

# Archival Experience in a Prototype Intermediate Depository

By SHERROD EAST\*

*National Archives*

SINCE 1958, when the World War II Records Division of the National Archives was established, I have wanted to record the archival history of its predecessor, the War Department (later the Departmental) Records Branch of the Army Adjutant General's Office, from the point of view of the only professional archivist having uninterrupted association and program responsibility. The twentieth anniversary of the depository inspires me to attempt it now.

In the late summer of 1943 I accepted the position of civilian archivist of the newly formed War Department Records Branch under Capt. (later Lt. Col.) Hugh M. Flick, who had been Archivist of the State of New York. Flick gave me full responsibility for, and supported me handsomely in, formulating the archival program and supervising its implementation. He and I were working under the general direction of Maj. (later Lt. Col.) Wayne C. Grover and Robert H. Bahmer, his civilian deputy. Grover and Bahmer had succeeded in the spring of 1943 to the overall direction of the records administration program of the War Department; they returned to the National Archives after the war and became in due course Archivist of the United States and Deputy Archivist, respectively.

It is not the purpose of this narrative to review the wartime records administration program of the Army in its entirety; this has been done by Lieutenant Colonel Grover. Our Branch was that "essential" custodial facility in the Military District of Washington set up to prevent the National Archives from becoming a depository for masses of military records of only temporary value. "The War Department Records Branch," said Grover, "was one of the clear gains to emerge from the period of redefinition and reorganization [of the W. D. Records Administration Program] in the spring and summer of 1943. It was the proving ground for the theory that

\*The author, a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists, is Director, World War II Records Division, Office of Military Archives, National Archives. The observations in his article are derived from his longtime association with the predecessor agency of the Division he now heads.

records in intermediate custody could be greatly reduced in bulk by the application of objective evaluation and orderly disposal. At the same time, the existence of the Branch assured the responsible preservation for use of valuable War Department records."<sup>1</sup> This last was the purpose motivating the Army Service Forces historian, Col. John D. Millett, whose insistence was an important factor in the establishment of the depository. To counter the breakdown of the prewar central files system of the War Department, files created on a decentralized basis could at least be brought together in their intermediate state and administered centrally for the benefit of the whole Department. Thus, we were given a unique mission, but we were not told how to accomplish it. Activated on July 31, 1943, the Branch was charged with "custody and administration of all non-current records of the War Department" that had been, or might thereafter be, transferred to the Adjutant General from War Department agencies in the Military District of Washington. A primary mission of the Branch was "to reduce . . . noncurrent files . . . to the minimum possible space consistent with their usefulness, and to prepare them for eventual transfer to the [National] Archives."<sup>2</sup>

It was to be expected that a depository that had been established to be intermediate between the operating levels of an executive department of the Government and the National Archives—and one that had been organized by archivists trained in the latter agency—would use control procedures and techniques adapted from those of that archival agency. As in the National Archives, much of the business of the War Department Records Branch consisted of separate transactions of a similar type, sufficiently important and sufficiently numerous to become the subjects of distinguishable case files, each consisting of a number of separate documents. Initially, three series of jobs and a single series of projects were established. A job represented a transaction by which the depository either took or relinquished custody of a body of records. A project covered any kind of processing work to which records were subjected internally, including arrangement, rearrangement, segregation, screening, and so forth. The separate categories of jobs and projects were as follows:

1. A series of *accession jobs* to cover the accessioning of records that were to remain indefinitely in the custody of the Branch, the control numbers to be constructed in the style *A44-1*. The letter *A* signified an accession, the *44*

<sup>1</sup> Wayne C. Grover, *War Department Records Administration Program*, p. 167 (Washington, 1948).

<sup>2</sup> AGO Memo 92, July 31, 1943.

indicated the calendar year, and the last part of the number after the dash represented a simple serial number assigned consecutively in the order in which the accession was registered in the particular calendar year.

2. A series of *transitory jobs* to cover the transfer of records for disposition by the Branch (by transfer to the National Archives, by transfer to another depository, or by sale as wastepaper). In a transitory job the Branch acted simply as a handling agent and was not expected to service the records. In an accession job, however, custody was indefinite and the Branch was expected to analyze, process, and service the records. Transitory job numbers were constructed similarly to accession job numbers in the style *T44-1*.

