

# Guides to Records of World War II

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**T**HIS paper begins with a profession of faith. It proceeds from that to the statement of a problem and the outline of a plan. It ends with a question.

The profession of faith is this, that the Government and the people of the United States can profit from knowledge of the past. This is the faith of archivists, for they are custodians of materials that constitute an important part of the record of the past; and it is their function, not merely to preserve those materials, but to facilitate and to promote their use. This is the faith also of men and women in varied fields of endeavor who make use of the recorded experience of mankind in order to understand the present and to plan for the future. It is because of this faith that the following injunction, addressed to all the world, is inscribed on the pedestal of one of the statues near the Pennsylvania Avenue entrance to the National Archives Building, "Study the past." This faith was expressed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, himself so keenly conscious of the flow of history, when he wrote to the Director of the Bureau of the Budget almost three years ago "the best way to advance our knowledge of administration is through the study of actual experience" and that we need "both for current use and for future reference a full and objective account of the way the Federal Government is carrying out its wartime duties." The same faith is implied in a letter that President Truman addressed to the Archivist of the United States on June 4 of this year. "The experience of the Federal Government in the war just ended," he wrote, "is full of meaning in relation not only to possible future emergencies but also to the problems of peace. The things we did and endeavored to do and the lessons we learned need to be studied thoroughly and dispassionately both by agencies of the Government and by independent resources of scholarship." He requested that the Archivist consider the problem of how the study of this experience could be facilitated by the preparation of guides to the documentation of that experience and that he make recommendations as to the sorts of guides that ought to be prepared, who should undertake the preparation of them, how the work should be done, and how it might be financed.

<sup>1</sup> Read before the Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists, October 24, 1946.

The Archivist, and members of his staff whom he called upon for assistance, faced a problem that I promised a few minutes ago to state. I will attempt to do this briefly. The materials containing significant information about the Government's wartime experience are so extensive as almost to stagger the imagination. In the six years between the German invasion of Poland and the surrender of Japan, Government agencies created several million cubic feet of official records. Much of this great mass of materials was of transitory value only, of course, and has been or will be disposed of. Some of it was created as a result of activities that had no relation to the war and need not, for present purposes, be taken into consideration. But there remain about a million cubic feet believed to contain information of importance for an understanding of the United States in relation to World War II. This is the equivalent of the contents of some 165,000 four-drawer filing cabinets, or enough completely to fill the National Archives Building. Included in this mass of Government records, and adding to the complexity of the problem, are vast quantities of technical or special records in the form of motion pictures, aerial mapping film, still photographs, sound recordings, and maps and charts. The problem is made even more difficult by the complexity and kaleidoscopic character of the wartime governmental organization by which the records were created, and by the comprehensive nature of the activities in which the Government was engaged.

The Government's official records, using that term in the archival sense, constitute the best documentation of the Government's wartime experience, but they do not completely document it. There are other materials that must be examined by one who seeks all the information essential for an understanding of various aspects of the Government's activities. There are, for example, the publications of the Government itself. Some of these are archival in character, but many of them are not. Information about those printed by the Government Printing Office is readily obtainable, but many publications appeared from presses or from multilithing machines and the like all over the world, and complete and precise information about these is not at present obtainable. In addition, there are non-Government publications that significantly supplement the documentation that the Government itself has made. There are also materials created or acquired by our Allies, and by the international organizations in which the United States participated. And there are the records of enemy governments, some of which are now in the possession of the United States or its Allies.

The problem cannot be defined, however, solely in terms of the quantity, complexity, and character of these materials. It must be understood also in terms of the needs to be served by guides to these

materials. These needs are as varied as were the multitudinous activities of the Government during six years of war. Only a few of them can be suggested here. The first of these is the need of the Government itself to have ready access to information that it may find essential in seeking to prevent World War III or, if that cannot be done, in defending itself in that war. This need encompasses other needs. There is need not only for the Government itself to study the problems of wartime administration and of wartime operations, to know the failures as well as the successes and what were the reasons therefor; but there is need for studies to be undertaken by scholars detached from any official responsibility and representing non-governmental points of view. Such studies are essential in a democratic society. There is need to study the effect of the war on the American people and on their institutions and their economy. There is need to make use of the vast accumulations of scientific and technical knowledge that resulted from the employment by the Government during the war of the human and material research resources of the nation. These needs are the needs of the Government itself, of farmers and businessmen, of historians and social scientists, of chemists and physicists and natural scientists generally, of physicians, and of engineers and technicians of various sorts. In their totality, they are the manifold needs of the American people.

