

Maynard Brichford

German Influence on American Archival Development

On 29 January 1941, Ernst Posner read a paper on "The Role of Records in German Administration" at a Federal Records Conference in Washington. In the paper, which was published as *National Archives Staff Information Paper 11*, Posner stated that he and an American archivist had concluded that the "overwhelming success" of the German army in June 1940 "was attributable to the fact that they had entered the war with a better filing system." He went on to refer to "German efficiency" and "talent for organization, their sense of order, their devotion to minute detail." He also explained how the registry or *Registratur* office controlled the flow and retention of correspondence, the three-hundred-year history of the registry system and its rational, organic subject matter filing system.¹

Superior record keeping had long historical origins in the German archival tradition. Literacy brought an impulse to record and a demand for the technology of recording. Printing presses provided a means of extending the market for archival documents and manuscripts and increasing the production of official records. Between 1517 and 1520, thirty publications by Martin Luther sold well over three hundred thousand copies. Jack H. Hexter has noted that "battles between religious zealots" made statesmen "more concerned" about "securing a stable civil order." The establishment of state offices, registry systems and archives were key factors in securing civil order.²

In the four and one-half centuries between 1348 and 1799, fifty-four German cities established universities. These municipal ventures, the equivalent of today's emerging centers of "world class" excellence, met continuing public needs for clergy, lawyers, government clerks and cultural education. By 1781, only six of them had closed. The universities taught the classical curriculum and welcomed new learning. They were committed to the organization, preservation and dissemination of information. More specifically, their registries and archives were engaged in these activities. In 1571, the first text on archival and registry practice

was published by Jacob von Rammingen, son of the Württemberg archivist. The critical analysis or authentication of sources in Germanic countries extended back more than eight hundred years. The development of diplomatic science in the late seventeenth century brought between 1699 and 1804 the publication of German diplomatic and archival texts in the university cities of Giessen, Jena, Halle, Nürnberg, Köln, Heidelberg, Strasbourg, Göttingen, Vienna, Hamburg and Braunschweig.³

The multiple sovereignties within the Holy Roman Empire had created bureaucratic opportunities in many competitive states. In 1457, Stephen Wirsing was appointed leader of the prince bishop's archives at Würzburg. Forty-seven other archives were established in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and fifty-five more in the eighteenth century. Many were established in the state-building period following the Thirty Years War. By the early nineteenth century, the 103 German archives included eighty-three national and state archives, twelve city archives and eight Austrian archives. With the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, the mediatization process brought the consolidation and strengthening of archival programs.⁴

Baron Heinrich Karl vom Stein, a leading statesman of the Napoleonic era, believed that knowledge of the medieval empire would "serve the cause of German nationhood." In 1821, he sent Georg H. Pertz to Vienna and Rome on a manuscripts search and then appointed him as editor of a series of source books on German history from 500 to 1500. The first volume of *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* appeared in 1826, and Pertz began his duties as archivist at Hanover in 1827. Six years later, Leopold von Ranke began his seminar at the University of Berlin. Among its members was Georg Waitz, who succeeded Pertz as general editor of the *Monumenta* in 1873. Often in close association with the Prussian State Archives, the *Monumenta* was "a nursery of professors and archivists." It obtained a preeminent place for German medievalists and a position of prestige and influence in the German university system that trained professors and clergy and attracted American scholars.⁵

While the *Monumenta* provided a national research enterprise and training in the interpretation of sources, there was a parallel increase in archival publications. The first German archival journal appeared at Bamberg in 1806. In 1834-36, the second journal was published in Hamburg by archivists from Berlin, Münster and Stettin. A third journal was published in 1847-53 at Gotha. In 1876, Franz von Löher, director of the Bavarian state archives, began publishing *Archivalische Zeitschrift*, the first German archival journal that has survived. Between 1765 and 1811, thirteen texts on archival and registratur practice were published. Two more appeared in 1854 and 1859. Von Löher's *Archivlehre*, the first modern archival text, appeared in 1890. After devoting 197 pages to the seven ages of German archival history, the author treated the principles

of archival management in the next three hundred pages. In 1905, the Dutch handbook by Muller, Feith and Fruin was translated into German.⁶