3. A series of *disposal jobs* to cover lists of disposable records submitted to the War Department's Records Management Branch for submission in turn to the National Archives, requesting disposal authorization from Congress. Disposal jobs originating in the War Department Records Branch were assigned a job number in the style *D44-1*; such jobs originating elsewhere, if processed in the Branch, usually were controlled as transitory jobs (see above).

4. A series of *projects* to cover the processing of records in the Branch. The project control numbers were constructed in the style *P44-1*.

Establishing control of transactions was, of course, only the first step. Accumulated holdings of the depository and the individual transaction dossiers had to be organized logically by record group. Within a record group the records were to be identified and controlled by the basic archival unit, the series. Our record group numbering pattern differed from that of the National Archives in that ours was a logical system arranged hierarchically in contrast to the random number pattern evolved in the National Archives. Conveniently, our pattern was the same as the organization pattern established in the Army Service Forces *Manual M-301* in 1943; thus, the statement of the mission and function of a particular organizational element of the War Department was correlated with the description of the resulting records. Initially, blocks of numbers were assigned to the major units and commands of the War Department as follows:

*100 group*: Office of the Secretary of War and the War Department General Staff.

*200 group*: Headquarters (including staff divisions), Army Service Forces.

*300 group*: Technical Services, Army Service Forces.

*400 group*: Service Commands and the Military District of Washington.

*500 group*: Headquarters, Army Air Forces.

*600 group*: Headquarters, Army Ground Forces.

*700 group*: Discontinued agencies of the War Department.

This record group pattern was modified and expanded in 1948—without changing its basic structure—to provide for new military

agencies created pursuant to the National Defense Act of 1947. Numbers from 000 to 099 were established for the Office of the Secretary of Defense and associated joint boards and staffs. Additional numbers in the 500 group provided amply for the new Department of the Air Force and the United States Air Force, to distinguish their records from those of the predecessor Army Air Forces. The new group 900 was provided for combined (or international) military organizations, and the group 1000 for captured records. By the time the Departmental Records Branch became the World War II Records Division of the National Archives 188 record groups had been registered. Documentation existing at that time in the transaction dossiers included, but was not necessarily limited to, the following:

1. For an accession (*A*) job there was an offer of transfer originating usually with the agency proposing to relinquish custody of accumulated files; a transfer authorization prepared by a member of the depository staff after inspection of the files; and a formal agreement, transferring accountability for both records and property, exchanged between the depository and the transferring agency. The job folder might also include shipping documents, agency-prepared inventories, and accountability lists of security-classified files.
2. A transitory (*T*) job folder was usually simpler. It did not include, for example, a formal accession agreement but it did include authority for disposal or other disposition of the records concerned.
3. A disposal (*D*) transaction folder contained, as basic to the appraisal of records proposed for disposal or for transfer to another depository, a records disposition authorization form and/or a series identification sheet. Disposal lists on prescribed National Archives forms were included when it appeared to be necessary to obtain congressional authorization for the disposal.
4. Each project (*P*) folder included a project authorization form indicating the particular processing work proposed for a body of records or for a particular series. Progress reports and a report on completion of a project were also filed in project folders.

The foregoing outlines the documentation that controlled the archival work of the depository during the first two years of its existence. Much of it is still basic to the work of the successor organization, the World War II Records Division of the National Archives. Although this system was adequate for the time and made it possible for the depository to meet the crisis of demobilization, our procedures were modified, refined, and expanded as the depository's archival program achieved greater sophistication in the postwar years. In the period 1946-47 the Army-wide records disposition program, with Robert G. Ballentine in charge, was also administered from the level of the War Department Records

Branch. Late in 1947 this function was returned to Management Staff (later Comptroller Division), Office of the Adjutant General.

With the reorganization of the military establishment under the National Defense Act of 1947, the War Department Records Branch was reorganized and renamed Departmental Records Branch. The mission of the depository was expanded to include responsibility for administering noncurrent records of the new Office of the Secretary of Defense and its subordinate joint boards and staffs and to serve as the depository for special collections of records such as those of combined (usually British-American) military headquarters in World War II, records of war crimes tribunals and counsels, captured records, and records of Allied military governments. Significantly, in our depository "unification" did not result in separation of the functions of the new Departments of the Army and of the Air Force—we undertook to serve both. Also at this time microfilming services for approved projects—work that had been performed in or by a separate branch of the Adjutant General's Office—became an operational responsibility of the depository.