The problem then is how to provide, for a wide variety of potential uses, such guides to the masses of materials with which we are concerned that the information in them can be made readily available both to Government officials and to other persons who have proper interest in such information. This was the problem faced by the Archivist and members of his staff as they prepared the recommendations that the President requested. In order that as many points of view might be taken into consideration numerous conferences were held, with officials of the Library of Congress, the War, Navy and State Departments, the Bureau of the Budget, and other Government agencies and with representatives of the social and the natural sciences.

On July 29 the Archivist submitted his recommendations to the President. A few days later the President approved them and requested that work on the plan proposed by the Archivist begin at once. As a result of this action, there has been set up in the National Archives an operating unit known as the World War II Records Project, and work is now in progress. It is the purpose of this Project to implement the Archivist's plan by producing the guides described in his recommendations. (For those of you who may wish to read these recommendations in their entirety, multiplied copies are available.)

Now a brief outline of the plan. In general it provides for the preparation of a number of separate but closely interrelated guides at what

may be considered four levels of description. Specifically, they are a handbook, inventories, bibliographies and special lists, and what may be called a general or overall guide.

Preliminary to much of the other work of the Project will be the preparation of a handbook of Federal agencies of World War II and their records. This is not intended to be light reading for a summer afternoon. As its name indicates, it will be a reference book. It will be used by many a person who may well say to himself, for example, "Where, in all the mass of materials pertaining to World War II, can I find the documents that will inform me as to how and with what success the Government handled the problem of scarce strategic materials?" The handbook will provide information about each agency of the Government, its major units, and even subdivisions of those units. This information will be in the form of a concise administrative history with emphasis on functions, and a statement of where the records created in the performance of those functions are. To some it may appear that such a handbook is not a guide to records. In the National Archives, however, we have learned by experience that a knowledge of the history and the functions of agencies that created records is essential for an intelligent approach to the problem of finding information pertaining to any subject that is being investigated. By use of an index to the handbook it will be possible to identify the one or several administrative units of the Government that created records containing information of the character desired. From the handbook one can then proceed to more detailed information that the Project will provide in its other guides. This handbook is scheduled for publication within about a year.

At another level of description it is planned to produce descriptive inventories of the records of the war agencies and of the war-related records of other agencies. The units of description in these inventories will be a series or groups of series. The determination of units to be separately described and of the fullness of each description will be made in the light of such considerations as the importance of the records and the details of description needed to make their general content understandable. These inventories will serve the needs of an inquirer who has already determined by use of the handbook or otherwise that he wants to examine the records of a particular agency but needs guidance to the one or more series of interest to him that are among the several hundred series constituting the records of that agency.

The greater part of the materials with which the Project will deal do not need to be described in greater detail than that provided in descriptive inventories. Certain materials, however, are of such value or of such character that they will need to be listed as separate items. There will need to be compiled, for example, bibliographies of the

publications of a particular agency or bibliographies of selected publications pertaining to a particular aspect of the Government's wartime experience. Of such character also will be a list, for example, of all the Government's war histories, printed, processed, or existing only in manuscript. Other special lists may well itemize policy documents of the highest value or such unpublished reports as those on important scientific investigations.

As a culminating product of the Project, it is planned to prepare a one-volume overall guide to the documentation of the experience of the United States Government in World War II. It will be based largely on detailed information provided by the handbook, the inventories, the bibliographies, and the special lists that I have mentioned. But it will serve most of those who use it as an introduction to these more detailed descriptions. The information in it will be organized according to the various aspects of the Government's experience rather than according to the administrative hierarchy of the Government. Separate chapters, for example, are expected to deal with the documentation of the Government's experience in handling problems of food production and distribution, of labor relations and wage controls, of transportation and communication, of psychological warfare, and the like, rather than with the documentation of the activities of the War Food Administration, the National War Labor Board, the Office of Defense Transportation, the Office of War Information, and the many other agencies that were concerned with those wartime problems.

The preparation of the several guides—the handbook, the inventories, the bibliographies, the special lists, and the general guide—is not only a useful but obviously a difficult undertaking. It is believed that it can be completed within about four years with an average staff of some sixty people. The work can be done within that period of time and with that expenditure of manpower only if it is participated in by the several agencies of the Government that have custody of the materials to be described. The Project has been planned as a cooperative enterprise. The Project staff in the National Archives is primarily a planning, coordinating, and reviewing unit. It will itself be responsible for the preparation of copy for the handbook and for the general guide, but it will depend for much of the information it needs upon other agencies. It will prepare inventories and lists of some of the war-related records that have been transferred to the National Archives Building and inventories and lists of the remainder of such records will be prepared by other units of the National Archives. Other agencies, however, will prepare inventories and lists and bibliographies for materials in their custody, using either members of their staffs or members of the staff of the Project in the National Archives that have been detailed to them.

