

Book Reviews



The Struggle for the Files: The Western Allies and the Return of German Archives after the Second World War. ASTRID M. ECKERT. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xv, 427 p. ISBN 978-0-521-88018-3.

The Struggle for the Files is a compelling reality check for anyone still clinging to the conviction that archival management is an exercise in objectivity and impartiality. In 400-plus pages of exacting detail, Astrid Eckert, an assistant professor of history at Emory University in Atlanta, decisively reveals the deep political and bureaucratic machinations associated with the confiscation, management, dissemination, and disposition of German records and archives by British and American governments after the Second World War, laying to rest any suggestion that records and archives stand apart from the quagmire of organizational manoeuvrings.

The book, adapted from Eckert's award-winning doctoral dissertation from the Free University of Berlin, originally appeared in German in 2004 and was published in English in 2012. *The Struggle for the Files* examines the history of the confiscation of German records and archives – both current documents used by the Reich during the war and historical archives of the German government dating back to the 1800s – by American and British governments in the wake of the Second World War. (Records seized by the French government represented a smaller portion of the whole and thus are only mentioned intermittently; the role of the Soviet Union in the capture of German records plays an even smaller role in the discussion.)

Immaculately researched and persuasively argued, the book introduces a historical environment in which archives are seen more as prized war trophies than impartial evidence; where archivists do battle with generals, politicians, and bureaucrats over the custody and control of records; and where the preservation and dissemination of historical resources is at the mercy of the competing political priorities of governments on different sides of a world war.

Chapter 1 outlines the history of the actual confiscation of the records by the Allies from about 1944 to 1949. The image presented is of a chaotic and

haphazard document collection process. In some cases, Allied troops seized records as soon as they were found – in offices, storage rooms, or secret hiding places – transferring them around Germany sometimes four or five times before finally shipping them off the continent. In other cases, records were held in situ and guarded by troops until inventories of some sort could be carried out and plans made to relocate them. For some involved with the process, the records were seen as essential sources of military intelligence, and protecting their integrity was paramount. For others, the records were historical objects on a par with fine art and cultural artifacts; to them, perceived cultural value played a part in selection. For still others, the quest was for war booty, and “souvenir hunting” (p. 57) was not only accepted but sometimes formally sanctioned. In this chapter, Eckert also introduces the story of the 1946 decision to publish a multi-volume series of *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*, to be co-edited by the British and Americans and published in both English and German. The complex and politically charged story of this enormous publishing project is a thread woven throughout the book.¹

In Chapter 2, Eckert examines the growing call by the new Federal Republic of Germany for the return of German records and archives. To set the scene, she examines the establishment of the Bundesarchiv in 1950, including the challenge of staffing the new institution and the “denazification” of German civil servants. Her insights into the post-war fates of individual German archivists accentuate the humanity behind the bureaucracy. (She notes, for instance, that Ernst Posner, who is well known to European and North American archivists, was approached to take on the directorship of the new Bundesarchiv. Posner, having experienced arrest and internment in a concentration camp before fleeing to the United States, did not consider the offer for any length of time, saying that he could never “become a Ger[man] civil servant again without breaking my soul” [p. 125].)

It was with the establishment of the Bundesarchiv that calls for restitution grew into a protracted political debate. Some records – many of low administrative value – were returned to Germany on an ad hoc basis, but many more remained in Allied hands until legal agreements could be formalized. German arguments for return focused on historical value and administrative necessity; British and American arguments against return concentrated on questions of ownership, security, and legality. Indeed, the very right of the new German government to own “old” German records was in question: how could records

1 The project lasted from 1946 to 1958 and ultimately resulted in ten volumes in English and seven in German. The English series was published under the title *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945: From the Archives of the German Foreign Ministry*, ed. R.J. Sontag and others under the sponsorship of the US Department of State, the British Foreign Office, and the French Government (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1949–).

be “returned” to a political entity that, after the surrender of the Third Reich, no longer existed?