Administration of historical documentation in support of official and unofficial research programs for World War II and the postwar years imposed on the depository new and demanding responsibilities—far beyond those involved in relatively routine administrative reference service. The phenomenal emergence of "operations research" by universities and research corporations, on Government contract or with the support of foundation grants, presented challenges as great as those of official in-house research and historical programs. As to the latter, the Office of the Army's Chief of Military History at its peak had a staff of more than two hundred researchers, historians, and editors working on its projected 97-volume official history of the War Department and the U. S. Army in World War II—a program to which we gave the primary source support.

In the immediate postwar years we added to our staff three specially qualified senior archivists, all of whom had been on the staff of the National Archives. On his return from Italy, where he had supervised the archival program in connection with the liquidation of Allied Force Headquarters, Lt. Kenneth W. Munden became Chief of the depository's Historical Records Section. Philip P. Brower was recruited to administer captured records taken over from the German Military Documents Section, G-2, and Martin P. Claussen was brought into the organization from the Franklin

D. Roosevelt Library to become branch archivist when the present writer succeeded Robert Bahmer as head of the depository. Bahmer had succeeded Lieutenant Colonel Flick in 1946.

Just as the War Department Records Branch had been the "prototype" of the intermediate depository in the Army system, so the Historical Records Section set the pace for the postwar Departmental Records Branch. Among other programs, Munden with the assistance of Carl Scharf, a training specialist, launched an archival training course for the Branch, unique outside the National Archives in its scope and quality. It employed seminar techniques and extended over a period of two years. Some of the best qualified people in the Army and the National Archives lectured or led discussions on every aspect of archives and records administration. In all, more than forty instructors appeared in weekly one- or two-hour sessions. More than two hundred staff members and other Army and Air Force records and administrative people received all or part of this training. A dozen formal "technical" or "seminar" papers resulted from this program and became a part of our in-service training literature. Some of these papers were published in the *American Archivist* and other professional journals.

Claussen's most significant contribution in this dynamic period of professional growth and development was to the guide, *Federal Records of World War II*, published in two volumes by the National Archives in 1950 and 1951. From control documentation and reference information in Departmental Records Branch and other Army depositories he prepared the descriptive entries for most of Volume 2—specifically those covering the War Department, the Army, and the joint and combined military agencies. This project represented a significant, cooperative undertaking of the military agencies and the National Archives.

Brower, as Chief of the German Military Documents Section in this period, produced the first edition of the *Guide to Captured German Records in Custody of Department of the Army Agencies in Washington, D. C., and Vicinity*. The odyssey of the collection of captured German records, originally some 27,000 cubic feet, is an archival story warranting a separate telling. Special procedures had to be devised for its administration, exploitation, and ultimate restitution to Germany. Decisions respecting these records were and still are within the periphery of vital postwar political considerations. The Chief of Branch and the Chief of the German Military Documents Section were constantly involved in intelligence



and interagency deliberations affecting this special category of archival holdings.

As military headquarters closed or as their missions were changed during and after demobilization, the reference service program of the Departmental Records Branch became vastly more complex. As early as 1946, in an address before the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Fritz Morstein Marx of the Bureau of the Budget had focused attention on reference service when he said that although record management had achieved some standing in the field of public administration, it could not "cease to exert itself in the elaboration and refinement of its working methods." He summarized his challenge in these words:

Coherence in administration can be achieved only when there is sufficiently frequent resort to the record of operations and the reasoning underneath those decisions that govern policy. Record officers are called upon to furnish a reference service to line and staff officials comparable to that rendered the scholar by the library. Development of such reference service will further raise the sights of record management.