Heinrich O. Meisner was a leading German archival writer in the twentieth century. He published *Aktenkunde* in 1935, *Urkunden- und Aktenlehre der Neuzeit* in 1950 and *Archivalienkunde* in 1969. In 1937, Meisner discussed German archival appraisal at the Gotha archives conferences. His remarks, published in the 1939 *Archivalische Zeitschrift*, drew the distinction between primary, or administrative, and secondary, or historical, values. He also discussed informational and evidential content and advocated a rational appraisal decision, rather than scholarly intuition. Adolf Brenneke's *Archivkunde* remains the most comprehensive text on archival history. Based on 1938 lecture notes from the archival school at Berlin-Dahlem, this book brought together several decades of German scholarly investigation of the archival past. Written after the first 150 years of the modern archival movement, it represented an emerging profession's search for its roots and traditions.⁷

History professor Albert Brackmann was appointed director of the Prussian state archives in 1929 and director of the German state archives in 1935. His 1931 lecture on "archival training in Prussia" was published in 1939 as the *National Archives Staff Information Paper* 1. Brackmann was retired in 1936 as a "pillar of liberal and pro-Jewish academicism." He continued to play a role in archival affairs, but has recently been attacked for his wartime support of German *Ostpolitik*. While some of Brackmann's ideas had been acceptable to leaders in the Third Reich, Veit Valentin was dismissed from his position as research archivist at Potsdam in 1933. Ordered to leave the country by the Nazis for his political activities, Valentin published his *Geschichte der Deutschen* in 1946 in Washington, DC. He died in 1947, and the German edition of his history was published in 1979. Postwar contacts with German archivists have been through the meetings and publications of the International Council on Archives and personal visits.⁸

The major German influence on American archival development has been through German immigrants. America, from "Zion" to "Melting Pot" to "Multiculturalism," has received European linguistic and national groups with their cultural traditions. Political and religious allegiances were based on literacy and record keeping. Between 1880 and 1885 more than a million Germans migrated to the United States. They brought German record keeping, archival traditions and linguistic skills to America. In 1909, Julius Goebel estimated that German immigrants were one-third of the United States population. The German "element" has been successful. Herbert Hoover and Dwight Eisenhower achieved the presidency and two German-Americans have served as archivist of the United States. Hoover chaired the commission on the reorganization of

the executive branch of the federal government, which modernized the National Archives.⁹

Arriving as linguistic foreigners, the first archival activities of German immigrants occurred in their religious congregations. German sects in the Reformation era had a strong sense of history. In the 1570s Peter Walpot appointed Kaspar Braitmichel "to organize the correspondence and documents, and establish an official chronicle so that the heritage of the Hutterites would not be lost." In 1683, Francis Pastorius led the first group of Krefeld Mennonites to Philadelphia. By 1709, thousands had left the Palatinate for America. In 1735, continued wars, religious communitarianism and economic conditions resulted in a Moravian emigration to Georgia. Count Nicholas L. von Zinzendorf of Herrnhut in Saxony sent August G. Spangenberg to plan the settlement at Savannah. Educated at the Jena university, Spangenberg employed his "splendid organizational ability" to superintend the Georgia colony and moved on to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in the following year. The Moravian archives date from this time. By 1755, "very detailed records were kept, down to every egg that was laid." Bishop Spangenberg managed the church colony like "a military camp." Joined by a second bishop in 1746, their correspondence with Zinzendorf covered the "minutest details." Non-German bureaucrats also had a "penchant for paperwork." In 1629, Massachusetts Bay Company officials called for a register of all persons in the colony and semiannual records "of the daily work done." In America, their request was ignored. In contrast, the Germans kept the record of "every egg that was laid."¹⁰

