

History and Archives (the Value of Primary Sources) – Historians and Archivists (Enemies Or Allies?)

KECSKEMÉTI, Charles, History and Archives (the Value of Primary Sources) – Historians and Archivists (Enemies Or Allies?). Atlanti, Vol. 19, Trieste 2009, pp. 243-249.

Original in English, abstract in English, Italian and Slovenian

The weight of archives and the influence of the archival profession are declining in a number of countries. The paper suggests that in order to reverse this trend, the profession should strengthen its linkage with the community of historians. Cooperation at the international level for carrying through large scale database and digitization projects may be instrumental in promoting the alliance based on the common concern to facilitate access to primary sources

KECSKEMÉTI, Charles, Storia ed archivi (Il valore delle fonti primarie) – Storiici ed archivisti (Nemici o alleati?). Atlanti, Vol. 19, Trieste 2009, pp. 243-249.

Il peso degli archivi e l'influenza della professione archivistica sono in declino in numerosi paesi. L'articolo suggerisce che per ribaltare questa tendenza la professione dovrebbe rafforzare i propri legami con la comunità degli storici. La cooperazione internazionale per condurre su larga scala database e progetti di digitalizzazione può essere lo strumento per promuovere un'alleanza basata sull'interesse comune per facilitare l'accesso alle fonti primarie.

KECSKEMÉTI, Charles, Zgodovina in arhivi (vrednost primarnih virov) – Zgodovinarji in arhivisti (nasprotniki ali zavezniki?). Atlanti, Zv. 19, Trst 2009, str. 243-249.

S pomembnostjo arhivov in z vplivi, ki želijo oblikovati arhivsko dejavnost, se srečujejo številne države. V prispevku navajam razloge, kako naj profesionalizacija arhivistov pokaže moč povezave z zgodovinarji. Sodelovanje naj poteka na mednarodni ravni, kajti

Preamble

The double topic proposed is of a dramatic importance in our information age. Dramatic importance because the long-term preservation of the recorded information generated by the computerized management of public and private business can't be guaranteed; dramatic importance because of the utterly cautious approach to the access dilemma: how to combine the political and ethical musts of disclosure and transparency with the practical and also ethical musts of privacy, maintaining restrictions because of national security and other justified purposes; dramatic importance, because the weight and influence of the archival institutions, together with the intellectual authority and convincing capability of the professional archival community, is declining in a growing number of countries - a process that started some 30 to 40 years ago; dramatic importance, finally, because on the web historical knowledge is mixed with fantasy products and no warning is directed to the internet users.

For more than hundred years, from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, the archival profession embodied erudition and, as such, belonged to the historical community. Then, from the 1960s on, the profession loosened its bond with historical scholarship and was or felt more or less obliged to opt for the linkage with the information professions. The old bond can't be restored. A new alliance has to be built up with the historians.

Sources - informational value

Unlike chronicles and memoirs, records don't aim at nourishing the historical culture of the posterity. They are produced in the conduct of public or private business. Years, decades or centuries after their production, the records, end products of the functioning of public or private bodies become raw material for scholarly research. Their informational value is not limited, it depends upon the analysing capability of the user and upon the combination with other sources. The professional approach by archivists to the processing and by historians to the use of records is based on this double para-

dox. It is impossible to imagine in advance the list of subject fields any given document may relate to. I selected three Hungarian documents for illustrating the proposition.

Those who studied medieval Central Europe have certainly encountered mentions of the deed of gift for the Benedictine Abbey of Tihany (located on the Tihany peninsula, northern shore of Lake Balaton, 350 km from Trieste). The purpose of the document was straightforward: King Andrew I made a donation to the Benedictine Order. For the historians it represents an extraordinary mine of information on toponyms, agriculture, food, way of life, social structure etc. of 11th century Hungary. Its importance for linguists is even more outstanding, because it contains the earliest written fragments of the Hungarian language.

The second document is more prosaic. In 1838, the village of Tök (450 km from here) was stricken by cattle plague. The figure on the livestock appearing in the report on the plague submitted to the county administration is 60% higher than the figure declared for the tax assessment. A document on animal disease may help in studying tax fraud.

