

Caring for prisoners of war: Marguerite Frick-Cramer's and Marguerite van Berchem's service activities in the International Committee of the Red Cross (1914-1969)

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SUMMARY: 1.—Introduction. 2.—Caring about the emotional well-being of prisoners of war. 3.—Care as a form of humanitarian knowledge to help prisoners of war. 4.—Indignation and resentment as moral components of care. 5.—Conclusion.

ABSTRACT: By examining Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer's and Marguerite van Berchem's work in the tracing agencies of the International Committee of the Red Cross, this article seeks to contribute to the development of a history of care involving the production of a form of humanitarian knowledge aimed at caring, at distance, for people who had been separated due to warfare. This feminist perspective, which examines the interactions between gender, class and race, allows us to rectify the masculine vision that has dominated this Geneva-based international agency, as well as to comprehend how Frick-Cramer's and van Berchem's service activities led to the standardisation of a sophisticated information management system aimed at promoting the well-being of prisoners of war. An analysis of the rare institutional records which have been preserved about the missions led by these two female representatives enables us to conclude that their moral concern, which led them to aid both military and civilian populations during warfare, was rooted in emotions such as indignation and resentment.

KEYWORDS: care, humanitarian knowledge, prisoners of war, International Committee of the Red Cross.

1. Introduction (*)

On the 21st of August 1914, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) created the International Prisoners of War Agency (IPWA) to restore family links for the hundreds of thousands of people who had been incarcerated since the outbreak of the First World War (1914-1918). These prisoners of war were not just combatants, they were also civilian internees and civilians who had been detained in occupied territories. Civilian internment was regarded by the ICRC's President Gustav Ador to be "a novel feature of this war", revealing to what extent this group of people would need to be granted legal protection by international conventions¹.

The IPWA remained active until 1923, only to be reopened as the Central Agency for War Prisoners (CAWP) at the beginning of the Second World War (1939-1945)². To carry out their daily activities — which included identifying prisoners of war, internees and missing persons, as well as distributing letters and packages— both tracing agencies recruited hundreds of volunteers. Many were female members of middle and upper-middle class families from Geneva. Amongst them, two women —Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer (1887-1963) and Marguerite van Berchem (1892-1984)— stand out, as they held various responsibilities at the ICRC and launched several initiatives aimed at improving detention conditions throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Despite their leading role within this institution, Frick-Cramer's and van Berchem's trajectories remain quasi absent from the Red Cross movement's institutional historical accounts³. On the one hand, this could be explained by the strong masculine vision that has dominated the history of the ICRC, starting with the mythological account of the so-called "founding fathers": the army general officer Guillaume-Henri Dufour (1787-1875), the lawyer Gustave Moynier (1826-1910), the military surgeon Louis Appia (1818-1898), the

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1. Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la Grande Guerre. Humanitaire et culture de guerre 1914-1918. Populations occupées, déportés civils, prisonniers de guerre* (Paris: Éditions Noësis, 1998), 236.
2. These services still exist today, but they were renamed the Central Tracing Agency in 1960.
3. David p. Forsythe, *The Humanitarians: The International Committee of the Red Cross* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 49/204; Caroline Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream: War, Switzerland and the History of the Red Cross* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1998), xxviii-xxx.

physician Theodore Maunoir (1806-1869) and the philanthropic businessman Henry Dunant (1828-1910)⁴. On the other hand, the fact that Frick-Cramer and van Berchem have received little historical attention could be interpreted as the result of the gender stereotypes which pervaded the portrayals of women within the Red Cross movement and showed women as heavenly nurses who comforted wounded soldiers in Pietà-like allegorical forms. This is particularly well illustrated in the myriad of posters produced throughout the world wars on which female Red Cross nurses “evoke traditional figures of mercy and charity” by echoing a Christian “religious iconography” to recruit volunteers and ask for donations from Western audiences⁵.

The wide dissemination of this essentialist representation of female aid agents has contributed to hiding other important care activities which were not directly related to nursing but were instead aimed at improving the precarious conditions of detainees, such as Frick-Cramer's and van Berchem's initiatives at the ICRC. As we argue in this article, their work perfectly illustrates a form of care which did not imply face-to-face relationships —as found in nursing— but rather assuming vital tasks to run complete sections of the Tracing Agencies. While a gender perspective has been recently integrated within humanitarian history, the development of feminist narratives to rectify the patriarchal vision that has dominated the ICRC is still to be fully explored⁶. The evolution of the humanitarian movement has already been interpreted as the development of an ethics of care which has been promoted by both female and male agents⁷. Nonetheless, we adopt a feminist conception of care in this article⁸ to rectify Frick-Cramer's and van Berchem's

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4. Dolores Martín-Moruno, *Beyond Compassion: Gender and Humanitarian Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).
 5. The perpetuation of such allegories and stereotypes remains present in contemporary images which represent female aid workers as naturally empathetic caregivers. See Valérie Gorin, “Looking back over 150 years of humanitarian action: the photographic archives of the ICRC,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 94, no. 888 (2012): 1357.
 6. Abigail Green, “Humanitarianism in Nineteenth-Century Context: Religious, Gendered, National,” *The Historical Journal* 57, no. 4 (2014): 1157-1175; Esther Möller, Johannes Paulmann, and Katharina Stornig, *Gendering Global Humanitarianism in the Twentieth Century* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan 2020); Dolores Martín-Moruno, Brenda Lynn Edgar and Marie Leyder, “Feminist perspectives on the history of humanitarian relief,” *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 36, no. 1 (2020): 2-18.
 7. Michael N. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity. A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).
 8. We adopt care here as it has been theorised by several Feminist scholars such as Joan C. Tronto and Berenice Fisher, “Towards a Feminist Theory of Caring” in *Circles of Care. Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, eds Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 36-54.