As modern administration is necessarily a complicated process, so record management is a complex and highly technical activity. Yet those in charge of records have an important part in helping the administrator attain the purposes of responsible management. Together with other staff services available to the government executive, record officers can help him to exercise his functions with insight and wisdom. They are the custodians of the evidence of their agency's thought and action.<sup>3</sup>

This, together with other challenges growing out of the professional ferment of that time, led directly to an attempt on the part of this writer and the staff of the Departmental Records Branch to facilitate, by a new approach to records control, the reference exploitation of large accumulations of records of diverse origin, broad subject content, and complex arrangement. In the face of skeptical, even contrary, professional opinion, we believed that basic library techniques of cataloging could be adapted to archival work, and we acted on our belief. By 1948 we had made such progress that the idea in its initial stage could be presented to the Interagency Records Administration Conference for critical evaluation. It survived the test. As the medium through which our depository synthesized its intellectual controls for the benefit of staff and clientele alike, the cataloging system took five years to evolve. The catalog became the key to the records series in our custody, as well as to our finding aids, our reference library, and, in selected in-

<sup>3</sup> Fritz Morstein Marx, "The Role of Records in Administration," in *American Archivist*, 10: 246, 248 (July 1947).

stances, file items and completed reference searches of exceptional significance. Individual knowledge of the content and arrangement of series can never be replaced, but the describable item catalog became as essential to our depository as a book catalog is to a library. Our cataloging rules had several revisions and by 1955 had been codified and issued as Section 8 (140 p.) of our *Standing Operating Procedures*. Cataloging was curtailed drastically in 1958, when the depository was transferred to the National Archives to become the World War II Records Division. The catalog at that time contained 64,800 cards in more than fifty 5"×8"-card file drawers. It continues to be indispensable for reference and control purposes.

As our laboratory for experimenting in the application of archival principles in an intermediate depository, the Historical Records Section developed other special reference tools. It evolved the concept of cumulative inventorying in recognition of the need of flexible though definitive inventories of record groups, the complexion of which changes from month to month or from year to year, on the assumption that such inventories may not be less definitive when compiled by archives assistants following established rules for uniformity of content and format. Besides cumulative inventorying, the immediate objective of which was to provide lists for internal use of series and components of series in shelf order, the Section aimed at the publication of inventories and it initiated two series of specialized finding aids: *reference aids*, which described the availability in the Historical Records Section or in the Departmental Records Branch of records pertaining to particular agencies, subjects, or functions; and *special lists*, which identified records series or components of series needed in connection with research projects or for special purposes. For example, *reference aids* issued in 1949 were: *Records Pertaining to Displaced and Destitute Persons in North Africa and Europe*, *Materials for the Study of the Topography of Italy*, *Sources for the History of Allied Military Government in Italy*, *Records Pertaining to the USSR*, and *Records Pertaining to Flying Pay*. One *special list* issued in the same year was *World War II General Officers' Personal Name Files Withdrawn from Organizational Records*. By 1957 the depository had produced about forty processed finding aids of all types, not including "Record Group Summary" sheets comparable to the National Archives' "Record Group Registration" statements.

One of the criteria basic to records center or intermediate depository operation in either the wartime records programs or later



in the Federal Records Centers has been low-cost (warehouse type) space. By 1950 the Departmental Records Branch was to meet this criterion. The outbreak of the Korean War forced the entire Branch into such space for the first time. Even under the extreme space pressures of World War II at least one part of the Branch—a section holding security-classified records—had remained in the Pentagon. Even so, the work of the depository had constantly been hampered by space problems requiring relocation of all or major portions of its holdings at least five times between 1943 and 1950, when we moved into a part of the former Naval Torpedo Factory on the waterfront in Alexandria, Va. Pressure to release reusable filing equipment was always upon us and was frequently the sole reason for our “rewarehousing”—and too often with little regard for the value of the records or the status of arrangement, description, and preservation work. As for preservation, we never had the proper facilities for rehabilitating deteriorated and damaged records. We merely practiced from day to day the art of mending by use of common tools and supplies. From time to time, however, small quantities of damaged records were restored by the National Archives on a reimbursable basis.

The Korean War and the establishment of Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in the spring of 1951 affected our programs in other ways. Munden was recalled to active military duty as archivist and records officer for General Eisenhower's new headquarters. Claussen had previously announced his decision to accept a position with another agency. These losses of key staff archivists, together with other considerations, brought about a major reorganization and an adjustment of program responsibility—a real test of the effectiveness of our employee development and training activities. Seymour J. Pomrenze was recruited from the National Archives to fill one of the two positions and Philip P. Brower was promoted from the German Military Documents Section to fill the other. Key supervisory staff in the several sections of the reorganized Branch by the end of 1950 were: Irving L. Kenyon, administrative assistant; Thelma K. Yarborough and Wilbur J. Nigh, General Reference; Cora May Higgins, Army Records; Pauline Wiltshire, Air Force Records; Clyde H. Christian, Joint and Combined Records; Herman Goldbeck, Captured Records; Charles E. McCusker and Russel D. Mikel, Army Technical Services Records; Gertrude Smith and Thomas E. Blades, Old Records (service determination case work on military service records in the National Archives); Albert M. Voltmer, microfilm-

ing specialist; Helene L. Bowen, program control coordinator; Lester Yost, records disposition officer; and Marshall A. Martin, security, service, and property control officer.

