

THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST

Volume V

APRIL, 1942

Number 2

THE FRENCH FOREIGN OFFICE RECORDS UNDER THE THIRD REPUBLIC

THE French have long regarded their foreign office archives as the brightest jewel among their archival depositories. In its first report to the foreign minister, the Commission des archives diplomatiques, which has been charged with the administration of this depository since 1880, referred to the records kept there as the "papers of a Ministry where, par excellence, history is made." In its last report, the commission praised the collection as being unequalled in Europe in the value of the material and the beauty of the volumes. Nor are such opinions unwarranted. If the proof of the pudding is in the eating thereof, so can the importance and value of an archival depository be determined somewhat by the extent to which its records are consulted. On this score, the records of the French foreign office rank high. Of all depositories in Europe, that of the Quai d'Orsay has probably been the most used by foreigners. Indeed, from 1914 to 1936 foreign researchers increased to the point where they always numbered one-half and sometimes two-thirds of the clientele. The largest single group of them came from the United States. But now war prevents visits to the Quai d'Orsay. It seems fitting, therefore, to describe at the present time the program and policy of the Commission des archives diplomatiques over a span of years that coincides roughly with the life of the Third French Republic. The thirteen reports issued by the commission form the basis of this paper.¹

¹ *Rapports sur les travaux de la Commission des archives diplomatiques pendant les années 1880-1881-1882* (Paris, 1883); *Rapport . . . pendant l'année 1883* (Paris, 1884); *Rapport . . . 1884* (Paris, 1885); *Rapport . . . 1885* (Paris, 1886); *Rapport . . . 1886* (Paris, 1887); *Rapport . . . pendant les années 1887 et 1888* (Paris, 1889); *Rapport . . . 1889 et 1890* (Paris, 1891); *Rapport . . . 1891 et 1892* (Paris, 1893); *Rapport . . . 1893 et 1894* (Paris, 1895); *Rapport . . . 1894 à 1904* (Paris, 1904); *Rapport . . . 1905 à 1907* (Paris, 1909); *Rapport . . . 1908 à 1920* (Paris, 1921); *Rapport . . . 1921 à 1936* (Paris, 1937). A brief description of the French foreign office records, together with a list of the transcripts and facsimiles of those relating to United States history in the Library of Congress, is given in S. F. Bemis and G. G. Griffin, *Guide to the Diplomatic History of the United States, 1775-1921* (Washington, 1935), 915-917, 920.

I

When the commission began its operations, the records of the French foreign office were already divided into three main groups: (1) Political Correspondence (*Correspondance politique*), that is, the correspondence between the foreign minister and the French diplomatic agents, (2) Memoirs and Documents (*Mémoires et documents*), consisting of a variety of papers which lie outside the first group, and (3) Consular Correspondence (*Correspondance consulaire*). A part of these records was already bound into volumes—the practise of binding had been followed by the French foreign office for more than a century—but nothing seems to have been done toward numbering and paginating volumes and stamping each document in a volume. In view of losses in the past from theft, the commission at once adopted a policy of numbering and paginating volumes and stamping documents in them. Work began in 1880 on the group Memoirs and Documents; and in 1884 a part of the Political Correspondence was subjected to the same attention.² The early reports of the commission contain details regarding the progress of these measures for safeguarding the records. By 1894, the commission could foresee the completion of this undertaking so far as the Political Correspondence and the Memoirs and Documents were concerned, and it declared its intention of turning next to the Consular Correspondence.³ The next report announced the actual completion of the undertaking with the numbering, stamping, and paginating of the sixteen thousand volumes in these two collections; it urged a policy of classifying and binding the eight thousand cartons of Consular Correspondence, which could then also be numbered, paginated, and stamped.⁴

In 1909 the Consular Correspondence was opened to researchers for the period prior to 1791. In anticipation of this event, the staff classified and bound part of the collection. This work continued apace, with the result that by the end of 1920 the bound volumes numbered 885.⁵ In 1931 a new program was initiated for binding only the more important of the unbound documents antedating 1900. These papers were expected to amount to four thousand or five thousand volumes.

In the meantime the adoption of a subject filing system by the

² *Rapport* . . . 1884, 8.

³ *Rapport* . . . 1893 et 1894, 8.

⁴ *Rapport* . . . 1894 à 1904, 8.