With German-trained clergy, the Lutheran Church brought a strong archival tradition to America. In the early nineteenth century, the Pennsylvania synod had a chapter on the "Archives of the Ministerium" in its regulations. The archives were "to be kept with care" and not carried about. All documents were "to be carefully preserved" and bound in packages with the year "carefully noted" on the outside. The pastor in charge of the archives was "bound to keep it in order and to render an account" when required. He was not permitted "to loan out any document, much less to alienate or destroy it." These German-American archival regulations are more than one hundred and fifty years old. In 1838, Carl Vehse, curator of the Saxon state archives, drew up a complex organizational plan for the Reverend Martin Stephan's conservative Lutheran emigrants. Vehse's Department VIII was responsible for "Library, Archives and Chronicles." Emigrants were to keep journals on the voyage to America and the secretary of the council was to keep legal records. In Chicago in 1847, German immigrants founded the "German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and other States." At the founding session the secretary of the synod was designated archivist and charged with the preservation of the documents and historical records of

the church. The 1854 church constitution provided that the secretaries of the general synod and secretaries of the district synods were in charge of the archives.¹¹

The Mennonites, Moravians and Lutherans are examples of many German immigrant groups with strong religious ties. After 1766, the United Brethren and Evangelical churches and the German Methodist conference provided a church home for a million German Americans. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thousands of German Catholics joined the migration to America. The term "Forty-Eighters" was applied to political and economic immigrants from Germany in the pre-Civil War period. Conservative Catholic and Lutheran immigrants in the 1850s outnumbered the Forty-Eighters two to one. The Saxon group of 1839 excelled with higher education standards and cultural attainments. For most, economic opportunity became a more important factor in the decision to emigrate to America than religious and political freedom. Though their employment and financial resources were primary concerns, the church provided a cultural link to Europe and the political party provided a link to their new homeland.¹²

German immigrants and their descendants have been among the leading figures in developing American archival practice. In 1920, Ernst Posner received his doctorate in history at Berlin and joined the Prussian state archives, where he was a colleague of Heinrich Meisner for eleven years. Moving to the new building at Dahlem in 1923, he became editor of the *Acta Borussia*, a documentary series on Prussian administration. Under Nazi persecution, he left Germany in February 1939 and joined the American University faculty in Washington. In collaboration with Solon J. Buck, he began teaching "The History and Administration of Archives." Buck was the son of Clara Luther Buck and a native of Berlin, Wisconsin, who became archivist of the United States in 1941. Posner exerted a strong influence on Buck and his successors Wayne Grover, Robert Bahmer and James Rhoads. Hundreds of other American archivists also learned the "basics" at Posner's institutes. Like the best teaching, a class with Posner was both the beginning of a personal friendship and continuing contact with a worthy professional exemplar. The 1967 Posner festschrift, with sixteen articles and a seventy-six-item bibliography, demonstrated the range of his contributions to American archival literature and understanding. As Rodney Ross noted in 1980, Posner was "regarded as the preeminent spokesman for archival interests in America." His *American State Archives* (1964) and *Archives in the Ancient World* (1972) reflected his standing among archivists in America and the world and his influence on American archival practice.¹³

The grandson of a German immigrant from southern Russia, Theodore R. Schellenberg also played a major role in the maturation of the American archival profession. His grandfather was a Mennonite

Brethren elder and his father was editor of German-language church publications in Kansas. The ten thousand Mennonites from Russia had a "strong sense of obligation to government and society." With a 1934 Pennsylvania doctorate, Schellenberg moved to a position with the American Council of Learned Societies' Joint Committee on Materials for Research. He joined the National Archives in 1935 and became head of the Department of Agriculture archives in 1938. In his July 1939 *National Archives Staff Information Circular* 5 on "European Archival Practice in Arranging Records," he cited ten sources. Six of them were German, including two German accounts of French practices. Schellenberg's views reflected the times and conditions in which he worked. While engrossed in the appraisal of the mass of federal records created in the 1930s, he was also engaged in filling the huge archives building at Eighth and Pennsylvania with records of research value. From 1950 to 1961, he was head of the Office of the National Archives and active in promoting in-service training programs. He wrote *Staff Information Papers* 17, 18, 19 and 20 (1951, 1955), the *National Archives Bulletin* 8 on archival appraisal (1956) and two textbooks, *Modern Archives* (1956) and *The Management of Archives* (1965). The former book was translated into German. Between 1956 and 1968, he contributed seven articles to *The American Archivist* and four to other journals. In a 1970 eulogy, Lester Cappon wrote that Schellenberg was "propelled by that Germanic persistence and thoroughness that leave no source uninvestigated and construct a substantial, carefully planned scaffolding that sometimes remains after the building is completed."¹⁴

