

THE AGENCY'S GAZETTE

1870-2020

150 YEARS FIGHTING FOR MORE HUMANITY IN WAR

October 1937, the first time in...

... China

The first mystery | To this day, we still do not know exactly when the ICRC first visited prisoners of war in China during the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). We do know that Charles de Watteville, the ICRC delegate dispatched to China, wrote a letter at the end of October 1937 in which he explained that he had visited prisoners of war and that they “seemed to be perfectly well treated, well fed and well housed”. He also wrote that there were only around 50 prisoners and about 20 of those were Japanese prisoners in Chinese hands.

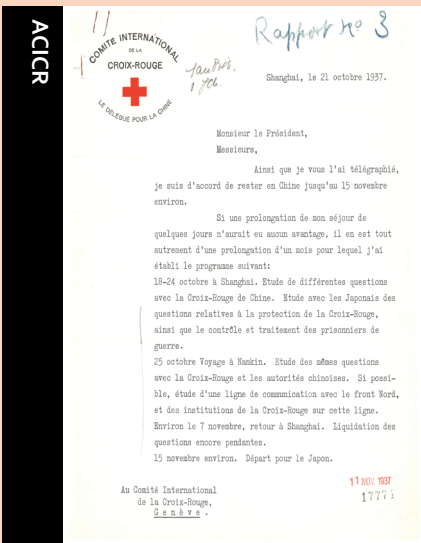
In fact, he was not even sure whether the 30 Chinese prisoners presented to him by the Japanese authorities were prisoners of war given they “did not have uniforms and were wearing peasant attire”. De Watteville’s successor, Louis Calame, worked as the ICRC’s delegate in China until May 1939. He shared his colleague’s suspicions and found it similarly difficult to gain access to prisoners on either



Delegate L. Calame (left)/ICRC

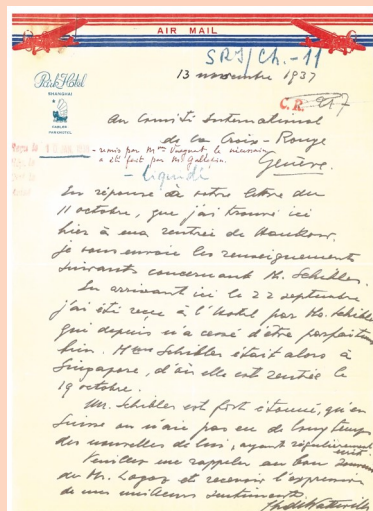
side, Japanese or Chinese. Japanese newspapers reported that there were no Japanese prisoners because the Emperor’s soldiers either fought to the death or committed hara-kiri rather than be captured alive. The Japanese assured De Watteville that they would abide by the 1929 Convention, although they then did a U-turn and claimed that the treaty did not apply to the Far East! De Watteville wondered whether it was his questions that eventually led both sides to keep some prisoners and to treat them well, just in case there were any more visits. ■ IME, DPM & DGON

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A letter detailing delegate de Watteville’s mission programme

The second mystery | So few prisoners? This raised questions. The Chinese ambassador to Switzerland told the ICRC that there were no prisoners of war in the conflict because the enemy was killing all the captured men! On the Japanese side, De Watteville wrote that the issue of prisoners of war seemed to be irrelevant.



A letter from Ch. de Watteville. The ICRC was also concerned about the fate of Swiss nationals in China