⁵ *Rapport* . . . 1908 à 1920, 8.

operating bureaus of the foreign office had led to a cessation of the traditional policy of binding the Political Correspondence (1896).⁶ The Commission des archives diplomatiques evidently disapproved of binding papers by subject. In its last report it pleaded the advantages of the chronological method of arrangement and urged the resumption of binding according to this system. By 1937, however, the commission was willing to consider binding more important than the arrangement of the individual papers.⁷

II

If the first duty of the archivist is to preserve and protect the records under his care, the second duty is to describe the records in such wise that they can be used, to provide them with suitable finding mediums. An archival depository which has remained at or sunk to the level of a mere document storehouse is virtually useless. Those who guided the destinies of the French foreign office records early showed that they were alert to this second duty—they determined to make the records as available as possible by means of the inventory. Two kinds of inventory were devised, one to serve the needs of the department, the other to serve historical scholars. The second kind, which is printed (the first apparently is not), need only concern us here.

Two types of printed inventory have been produced—the summary (*Inventaire sommaire*) and the analytical (*Inventaire analytique*). The summary inventory, containing brief descriptions of the records, has been applied to both the Memoirs and Documents and to the Political Correspondence. It required three volumes to treat the papers antedating 1830 in the Memoirs and Documents collection.⁸ Work on the first, covering the *Fonds France*, that is, the papers dealing with domestic affairs, was pressed with such vigor that the summary inventory for it appeared as early as 1883.⁹ An inventory for the *Fonds divers*, which consists of papers dealing with foreign affairs, was published in 1892 (460 pp.).¹⁰ And four years later

⁶ *Rapport . . . 1921 à 1936*, 6-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ This collection embraces more than four thousand volumes. *Rapport . . . 1894 à 1904*, II.

⁹ *Inventaire sommaire des archives du Département des Affaires Étrangères. Mémoires et Documents: France* (Paris, 1883). Among the records described in this volume are the Joseph Bonaparte papers.

¹⁰ *Inventaire sommaire des archives du Département des Affaires Étrangères. Mémoires*

the commission published a supplementary volume which treated the material in both fonds not covered in the first two volumes, together with new accessions of records dating down to July 31, 1830.¹¹ Then publication of the summary inventory for the Memoirs and Documents ceased. In its last report the commission announced that another supplementary volume was practically ready for the press.¹² It presumably covers the period 1830 to 1871, the date to which the foreign office is now open to research, but it has not appeared.

Work on the summary inventory for the Political Correspondence did not begin until 1898 because, although these records were the principal collection in the depository, the less complicated arrangement of the documents made research easier than in the Memoirs and Documents. In preparing the inventory the countries with which France has had diplomatic relations were taken up in alphabetical order. The first volume of the inventory appeared in 1903. It treated two thousand volumes of correspondence between the foreign minister and the French envoys in Germany (Allemagne), England (Angleterre), Argentina (Argentine), and Austria (Autriche).¹³ Part I of Volume II, published in 1908, covered Baden to Danzig. Then followed a long interlude of thirteen years until the inventory on Spain (Espagne) appeared at Part II of Volume II (1921). The inventory on the United States (Etats-Unis) was intended to form Volume III, but this volume, already printed in 1921,¹⁴ has never been published.

The analytical inventory has been applied only to the Political Correspondence. Modeled on the English *Calendars of State Papers*,¹⁵ it was designed to contain résumés of or selections from the correspondence of the French diplomatic agents. For a time indeed the commission hoped that this type of inventory would be sufficient for the well-arranged Political Correspondence. The first volume, edited by J. Kaulek, appeared in 1885 under the title *Correspondance politique de MM. de Castillon et de Marillac, ambassadeurs de France en Angleterre, 1537-1542*. The second volume, also edited by M. Kaulek, was published the next year. It was the first of six

et Documents: Fonds divers (Paris, 1892). The *Fonds divers* contain many papers relating to the United States and the West Indies.

¹¹ *Inventaire sommaire des archives du Département des Affaires Étrangères. Mémoires et Documents: Fonds France et Fonds divers supplément* (Paris, 1896).

¹² *Rapport* . . . 1921 à 1936, 9.

¹³ *Inventaire sommaire des archives du Département des Affaires Étrangères. Correspondance politique: Allemagne à Autriche* (Paris, 1903).

¹⁴ *Rapport* . . . 1908 à 1920, 17-18.