lack of visibility at the ICRC, as well as to comprehend how their actions enabled the creation of transnational information networks which allowed the circulation of knowledge aimed at promoting the well-being of prisoners of war⁹. To shed light on their conception of care —including its moral and emotional dimensions— we draw on the rare institutional files concerning Frick-Cramer's and van Berchem's official missions which are preserved in the ICRC's general and agency archives. As shown, these female representatives organised services within the IPWA and the CAWP, through which they cared for others by paying attention to the needs of military and civil detainees and filled in organisational gaps to protect those affected populations who were not recognised in previous legal frameworks. Yet, their legacy has remained largely overlooked.

2. Caring about the emotional well-being of prisoners of war

The first initiative orchestrated by the ICRC, which targeted detained populations, was the IPWA. This agency was intended to play a neutral, intermediary role between parties at war to create lists of detained people, as well as to share this information with both national authorities and families. To accomplish these objectives, the IPWA functioned through two services: the information service and the enquiries service, the latter remaining quite disorganised at the beginning of the war as the agency was rapidly overwhelmed by enquiries coming from around the world. The IPWA decided that each country would be in charge of providing lists of prisoners as well as managing enquiries via their Prisoners of War Information bureau and their own national Red Cross society. The IPWA also encouraged families to contact their national societies as enquiries flooded in from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Austria, Serbia and Russia. In October 1914, more than 10,000 letters arrived at the IPWA each day, while 2,000 to 3,000 missives were sent to national Red Cross societies for the prisoners.

and Pascale Molinier, "Au-delà de la féminité et du maternel, le travail de care," *Champ Psy* 58, no. 2 (2010): 161-174.

9. We use here the notion of knowledge as it has been proposed in the field of the history of knowledge by scholars such as Peter Burke in his *History of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015) to refer to standardised systems of information which have been traditionally neglected by historians of science, technology and medicine.

The primary goal of the IPWA was to provide information to families whose links had been broken by the outbreak of the conflict in Europe. Nevertheless, the scope of activities rapidly expanded to include other tasks such as sending correspondence and packages from relatives to prisoners to support their moral and material conditions. The increasing amount of work forced the agency to develop a very sophisticated information management system, which led to the creation of an index made up of thousands of personal identity cards that were used for tracing prisoners. Five million cards —related to two million prisoners— were produced between 1914 and 1918, with an estimated average of 10,000 to 15,000 cards produced per day. Approximately 400 volunteers from the Genevan society dedicated their time to fulfilling this objective, as explained in the *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge* [hereafter the *Bulletin*]:

Amongst male and female students, maids and married women, in the busy and active hive that is the Agency from morning to evening, one can see professors, pastors, bankers, writers, academic doctors and annuitants who show by their regularity in their work that they have not lost their usual habits, mothers who are distracting themselves from their household duties and traders who do not wish to entertain the free time they now have due to the slowdown in business activities¹⁰.

Amongst the female volunteers, 40 women were hired as typists to fill in cards reporting information about each prisoner's situation and whereabouts from the lists provided by national states. The service activities carried out by these volunteers embody a form of care that can be understood as the unpleasant but vital "dirty work" which "has to be done" to satisfy the needs of the beneficiary¹¹. As Feminist theorists remind us, this dirty work has historically been delegated to women, as well as less privileged classes and racial minorities. The long and tedious task of filling in thousands of cards and writing letters can be regarded as dirty —yet essential— work that had to be carried out for prisoners of war in the crowded rooms of the Musée Rath, the place used to host the IPWA in Geneva. Although they were not displayed on posters, the activities carried out by these female volunteers were recorded

10. *Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge*, "L'Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre," 45, no. 180 (1914): 266-267.

11. To go further on this notion of dirty work, see Carol Gilligan, Arlie Hochschild, Joan Tronto. *Contre l'indifférence des privilégiés. À quoi sert le care* (Paris: Payot, 2013); Pascale Molinier, "Au-delà de la féminité," 166-167.

by the ICRC through photographs, which shed light on this work which, otherwise, would have remained in the shadows due to the lack of records in the ICRC written archives. Photographs, such as Figure 1, show to what extent the IPWA and the CAWP represented a space of emancipation within the humanitarian system for many Genevan women from the middle class.



Figure 1. World War I. Geneva, Rath Museum. International Prisoners of War Agency. Typing Service. Source: ICRC archives, V-P-HIST-01815-10.