All American archivists since World War II have been influenced by the German archival tradition. In 1954, I attended American University's first Institute of Records Management, which was directed by Ernst Posner. In 1967, Theodore Schellenberg was the first visiting lecturer in our archival education program at the University of Illinois. In addition to Posner and Schellenberg, there has been a strong German-American group in the Society of American Archivists. Lester Kruger Born, an "American Posner" in postwar Germany, helped to restore German archival education and wrote on archival origins, including an article on Jacob von Rammingen. G. Philip Bauer, Schellenberg's assistant, collaborated with Herman Kahn in the first major discussion of archival appraisal in *Staff Information Paper* 13 (1946). Additional German names include Robert Bahmer, Richard Berner, Jesse Boell, Mabel Deutrich, Meyer Fishbein, Kenneth Munden, John Ness, Morris Rieger, Charles Schultz and August Suelflow. A quick survey of the 1964 Society of American Archivists *Biographical Directory* shows more than 20 percent of the membership to be German-Americans.¹⁵

The contributions of Germans and German-Americans to American archival theory and practice are substantial and have continued throughout our history. No discussion of the influence of German

archival science would be complete without the consideration of twentieth century nationalism and the disruptions of World Wars I and II. Ernst Posner was termed an "enemy alien" in a congressional hearing. Schellenberg and Born, who drew on European archival traditions, never gained the full confidence of American archival administrators. By education and employment, archivists have strong attachments to the nations and institutions that they serve. These ties raise questions posed by the uses and users of modern German archives. Some writers maintain that it is possible to abandon one's heritage. Others impute a knowledge of subsequent events to an earlier period, e.g., a knowledge of the Holocaust to persons in 1935. A third group would condemn language as well as actions. It can be difficult to distinguish between the verbal positions represented by twentieth century academic and political credos and the actions taken by nations. In maintaining an impartiality in dealing with sources and users, archivists should be sensitive to the misuses of research in the name of national and personal "history."

As described by librarians and historians, archival origins are related to library and history traditions. Librarians relate how the settlers of the North American continent revered the book and its technology, established subscription and public libraries, hungered for a romantic national past and applied their pragmatic skills to organizing information resources. Historians cite the emergence of scholar historians. George Bancroft, John W. Burgess and Herbert B. Adams sought German training in the investigation of the past and discovered that to write history "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist" required archival and manuscript sources. Göttingen-educated George Bancroft's *History of the United States* also sold thousands of copies. Upon returning to American research institutions, these pioneering historians formed professional associations, which sponsored the Public Archives Commission, Historical Manuscripts Commission and missions to study and copy European and colonial source material. In 1884, the American Historical Association elected Leopold von Ranke as its "first and only honorary member." In 1909, Marion Learned reported to the American Historical Association that American archives were far behind German state archives "in the care and treatment of archives." In 1910, Gaillard Hunt from the Library of Congress and Waldo G. Leland of the Carnegie Institution's Department of Historical Research participated in the first International Conference of Archivists and Librarians in Brussels, which endorsed the German archival principle of provenance. Hunt told the American Historical Association that the archives in Berlin "are in better condition, receive better care, and are better housed than any official archives in Washington." Users of archives have given us graduate schools, vast quantities of publications, professional meetings and the historical probes that would reveal each generation's "new history." Through it all,

migrating German archival concepts and immigrant German archivists have played an important part in keeping the record.¹⁶

University of Illinois
Urbana, Illinois

Notes

¹ National Archives Staff Information Paper 11 (July 1941): 1.

