borne by these workers increased in line with the growing number of prisoners. In 1916, the work was organized under a joint committee with a presidium within the DRC, headed by Prince Valdemar, who served as the bureau's honorary president.

Dispatch of parcels and letters



▲ *Volunteers with index cards, 1916 (POW records).*

The DRC's POW bureau created index cards for prisoners on the Eastern Front that would enable them receive aid packages from their families. In the autumn of 1914, the DRC was tasked with gathering information on POWs from the Eastern Front—Russian prisoners in Germany and Austria-Hungary as well as German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners in Russia. The purpose was to establish contact between prisoners and their families and facilitate the forwarding of letters and parcels.

Over the course of the war, the bureau created sixteen name indices comprising more than 3.4 million index cards. A total of 251,000 letters were forwarded in 1915 alone, rising to 429,000 the following year and 501,000 in 1917. Approximately 18,500 inquiries regarding missing prisoners were also submitted. In total, the DRC handled over one million letters and more than six million parcels, all of which had to be censored to prevent propaganda, espionage, and smuggling. This necessitated that all correspondence be opened and read individually. To help support these efforts, the bureau employed 261 women and 78 men in addition to hundreds of volunteers by 1 March 1918.

Inspection visits

In 1915, the DRC received permission to conduct inspection visits to POW camps in Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary. This initiative originated with the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, born Princess Dagmar, daughter of King Christian IX and wife of Tsar Alexander III, who served as patron of the Russian Red Cross during the war. The following year, in 1916, the DRC sent thirty-two doctors and nurses on inspection missions. Healthy prisoners were often used as forced labor while the sick and wounded were left to their fate. Conditions in Siberian camps were found to be utterly horrific, with thousands dying from hunger and disease. This, in turn, led to the establishment of a DRC office in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) and an increase in staffing at the Danish legation.

In Siberia with medicine and vaccinations

These inspections prompted the DRC to cooperate with the State Serum Institute to launch a large-scale campaign to inoculate prisoners against typhus and cholera. In 1916, Thorvald Madsen, head of the State Serum Institute, personally led a campaign to vaccinate 175,000 prisoners. The distribution of food, medicine, and vaccines continued through 1916 and 1917, saving thousands of lives.

After the Russian Revolution in 1917, negotiations with the revolutionary Bolshevik authorities were required to maintain operations. According to Edvard Saltoft, these negotiations took place “with revolvers on the table.” Despite allegations of espionage, the DRC was nevertheless allowed to continue its work until the last Danish personnel were evacuated in 1920.

Sister visits

These were smaller follow-up missions to the inspection visits that were designed to have some oversight of enemy POW camps, something which sides insisted on maintaining. Beginning in the summer of 1916, Red Cross nurses would accompany Danish officers during camp visits, with nurses required to be of the same nationality as the prisoners.

Evacuated POWs

At the end of the war, the largest group of prisoners was located in Germany. Conditions continued to deteriorate as Germany collapsed, making evacuation increasingly urgent. The DRC organized the relocation of approximately 90,000 prisoners to Denmark. Of these, 40,000 were British soldiers using Denmark as a transit country, along with French, Italian, Indian,

Japanese, and Chinese soldiers. They were housed in such camps as Hald and Horserød, as well as Greve, Barfredshøj, and Sandholm. Copenhagen's Free Port served as a reception and departure hub. Most soldiers stayed a few weeks before being transported home by Danish trains and ships—thirteen passenger vessels in total.

Sick and wounded POWs



▲ *Burial of a Russian POW, Horserød, 1917.*

In 1917, the Danish Red Cross transferred around 4,000 sick and wounded prisoners from foreign camps to Denmark, where they were treated in specially built hospital camps at Hald and Horserød by Danish doctors and nurses.

Conclusion

The humanitarian work of the DRC during the First World War constituted one of the most extensive and complex civilian relief operations of the early twentieth century. By operating the POW bureau in Copenhagen, the DRC effectively became an invaluable intermediary between millions of prisoners and their families. Its capacity to process thousands of letters and parcels, to organize inspection missions across Eastern Europe and Siberia, and to facilitate medical evacuations demonstrated an unprecedented level of humanitarian logistics for its time. At a broader level, the Danish experience illustrates how neutrality can be transformed into an active humanitarian instrument. Rather than remaining passive, Denmark leveraged its geopolitical position to enable humanitarian access in regions otherwise cut off by war.

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2 Volunteers with parcels 1916, copyright Royal Danish Library.

3 Burial of Russian POW 1917, copyright Royal Danish Library.