

REPORT ON THE DESTRUCTION BY THE  
GERMANS, SEPTEMBER 30, 1943, OF THE  
DEPOSITORY OF PRICELESS HISTOR-  
ICAL RECORDS OF THE NAPLES  
STATE ARCHIVES<sup>1</sup>

BY ORDER of the Ministry of the Interior, with the object of removing them from the dangers of aerial attacks, I arranged and attended to the transfer of the most valuable historical documents of the State Archives of Naples to the Montesano villa near San Paolo Belsito, about thirty kilometers from Naples. In the halls of that solid building there thus deposited more than 30,000 volumes and about 50,000 parchments, for the most part contained in 866 cases.

When the Allied Army was already near, in the afternoon of September 28, there appeared at Montesano villa a squad of three German soliders in search of calves.

For some weeks already the country in the Nola region had been infested with these squads, of three soldiers each, well-armed with sub-machine guns; some were stealing hens and eggs from private homes, others were taking cows and pigs, some were seizing able-bodied men, others were plundering houses and robbing them of objects of value. In these last days other squads composed of wreckers joined them; some mined the public buildings and the best private houses, others set fire to industrial establishments, mills, warehouses, railway stations, workshops, etc.

When the soldiers of the squad that came to the Montesano villa

<sup>1</sup> The records destroyed in the wanton outrage described in this document represent the most serious loss to the historian yet reported from Italy. They comprised a selection of the more valuable holdings of the Royal Archives at Naples, removed to the Montesano villa, supposedly for greater safety. But slight damage was reported to the larger volume of less valuable material that was left in the archives building at Naples to take its chances.

Count Filangieri, author of this account, is a member of an old Neapolitan family, an authority on medieval and modern Italian history and art, and author of books and articles in these fields. An article by him on the Naples archives, illustrated with photographs of the building, appeared in the Italian journal *Archivi* for 1938 (Serie I, Anno V), 233-242.

A copy of Count Filangieri's report was given to Fred W. Shipman, director of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, when he was in Italy in April, by Fausto Nicolini, inspector general of the archives of state. This translation from the Italian was made by Arthur H. Leavitt and Salvatore D. Nerboso of the staff of the National Archives.

did not find with the peasants the calves which they knew existed, they entered with violence the ground floor of the villa, where they saw the great pile of cases containing the documents. When asked what those cases contained, the archives personnel living in the villa informed them of the presence in that depository of the historical documents of the State Archives of Naples. Having learned this, they went away without saying anything.

The next morning, September 29, there appeared at the Montesano villa an officer and another soldier, who, after asking the director of the depository, Comm. Antonio Capograssi, for a valise, wished to visit the rooms where the documents were. He had one of the cases opened and they examined the volumes. The director informed them of the importance of these documents, furnishing them all suitable explanations to demonstrate the purely cultural character of that depository. After having examined everything, the officer said: "All right," and left.

As I was in my villa in Livardi, a little distance from that place, I was immediately informed of what happened by the business manager of the archives, Lt. Col. Guiseppa Basile, who was also living at Montesano villa. But since as far as I knew no hostile act had been committed up to that time by the Germans against cultural institutions, I was not worried. Neither was I worried by the killing of a German soldier a few days before in the square at San Paolo Belsito, because, although the destruction of the public buildings and some country houses by mines had been threatened, nothing had come of that threat.

In the morning of the thirtieth I was informed by the mistress of the villa, Signora Santamaria Contieri, that in the late afternoon of the previous day another squad of German soldiers had appeared at the Montesano villa and had entered the cellars underneath the rooms and had hung around for some time. This had aroused the suspicion that they had mined the villa.

Although the collapse of the villa would not represent a serious danger to the manuscripts enclosed in solid cases piled up in four rows, one above another, still I thought it fitting to call attention of the local German commander to his responsibility. I therefore addressed a letter to him in which I described in summary the contents of that depository, the fact that it belonged to the Naples state archives, and the exclusively historical character of the manuscripts.

I also listed for him the series of documents which even concerned the history of the various countries of Europe, including Germany, adding that various German students had studied them and inviting the said commander to report the nature of that depository of documents to the German Historical Institute in Rome.

One of the archives guards who took my letter to the Montesano villa at about 9:15 met a squad of three German soldiers on motor-cycles armed, as usual, with sub-machine guns, who were going towards the villa. They had hardly arrived when they announced that within fifteen minutes they would set fire to the whole depository of documents. Then my letter was handed to the man who was commanding the squad and who had formed part of the squad brought there the day before. And as this man did not understand Italian the letter was entirely translated for him into French by Director Capograssi and Signora Contieri, who happened to be there. After the German had listened to the letter he brutally snatched the letter and the lists of documents and throwing them into the air, shouted: "Commander know everything, order burn."

The director vainly sought to obtain a delay in order to warn me and to send my letter to the commander; the three soldiers immediately began the work of destruction by placing paper, straw, and gunpowder in the four corners and in the center of each room and by setting the fire in such a way that in a few minutes the whole villa became an immense pyre.

After assuring themselves that the fire could not be extinguished, they went away but returned an hour later to make certain that the work of destruction was complete.

After their first departure the guards and the peasants tried to save what they could; but the violence of the fire was so great that only eleven cases of notarial registers and ninety-seven cartons of the Farnese Archives could be dragged to safety.

From the investigations made afterwards, I found out that the German commander who was at Nola a few days before was already transferred to Cancellio and that various squads of pillagers and wreckers were coming from Sarno—reasons for which I do not exclude the possibility that the orders to destroy the archives came from Naples. I have not succeeded in learning anything precise about the names of the higher officials responsible for the crime. From some I have learned that a certain notice posted at Nola bore the signa-

ture Kellermann. Others have mentioned a Captain Sommerfeld [Sommerfeld?].

The extent of the disaster is enormous. In that depository I had collected all the most precious series of documents coming from the various archives of the south of Italy. And their destruction has created an immense void in the historical sources of European civilization, a void which nothing will ever be able to fill.

Among the most precious documents lost are the series of 378 registers of the Anjou Chancery (1265-1435), which was one of the most valuable historical sources of the Middle Ages, the registers of the Aragon Chancery, the manuscripts, codices, autograph collections, and original treaties of the kingdom of Naples, and famous political trials; and the greater part of the archives of the Royal House of Bourbon, of the Farnese House, of the Royal Summary Court, of the Collateral Council, of the Royal Chamber of Santa Chiara, of the Secretariat of the Viceroy, of the Superior Chaplaincy, of the Council of Sicily, of the Ministries of the Presidency and of Foreign Affairs of Bourbon, of the Order of Malta, of the Feudal Commission, of the Ancient Treasury, of the Conservatory Court of the Nobility, of the most ancient notaries, has been destroyed.

COUNT RICCARDO FILANGIERI

Royal State Archives at Naples