

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

Aktenkunde: Ein Handbuch für Archivbenutzer mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Brandenburg-Preussens, von Heinrich Otto Meisner, Staatsarchivrat, Reichsarchiv, Potsdam. (Berlin. E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1935. Pp. xix, 186. M. 10.)

For a decade the author of this volume has been concerned with aids to research in modern archives, especially as an instructor in the training school for archivists at the *Preussisches Geheimes Staatsarchiv*, since 1930 the *Institut für Archivwissenschaft und geschichtswissenschaftliche Fortbildung*. With this experience, in addition to that of a *Staatsarchivrat* at the *Reichsarchiv* in Potsdam, Dr. Meisner is well qualified for the task he has undertaken. That task is to attempt to do for public records of the last several centuries what diplomatics embraces for records of earlier centuries.

At one time the author suggested to this reviewer that modern diplomatics might be a fair translation of *Aktenkunde*. It is evident that such a translation begs the question. To describe the work as a study of modern documents, while it is not a precise translation, has the distinct advantage of withholding a possible contribution to the frequently protracted terminological disputes of some of our abler colleagues.

Having defined the scope of his work in a short introductory chapter, the author clears the air with an explanation of Prussian archival terminology. The remaining three chapters are given over to a systematic and concrete study of the customary forms of modern documents, an analysis of their internal and external characteristics and an excellent genetical study of the origin, use, and storing of archives (1) in the office of origin; (2) in the registry; and (3) in the archival depository.

The exposition is limited to the *fait accompli*. The reader is not distracted by musings on what might have been, or what could be in the future. For archivists, teachers of historiography, historians, and other searchers particularly interested in German, and specifically Prussian archives, the work fills a considerable need. To American archivists, the exposition of official German practices in archives administration, as contained in particularly the last chapter, and the fact that the way is pointed for a similar project in the study of American official documents are most interesting.

Lacking as we do the salutary effects of intelligent centralized control and responsibility for accumulating official documents, achieved in Prussia by the traditional and effective *Registraturen*, our archivists and historians are confronted with sprawling record masses to which there is no satisfactory introduction. While discussing the problem of destruction of records, Dr. Newsome has referred to Mr. Jenkinson's proposal of the administrator, acting through his central registry, as the sole agent for the selection and destruction of public archives. Dr. Newsome objects, with good reason, to our type of ad-

ministrator alone assuming such an important duty and points out that conditions in American state and local government "raise serious doubts as to the practicability and wisdom of the system of central register for state and local archives in the United States."¹ This may be understood to assume that such a policy of selection and destruction of records by the administrator is an integral part of the registry system and therefore the latter is inapplicable in the United States, which is not the case. The registry, essentially, provides a centralized control over and custody of the current or semicurrent official records of the whole or a major part of a single administration or bureau. It differs from our average central files principally in degree of control and extent of custody over records of the agency maintaining it. It does combine some of the functions of our mail sections with those of our central files.

It is true that the registry may be used to simplify a program for the destruction of records. Likewise, as in Prussia, it may so centralize, arrange, and prepare inventories of modern records that similar work to be done later by the archivist is greatly facilitated. But these are incidents of such a system and not at all of its essence. Dr. Meisner described the *Registratur* or registration process as it exists in Prussia so as to include (1) the individual memorandum of all documents internal to an agency of the government; (2) the recording or compilation of an inventory of the documents in the *Registratur*; (3) the recording of outgoing papers (outgoing register); (4) the permanent documents, so recorded, of the whole or a part of an agency (Registry A, B, C of Bureau X); (5) the place for keeping registered documents; (6) the officers assigned for the maintenance, arrangement, and administration of such documents.

What a single file is to an office, all records of an agency are to a registry, and theoretically at least all records of all agencies are to a central archives. Each of these three authorities has a logically defined jurisdiction, the registry being the responsible and recognized authority for good housekeeping as far as the records of a line agency are concerned.

Since our public archives present few linguistic and no palaeographical obstacles to research, our handicaps to effective use of records are rather the inavailability of much of our public archives, the modicum of heuristic thereto, and the total absence of such a specialized aid to the study thereof as Dr. Meisner has prepared for the archives of Brandenburg and Prussia. That the study is fragmentary the author is the first to admit. Nevertheless, it is published with a reasonable expectation that the discussion it may call forth will lead to a better approximation of "modern diplomatics." Its significance lies in its disciplined and timely conception.

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¹ "Uniform State Archival Legislation," *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST*, II (1939), 14.