

## *Military Archives and Military History: A Matter of Perspective*

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Military archivists and historians have much in common — the vast holdings of documents with which to tell the story of the past. If archivists do not acquire the most valuable materials and prepare usable finding aids, however, then historians cannot possibly tell the whole story.

At the recent meeting in Turin of the Committee on Military Archives of the International Commission of Comparative Military History (ICCMH), it became evident that there are different international perceptions of military history. Some military archivists have charge of quite small holdings of strictly army history and see their task as ancillary to the General Staff, as indeed were many archival and historical sections until after 1945. Other military archives are contained within the central government archives, as the Public Record Office in London, the National Archives in Washington and the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa. Even among these three establishments access varies considerably, as does the cost of reproduction.

However, the most important difference lies in the conception of military history, a difference which is exemplified by the PRO's guides and lists. For the period of World War II, for instance, in addition to the modernized "Guisseppi," *A Guide to the Contents of the Public Record Office* (2 vols., 1963) and *The Second World War: A Guide to the Documents in the PRO* (1972), there are more than 100 mimeographs which describe the contents of the PRO classes and restrictions prevailing.

More importantly, no researcher into World War II can ignore the first class of records, those of the Cabinet (the CAB series) since the chiefs of staff reported to the Prime Minister as Minister of Defence, and were also present in the Cabinet War Room at their green-beige table within the "U" where sat the ministers and the PM facing them but a few feet away.

Then there are the records of the Chiefs of Staff (COS) and of the various departments, in particular the Admiralty (ADM), War Office (WO) and Air Ministry Group (AIR), not to mention the Ministry of Supply (MOS) and Ministry of Aircraft Production (AVIA) groups. The breadth of the Australian and British concepts of war may be judged by looking at the published titles in each series (to be found in *Official Histories*

[1970] and a supplement in progress). These volumes cover topics ranging from grand strategy to social policy and the health of the nation. All are related to battlefield outcomes.

In France, the military, naval and air archives are located at Château Vincennes, which makes it easy for researchers to move from the textual documents and graphic materials of one service to those of another. There the historical services have custody of the military archives, while the national political records are at the Archives Nationales in Paris. Access to Château Vincennes is easy after a preliminary letter of enquiry, and the staff are helpful and efficient.

From the discussions at Turin, it would seem that there is some variance of conception among archivists as to what military history comprises. Some archivists obviously are constrained in their outlook by the documents which they acquire and preserve; others, with broader holdings and contacts, take a wider view. All archivists, and indeed historians, are subject to the history of their country as well as its "paper" heritage, of which they both are the guardians.

Both groups are also affected by a changing heritage and professional culture. Archivists are struggling with the sheer volume of twentieth-century records, including magnetic tapes and computer disks. As noted in an earlier article, however, they may still not be acquiring everything that historians want and will seek.<sup>1</sup>

Historians of war are no longer simply military, naval or air historians. They are changing both their work habits and their perspectives, both of which have been fluid for perhaps nearly three decades. Two factors have impelled these changes. The first is the cost of getting to and staying at the archives, as the physical distance at which historians reside and work increases and history itself becomes no longer delimited by national boundaries and transoceanic crossings. This means that there is a very real trade-off between air fare and per diem costs, and photocopying —well in favour of the latter. If the per diem is roughly \$150 US, then that corresponds to 1,000 pages copied from microfilm or microfiche. Given such a ratio and a computer at home, historians no longer expect to spend days or weeks in the archives, so much as to obtain access to the materials in the form of copies. Indeed, the professional researcher who can work with the historian in order to locate and copy files has become invaluable; an acceptable substitute is a graduate student residing near the archives.

What remains more critical even than how in the future historians' work will be published is how archives will respond to the new breadth of interest among modern scholars of war. While some such researchers are still concerned with high policy, and others with operational planning, many are dealing with economic policy, production matters and the infrastructure of services and state. Vital to this work, then, is a knowledge on the part of archivists of the organizational structure of each ministry, so that researchers can locate the records (for example) of the office responsible for ordering tools, or of the statistical branch of the secretariat.

The basic concern of course is the same as in the library field. It is essential that professional keepers of the records talk to both the professional users from the general staff and, as the documents are opened for public use, to historians.

This also raises the question of whether archives can afford to publicize the documents. Would not their ever-more-limited funds be better spent creating descriptive

inventories which could be photocopied and sold to researchers on an ad hoc basis?

We are now, both archivists and historians, shedding nineteenth-century concepts so that we can face the realities of the twenty-first century. Should we not also consider where we ought to be going and by what means? It seems to me that we should be exchanging ideas either through joint conferences or by means of journals and newsletters. We must also consider what should be acquired now, what archivists should try to recover of the historical record, how holdings should be organized, and finding aids developed and for what purpose military archives should exist — as the armed forces shrink back to the level of the 1920s once more, while the scholarly world continues to expand its interest into all aspects of human activity, military as well as civilian.

### Notes

- 1 Robin Higham, "Historians, Archivists, Wastage and Planning for War," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), pp. 188-94.