¹⁵ *Rapport* . . . 1921 à 1936, 9.

on the *Papiers de Barthélemy, ambassadeur de France en Suisse, 1792-1797*. But with the publication of the ninth volume in the series in 1910, the commission abandoned the project of issuing analytical inventories. Lack of interest in this type of inventory was a contributory cause.¹⁶

So much for inventories. Unable to continue publication of this kind of finding medium, the commission decided in the case of the Political Correspondence to resort to a less ambitious form, namely, an elementary guide. Such a guide, containing 510 pages, appeared in 1936 under the title *Etat numérique des fonds de la correspondance politique de l'origine à 1871*. It treated more than thirteen thousand volumes of manuscripts, and is intended to preclude useless searches as well as unnecessary handling of the volumes. It is not intended to be a substitute for the summary inventory, which, in the opinion of the commission, should be continued.

III

From the beginning the Commission des archives diplomatiques has not been content to make contacts with the learned world only through the publication of inventories and a guide. In addition to the material in the analytical inventory it has tried to make part of its other treasures available through the printing of long series of documents bearing on particular subjects. The first series undertaken was the instructions to the French ambassadors from 1648 to 1789. This *Recueil des instructions données aux ambassadeurs et ministres de France depuis les traités de Westphalie jusqu'à la Révolution française* first began to appear in 1884 with a volume on Austria. The second volume dealt with Sweden. By 1936 twenty-seven volumes had been published, and others were in preparation. It is interesting to note that the late Ambassador Jusserand, after his retirement from the embassy in Washington, edited the first two volumes on England.

Two other major series of published documents are those dealing with the diplomatic origins of the wars of 1870 and 1914. In 1910 appeared the first volume of *Les origines diplomatiques de la guerre de 1870-1871*. The twenty-ninth and last volume came off the press in 1932.¹⁷ In the meantime the German government had published in forty volumes of documents its version of the causes of the World

¹⁶ *Rapport . . . 1908 à 1920*, 19.

¹⁷ The whole publication covers the period December 25, 1863, to August 10, 1870.

War as recorded in the diplomatic dispatches of the agents of the Imperial German government.¹⁸ The British began to publish documents of like character in 1926.¹⁹ Inspired or perhaps impelled by these examples, a special commission of the French foreign office in 1929 began to publish the *Documents diplomatiques français*, 1871-1914. Divided into three series, each with a different initial date, this publication by 1936 had reached twenty-eight volumes and one supplemental volume.

IV

The Commission des archives diplomatiques has always been very careful to inquire into the qualifications and purpose of those who desire to consult its records. Foreigners are required to get permission to do so through their embassies in Paris. By observing such precautions the commission has hoped to prevent the use of the records for polemical purposes or against the national interests of France. At the close of the century it refused, without apparent reason, to allow a young German scholar who was collecting material on the colonial policy of Napoleon to consult the Political Correspondence.²⁰ In recent years, however, control has threatened to slip from its hands in an unexpected way. Owing to the development of modern techniques of reproducing documents at small cost, it has become possible, particularly for foreign organizations equipped with abundant funds, to reproduce large groups of records and make them available to anyone who may wish to consult them. The commission considers this practise contrary to the letter and spirit of its ruling in regard to the reproduction of masses of documents. When M. Barthou was foreign minister, it was decided in principle that the mass reproduction of documents should not be authorized for the period after 1830.²¹ All other requests to make such reproductions were to be decided upon each on its own merits.

Another development which gives the commission concern is the tendency among researchers, again particularly on the part of foreigners, to hire professionals to make researches for them or to

¹⁸ *Die grosse Politik der europäischen Kabinette, 1871-1914* (Berlin, 1924-1927).

¹⁹ *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914* (London, 1926-).

²⁰ Gustaf Roloff, *Die Kolonialpolitik Napoleons I* (Munich and Leipzig, 1899), vii. Roloff's comment on his failure to get access to these records suggests Ranke's reaction to the inaccessibility of the Vatican archives when he was preparing his *History of the Popes*.

²¹ *Rapport . . . 1921 à 1936*, 11.

copy documents. It desires the research to be purely personal. In a word, the commission in principle wishes to see in person at the central depository in the Quai d'Orsay all those who use its records. By the same token, it opposes the opening of the archives of the diplomatic and consular posts to research.

