Abstract

The Second World War caused a significant and widespread problem of missing persons. Although the inherent and inevitable link between missing persons and war has long been recognized, the extent of the phenomenon after World War II far surpassed that of previous wars. The protracted nature of the fighting, the use of new military measures, the widespread global theaters of war, and the targeting of specific groups for destruction, first and foremost the Jews, resulted in a never-before experienced number and geographical dispersion of missing persons. From the reports of the various armies and relief agencies involved, it can be estimated that the war resulted in between eight and ten million missing persons in Europe alone. Facing the need to trace such a large number of missing persons, the Allied armies and the humanitarian organizations came to the realization that the problem could no longer be treated as a private matter, but must be dealt with as a national issue with significant political implications. Primarily, this approach was called for because the unresolved issue of missing family members left their families in a state of turmoil, with many refusing to follow plans for their resettlement until the issue had been settled. Another important problem was that the proliferation of missing persons left unresolved many legal matters, among them the rights to their property. Thus, the problem of the missing persons directly impeded the rebuilding of the post-war nation states. Different tracing services were established in order to attempt to address this problem, of which the most well-known was the International Tracing Service (ITS).

This article examines the heuristic value of four categories of missing persons – soldiers, civilians, children, and Jews – to analyze the problem of missing persons, and assesses the phenomenon’s short term effects. As a result of these considerations, it suggests that missing persons be included as a third, independent category in the results of the war, in addition to the number of living and dead.