



90,000 volunteers
One remarkable legacy

OUR REFUGEE SERVICE DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Refusing to ignore people in crisis

Our refugee service during the First World War

redcross.org.uk/WW1

Following the outbreak of the First World War on 4 August 1914, the British Red Cross formed the Joint War Committee with the Order of St John. They worked together and pooled their fundraising activities and resources. The committee supplied services and machinery in Britain and in the conflict areas abroad. They also organised a refugee service for displaced people in Britain and abroad, which continued after the war.

Helping refugees

The Red Cross helped refugees in a number of countries during the war, providing food, clothing and other items to many. They worked in France, Belgium, Egypt, Palestine, Salonika, Corfu, Mesopotamia and Northern Prussia. Additional work was done in Switzerland and Malta, particularly after the armistice.

Work in France and Belgium

Enteric fever spread among Belgian refugees so a hospital was opened in Malassise, near St Omer, in February 1915. A large number of Red Cross trained nurses were despatched to Malassise to provide aid to the soldiers.

Trained nurses were also sent to the Friends' Ambulance Unit which had opened a hut-hospital at Malo les Bains. Attached to this hospital was the Isle of Wight barge hospital on Dunkirk canal. Managed by Madam O-Gorman, it provided accommodation for 26 patients, all of whom were Belgian refugees.

The Boulogne rest station was established to offer food to French and Belgian refugees travelling south, away from the bombardments. Cocoa and milk was provided by the French Military Authorities and distributed by the French Croix Rouge Infirmière. Between March and June 1918 over 10,000 people were fed at this rest station.

Work in Egypt and Palestine

A condition of the armistice between the allies and the Turks was that all allied prisoners of war should be transferred to Egypt to be sent home. As well as bringing troops, the repatriation ships brought hundreds of civilian refugees. The Red Cross provided vital aid to the refugees administration of Egypt, which was responsible for these civilians. This aid consisted of food, clothing and other items.

When the British forces entered Palestine and Syria, they discovered many people in need of aid. The army quickly set up an initiative to care for them and additional help was provided by the American Red Cross, the Syrian and Palestine relief fund, and other funds that had been formed with similar objectives. These organisations provided supplies for Serbian refugees including food and clothing and they worked to prevent the spread of typhus. A Serbian refugee

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camp was set up with funds from the Joint War Committee in 1916.

Work in Salonika and Corfu

The commissioner in Salonika mentioned in a report the work being done for the Serbian relief fund, which had been given a grant from the Red Cross in London. Refugees had travelled over the mountains in Serbia and Albania, arriving at Salonika in a horrific condition. The Joint War Committee provided funds to help prevent the spread of disease, which was a large threat. They also funded food, water, clothing and other supplies. Most of the work was carried out at the Serbian relief camp, which was managed by VADs.

Work in Mesopotamia and Northern Persia

As opposing armies advanced and retreated across Mesopotamia and Northern Persia, huge numbers of people were displaced. Red Cross supply depots in Northern Persia provided refugee camps with food, clothing and medical equipment to treat dysentery, fevers and influenza. These included a camp for Russian refugees in Basrah and the Jelu refugee camp at Bakubah.

Work in Switzerland

Around 550 bags of washing supplies were given to refugees travelling through Switzerland from Austria, Poland and Hungary. Clothing was also supplied to the refugees as many of them had only one set of clothes.

Work in Malta

After the war, there was a call for clothing, boots, bedding, “invalid food” and other essentials for British and Russian refugees who were returning from the Front.

Sources

- > Reports by the Joint War Committee and the Joint War Finance Committee of the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St John of Jerusalem in England on voluntary aid rendered to the sick and wounded at home and abroad and to British prisoners of war 1914–1919
 - > Oliver, Beryl (1966) *The British Red Cross in Action*; London; Faber and Faber Limited.
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