

The Preservation of the State Records in Poland

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THE Polish nation has a traditional understanding of the value of state documents and archives. The earliest Polish documents, generally the communications between the highest clerical and secular officials, were carefully preserved in the treasury of the Cracow cathedral. One of Poland's oldest documents, now extant only in copy, dates from the 10th century, when Prince Mieszko I put the Polish nation formally under the protection of the Holy See, thus making it a part of the Patrimony of St. Peter. Later, in the 14th century, the archival storeroom of King Casimir the Great in Wawel Castle in Cracow, modeled after the architectural plan of the Pope's castle at Avignon, was constructed. Here the oldest documents were stored in the Royal Treasury. One such document was the permission granted by Pope Urban V to Casimir to establish the first university in Poland in 1364.

The history of Polish archives during the partition period, between 1795 and 1918, is the subject of an article in the first issue of *Archeion*, a periodical which since 1927 has been devoted to the subject of Polish archives. The difficulty of preserving Polish records in the Austrian, Prussian, and Russian bureaucracies was enormous. In 1795, the partitioning powers agreed to divide the records in their respective areas. Russia occupied Warsaw and executed this provision with ruthless exactitude, to the point of breaking bound volumes.

After World War I the state archives of the Republic of Poland were organized by the decree of February 7, 1919. This enactment provided for a special Division of State Archives as part of the Ministry of Education and Religious Denominations. The Division gradually acquired control of the national historical records. Although municipal records and the large holdings of private

¹ Paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Washington, D. C., October 11, 1956. The author, Polish specialist of the Library of Congress, was lecturer in history at Cracow University, 1945-48, and received her doctoral degree there in 1947. A bibliography supplied by the writer has been omitted for lack of type with the proper diacritical marks.

and Church institutions were not within its direct responsibility, it, nevertheless, kept a watchful eye on such collections. The newly formed Republic of Poland sought by diplomatic means to obtain the restoration of Polish records from Austria, Germany, and Russia. The Polish-Soviet peace treaty of 1921 is an example of such an effort.

Before World War II, the Polish state archives were divided in 17 state archival centers. Five of these centers were in Warsaw: the Main Archives, Old Records, Treasury Records, Educational Records, and the Central Military Archives. The Main Archives contained the *Metryka Koronna*, the royal records of Poland (1377-1794). There were also a great many private, municipal, and institutional record-holding agencies.

During the occupation of Poland by the Nazis from 1939 to 1945, the state archives of the territory annexed by Germany became part of the German archival network. All archives in the General Government came under the jurisdiction of the German General Directorate of Archives in the Reich's Ministry of Interior (*Direktion der Archive*). This office was in Cracow, at that time the capital of the occupation government. War and German and Soviet occupation brought much destruction to Polish archival records.

After the war the state gradually took steps to collect and preserve the remaining records. Archives, however, were not a priority problem. The 12 state archives of 1946 employed a total of 88 people, 47 of them scientific personnel. It was not until March 29, 1951, that a decree reorganized Polish archives.

Before 1947, the Polish Government was not entirely Communist. After the so-called election of 1947, however, Poland entered on a course of rapid communization of her political structure. In the intellectual world, the Communists met effective resistance, and even today there are limitations to Communist authority. But the government has tried to organize and control all Polish intellectual life, and archival matters are one of the many objects of its concern. The main role of archives and the purpose of archival science at present in Poland is to organize a body of source materials for a new conception of the nation's history. This new conception takes little account of the Polish struggle for independence from Russian domination and interprets the history of Poland as a class struggle of the Polish people to free themselves from the Catholic Church and from the privileged secular elements of the nation.

In 1951 the government took vigorous and thorough steps to mold intellectual activity to the new pattern. The decree of March

29, 1951, on Polish archives was a part of this general effort. It created a Main Directorate of State Archives attached directly to the office of the President of the Council of Ministers. The function of this new authority is to secure, collect, and select archival materials. The Main Directorate is required to register, record, and hold archival property. It is responsible for the management of the buildings that hold the records and for direct scientific research and publishing in the field of archival science. The right to decide what documents have value for historical research is an exclusive function of the archival authorities.