The third document is the Cash Book of the *Opposition Circle* from 1846 to 1848, created in the city of Pest (480 km from Trieste). It was conducted for recording the payment of dues by members and the expenditures of the Circle. For the historian, this Cash Book gives the image of a party, which strove to become the leading political force and to assemble the intellectual and economic elite of the country. Besides the liberal leaders and several hundreds of local militants, the Circle had among its members poets, actors, scholars as well as printers and entrepreneurs, and also prominent personalities from the progressive Jewish community.

These three examples show that the informational value of the primary sources is inexhaustible if the researchers raise the right questions. That is why arrangement and description by subject matters (the “user friendly finding aid”) belong to the fallacies Jeremy Bentham would be happy to comment upon. Fortunately, multiple entry databases solve the problem. They permit queries by subject while maintaining the integrity of the archive group.

Enigmas

The history of all countries is rich in unsolved enigmas. They offer splendid possibilities for placing bestsellers on the book market and producing movie hits. To quote an example from this part of Europe, the mystery that surrounds Mayerling remains as thick as it was in 1889. The year before, five prostitutes were killed in Whitechapel, London and we are not closer to know the identity of Jack the Ripper than Scotland Yard was in 1888. Innumerable guesses were, are and will be made on both enigmas, the bibliography is getting richer year after year. According to the latest hypothesis on the Whitechapel enigma, launched by a French author, Sophie Herfort, the serial killer was Sir Melville Leslie Macnaghten, later head of

s pomočjo široke palete podatkov in projektov digitalizacije, bo to zelo koristno za povezovanje in zaveznitvo tako arhivistov kot zgodovinarjev, saj se vsi zavzemamo za skupne stvari, ki so v omogočanju dostopa do arhivskega gradiva in vrednosti primarnih virov.

Scotland Yard¹. The common feature of these two enigmas is the lack of authentic and reliable documents reconstituting what happened, either because such records were not established or because the clues were destroyed. They may turn up one day, but I don't think it will happen.

The solution of some other enigmas seems possible. The sources still exist but they have not been disclosed so far, have not been sought for or have been overlooked. In March 1953 Stalin died, in June of the same year, a week after the Berlin riots, Lavrenti Beria was arrested and in December the press reported on the trial, the sentence and his execution. The official charges against him were rubbish, they copied the absurd terminology of the Moscow trials of the 1930s. Was Beria killed on June 26, immediately after his arrest or in December after a humbug trial? - the opinions diverge. There is only one certainty: the fall of Beria was linked with the GDR crisis of June 1953. Rudolf Herrnstadt, editor of *Neues Deutschland*, the Party newspaper, suspected to belong to Beria's network, was immediately dismissed from his position and removed from Berlin, but was not liquidated. He was given a job in the Central Archives of the GDR in Merseburg².

IIAS could invite its members to list the unsolved mysteries in Central and Southeast European history with a comment on the sources, which relate to them.

Misunderstandings on access to archives

One of the misunderstandings is deeply rooted in the history of archives. Since the refusal of access is notified to the would-be user by the custodian, those who feel harmed often indulge in accusing the archivists of withholding information. At times, such charges may be well founded, especially when the restriction is based on internal decisions, e.g. arbitrary and automatic limitation of the items a user is entitled to request per day or the refusal to communicate unrestricted documents, which the archives consider irrelevant for the research topic of the user. The main obstacles, however, are either imposed by higher authorities both in public and private archives, or result from the lack of finding aids, from the understaffing of the archival service - these are facts that discontent users should be reminded of.

Whether of regulatory origin or due to poor budgets, restrictions are equally detrimental to the archives and to historical research. The two communities should act jointly against restrictions that are not necessary to protect public or private interests and for increasing the financial and human resources of the archival services. Blaming archives for the difficulties encountered by researchers is all the more unfair, since from its inception in 1948-1950 until the beginning of the 21st century, the International Council on Archives conducted a permanent crusade for making the archival documents more accessible.

A most annoying misunderstanding emerged recently as a con-

1. Sophie HERFORT, *Jacques l'Éventreur démasqué*. Paris, Tallandier, 2008.

2. Irina LIEBMANN, *Berlin-Moscou-Berlin*. Paris, Christian Bourgeois, 2009.

sequence of the Freedom of Information Acts (FOIA). Because of the vocabulary used - freedom, transparency, citizens' rights etc. - these Acts created the impression that government agencies had a quite liberal approach regarding consultation of their records, while a variety of obstacles hinder the access to documents in the archival institutions.