In the matter of planning as well as in the actual preparation of the several guides, the Project will need the cooperation and the advice of interested persons both in and outside the Government. For the work that has been planned there is not much recorded experience from which we can learn. I do not know of any enterprise of similar character, on so extensive a scale, that has hitherto been undertaken anywhere. It is true that twenty years ago the Chairman of this Session, was responsible for the compilation of a book that bears the title, "Introduction to the American Official Sources for the Economic and Social History of the World War." And the National Archives, some ten years ago, made or sponsored the making of surveys of all the records of the Federal Government in and outside the District of Columbia. At about the same time the Historical Records Survey prepared inventories and other guides to State and county records throughout the United States. Knowledge of these undertakings, including that of participation in them, has been helpful in planning the work of the World War II Records Project and will be helpful also in carrying out the work that has been planned. But from no one of these, nor from all of them combined, can be gotten the answers to all the problems that this Project must solve. Many of the problems result from this fact chiefly: that the materials with which we must deal are for the most part modern records. With the problem of preparing guides for extensive bodies of modern records, most of which are filed according to some numeric or subject or subject-numeric classification scheme, no one has had much experience. What, for example, is an inventory? How can one prepare an inventory of 5,000 feet of the records of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations that constitute one series and are filed according to the Navy Department's Filing Manual, which itself numbers several hundred pages? What principles shall be applied in identifying and listing documents of such significance that they need to be separately listed? What items from the thousands of books and articles pertaining to the war that have been published by commercial publishers should be included in our bibliographies? To what extent should an effort be made to describe, for the purposes of this Project, the records of the German High Command or of the German Foreign Office? What information about records not in the War and Navy Departments do the Army and the Navy want? What kinds of descriptions of records can be prepared that will serve best the needs of Government administrators generally? What do the economists want to enable them to study, for example, the effect of war upon price levels and wages? What do physicians want that will enable them to learn from the Government's experience how, let us say, to treat tropical diseases? What does the business man want to know from Government records that will be



of help to him and what guides can we devise that will make this knowledge available to him?

We shall need the help of many persons in our attempt to answer these questions and to provide guides that will meet the needs suggested by them. We intend to prepare, as pilot project work, samples of copy for the handbook and sample inventories and bibliographies and lists. We should like to submit them to persons who from their varied points of view can criticize them and help us to learn how best to serve their needs.

The several questions I have raised can be summed up in one question—What can this Project do that will provide for all potential users the most useful guides to the materials that significantly document the experience of our Government in World War II? I have attempted in this paper to outline a plan as we now see it. What do *you* think? That is the question with which I promised to end this paper.

## SEA WATER AND INK

The captain insisted that the field desk containing the Detachment records must be crated and shipped as part of the Detachment impedimenta—that is, with the cook stoves, kitchen utensils, pyramidal tents, and the like. The first sergeant objected. Back in the States in the peace-time army, custom if not regulations decreed that the service records and other personnel papers went with the outfit when it moved. The personnel clerk, a “happy” pfc., was silent for he had learned in 13 months in the army—ten of them overseas under this first sergeant—that such an arrangement would place the field desk on his shoulders. He was under the impression that even one additional pound added to the staggering Aleutian equipment would bend him right over into the tundra. The captain had his way. Maybe he guessed.

At Adak Island, a scant 200 miles east of Kiska, a task force charged with seizing the important intervening island had been assembling since November 1942. At the edge of this forgotten frontier every essential of bare military existence had to be brought in. There were no surpluses, and there were many gaps in supplies. One of the shortages was of record ink, that permanent variety which regulations direct shall be used in service records and other important personnel papers. When this particular detachment exhausted its supply, the personnel clerk recalled the bottle of quite ordinary ink he had purchased in the post exchange back at Fort Ray or in the “dime” store at Sitka for letter writing. The captain agreed somewhat reluctantly that there was no choice but to violate regulations and use civilian ink. With new men coming in from the States to fill the complement, even a delay of a few days or weeks would throw involved record-keeping farther and hopelessly behind schedule.