Nevertheless, dirty work was not a matter of concern for the upper-middle-class women of the Genevan patrician families who used their class privilege and professional expertise to assume other caring practices than those performed by the anonymous, middle-class typists. This was the case for Frick-Cramer and van Berchem, who were amongst the first female volunteers at the IPWA in 1914 and who remained in the agency for four years¹². They

12. These women, together with Suzanne Ferrière —who worked for the civil section of the Agency— and Lucie Odier, were the only ones to assume leading positions in the Agency.

both benefited from a large social network, both in Geneva and the ICRC, which allowed them to rapidly evolve within the organisation and assume leading roles. Frick-Cramer became the Director of the Allied Section with Jacques Chenevière and van Berchem was appointed as Head of the German Section together with Marc Cramer, showing to what extent women's work within this organisation still remained under the tutelage of men. Their mission consisted of coordinating the transmission of information about prisoners so as to provide them some relief through correspondence from their relatives.

Frick-Cramer was born in Geneva on the 28th December 1887, into the Cramer family which had belonged to the bourgeoisie since 1668. She studied law in Geneva and Paris and obtained a law degree from the University of Geneva in 1910 and a Doctoral degree in Humanities. Although she never practised as a lawyer, her legal expertise played an important role in her later career at the ICRC. She also specialised in national history and won the prestigious Prix Ador in 1911 and 1913. She was the first woman to be appointed as Substitute Professor in History in Switzerland, but she resigned from this position to become the first female delegate in diplomatic missions in 1917 and the first female member of the ICRC in 1918. Until the Committee decided to co-opt Cramer, it had been exclusively dominated by white, Protestant and male figures. "Gender aside," her appointment has been explained because "she fitted the mould of a Committee member: she was from the Genevan upper-middle class, was related to seven other Committee members, and preferred working through legal means"¹³. It was actually Cramer's elite origin which raised debates amongst the committee members, as criticism had already been raised against the "all-Geneva" club which the ICRC was seen to symbolically represent¹⁴. Cramer went on to perpetuate this elitist self-sufficiency by marrying Edouard Frick, an ICRC delegate, to become Frick-Cramer in 1920. A woman of letters, she was a prolific writer in the *Bulletin* where she acted as an important observer and analyst of the evolution of the tracing agencies and International Humanitarian Law.

Van Berchem was also born in Geneva, on the 11th April 1892, into a family of annuitants and intellectuals who owned a number of large properties in the Canton. She first studied archaeology and art history at the prestigious École du Louvre et des Hautes Études in Paris, following the path of her father,

13. See Forsythe, *The Humanitarians*, 203.

14. Camille Meyre, "Renée-Marguerite Frick-Cramer", *Cross-files - Blog CICR*, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://blogs.icrc.org/cross-files/fr/renee-marguerite-frick-cramer/>.

the famous orientalist and historian Max van Berchem who had travelled to Egypt, Palestine and Syria in the late-nineteenth century. Marguerite van Berchem lost her mother at the age of one, but she remained very close to her father who—even though he remarried and had six other children—only kept up a life-long correspondence with her. Like her father, she specialised in early Islamic art and published several books about the Christian and Islamic mosaics of the archaeological sites that she had visited in Palestine and Syria during the 1920s¹⁵.

After her first period working at the IPWA, she decided to join the newly opened CAWP in 1939 where she led a special section to aid French colonial troops: the so-called indigenous soldiers. Therefore, van Berchem was a woman who had been active in the field before she entered the Committee in 1951. However, she is most known for her archaeological work, due to her several expeditions to conduct excavations in the Moroccan and Algerian Sahara, and her father's legacy. In the Sahara, she rediscovered the ancient Berber city of Sedrata, in "working conditions" that "were extremely hard because of the arid climate and the frequent sand storms". These excavations were interrupted at the beginning of the Algerian revolution in 1954, but the connections which she had established in the MENA region, as well as "her well known courage and perseverance" led the ICRC to entrust her with several missions in Tunisia (1961), Syria and Jordan (1964-1965)¹⁶. Van Berchem remained largely independent throughout her life thanks to her financial privileges, as well as her very unusual choice—for her time—to remain single until she married the banker Bernard Gautier at the age of 74. She had no heirs of her own, which gave her additional freedom to pursue her career.

Both Frick-Cramer and van Berchem actively embodied the new ethics of care promoted by the IPWA which emerged to address the material, emotional and spiritual needs of prisoners of war: a group which started to be perceived as deserving a more "humanitarian treatment" throughout WWI¹⁷. Prisoners frequently suffered from mental health issues because of their incarceration. The Swiss physician and ICRC delegate Adolf Lukas Vischer (1884-1974)

15. See for example Marguerite van Berchem and Etienne Clouzot, *Mosaïques chrétiennes du IVème au Xème siècles* (Genève: Presses du Journal de Genève, 1924).

16. Fawzi Zayadine, "Islamic Art and Archeology in the Publications of Marguerite Gautier-Van Berchem", *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan*, no. 28 (1984): 206.

17. Neville Wylie and Lindsey Cameron, "The Impact of World War I and the Law Governing the Treatment of Prisoners of War and the Making of a Humanitarian Subject," *The European Journal of International Law* 29, no. 4 (2019): 1336.

referred to these psychological disorders —which were characterised by boredom, isolation and uncertainty— as *Stacheldraht-Krankheit* (barbed-wire disease)¹⁸. Amongst the causes of this pathology, observed during his visits to German prison camps during WWI, he highlighted “the irregularity of communication from home”¹⁹. The work conducted by these female volunteers was essential for taking care of this form of apathy, also related to other combat diseases such as *le cafard* (feeling blue).