² Elizabeth Eisenstein, "The Advent of Printing and the Protestant Revolt: A New Approach to the Disruption of Western Civilization," in Robert M. Kingdon ed., *Transition and Revolution* (Minneapolis: Burgess, 1974), 235, 263.

³ Josef Engel and Ernst Zeeden, eds., *Großer Historischer Weltatlas* (München: Bayerischer Schulbuch-Verlag, 1981), 2:80, 3:3; Harry Bresslau, *Handbuch der Urkundenlehre für Deutschland und Italien* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1931), 1:32-36; Adolf Brenneke, *Archivkunde* (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1953), 45-46.

⁴ Wolfgang Leesch, *Die deutschen Archivare, 1500-1945* (München: K.G. Saur, 1985), 23-204.

⁵ David Knowles, "Great Historical Enterprises III: The Monumenta Germaniae Historica," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th Ser., 10 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1960): 130, 132-34, 136, 141, 147, 149.

⁶ Brenneke, 52-53.

⁷ Winfried Baumgart, *Buchverzeichnis zur deutschen Geschichte* (Nördlingen: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983), 85; Heinrich O. Meisner, "Schutz und Pflege des staatlichen Archivgutes mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des Kassationsproblems," *Archivalische Zeitschrift* 12 (1939): 42, 46-48.

⁸ *Neue Deutsche Biographie* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1953), 2:504-5; National Archives Staff Information Paper 1 (1939); Michael Burleigh, "Albert Brackmann and the Nazi Adjustment of History," *History Today* 37,3 (March 1987): 42-46; Veit Valentin, *Geschichte der Deutschen* (Köln: Knaur, 1979), 11-14.

⁹ Julius Goebel, "The Place of the German Element in American History," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1909* (Washington: 1911), 183-89.

¹⁰ Leonard Gross, *The Golden Years of the Hutterites* (Kitchener: Herald Press, 1980), 200; Klaus Wust and Heinz Moos, *Three Hundred Years of German Immigrants in North America* (Baltimore: Heinz Moos Publishing, 1983), 16, 23, 75; Edwin A. Sawyer, "The Religious Experience of the Colonial American Moravians," *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society* 18,1 (1961): 62, 109, 111-13; David Cressy, *Coming Over* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 132-33.

¹¹ Ernest L. Hazelius, *History of the American Lutheran Church* (Zanesville: Edwin C. Church, 1846), 277; Roy Ledbetter, "A Rich Resource for Family History," *MSS for Illinois Libraries* (1992); Walter C. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 58, 125, 575, 582; Carl S. Meyer, ed., *Moving Frontiers, Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964).

¹² Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 111-18, 286-89; Forster, 247-48.

¹³ Rodney A. Ross, "Ernst Posner: The Bridge Between the Old World and the New," *The American Archivist* 44,4 (Fall 1981): 304-12; Leesch, *Die deutschen Archivare*, 30; Ken Munden, ed., *Archives & the Public Interest* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1967).

¹⁴ Jane F. Smith, "Theodore R. Schellenberg: Americanizer and Popularizer," *The American Archivist* 44,4 (Fall 1981): 313-26; Theron F. Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation*

(Kitchener: Herald Press, 1988), 293; Theodore R. Schellenberg, "European Archival Practices in Arranging Records," *National Archives Staff Information Circular* 5 (July 1933): 1-12; Lester J. Cappon, "Prodigious Worker and Archival Envoy," *The American Archivist* 33,2 (April 1970): 190-91.

¹⁵ Kenneth Munden, "Lester Kruger Born," *American Archivist* 33,1 (January 1970): 79; *Biographical Directory of the Society of American Archivists* (Lawrence KS: Allen Press, 1965).

¹⁶ James W. Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1967), 2:180; "Archival Principles, Selections From the Writings of Waldo Gifford Leland," *National Archives Staff Information Paper* 20 (March 1955).

