

# Archives in East Germany

By JOHN GAGLIARDO

University of Kansas

IN MAY of 1956 I determined that in order to find the materials necessary to finish a historical project in the field of 18th-century Prussian administrative history, I should have to go to East Germany. Through correspondence with a number of municipal officials I was able to obtain the names of certain archives that might contain the documents I needed, and subsequent correspondence with these archives confirmed the existence of some of the needed documents. As the contents of two archives, those in Potsdam and Magdeburg, were especially important for my work, I wrote the Prime Minister of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), Otto Grotewohl, towards the middle of the summer, and was gratified to receive shortly thereafter a letter from his secretary, Herr Tzschorn, telling me that the Prime Minister saw no objection to my admittance to the country and that he had forwarded my letter to the State Secretariat for Universities (*Staatssekretariat für Hochschulwesen*), which would inform me of the formalities involved. The Secretariat responded almost at once, suggesting that I enter the eastern zone through Berlin, where I was to pick up my visa.

Reinforced by a letter from the chancellor of the University of Kansas, stating my official position in the university, I arrived in Berlin by plane in the middle of September, immediately entered the Russian sector of the city, and went to the offices of the State Secretariat for Universities, where I was most cordially received, and where I was given certification for the visa.

In Potsdam I had the opportunity of discussing various aspects of archival organization and administration with members of the State Archives Administration (*Staatliche Archivverwaltung*).<sup>1</sup> Some points brought out in these discussions will be of interest to American archivists and historians.

Archival activity in East Germany in the period 1945-49 was largely concerned with finding, rebuilding, or extending structures to replace the archives buildings that had been destroyed in World

<sup>1</sup> Among these were Dr. Karl Höhnelt, director, and two of his assistants, Messrs. Schwabe and Jentsch. Dr. Beck, director of the Brandenburg Main State Archives (*Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv*) in Potsdam was also very helpful to me.

War II and with relocating many documents and materials that had been removed from archives for safekeeping during the war. Not until 1949 was much attention paid to the administrative and organizational problems of the archives.

East German archives are generally organized in six basic classes: state, city, district, administrative, business and industrial, and ecclesiastical archives. Among the state archives, the German Central Archives (*Deutsches Zentralarchiv*) in Potsdam is the repository for most of the documents previously housed by the German Imperial Archives (*Deutsches Reichsarchiv*) and has particularly large collections from offices of the Prussian central government in the period of the Second Empire (1871-1918), with emphasis on the Bismarck period. Many other documents taken from various places in Germany by the Russians after the war also have found their way into the Central Archives. A subsidiary division of the Central Archives, in Merseburg, contains the former Prussian Secret Archives (*Preussisches Geheimes Archiv*) and the Brandenburg-Prussian House Archives (*Brandenburg-preussisches Hausarchiv*). Each of the five constituent states of East Germany has a main state archives (*Landeshauptarchiv*), often with several subsidiary or attached state archives (*Landesarchive*). These subsidiary archives, most of which were founded originally as the central archives of the independent governing units then in existence, have in the course of German unification and consolidation become essentially regional archives, housing materials of all kinds from the area in which they are located. In general, under the present system of East German political division, each Main State Archives contains more materials from the central administration of the state than the subsidiary State Archives, which retain a stronger local and district orientation.

City archives (*Stadtarchive*), which contain historical materials relating to all kinds of municipal developments, were in a chaotic condition at the end of the war. Under a program designed to increase recognition of the importance of local history and to stimulate research in the field, city archives administration has been reorganized, both through the appointment of archivists in places where none had been before and through the amalgamation of city archives with district archives in places where the number of municipal documents did not justify the existence of city archives.

The district archives (*Kreisarchive*) were established in 1951 to accommodate documents from cities and communities not large

enough to have separate archives. By 1955 such archives existed in all districts of East Germany.

Administrative archives (*Verwaltungsarchive*) came into being as the result of a law of 1951 requiring all administrative offices and posts of the government to maintain archives in order to remove materials no longer in use from the registers and files of those offices. Such materials are to be cataloged and preserved until they can be given over to the state archives. In some cases these administrative archives have been combined with city or district archives.

Nationalized industries have been required since 1950 to keep business or industrial archives (*Betriebsarchive*) for such materials as may be important for their history. In addition to formerly private business and industrial concerns, this requirement applies to the government's postal, trade, banking, and cooperative organizations.

Various church archives (*Kirchenarchive*), the basic organization of which has not changed since before the war, are also maintained. These include pastoral and episcopal archives, as well as the archives of the Evangelical State Church Council (*Evangelischer Landeskirchenrat*) in Eisenach.