Care as a response to the suffering of detained populations marked the evolution of Frick-Cramer's and van Berchem's careers at the ICRC. Combined with their academic achievements, this new ethics of care helped them harness positions of responsibility within this institution. They led operational and monitoring teams, participated in decision-making meetings and negotiated with state and military stakeholders. Even though gender has never been considered as a determining factor which could explain their activities at the ICRC, Frick-Cramer's and van Berchem's contributions have remained largely invisible in historical works, unlike those of the leading female figures who participated in the international children movement in the 1920s —such as the British humanitarian Eglantyne Jebb (1876-1928), the founder of the Save the Children Fund²⁰. This could be explained by the late emergence of the suffragist movement in Switzerland —a country which only granted women the right to vote in 1971.

3. Care as a form of humanitarian knowledge to help prisoners of war

Van Berchem and Frick-Cramer played a dominant role in the creation of the Agency and in the strengthening of its monopoly over the centralisation of information about prisoners. Both women collaborated during field visits, which allowed them to build on their expertise and provide an attentive

18. Adolf Lukas Vischer, *Barbed Wire Disease. A psychological Study of the Prisoner of War. Translated from the German, with Additions* (London: Bale & Danielsson, 1919). See also Matthew Stibbe, “The internment of Civilians by Belligerent States during the First World War and the Response of the International Red Cross”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 1 (2006): 5-19. On the French *cafard* see Marie Leyder, *Engagées en première ligne: Mairaines de guerre et infirmières sur le front de l'Yser pendant la Première Guerre mondiale* (PhD Diss, Université de Genève, 2023).

19. Vischer, *Barbed Wire Disease*, 3.

20. Linda Mahood, *Feminism and voluntary action: Eglantyne Jebb and Save the Children, 1876-1928* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

service to detained people by anticipating their needs. Working in a rigid institution was not an easy job, as can be seen in the small portion of the photographic archives dedicated to Frick-Cramer and van Berchem which represented them sitting at their desks, writing correspondence. Although such pictures contrasted with female stereotypes —such as the allegory of the *Mater Dolorosa*— they were still embedded with visual codes that reproduced the patriarchal environment in which these women worked. Thus, some photographs capture Frick-Cramer and van Berchem in meetings with their male colleagues in which the men are standing up and surrounding the sitting women who are looking at what the men are pointing at (see Figure 2). This sort of visual composition reveals the sexual division of labour which was promoted at the ICRC and further reinforces its image as an institution where, historically, only men were seen to take decisions.



Figure 2. World War II. Palais du Conseil Général. Central Prisoners of War Agency. Central Commission (in the centre: Miss R. M. Cramer). Source: ICRC archives, V-P-HIST-03560-32

Thanks to their previous expertise, both women offered their services to the CAWP again in September 1939, after the outbreak of WWII. The Agency conducted similar activities as during the previous conflict and produced

around 36 million cards. However, this global conflict posed new challenges to the CAWP, such as the need to help colonial troops who had been mobilised *en masse* by the French government. If these soldiers were captured and remained alive they were imprisoned in *frontstalags*: camps which had been specifically created to incarcerate colonial troops in occupied France. To cope with this situation, van Berchem's orientalist and Islamic knowledge led her to establish a Colonial Service in June 1940. This section was a separate service dedicated solely to handling the case of indigenous soldiers from French colonies, as it took into consideration their mother tongue and their specific needs as long as they remained detained in prison camps in Europe. The idea of a colonial index ranked by country of origin came to van Berchem after she realised the frequent misspellings of names and the illiteracy which characterised both the indigenous populations and the detaining Imperial powers. Using elite Swiss newspapers such as the *Journal de Genève*, van Berchem advertised that she urgently needed to recruit language specialists and experts "with an in-depth knowledge of indigenous countries, customs and dialects" who would have the "task of deciphering the names that were always distorted on official lists or by the prisoners themselves, or the family addresses which were almost always misspelled or incomplete"²¹.

The establishment of this institutional form of caring at a distance at the ICRC would never have been possible without van Berchem's orientalist knowledge and her previous experience in Arabic-speaking countries²². What could have appeared to be just a phonetic detail was in fact a question not only of identity but also of dignity. Her initiative helped to ensure that thousands of indigenous prisoners were no longer anonymous, something that was important as "the denial of the individual weigh[ed] in particular on the prisoners from the colonial empires"²³. The relationship of trust established between these populations and the CAWP staff was attested in van Berchem's accounts of receiving family letters: "it is a generally too widespread mistake to think that [indigenous families] exhibit indifference towards their relatives (...). Many letters, including ones that sometimes come from the most remote places of the French empire, arrive in Geneva every

21. Marguerite van Berchem, "Le Service colonial de l'Agence centrale des Prisonniers de guerre," *Journal de Genève*, 28 juillet 1944, 1.

22. Service colonial —noms arabes et leurs dérivés, C G2 FR C-009, ACICR, Genève.

23. Sophie Bajart and Cosima Götz, "Retrouver les hommes derrière l'image: histoires de prisonniers musulmans pendant la Grande Guerre," *Cahiers bruxellois* 1F, no. 46 (2014): 267.

day”²⁴. In so saying, van Berchem was showing to what extent words were important for caring for colonial soldiers and recognising their humanity within the ICRC’s legal framework.

