Dependence and Divergence, 1941–2

The system tested: the ICRC in the Mediterranean and the Far East

On 20 April 1941, Greece – having resisted the invasion launched by the Italians in October 1940 and the arrival of the Germans in the spring of the following year – finally capitulated to the Axis. In the days that followed, the Wehrmacht rounded up the remaining British and Colonial soldiers that had been sent to Greece’s defence, taking, by the time of the fall of Kalamata on 29 April, a grand total of 11,000 British POWs. A little over a month later, these were joined by an additional 12,000 of their comrades who, following evacuation from the mainland, had fought on in the subsequent battle for Crete, only to surrender on 1 June. Though the total number of POWs taken in the Greek campaign was less than the intake in Western Europe in 1940, the same problems of transportation, housing and food soon emerged. The two main transit camps in the region – Dulag 183 (Salonika) and the ‘Corinth Cage’ Frontstalag – were ramshackle facilities in which prisoners were beset by dysentery and untreated infections and, in some cases, shot by overzealous guards for such trivialities as attempting to use the open-ditch latrines at night. The experience of capture for Allied prisoners taken in North Africa during the same period was little better. The main transit camp at Benghazi – ‘The Palms’ – was little more than a dust-choked, barbed-wire-ringed enclosure, in which the sanitation was non-existent and the rations consisted of watery macaroni and hard tack biscuits, supplied in measly quantities. Transit camps in Italy were comparably bad. The camp at Capua, bereft of adequate water supplies and functional latrines, was notorious as a breeding ground for malaria and beri beri.1

Administration of camps in the Mediterranean also left a lot to be desired. Viewed as good for little more than guard duty, the Italians were charged by their senior German partners with the task of running the transit camps in North Africa and Greece and handling the processing of the POWs through to their places of permanent internment, usually within northern Italy or the Reich itself. In this the Italians soon earned a reputation for cockiness, cruelty and incompetence. Reporting to Geneva from the transit camps happened rarely, if ever, despite the fact that the Italian Red Cross – in theory close to ICRC – was given this duty by Rome. As late as November 1941 the Agency was still waiting on capture cards for prisoners taken in April who, by year’s end, had been transferred from North Africa to permanent camps in Europe.\(^2\) In terms of privation therefore, the capture and transit experience for British prisoners of the Italians in 1941 was eerily reminiscent – and, for the most part, worse – than that experienced by their comrades the year before.

Aspects of the POW experience in Greece that did differ from that of France were the more coordinated and expedient response of the ICRC and the understanding and support proffered by Whitehall to its enterprise. The PWD was informed by Haccius in the first week of May 1941 of the number of prisoners captured in Greece and the rate at which they were expected to be transferred to permanent camps in Germany. The BRC acted on this information by releasing funds to the ICRC for purchases of food and clothing in Turkey and sent a representative, Edward Hogg, to Ankara in order to coordinate relief efforts with Marcel Junod.\(^3\) Standing at the centre of this response from the Red Cross was the ICRC delegate Robert Brunel, a man widely regarded as one of the Committee’s finest servants during the war.\(^4\) Brunel had first been despatched to Athens at the outset of Mussolini’s failed Balkan adventure in the autumn of 1940 and so was well established in the capital in the spring of 1941 when the Germans finished what the Italians started. Following the cessation of hostilities, Brunel – adopting the spirit of Junod and Marti’s visits to the camps in France the year before – opted to gather information on the newly captured POWs in person rather than wait for the compliance of the Axis authorities, whose competence to handle POW affairs he already doubted.\(^5\) This direct approach led to more expedient and detailed reporting of capture information. His initial report, which was received by Haccius on 13 June, presented gram-by-gram information on the quantity and type of food available as well as details of the numbers of those affected by dysentery and diarrhoea following its consumption. This depressing