V

In concluding its last report, the commission makes a plea for the resumption of the "program of 1880." This means classifying, binding, and inventorying the documents as they are progressively opened to research. Such a program requires workers. And workers are precisely what the commission has woefully lacked. Some archival depositories have felt handicapped because their staffs have not been increased to meet growing demands. That of the French foreign office during the thirty years prior to 1936 suffered a diminution in personnel of three-fourths. No wonder the program of 1880 has been interrupted!

Perhaps the future historian will see in these thirteen reports of the Commission des archives diplomatiques a reflection of the rise and decline of the Third French Republic. Whatever he sees, it is an arresting fact that the finest work of the commission was done during the period when the republic was struggling for existence. A number of celebrated scholars such as Lavissee, Rambaud, Masson, Sorel, Aulard, and Hanotaux then served on the commission. But once the republic was thoroughly established at home and abroad it became niggardly about supplying funds for the care and preservation of its foreign office records, to say nothing of making provision for the publication of inventories.

To what extent is the program of 1880 praiseworthy or expedient in 1941? Every scholar who has used the inventories prepared under the direction of the Commission des archives diplomatiques can hardly fail to favor the continuation of such useful work. A good inventory saves him time and trouble. It also facilitates the servicing of the records. The commission's policy in favor of binding documents is another matter. No doubt binding is one of the best methods to ensure the preservation of manuscripts, and surely the researcher would prefer to use a bound volume rather than loose papers brought him in bundles or cartons. Yet the growing mass of modern records seem to compel the conclusion that the policy of binding is antiquated. Probably only a portion of the records can be bound in the future

and the selection must be made with the greatest care. The publication of modern documents will probably be curtailed also. If the publication of the instructions to the French ambassadors during the century and a half before the French Revolution, begun in 1884, is not yet complete, one can only imagine how long it would take to publish a similar series on the period since 1789.

The commission's protest against modern "streamlined" methods of research is worthy of comment. No doubt it has seemed alarming to the members of this learned body, rooted in tradition, to view the arrival of foreigners or Frenchmen in the pay of foreigners, intent on the reproduction of large groups of records for free use in another country. But is such reproduction truly alarming? Is there any evidence that documents reproduced in this manner have been used for polemical purposes or against the national interests of France? This writer knows of none. On the other hand, he can mention several American scholars—Childs, Logan, Setser—who by the aid of photostat copies of certain French foreign office records in the Library of Congress have produced books of such high quality that any country including France ought to be proud to claim them.²² As for the printing of documents *in extenso*, such a volume as Turner's *Correspondence of the French Ministers to the United States, 1791-1797* has benefited innumerable students of the period without injuring France.

It is well to point out further that for a number of years—this may still be true—the scholar who visited the Quai d'Orsay in person was handicapped by the limited schedule of the search room. One could work there only in the afternoon from two to six. And from the middle of July to the end of August the search room was closed entirely. This situation was ruinous to the student who had time and means to spend only a summer in Paris. Such a student could scarcely be censured for wishing it were possible to consult photographic reproductions of the French foreign office records in his own country. Working conditions in American archives and libraries are certainly far superior to those in similar institutions in Europe.

This is not to say, however, that the commission's desire to see

²² Frances Sergeant Childs, *French Refugee Life in the United States, 1790-1800: an American Chapter of the French Revolution* (Baltimore, 1940); Rayford W. Logan, *The Diplomatic Relations of the United States with Haiti 1776-1891* (Chapel Hill, 1941); Vernon G. Setser, *The Commercial Reciprocity Policy of the United States, 1774-1829* (Philadelphia, 1937).

the searcher in person at the Quai d'Orsay has no validity. History is not to be found in manuscripts alone. In a famous old city like Paris, it is in the palaces, the churches, the museums, in the public squares and gardens, the cemeteries, the bridges, it is in the very air. The American searcher feasts his eyes on all or part of these evidences of the creative spirit of the French people on his way to and from the Quai d'Orsay. And in the foreign office building paintings of scenes from the reigns of Louis Philippe and Napoleon III look down upon him as he toils up the stairway to the search room on the second floor. If he be vexed over the hours and the working facilities, let him rejoice the more over the advantages to be had in his own country. And when he returns, let him remember the points in which the French excel and thus help to keep us from ever becoming as provincial as the French, often justly, are accused of being. It would be a pity in fact, as Dr. Jameson once remarked, if our young scholars became so content to use photographic reproductions as to feel no urge to visit the countries which produced the original documents.

CARL LUDWIG LOKKE

The National Archives