The Colonial Service developed the only index which provided accurate information about the location of the *frontstalags* and the soldiers’ sanitary and psychological conditions. The index was also intended to confirm whether soldiers were dead or alive and it enabled the creation of a transnational network to send soldiers letters or packages. Acting as a real “substitute” for the French civil register, the Colonial Service also tried to identify soldiers’ graves to facilitate communication with their relatives, including questions about inheritance. Even though most of the time the lists provided by German authorities only indicated “unknown Negro” or “unknown man of colour” to refer to these French colonial soldiers, the Colonial Service managed to identify more than 75% of those who died anonymously²⁵.

At the end of the war, van Berchem became obsessed with the fate of the Colonial Service after the efforts she had put into the creation of an index which had traced the identity of 550,000 indigenous soldiers. With the approval of the ICRC, she organised a trip to Paris during the summer of 1945 to discuss the use and, even, the possible carryover of the index with French military and colonial authorities. During her stay in Paris, she sent several letters to Frick-Cramer to consult her opinions about sensitive topics and ask for her support. Although this was not expressed explicitly in these missives, the parallel discussions of two specific cases in this correspondence shows how these women became accomplices to push the boundaries of their actions beyond the strict institutional —and male— mandate provided by the ICRC.

The first case related to the fate of French prisoners —both military and/or civilian— in Indochina who were in the hands of the Japanese and who had no means of communicating with their relatives in France. Van Berchem was keen to extend the telegraphic or radiophonic shows between Indochina and the French metropole, which she had previously helped to set up for Indochinese colonial troops who were detained in *frontstalags*. Worrying about their psychological state, van Berchem had asked the French Red Cross to organise the transmission of messages via radio in June 1942. Her system was creative and ingenious: letters from prisoners were taken from

24. Mission à Paris de Mademoiselle van Berchem, 12 novembre au 5 février 1945, C G2 FR C-015, ACICR, Genève.

25. Idem.

Geneva to the transmitting station of the *Voix de la France*, which broadcasted extracts on a daily basis. A few days later, the French Colonial Office would communicate telegraphed responses to these messages to Geneva²⁶. During her stay in Paris in 1945, van Berchem dedicated a great amount of her time to remedying the situation for French prisoners in Indochina as well. Rather than asking Roger Gallopin, the Director of the Agency, directly, van Berchem contacted Frick-Cramer —who had previously expressed her interest for such broadcasts— to obtain her support for raising funds²⁷. Her choice could be explained by the female alliance she had developed with Frick-Cramer since WWI, as well as by the mistrust that both women shared towards rigid institutional policies —two aspects which shaped their gender identity throughout their career at the ICRC. In the end, Frick-Cramer decided to use her influence to discuss this issue with Gallopin, who agreed to launch the initiative on the sole condition that the collective broadcasts would be limited to welfare messages and that they were given the approval of the occupying (Japanese) authorities in Indochina²⁸.

The second case referred to the complex colonial situation which marked the aftermath of WWII. Despite van Berchem's concern for the fate of indigenous soldiers, she did not openly call the colonialist system into question. This position was not at all exceptional among Western elites in the 1940s; however, it shows that gender conceptions of care offer new lines of inquiry at the intersection of race and class privilege. Thus, when van Berchem initially visited French authorities during the summer of 1945, she insisted that the index she had developed was the only one “encompassing the entire French colonies” and that it was “a precision tool that France needs and will need for a long time”. However, at that moment, she did not realise the political implications of its use by the French administration which had totally lost contact with its colonies since the winter of 1944. Although van Berchem remained ambivalent about the colonial situation after the war, she called for a more “humanitarian” approach to solve this situation rather than the development of a political solution. To this end, she acknowledged the

26. Idem.

27. Marguerite van Berchem, Lettre personnelle à Madame Frick, membre du CICR, n.d., C G2 FR C-017.01, ACICR, Genève.

28. Marguerite Frick-Cramer, Note pour Mademoiselle van Berchem concernant les messages radiophoniques à destination de l'Indochine, 12 juillet 1945, C G2 FR C-017.02, ACICR, Genève.

atrocities carried out against indigenous populations and openly designated Western Empires as the oppressors.

I must also add that the actions carried out in Geneva in favour of the indigenous populations have a greater reach than those of other national services within the Agency because they concern peoples towards whom the white races are guilty of carrying out a lot of abuse. In post-war Europe, if the colonial question is not dealt with on another level, a more humanitarian level, it has to be considered that these races of colour which have now judged us will no longer accept foreign interference in the running of their countries²⁹.

On the question of transferring the index to French authorities, she once again asked her friend Frick-Cramer for advice. On this occasion, Frick-Cramer responded negatively, underlining several reasons including her rather rigid legal approach:

I do not think that it is very opportune for us to currently attract attention to [the question of the colonies] and to appear to want to underline that the colonies belong to the French metropole, through a measure which would be exceptional and, as stated earlier, very questionable in terms of international law. This could, according to the cases, be held against us at a later date by the indigenous populations themselves (*sic*)³⁰.