The American and British positions on the ownership of the records are elaborated in Chapter 3, as negotiations continued – often with considerable foot-dragging. In the United States, an Interagency Conference on Captured German Documents met for the first time in 1950 and deliberated on the fate of German records through the rest of the decade. The British, in an effort to address stiff internal division over the matter, established a Joint Consultative Committee to provide a formal framework for discussions. In their own efforts to press for the return of records, the Germans were hampered by a lack of information about which records were actually still in existence and where they were held.

When actual negotiations over return officially opened in the 1950s, as examined in Chapter 4, the legal status of the materials became an increasingly contentious point. Questions swirled around which records were personal and which were public, who owned copyright, and whether the records were strategic diplomatic assets or war booty. While some documents, particularly diplomatic files, were returned to Germany as early as 1956, Allied plans to publish or microfilm records often slowed the transfer, allowing the British and Americans longer access to originals and ongoing use of the information through reproductions. Ultimately, Eckert notes, there was never a definitive end to the restitution process, and as recently as the late 1990s the American government was still uncovering and returning captured German files.

Chapter 5 examines the use of the captured documents for the writing of history, particularly but not only in relation to the extensive and complex Documents on German Foreign Policy editing project. While the story of this publishing project is worthy of inclusion, this chapter is not as clearly presented as the others because the author has to abandon the chronology used to good effect in earlier chapters in order to expand on the history of the initiative. In this chapter, Eckert also introduces the issue of Cold War conflicts over records, which opens the door to yet another complex element of German history.

Eckert ends her book by emphasizing the role of records and archives, not just as evidence but as tools for the preservation of identity. She laments the chaos resulting from the “struggle for the files” or, as German historian Gerhard Ritter wrote in 1962, the “mutual archival theft” that had become part of the “modern style of warfare” (p. 382). Eckert acknowledges, however, that had the records *not* been seized, they might not have survived the war. Wrangling over the “right” home for them was perhaps the lesser evil.

The Struggle for the Files is exceptionally readable, especially for such a dense and detailed work. Since the book was first written in German, additional praise must go to the translator, Dona Geyer, as well as to the author for the quality of the English prose. While the history of records is an engaging topic for archivists, the author tells this story in such an absorbing fashion that the

book demonstrates that the history of recordkeeping is more than “just” stories about the mechanics of archival management. One might hope, in fact, that historians will see in this book the potential for the history of records, not as a sidelight to other historical studies but as a significant historical topic in its own right.

The book still shows a few lingering vestiges of the apparatus of doctoral dissertations, including the occasional use of awkward chapter or section transitions. As well, the elegance of the prose makes it easy for the reader to forget that even quoted passages are translated, and a question lingers about whether various quotations – from military officials, bureaucrats, or politicians – were as expressive in their original language. The alphabet soup of acronyms is unavoidable in a work centred on the machinations of a range of bureaucracies, so the reader is cautioned to bookmark the useful list of abbreviations (pp. xi-xv) while reading the text. The footnotes add colourful detail, not just straight citations, and their presence on the bottom of each page – not relegated to the distant reaches of the back of the book – is a tremendous asset to the reader. Thanks must go to the publisher for an expensive but much appreciated editorial decision.

Missing from the book are particulars that may well have been beyond the author’s scope but that come to mind for anyone interested in the inner workings of recordkeeping. Exactly what kinds of archives and records were confiscated: which series, in which media, from which offices? What was the condition and order of materials at the time of confiscation and at the time of restitution? Was there any evidence that items were lost or damaged before, during, or after seizure by the Allies? How were files transferred, inventoried, tracked, used, and preserved? Who other than official historians accessed the holdings while they were in Allied hands? Which records were duplicated, and why? Many of the later debates over restitution may well have been related to specific archival actions, and the inclusion of some insights into the shape, scope, and handling of the materials themselves might have illuminated the story that much more.

As a work of archival history, this book sets a very high bar for historians of the record. *The Struggle for the Files* is a convincing inducement to the scholarly community to pursue comparable studies into similar archival topics, from the management of archives during war to the role of records in the creation of new nation-states to the fate of documentary evidence in times of technological change. Scholars can draw on this work as a model for the study of archives both *in* history and *as* history. As the author notes, and as her book abundantly demonstrates, “it is not always the archive that shapes history ... history can come over the archive” (p. 12).

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