In fact, this misunderstanding results from two deceptions. It mixes up access to single documents in the agencies with access to archival holdings and their finding aids in the reading rooms, the satisfaction of individual requests for government information on a fact or a decision with historical research. The second deception may even threaten the research in the archives if the historical and archival communities fail to be on their guard and act jointly. Regulations on access to official documents (FOIA) except from public scrutiny the deliberations within or between public authorities during the internal preparation of a matter, in other terms, the working files. Should this restriction be extended to the holdings in archival custody, historical research would become impossible. This is why the legal status of archival (i.e. historical) documents has to be clearly defined by legislation or other appropriate means.

Results achieved in the international field regarding accessibility

This lecture is not supposed to recapitulate the history of ICA's long-standing action in the service of users. Perhaps, a paper will be written, one day, on this topic. Until then, information may be gathered easily from *Archivum* and the *Proceedings of the International Round Table Conferences*.

In order to facilitate access to the sources of the history of the "South" preserved in the Archives of the "North", ICA produced, with the support of UNESCO, the three series of the *Guide to the Sources of the History of Nations. A Guide to the Sources for the History of the Architecture of European Capitals* was published in 1980.

The international action for improving access conditions focussed on two targets: i) to get rid of antiquated rules (e.g. general closure period of 50 years) and of restrictions that became meaningless (e.g. discrimination between nationals and foreigners) and ii) to develop common standards in order to harmonize internationally access regulations.

Step by step progress was constant in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. The major breakthrough occurred after the turning point of 1989-1990. The paranoiac secrecy system, which crippled the archival institutions in all countries controlled by State-Parties could be disposed of. In the same time the East-West confrontation came to an end, the Cold War was buried. The Council of Europe and ICA developed, and then carried out, a program for the democratization and modernization of archives in the new Europe, without "real socialism" and without blocks opposed to each other.

"From 1994 to 1998, a series of European and sub-regional

meetings, attended by archivists, historians and lawyers from the Western countries as well as from the new democracies, proceeded to a comprehensive analysis of the access situation within Europe and identified the principles to be observed by democratic countries for shaping access conditions. On the basis of this intensive preparatory work, a draft Recommendation was developed early in 1997 and submitted to the relevant authorities of the Council of Europe. The work came to its conclusion on 13 July 2000, when the Committee of Ministers adopted Recommendation R(2000)13 on a European policy on access to archives” - these lines are quoted from *Access to Archives. A Handbook of Guidelines for implementation of Recommendation No R (2000) 13 on a European Policy on Access to Archives*.

It was a fascinating exercise. For the first time, an intergovernmental organisation approved a standard on a highly sensitive archival issue. The *Recommendation* addresses the issue of access to documents already in archival custody. The legal experts of the Council of Europe ruled that a distinct Recommendation was to be prepared on the issue of access to records still held by the agencies. This text, *Recommendation Rec(2002)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on access to official documents* is also included in the aforementioned *Handbook*.

The follow up of the adoption of the Recommendation was somewhat disappointing. By 2005, in addition to the English and French versions issued by Council of Europe, Recommendation R (2000) 13 has been published in ten countries only: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Spain and Switzerland. It may well be that top archivists of other than English or French mother tongue do know at least one of these languages well enough and prefer to forget that their staff members bitterly need a translation into the domestic language. The Handbook, published in English and French by Council of Europe, has been translated only into one other language, Romanian, thanks to the efforts of our friend Bogdan-Florin Popovici. The fact is, that the principles and procedures of the access policy recommended by the Council of Europe does not seem to attract the attention - approval or criticism - of the archival authorities in the majority of member States, nor that of the associations of historians. Strange and silent indifference for undeclared reasons, a small professional mystery for IIAS to puzzle out.