The decree of 1951 refers to state archival property. In 1952 an ordinance of the Council of Ministers defined state archival property as consisting of all archival materials of political, social, economic, scientific, or historical significance. Thus, theoretically, the extent of archival authority in Poland is tremendous. The vast bureaucracy of Communism generates a great deal of paper. In practice, however, the work of the archivist is much reduced by the exclusion of Communist Party, foreign affairs, internal security, and defense records from the domain of the Main Directorate and by the existence of extensive separate "working files" in the various ministries. And as documents that do not serve Communist purposes are neglected, there is a real danger that valuable records will be lost.

In January 1952 an ordinance of the President of the Council of Ministers established four different types of state archives under the Main Directorate: central (in Warsaw), provincial, district, and county. The provincial archives are housed in each of the provincial capitals. District archives serve as a link between central or provincial and county archives. The district organization is responsible for the archives of former provinces and for larger city record holdings. There are nine such district divisions. The county archives are required to obtain, select, and turn over to the provincial archives all materials existing in their jurisdictions. By the end of 1954, there were in Poland 94 archival divisions, including 2 central, 16 provincial, 9 district, and 67 county archives. The total number of persons employed in the system in 1954 was 682. The volume of Polish state archival records in 1955 has been estimated at 100,000 running meters, of which 60,000 were inventoried in the period 1945-54. Much of the volume of state holdings results from the confiscation of local and private records by the state and the entrance of the Communist government into economic activities previously carried on by private enterprise.

In 1953 an Archival Council of 22 members was established as

an advisory staff for the Main Directorate. The primary function of this Council is to give opinions that will lead to the coordination of archival plans with the needs of current Polish historical science. It also furnishes technical advice on procedures for disseminating information, establishes priorities for materials, and lays down the principles that shall govern the formation of collections. Finally, it appraises the work done in the Directorate in selecting and inventorying materials and advises on questions of research, training, and the custody of materials.

The chairman of the Archival Council, Professor Tadeusz Manteuffel, is also Director of the Historical Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Professor Manteuffel announced in 1955 at the Third Methodological Conference for Archivists that archival science is a service established to fulfill the objectives of the science of history. In Manteuffel's view, the two objectives of historical science in modern Poland are, first, to prepare a comprehensive Marxist synthesis of Polish history, and second, to destroy the falsifications of the so-called bourgeois historiography. This is very different from the pure guardianship of records.

The archives of Poland should be the venerable record of national life. The tragedy of the Polish archivist is that his interest in this record is now directed toward extraneous, political objectives. The archivist in Poland has great responsibility for the destruction as well as the preservation of records; but the government's policy aims at directing research according to Communist principles, limiting its scope, and denying historians access to certain fields.

Some expansion of the role of the archivist is evidenced by the fact that, for the first time, a Polish Communist delegation participated in the Second International Archives Round Table that took place in Namur (Belgium) in April 1955. Still the exclusion of many records, notably those dealing with foreign affairs and with military, police, and Communist Party activities, limits the usefulness of Polish archives. The local industrial, economic, and technical records generally are also excluded. The records of technical equipment are still classified and unavailable even to Polish archivists. The Main Directorate has been obliged to prepare archival exhibitions celebrating Russo-Polish friendship, the achievements of Communism in postwar Poland, and the Polish character of the history of Silesia.

A recent innovation was the establishment in April 1955 of a Publishing Council in the Main Directorate of Archives for the purpose of evaluating publishing plans. This council of seven has

only two permanent members: the Chief of the Main Directorate and a representative of the powerful Institute of Social Sciences of the Central Committee of the Polish Communist Party.

The professional relations of archivists with other Polish scholars are, of course, a dynamic element in Polish intellectual life. For the present, the association with historians appears secure, at least until the history of Poland is established to Communist satisfaction. The relations with librarians seem to be less close than in the past. From 1945 to 1953 the Association of Polish Archivists and Librarians was a single professional union under the Central Council of Labor Unions. Since 1953 the professions have been separately organized. The association of the archivists with the innovators of machine record management is still in the future for Poland.

In conclusion I would emphasize the function of the Main Directorate of State Archives in Poland: It is an ideological establishment organized as a special branch of the Council of Ministers. Its mission is derived exclusively from the Communist nature of the state. It is primarily a propaganda arm of the Communist administration. No organization in the United States has a comparable function. Our National Archives has nothing in common with the State Archives in Poland.