This episode shows the limitations of their work, as the political situation in the colonies was beyond the scope of the ICRC and their care for others meant that they could not officially question the fate of colonised populations. Because the CAWP was particularly overwhelmed, a special department in charge of the auxiliary sections of the Agency was created in 27 Swiss cities in July 1940. Van Berchem accepted to become its director in March 1943³¹. Leading a team of 1,413 co-workers, she reorganised the auxiliary sections to improve their CAWP support activities, including translation services in many foreign languages (Bulgarian, Hungarian, Turkish, Japanese, Finnish and Russian). The same year, Frick-Cramer took the lead of the newly created

29. Marguerite van Berchem, Note à Mr. Lombard, 23 octobre 1944, C G2 FR C-015, ACICR, Genève.

30. Marguerite Frick-Cramer, Lettre à Mlle van Berchem, 11 mai 1945, C G2 FR C-019, ACICR, Genève.

31. Marie Allemann, "Marguerite Gautier-van Berchem, an emblematic figure", *Cross-files – Blog CICR*, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://blogs.icrc.org/cross-files/fr/marguerite-gautier-van-berchem/>.

'Service for dispersed families.' Based on the effective information management system developed by the CAWP, this department was in charge of millions of civilians, some of whom were internees, who were dispersed around the globe due to the conflict and who were looking to restore family links.

In April 1944, Frick-Cramer reflected on the "breaking up of family units" and "the painful uncertainty" of those remaining without news "during an indefinite period of time", thus underlining once again the importance of the emotional well-being of ordinary citizens who were victims of enemy occupation, bombings, political detention, internal displacement or evacuation³². Learning from the experience of the Colonial Service, the Service for dispersed families put into practice two identification and reconnection methods inspired by van Berchem: the "phonetic classification" of names of Slav, Latin, German or Anglo-Saxon origins and the use of "radiophonic shows" to communicate with families who were on the road³³. Van Berchem's and Frick-Cramer's recognition of the needs of and their commitment to populations who were not yet protected by humanitarian law can be considered as a form of humanitarian knowledge which aimed to care for their well-being. As we will show in the next section, van Berchem's and Frick-Cramer's work cannot be understood without analysing their strong moral investment towards groups such as soldiers and civilians prisoners —which were still not considered to be fully human— in the light of the histories of emotions and experiences.

4. Indignation and resentment as moral components of care

The fate of prisoners —whether they were military or civil— and their protection remained the core preoccupations of both women and sometimes translated in their reports as a form of moral indignation at the brutalities of war. Yet, on several occasions, the lack of initiative, response or even a display of concern by the ICRC turned their indignation into resentment against the institution. Relying on her legal expertise, Frick-Cramer participated in the drafting of several documents, such as the Third Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war in 1929. She was particularly attentive

32. Marguerite Frick-Cramer, "Au service des familles dispersées," *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge* 26, no. 304 (1944): 307-308.

33. Frick-Cramer, "Au service des familles dispersées," 315-316.

to the gaps in the legal instruments, when reflecting on the development of this convention in 1925.

[We] must not allow the interests of the governing bodies to fade away and [we] must multiply our efforts so that, in the awful case that the horror of war rains down on the civilised world once again, this horror will not be made even worse by a lack of foresight that will be even more guilt laden as there is no longer any excuse for it³⁴.

Among the non-protected and the most vulnerable, two categories could be designated in international law which differentiated between those who could be mobilised (men) and those who could not be mobilised (women, elderly or disabled men, children and teenagers). The latter category of people became the object of Frick-Cramer's moral engagement in the following decades, after she realised that no international convention would protect civilian enemies in a belligerent country.

In our opinion, we believe that the philanthropic and judicial associations which deal with this question, which know the importance of it and which cannot ignore the possible consequences of the solution which will be found for it, owe it to themselves to refuse outright to supply a legal basis for the capture of non-mobilisable civilians³⁵.

Indignation was at the roots of Frick-Cramer's initiative as well as that of van Berchem, Suzanne Ferrière and Lucie Odier —the other women who had been active in the Agency since 1914³⁶. Frick-Cramer participated in the 'Draft International Convention on the Condition and Protection of Civilians of enemy nationality who are on territory belonging to or occupied by a belligerent' and travelled to Tokyo with Odier and van Berchem to attend the 15th International Conference of the Red Cross in October 1934 as the ICRC's representatives, where the draft was to be discussed and hopefully adopted. However, this draft was never ratified, something which was regarded by these female representatives as a painful failure.

During WWII, Frick-Cramer built up a good knowledge about the fate of displaced and detained civil populations and was thus particularly affected by

34. Marguerite Frick-Cramer, "A propos des projets de conventions internationales réglant le sort des prisonniers," *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge* 2, no. 74 (1925): 75.

