

Civilian Red Cross Messages Forwarded between the US and Japan in World War II

Synopsis

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Purpose and Scope: The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) played a vital humanitarian role during World War II, acting as an intermediary for communication between separated families and prisoners of war (POWs). One of the most critical tools utilized in this effort was the Red Cross message form, which provided a means for civilians and soldiers alike to maintain contact with loved ones despite the severe disruptions caused by war. While more than 22 million messages were processed by the ICRC throughout the war making them generally easy to acquire, this article focuses on the exchange of messages between US residents of Japanese ancestry and family/friends in Japan, a very difficult subset of message forms to acquire.

Also included in this study are Japanese postal stationery postcards generated by civilians in Japan in lieu of the Red Cross message form that were processed by Japanese Red Cross in Tokyo and sent to the US throughout the war aboard diplomatic exchange ships and the trans-Siberia railway.

Restrictions on the Red Cross Message Forms and Postcards: The Red Cross message form was a standardized form designed to facilitate brief and censored communication between individuals separated by the war. These forms had specific features and restrictions to ensure their effectiveness while adhering to wartime regulations. The postcards also had specific restrictions applied.

1. **Limited Word Count:** To streamline processing and facilitate censorship, messages were typically restricted to 25 words or fewer. This limitation required correspondents to be concise and deliberate in their writing. Postcards were limited to 200 Japanese characters.
2. **Predefined Content:** Message forms and postcards were allowed to contain only essential information about personal health, well-being, and safety. Requests for specific details about military operations or escape attempts were prohibited.
3. **Neutral Handling:** The message forms were routed through the Red Cross headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, which maintained a neutral stance and ensured that correspondence was conducted according to international agreements. The postcards were processed through the Japanese Red Cross, Tokyo.
4. **Delivery Delays:** Due to wartime conditions, processing delays were common, and messages took many months to reach their intended recipients. Postcards carried aboard

the diplomatic exchange ship, *Gripsholm*, were an exception, most of them generated and delivered between September and December 1943.

5. **Censorship:** Messages were subject to examination by both the sender's and recipient's governments or military authorities, ensuring that no sensitive or politically subversive information was transmitted. Writers were often provided guidelines by Red Cross representatives to help assure their communications would be sent on.

Personal study: This article is part of a decades long study of the World War II experience of German, Italian, and Japanese US-resident noncombatants impacted by the war. It includes both interned and unconfined civilians. I have published widely on the subject, both in the historical and philatelic literatures.

Reference

- Louis Fiset. *Detained, Interned, Incarcerated: U.S. Enemy Noncombatant Mail in World War II* (Collectors Club of Chicago, 2010).