As the tempo of military preparedness increased to counter the intensification of the cold war all over the world, there was a corresponding increase in the rate of records retirement and in our reference service. Reference demands by the intelligence community and the Government as a whole on captured German records of World War II, for instance, advanced by 300 percent in 1951. Increased exploitation of U. S. and Allied postwar military government experience in Europe and the Far East prompted the production of our most substantial reference aid, the two-part, 477-page *Guide to Civil Affairs and Military Government Records in the Adjutant General's Records Centers* (Washington, 1952), prepared under the direction of Seymour J. Pomrenze. Soon after completing this *Guide* Pomrenze received an appointment in the Records Management Branch, TAGO.

After 1952, when Munden had returned from military duty and had been appointed Assistant Branch Chief, the Departmental Records Branch began gradually to codify its technical and administrative issuances for publication as *Standing Operating Procedures*. The 1956 edition completed the SOP as a program document. Of this edition Lewis J. Darter, Jr., now Deputy Assistant Archivist of the United States for Records Appraisal, said:

. . . An Army procedural manual at first glance might appear to have little of value to archivists in general. Indeed, the sections dealing with administrative practices . . . are limited in their interest, except for those who are especially concerned with management practices. But such sections as Section 5 on reference procedure, Section 8 on rules for subject cataloging, and Section 9 on the preparation of finding aids should be of wide interest as evidence of exceptional zeal in promoting and encouraging the serious, scholarly use of recent records. These sections outline principles and describe procedures that combine competence and enthusiasm with ample administrative support to effect a thorough finding-aid and reference program. . . .

. . . Cataloging (i.e., indexing) discrete items by originator, by function, and by such special categories as geographical area, personal name, and military operation can achieve pretty complete intellectual control over the subject content of records. Its minuteness, however, makes it a special-purpose system suitable only for records of very great interest rather than for all records.

Although reference service is of major concern to the Branch, other aspects of the the work of a record depository are not slighted. The basic responsibilities of the Branch in accessioning and disposal are outlined (Section 4), and

pertinent parts of the discussion on record values are wisely abstracted from the National Archives publication *Disposition of Federal Records*.

The *Standing Operation Procedures* are a real implementation of the policy expressed in 1947 by the then Chief of Staff, Dwight D. Eisenhower, in the following words: "The historical record of the Army's operations as well as the manner in which these were accomplished are public property, and except where the security of the Nation may be jeopardized, the right of the citizen to the full story is unquestioned."

Investigators have not fully realized the extent to which the orderly character of the Government's record programs makes studies of recent events possible through the collaboration of archival and record center services provided by the General Services Administration and other agencies. The *Standing Operating Procedures* of the Departmental Records Branch are evidence of the real service that is given in making records of the recent past meet the needs of today.<sup>4</sup>

In the years 1953-56 all records centers in the Defense system, and especially the Departmental Records Branch, were subjected to a series of critical "organization, methods, and manpower" (OMM) surveys. Since the relative cost of its operations exceeded that of any other "intermediate" depository, the Branch was repeatedly called on to justify every aspect of its program. But no less did the scope of its administrative and archival work exceed the scope of such work in depositories with which it could be compared. It is perhaps sufficient to say here that the surveys did result in gradual diminution of our manpower resources from 167 (including 14 military) people in 1952 to 133 (including 17 military) by June 30, 1957. It should not be inferred, however, that OMM surveys and manpower reductions were directed solely at the Departmental Records Branch and the Defense records center system; they were generally applied to all military activities to reduce budgets in the years following cessation of the Korean fighting. To avoid, as far as possible, reduction in combat strength and related military programs, special emphasis was put on reducing the cost of military administrative overhead.