35. Frick-Cramer, "A propos des projets," 80.

36. Ferrière joined the committee in 1924 and Odier in 1930.

this. Together with her female colleagues Odier, Ferrière and Renée Bordier—who joined the committee in 1938—she pleaded to the ICRC presidency to publicly denounce the deportation and detention of civil populations during WWII. The Swiss historian Jean-Claude Favez has stressed the pressure that Frick-Cramer applied, several times, on the ICRC presidents Max Huber and Carl Burckhardt to start negotiations with the Nazi authorities on behalf of the Jewish population in 1942³⁷. The most notorious moment of moral dispute regarding the fate of civil internees was the ICRC plenary session of October 14th 1942 during which the committee voted against launching a public appeal to denounce the deportations of Jewish populations: a decision which has since been interpreted as a “moral failure”. Thanks to intelligence reports from Swiss and international Jewish associations, the ICRC was aware of the Nazi regime’s extermination plans. However, the committee rejected the idea of a public appeal because it estimated that it had no chances of success. Its members felt that speaking out would not stop the extermination plans, but instead harm the relationship with parties at war because the institution would no longer be seen to be neutral. The ICRC was indeed facing a legal vacuum without any conventional basis for protecting civilians and so it chose to continue to provide assistance to prisoners of war in Germany instead. As a proponent of the appeal, Frick-Cramer’s arguments were based on moral values ahead of pragmatic reasons and were inspired by a strong feeling of indignation—a righteous form of anger which has historically dignified the person who has denounced injustices³⁸.

Only Mme Frick-Cramer, who had by now agreed in principle to abandon the idea of a public condemnation, demurred. Her tone of outrage comes across even through the dry minutes. The Red Cross might very easily disappear altogether, she said, during the current international turmoil. But it should not do so as a result of abandoning the very moral and spiritual values on which it had been founded. She asked that an immediate intervention—albeit private—be made on behalf of hostages and deportees³⁹.

37. Jean-Claude Favez, *The Red Cross and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 39-43, 61-63, 88.

38. On indignation, see Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Anger: The Conflicted History of an Emotion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020) and Martín-Moruno, *Beyond Compassion*, 54.

39. Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, 28-30; see also Forsythe, *The Humanitarians*, 49.

This is not the first time that Frick-Cramer openly opposed institutional decisions. In 1918, she had already expressed her desire to quit the ICRC because she was dissatisfied with the tensions that existed around the work of the IWPA. She used her resignation as a threat to pressure the ICRC's committee to allow the directors of the agency to participate in committee meetings⁴⁰. The 1942 episode accelerated Frick-Cramer's disillusion with the ICRC, she finally resigned in September 1946. When she explained her reasons in a letter that she wrote to Max Huber, she clearly revealed her feelings of resentment towards this institution —an emotion which allowed her to express the suffering that she felt due to the lack of acknowledgement of her career at the ICRC⁴¹. At a time when the ICRC was facing immense challenges —Europe was in total chaos and the humanitarian world was undergoing rapid changes— her decision to leave the ICRC raises many questions, even though she remained an honorary member of the ICRC until her death in 1963. However, it seems that Frick-Cramer's values conflicted with the ICRC's institutional policy. Amongst the factors leading to her resignation, she mentioned in her letter the “lack of constructive policy towards populations displaced during the war” and the failure of the Service for dispersed families due to a lack of appropriate means. She must also have resented the ICRC's decision not to speak out in 1942, when she accused the ICRC of showing a “reluctance” to “stand out in favour” of displaced populations⁴². Despite her resignation, she continued to work on drafting the convention which she believed in so much: the Fourth Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War signed in 1949.

Although Frick-Cramer's moral values show that she conceived care as a strong belief in the fundamental doctrine of the ICRC and the legal protection of the most vulnerable, her conception of care seems to have diverged from the ICRC's governance —which she thought was guided more by the “opportunistic” will to please “external contingencies”⁴³. In her obituary, the editor in chief of the *International Review of the Red Cross* emphasised that “during meetings, in law or technical commissions, her experience bestowed

40. Cédric Cotter, *(S')aider pour survivre* (Genève: Georg, 2017).

41. To understand the history of resentment from a gender perspective, see Dolores Martín-Moruno, “Introduction. On Resentment: Past and Present of an Emotion”, in Bernardino Fantini, Dolores Martín-Moruno and Javier Moscoso (eds.), *On resentment: past and present*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013). pp. 1-16.

42. Marguerite Frick-Cramer, Lettre à Max Huber, septembre 1946, PMFC 019, ACICR, Genève.

43. Lettre à Max Huber.

a great authority to her opinion"⁴⁴. However, in her resignation letter, Frick-Cramer stated that she felt she was "a useless member, maybe unusable, in all cases, unused". She further stressed that she had the feeling that leaving would not deprive the ICRC "of an efficient assistance or [undermine] it in any way", as her advice during the last year "were not sought nor followed"⁴⁵. Her final parting words were an attack on the old patriarchy which governed the Committee, as she stated that "since more than a year, [she had] persistently demanded the recruitment to the ICRC of young and competent members", as she considered the Committee to have become "an amorphous mass, with no reaction, showing less and less interest in things it knows poorly, imperfectly or too late"⁴⁶.