In 1949 a central archival administration was set up. This agency, now known as the State Archives Administration, operates under the Ministry of the Interior and has its offices in the Central Archives in Potsdam. It coordinates and supervises the activities of the Central Archives, the various state archives of East Germany and the two schools for archivists that it established — the Institute for Archival Science (*Institut für Archivwissenschaft*) and the Technical School for Archival Matters (*Fachschule für Archivwesen*), both in Potsdam. Almost all other archives are subordinate either to certain special organizations or to the administrative agencies to which they are attached. For example, city and district archives are under the city and district counsellors respectively. In regard to some technical matters, however, all archives are under the control of the State Archives Administration, except the ecclesiastical archives. These are entirely independent of state control and are administered by the churches or church organizations concerned. In the exercise of its administrative duties, the Archives Administration makes use of certain agencies of the Department of Internal Affairs.

The present activities of the State Archives Administration in

particular and East German archives in general seem directed to the following ends:

1. There is a great deal of effort toward coordinating and recording acquisitions and the contents of archives in order to help researchers to find materials and in order to put the newly acquired documents in the most suitable archives. Of considerable importance here are family archives of various kinds, which for one reason or another have come into archivists' hands since the end of World War II.

2. Much work has been done to establish extensive foreign connections for documentary exchange (through photocopying or microfilming) and to assist researchers of the eastern zone in finding foreign materials. Although naturally the most extensive cultural relations and exchanges until now have been with the Soviet Union and other countries of eastern Europe, a number of western European and American contacts have been reopened. The Archives Administration is eager to exchange publications and periodicals with American libraries and archives.

3. A building program for the archives of East Germany is under way. Much of the housing of documents is temporary because of the general housing shortage that goes back to the end of the war. The Brandenburg Main State Archives, for example, is still in one of the wings of the Orangerie in the park of the palace of Sans-Souci in Potsdam, with insufficient space and facilities. The Central Archives also is still there, but in 1955 a new building for it was begun. A general program for increasing the capacity of archives buildings and the amount of photographic and other technical equipment is under way. At present microfilming goes very slowly because of the lack of photographic equipment in all but the largest archives. It is often necessary to transport either the documents or the equipment from one place to another to get such work done.

4. One of the biggest and most important jobs undertaken in East German archives is recataloging the innumerable documents contained in them. This is necessary for two reasons: first, because many documents were destroyed in the war, separated permanently from their registers, or frightfully mixed and confused; second, because even where documents and registers were kept together, the registers, made for administrative purposes of government organizations when the documents first came into existence, are now at best most trying to use. The recataloging of many documents has now been undertaken and good, though scattered, results can already be seen.

In most cases the recataloging is designed to reduce document identification to a straight numbered series. The old registers list documents under certain general headings, which in some cases have several subheadings, and the documents are numbered from "1" under each heading or subheading. It is thus necessary, in referring to documents, to give the heading, subheading, and number. And, as many of the documents listed in the old registers have been destroyed, even these numbers do not run consecutively. The new registers retain the headings and subheadings with little change, but within any one register

volume the document numbers run consecutively from "1" to the end of that volume. These new registers of course list only documents on hand in the archives and not those that have been moved or destroyed since the old registers were made.

Archives employees themselves engage in a wide range of activities. In addition to their regular work of classification and cataloging, they write historico-geographic sketches of areas from which particular groups of documents come; and, since many archivists are trained also in fields such as history or law, they often write monographs on the documentation in those fields.

5. The State Archives Administration has itself published a number of books; and, together with publications of the state archives, this series forms a considerable body of literature. Since 1951 the Archives Administration has published a quarterly periodical, *Archivmitteilungen*, which contains articles of general archival interest, and some with a more specific attention to East Germany's own contemporary ideological interest. Among the books published by the Archives Administration, one that might be of special interest to American archivists and historians is *Archivar und Historiker*, no. 7 in the Administration's book series. One of the articles in this work is a careful study of the losses suffered during the war by the old German Imperial Archives. Publications of the state archives (some of which are still in preparation) include reviews of the contents of the following archives: Deutsches Zentralarchiv, Potsdam and Merseburg, 2 vols.; Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Potsdam, 2 vols.; Sächsisches Landeshauptarchiv, Dresden; Landeshauptarchiv Sachsen-Anhalt, Magdeburg, 3 vols.; and Thüringisches Landeshauptarchiv, Weimar.

For further information concerning the organization and administration of archives in East Germany, one should examine *Archivmitteilungen*, 1956, vol. 6, part 3 (Deutscher Zentralverlag, Berlin), from which a part of the material for this article has come; also "Das Verwaltungs-Archiv" and "Das Kreisarchiv," in no. 2 of the book series of the Archives Administration, *Archivarbeit und Geschichtsforschung* (Rütten und Loening, Berlin, 1952).