The Federal Records Act of 1950, implementing one of the 1949 Hoover Commission studies, authorized the Administrator of General Services to establish and maintain a records center system. The act recognized the existing agency-operated records centers and endorsed the concept of "responsible intermediate custody" according to which noncurrent records may be administered by departmental or agency centers rather than by the central archival agency. In 1954 the General Services Administration, tak-

<sup>4</sup>Lewis J. Darter, Jr., in *American Archivist*, 20:165 (Apr. 1957).



ing into account the trend toward reduction of the Defense budget, suggested to the Department of Defense that the National Archives and Records Service could operate Defense records centers more economically than could the military departments. This suggestion resulted in a survey, by the records management consulting firm of Leahy & Co. under GSA contract, of both Defense and GSA records center systems. Although the Leahy report recommended continuation of Defense agency-operated centers, the military services were forced within two years to begin transfer of their centers to the National Archives and Records Service as one means of avoiding further across-the-board manpower reductions. In April 1957 the Adjutant General of the Army "reluctantly agreed" to transfer the function, holdings, personnel, and property of the Departmental Records Branch to the Federal Records Center, Alexandria, Va., and on January 19, 1958, the transfer was made. Certain functions of the Departmental Records Branch, however, had to be retained by the Adjutant General and were absorbed by other branches of his office. Civilian employees numbering 102 were transferred, along with some 235,000 cubic feet of records and all related property.

But the transfer of the Departmental Records Branch to the Federal Records Center in Alexandria proved to be only an interim step. Although the Chief of the Departmental Records Branch, being the senior archivist, became Chief of the consolidated Center, it was clear that our depository's former program, insofar as it affected the permanent World War II and Korean War records, would not be compatible with the overall Center program. This was true in part because the agreement of transfer provided for continuation of specialized services to the Defense agencies in support of their research activities. Within six months, therefore, a further reorganization created the World War II Records Division of the National Archives and named the Chief of the former Departmental Records Branch as its Director. This change resulted in the transfer *in situ* of some 120,000 cubic feet of records and 74 people, together with related property, from the Federal Records Center to the National Archives.

It has not been a purpose of this paper to argue the advantages and disadvantages of gradual versus periodic or block transfer of permanent records to the central archival agency. Before its discontinuance the Departmental Records Branch had in fact begun the gradual transfer of World War II records to the National

Archives; in any case, the functional transfer of 1958 superseded this program.

The Departmental Records Branch operated on this premise: To the extent that archival techniques of intellectual control of large masses of noncurrent records are efficacious, they should be applied as soon as practicable after records are concentrated in an intermediate depository. An inevitable result of modern administration and documentation systems in large agencies of government, in the absence of effective central filing at major organizational levels, is the fragmentation of the records that document "performance." Archival controls are the only means by which logical order can be achieved and relationships of such records can be established.

But these invaluable records have yet to arrive at their final stage. It is anticipated that in 1965, perhaps, sufficient space will become available in the National Archives Building for them and indeed for all permanent military records through the Korean War. Only then will the prototype intermediate depository have been absorbed by the National Archives.

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### ***"Tongue in his heart"***

Who are the men and women that serve in the German registry and what are their qualifications? We should rather ask: Who are the men; because no "females," to use the old official term of this country, are found in German registry positions. That registry work has a definitely male character is tacitly assumed. The qualifications of the registry official were eloquently stated by the theoreticians of the eighteenth century. He must be intelligent and must have a good memory and mature judgment, because if he lacks these virtues disorder and confusion will predominate in the registry. He should have a quiet, calm, and well-poised mind, since a sanguine and fickle temperament would not be compatible with the profession. He must not be talkative, but must have his tongue in his heart and not his heart upon his tongue. He should have adequate fundamentals and should in general talk very little lest he blab out the secrets of his registry. He must ordinarily attend to his work during office hours from early in the morning until noon and from 3 o'clock until 6, and on winter days he works as long as he can see without light; even on holidays, on which he is free to attend the morning and afternoon services, he must appear at the registry to take care of pressing matters. Regulations in this respect became somewhat less rigorous in the nineteenth century, which may be regarded as the golden age of registry work and registry officialdom.

—ERNST POSNER, "The Role of Records in German Administration,"  
in *National Archives Staff Information Circular* no. 11, p. 9  
(July 1941).