Van Berchem also shared Frick-Cramer's taste for telling unpleasant truths. In November 1961, she was sent by the ICRC to Tunis with Pierre Gaillard to negotiate with the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (PGAR). This was a delicate mission, in the context of the decolonisation wars; its main purpose was to establish diplomatic relations and discuss the application of the Geneva Conventions to French soldiers and civilians detained by the National Liberation Army in Algeria. During their mission, van Berchem and Gaillard met with several high authorities, including the PGAR President and the president of the Algerian Red Crescent society. In her account of the mission, van Berchem chose a very unusual introduction to this otherwise formal written exercise. She felt the need to underline her previous knowledge of the country, when she was conducting archaeological excavations in Sedrata, and more importantly, her legitimacy as an eyewitness:

Maybe I was better placed than others to understand —without, however, accepting— the shortcomings of the leaders of the FLN [National Liberation Front] with respect to the work that we are carrying out, as I am the only one amongst you to have lived through this terrible war in Algeria, and not through sporadic visits, as our delegates have done, but during more than ten consecutive years, in the climate and in the middle of the events which have been building up to this uprising for such a long time. I saw, as early as 1946, tensions rise, the first repressions —repressions without any mercy— of the Muslim population by the French Air Force, then the war break out with all of

44. Jean-Georges Lossier, "Mme R.-M. Frick-Cramer," *Journal de Genève*, 24 octobre 1963, 10.

45. Lettre à Max Huber.

46. Idem.

the horrors that such a war brings with it when there is such a huge disparity between the forces which are fighting each other⁴⁷.

In clear contradiction of the tradition of confidentiality which was at the core of the ICRC's dogma, van Berchem insisted that "by evoking some personal memories" she would like "to show [the committee] the true face of this war". Such personal evocations are extremely rare in mission reports and attest to her desire to put her feelings ahead of her duty of reserve. Her affective attachment to this country and its inhabitants, that she considered to be the victims of a brutal war, can be seen in the indignation she manifested by designating "the oppression of poor and miserable, but brave people, by another people which is much more powerful". She continued with a long descriptive list of horrors which she had personally witnessed during her presence in Algeria in 1946, from "whole destructed villages" to "human wrecks [wandering] half naked". She did not refrain either from making denunciation statements, such as emphasising that the "greater (*sic*) number of French people in Algeria with whom I spoke did not envision anything other than the suppression of the Algerian people" and that their death was "all (*sic*) the French people wished for"⁴⁸.

Although she did not participate in the 1942 plenary session regarding the public appeal for Jews, her resentment against the ICRC's culture of silence can be observed at the end of her mission diary. In it, she asserted that "all truths are not good to be told, but around this table and in this house where we must face such serious issues, some have to be said"⁴⁹. In spite of this, van Berchem continued to accept some missions afterwards and became an honorary member of the committee in 1969 until her death on January 22nd 1984. In her obituary, published in the *Journal de Genève*, the lawyer Jean Pictet —an expert in International Humanitarian Law and the ICRC's vice-president— commended this ambiguous woman who "admirably embodied the 'Geneva spirit', thoughtful and reserved, readily rebellious and caustic, but generous as well and able to fire herself up for noble causes"⁵⁰.

47. Marguerite van Berchem, Rapport de Mlle van Berchem sur sa mission à Tunis accompagnée de Mr. Gaillard du 20 au 21 novembre 1961, B AG 210 008-011.01, ACICR, Genève.

48. Rapport de Mlle van Berchem.

49. Rapport de Mlle van Berchem.

50. Jean Pictet, "Marguerite Gautier-van Berchem," *Journal de Genève*, 25 janvier 1984, 12.

5. Conclusion

By historicising care, we have reconstructed Frick-Cramer's and van Berchem's service activities at the ICRC's Tracing Agencies as work which —nonetheless— was not always recognised by the members of this international agency, as it frequently defied its institutional dogma. This lack of recognition —which is at the origins of the suffering of employees within large organisations— explains their recurrent expression of feelings such as indignation and resentment against the ICRC. Such moral expressions were not only guided by a sense of purpose to improve the physical and emotional well-being of detained people, but also to rectify the all-male culture represented by this Genevan institution and its resistance to change. Even though their legacy has remained largely invisible, both in the history of the ICRC and in the history of humanitarianism in general, Frick-Cramer's and van Berchem's activities filled in organisational gaps to protect vulnerable populations such as prisoners of war, civil detainees and indigenous populations who were not recognised in previous legal frameworks. Their initiatives demonstrate how gender —together with class and race— played a central role in the development of a new ethos of care intended to protect populations affected by armed conflicts throughout the first half of the twentieth century. For Frick-Cramer and van Berchem —as well as the anonymous body of female volunteers who worked at the IPWA and the CAWP— care was understood as a global concern for categories of people whose needs were unmet, invisible to or ignored by institutions. This perspective opens new lines of inquiry about the conceptions of care —from the individual to the institutional perspective— to shed light on notions of caring about and caring for people, as well as to contextualise geographies of care which do not always imply face-to-face relationships. In adopting care as a theoretical lens, our aim is twofold. On the one hand, we would like to encourage future scholars to write a gendered account of humanitarian history that is care-sensitive. On the other, our objective is to reconstitute these tedious tasks which have not previously been considered to have been reported reliably by the history of science, medicine and technology. From collecting, recording and sharing information to advocating and drafting legal conventions, Frick-Cramer's and van Berchem's activities at the Tracing Agencies can be interpreted as a form of humanitarian knowledge which was produced about detained people, at times of extremely violent episodes, from world wars to decolonisation wars. Although gender, in intersection with class and race, has never been considered as a useful category to comprehend their

careers, this approach has allowed us to show to what extent their activities were moved by an agenda which differed from both that of the anonymous body of female volunteers and the ICRC's male representatives. Even though Frick-Cramer and van Berchem contributed to the constitution and further development of this humanitarian knowledge at the ICRC —which intersects with gender, emotions, experiences and politics— their authority has yet to be recognised within this institution and abroad.

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