Linda Barnickel’s “Spoils of War: The Fate of European Records During World War II”¹

Introduction

The use of records and archives during World War II, and the fate of the records and archives after the war ended, is an extremely interesting topic. The reasons for the protection, destruction, exploitation, and the methods of repatriation of records and archives is an important area of study, especially for the lessons humanity can learn for future conflicts.

About the Author

Linda Barnickel graduated from the University of Wisconsin – Madison School of Library and Information Studies. After graduation, she worked at the Kansas State Historical Society as a reference archivist (19). It is currently believed that Barnickel works at the Nashville Public Library².

Summary

Barnickel starts the article with an explanation of intelligence value. She asserts that most archivists are already familiar with the values of archives and records, such as administrative value and legal value. To the list of values, Barnickel would like to add intelligence value. She defines intelligence value as “the value information has for enemies or opponents of the creating or possessing individual or agency” (8).

Records with intelligence value are treated differently during times of war. Barnickel illustrates that the fate of these records can be categorized into five groups: Response to threats, Occupation, Destruction, Protection, and Repatriation. Barnickel expounds on each group, listing evidence of the fate of particular records and archives. Further, Barnickel attempts to explain the reasons certain records and archives met their particular fate.

**Response to threats**

With the expectation of occupation, some records managers and archivists prepared to have their records removed from the path of the Axis powers. One such case of a records office removing their records is the Norwegian Foreign Affairs office. The records contained information that could damage Norway’s relationship with Norway’s allies. Axis forces could have used the information to create schisms among the allies, or to improve the effectiveness of their propaganda (9).

Other records offices and archivists did not prepare in time to have records and archives with intelligence value removed from harm’s way. Instead of having the information fall into Axis hands, the controllers decided to destroy the information (10).

**Occupation**

Records and archives that were not evacuated or destroyed at their caretaker’s own hands were subject to capture and exploitation. Both the Axis and Allies captured and exploited records and archives. Records with administrative value aided the invaders with the quick and effective take over of the infrastructure of the area. As Barnickel says “Perhaps the greatest value of records to an occupying force is that they enable the invaders to make use of preexisting government structure” (11). The invaders did not
need to expend energy and resources on setting up a new infrastructure; they took shortcuts to build upon and modify the preexisting structure for their own purposes.

Records and archives also provided information on the population of the captured area. Vital statistics, registers, and other records were used to determine who the loyal citizens were. This information was also used in the production of propaganda (12).

**Destruction**

There are many instances of the destruction of records and archives. Some destruction was performed by the caretakers of the records and archives, as mentioned above. In some cases, a county’s citizens, opposed to the Nazis, destroyed their records as a way to interrupt the use of the records and archives already captured (12).

Other instances of destruction came from the Allied forces targeting record depositories and archives with aerial bombs. This kept the Axis powers from using the records and archives to determine who belonged to the Nazi resistance (14).

Also, records and archives were destroyed to erase the cultural and historical memory of a people. Barnickel reports that there were several units within the Nazi army devoted to commandeering or destroying records, archives, and other cultural artifacts of historical value (15). Capturing the records and documents of the actions of these units aided the Allies in repatriation efforts.

Another form of destruction came when the Germans were retreating. As they retreated, they destroyed records and archives. This way, the Allied forces could not use the records and archives against the Germans, nor could the liberated country easily rebuild their old governments.
Barnickel states “Despite organized military attempts on both sides to seize, protect, exploit, or destroy archives and repositories, individual units or soldiers sometimes took matters into their own hands” (16). Contrary to policy and commands, American soldiers sometimes used captured documents for personal trophies, to sell at a later date, or for some other purpose, such as for blotting paper for developing film.

**Protection and Repatriation**

As mentioned above, Allied forces pushed for the protection of documents. Winning the hearts of the people included being respectful of their cultural heritage. Returning and protecting the evidence of the culture, aside from being the right thing to do, could also be used to reinforce the idea that the Allied forces were the good guys (17). Also, securing records of how the Axis powers had looted aided the Allies in the return of property to their rightful owners. However, some captured German records and archives were destroyed or kept by some nations as revenge for the German looting and destruction (18).

**Critical Analysis**

Barnickel’s article presents a model for understanding the importance of records and archives: arguing for the recognition of intelligence value. The assessment of records and archives with relation to their intelligence value can reveal interesting ethical issues, especially for records and archives susceptible to the forces of war. One rarely thinks of records and archives with respect to potential or real enemies. The addition of this value to those already established and well known within the archival profession allows for a richer, deeper understanding of the overall value of records and archives.

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3 Andrew Wertheimer, Class Lecture, 27 July 2005, Honolulu, HI
There may be negative consequences in determining the intelligence value of records and archives. If one were overly concerned about the intelligence value of records and archives, records managers and archivists may be more willing to destroy potentially harmful documents and archival units. In the place of an attitude of openness and access, restrictions, undue protections, and excessive paranoia would surround records and archive institutions.

This is not to say that precautions shouldn’t be taken and preparations shouldn’t be made. Every archive institution should have a preservation plan that outlines the steps to take in case of an emergency, natural or of human design. An example given in the article involves the Norwegian Foreign Affairs office. Preparations for preservation were made ahead of the actual threat to the records and archives.

While not a major topic in the article, barely a minor point in fact, the laws that govern warfare ought to be understood and communicated to those that work and deal with archives. Archivists, records managers, soldiers, and civilians should understand how to handle records and archives, those belonging to both sides of the conflict, during times of war.

The author attempted to cover a lot of major concepts in a relatively short article. The issue raised above, concerning conduct during wartime, deserves extensive treatment as a fully developed subject on its own. There are other concepts featured in the article that deserve further exploration and deeper treatment as well. The defense of intelligence value as a separate and distinct value from other values should have been introduced and explained beyond the applications of intelligence value in times of war. The definition presented in the article allows for intelligence value of records and archives outside the
confines of war. More time could have been spent establishing this definition before applying it to the topic of the article. Each group or category presented in the article could have been presented with more examples and support. A reader gets the impression that the author attempted to cover too much, and in the end, the reader is left wanting more. These problems may be due to limitations on the length of the article imposed upon the author. A reader may be more satisfied after reading Dr. Rebecca Knuth’s chapter on Nazi Germany in her book Libricide. Definitions and the limitations of scope are explained in the chapter preceding the pertinent chapter. Separating the subject from the definitions solves the problem of glossing over both the subject and definitions out of concern for length.

In addition to clarifying and expounding on the definition of intelligence value, the article could spend more time defining other terms. Throughout the article, the terms “records”, archives” and “documents” are used as near synonyms. Records managers appear to serve the same roles as archivists. Records that were in current use during and before the war, and thus not technically archives, are called archives, and archives are labeled records. This may not be problematic for those initiated into the world of records and archives. For the students of archives, the ambiguity of terms confounds.

If the sole purpose of the article is to introduce the topic and provide a summary of further research, the article is a success. As a summary and introduction, the article is more than satisfactory.

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