Besides the policy project, two transnational practical projects have been initiated by the Council of Europe for fostering access to historical sources. The reconstitution of the archival heritage of partitioned Poland required the participation of the archives of Austria, Germany, Russia and Ukraine (contributions were also made by France and Italy) and was carried out in consultation with Polish historians. I think that most of those present know about the online database and digitization of the Komintern Archives. The multiple entry database replaces the 23 000 pages of the *opisy*, and up to now one and half million pages of documents have been digitized. Funding was secured by the Council of Europe in the initial preparatory stage and then eight partner organisations (Archives of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland, Library of Congress and Open Society Archives) granted a total of one and half million dollars to cover the cost of the equipment, software, training, plan-

ning and building up of the database, the production of the digitized images and the installation of the online system. The selection of the series and subseries to be digitized was commissioned to a team of archivists and historians from Russia and the countries of the partner organisations.

A painful paradox

The mission of archivists, whether ranged among scholars or information professionals, consists in preserving collective memory and historical continuity. When processing the records, servicing the reading room or arranging exhibitions, they are immersed in the past, recent or remote. History is their daily bread. In spite of this exceptional situation of the archival community, the literature on the history of archives is unbelievably poor. Besides a few high-level learned monographs, like those of Ernst Posner and Elio Lodolini, and summary national histories of archives, it contains mainly shorter papers on subjects of limited scope, scattered in journals, encyclopaedias, conference proceedings and Festschriften. This material permits, at least in theory, to follow the history of Archives from 3000 B.C. to the 21st century, but as far as I know, no comprehensive bibliography has been compiled, and no research centre or custodial institution is specialised in collecting publications on the history of archives.

The contrast with the library field is striking. Book history and the history of libraries are flourishing branches of the human sciences, served by specialised bookshops, international and national research centres and online bibliographies. We know that, throughout the world, libraries are better known and enjoy a higher esteem by Governments and civil society than archives. The confidentiality surrounding the history of archives enters probably among the reasons of this discrepancy.

Could IIAS look into this matter and imagine remedial initiatives?

Response to the challenge

I strongly believe that the archival community has to respond with determination and in an organized way to the complex challenge it is faced with. We have to admit that alone, without powerful allies, no significant results can be achieved. We can expect individual support from various circles, e.g. lawyers, MPs, magistrates and organisations of the civil society, but when the future of the archives, of the archival material and of the archival institution, is at stake, we need more than this type of scattered goodwill.

The historical community shares our main concerns: securing the preservation of and the access to the primary sources. It happens also that, for a variety of reasons, the civil society of our time is fed up, everywhere, with the lies on the past. The work of historians is

appreciated, their moral and intellectual authority is impressively strong, as evidenced by scores of websites, the expansion of the market of historical publications and the large room given to historical essays and articles in journals and magazines.

The historians need our work and we need their involvement in order to reverse the decline process mentioned before. Involvement does not mean pro-archives lobbying by prominent personalities but large-scale, coherent joint scholarly actions, planned and carried out by the two communities, like those mentioned above.

In the 19th century, the professionals of the newly established archival institutions belonged to the community of historians. In the second half of the 20th century, this professional identity has been called to question. The archivists are now included in the community of the information professions. It would be pointless to play with the idea of returning to the 19th century. But a new alliance between historians and archivists is a must for the future of both the archival institution and historical scholarship. The issue has to be dealt with country per country. Cooperation at the international level could serve as an incentive to foster the national efforts.

In 2008, various academic and archival institutions of France, Germany, Russia and Switzerland concluded that a major international project could and should be undertaken for facilitating research in the records documenting the societal, cultural and administrative impacts of the Cold War (1946-1989) on the everyday life of the peoples. The project is not supposed to cover the diplomatic and military aspects of the Cold War.

The objective is to build an international database (computerized guide) covering public and private holdings, which contain source material on the everyday (ideological) Cold War. In order to make the task manageable, preliminary agreements ought to be worked out on various methodological issues, such as the categories of holdings to be surveyed, the typology of sources to be described and the method of description. My question is: could IIAS contribute to the preparation of the project?

Apologies

I took the liberty to include in this short paper several wishes and suggestions for consideration by IIAS. Be it said in my defence that, back in the 1980s, I took part in the discussions that prepared the foundation of the Maribor Centre, predecessor of IIAS. Dr. Peter-Pavel Klasinc could confirm as “crown witness”.

