NORWEGIAN ARCHIVES IN THE WAR[1]

ONE fate is common to all archives: they are always in danger of being destroyed. Ink may fade, paper may moulder, roofs may leak and let in water, cellars may be flooded or may give shelter to mice and rats who love to gorge on precious documents, and fire may consume both houses and treasures. Even the archivists themselves, zealous for order or dogmatic in their principles, may be too eager in their scrap-heap policies. (Those policies, of course, belong to the past; modern archivists are perhaps too much afraid of discarding old paper.) In short, there are a thousand ways of destruction menacing archives. And of them, war is probably the most spectacular for it may bring general catastrophe to what centuries of patient work have wrought.

Most European countries have been harried by wars time after time during the past centuries. Only Great Britain, until recently happily isolated from the continent, has most nearly escaped warfare within its own territory. Therefore, Great Britain has been able to preserve unbroken series of archives to an extent elsewhere unsurpassed. The two kingdoms on the Scandinavian peninsula, too, have been fortunate in very rarely seeing enemies within their borders, and from 1814, they lived for 125 years in uninterrupted peace. But now, since 1940, Norway has suffered occupation by a cruel enemy who has looted the country in many ways. Naturally, the question arises what, under such conditions, may have happened to the archives of the country.

Let me say it at once: The main archives of Norway have escaped destruction, whether total or partial, at the hands of the Germans. I beg you, however, to notice the reservation contained in the last words. And let me then explain how this happened.

The fact is that we had expected and were, at least in this regard, prepared for the German attack. We were not prepared for it in the form in which it finally came. But we had seen the fate of Warsaw, and we considered the possibility of having our capital, Oslo, similarly wrecked by German bombers. We had not expected a complete invasion and occupation. I, for one, at any rate, imagined that an enemy would not easily be able to pass the fortifications of the fjord

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leading in to Oslo. Quite generally, I think, we did not take into account an invasion by air, by troops being landed as parachutists from carrier planes. You must remember that it was a new experience when it happened in Norway. But we did not doubt that the Germans, if they found it convenient to begin war against Norway, would not hesitate to send their war planes over Oslo and to bomb the open city. For this possibility we prepared ourselves.

The foremost question regarded the protection of our National Archives or, as we call this institution in Norwegian, the *Riksarkiv*, where all the records of the central administration of the kingdom prior to about 1880 were united. The chief archivist of Norway, Dr. Asgaut Steinnes, whom many American archivists know from his visit to this country shortly before the war, planned what to do about these archives. It was not thought necessary to move them out of the city. There was nothing in them that might possibly tempt the greed of a conqueror. The plan would be to find a safe place where these collections could not be hurt by hostile bombs. It so happened that only a couple of blocks away from the archives building a magnificent business house was left practically empty because the bank that had had it put up had gone bankrupt. The basement of this building was considered as safe as any place could be, and in the course of some months large parts of the records in the National Archives were moved there. As it turned out, the city of Oslo was not bombed by the Germans but to a very small extent. The city was surrendered after the airports at both sides of it were captured. Then German troops were able to march in without any resistance because there were neither troops nor fortifications within the city. Thus, the national archives were not endangered by the invasion, and I have not heard of anything being done to them by the Germans afterwards.

What may happen to them during the fight to liberate Norway is another question. Oslo has been bombed once by the British. It was on September 25, 1942, when Quisling celebrated the second anniversary of his puppet or traitor government. The celebration was broken up by the visit of British planes, and on that occasion some parts of the city were destroyed, not however those parts where the national archives were lodged. Still larger parts of the city were wiped out by the great explosion that occurred in the port of Oslo on December 19, 1943. But then again the national archives

escaped the blast. Such occurrences clearly demonstrate that danger may still be ahead. As long as the Germans remain in Norway, nothing there can be absolutely safe.

There were—and are—many public archives in Oslo other than those in the central National Archives. Until only a few years back, the national archives were lodged in the house of the parliament (which in Norwegian we call the *Storthing*), and they were at that time united with the local archives of the administration, civil and ecclesiastic, of the whole of eastern Norway south of Trondheim. These local archives were still in the house of the *Storthing* when Norway was invaded. Besides, preserved there were the legislative archives for the whole period of our parliamentary government, since 1814. Then the Germans made this building the center of their administration of Norway. Whether they removed the archives or left them at the spot, I am unable to tell. Anyway, I have no reason to think that they have suffered any damage during the period of occupation. The same holds true about the archives of the Supreme Court and of the different departments of administration.

One group of governmental archives was the natural object of particular concern. That was the archives of the Department of Foreign Affairs for the period since 1905, the year when Norway took over the independent control of its foreign relations. Not only had these archives a special importance, but they could be expected to attract the particular attention of foreign invaders and, obviously, they contained a number of secret documents that ought not to fall into enemy hands. Very early after the outbreak of the war, therefore, the question of preserving these archives from destruction or from appropriation by enemies was taken up within the department.

I want to give due recognition to the man who most particularly pressed the question of measures for this purpose. He was the chief of the so-called administrative division of the department (the two other divisions dealt with politics and with commerce). His name is William M. Johannessen, and he is still in Norway, taking care of what remains there of the department. He came repeatedly to me and urged on me the necessity of preparing for taking away from Oslo everything needed for the administration of foreign affairs in the event that Oslo was attacked by enemy forces. You will notice that he thought not only of secret papers but also of all papers in use for current affairs. I used to tease him a little for his eagerness

to get away from Oslo as though he were afraid of losing his life by staying there. But, of course, I took his suggestion seriously and authorized him to take the necessary measures.

After that was decided, the matter was laid in the hands of the chief archivist of the department, Mr. Reidar Omang, and he planned what should be done in case of war. He made up lists of all records that would have to be taken away, and he bought a large number of boxes fitted to the size of our dossiers.

As a consequence, when the Germans attacked and, in the early dawn of April 9, 1940, the Norwegian government resolved to flee Oslo, in the Department of Foreign Affairs everything was ready for removal. Mr. Omang, who lived in one of the suburbs of Oslo, was called to the department by telephone. He immediately set to work to collect all the papers previously listed and to pack them in the boxes provided. A few hours later, three big trucks loaded with documents were driven away and actually left Oslo at one end of the city while the Germans marched in from another end.

Because, in that way, essential parts of the records regarding foreign affairs were rescued, the Germans were prevented from finding any papers there which they could use for political purposes. Of course, they ransacked the department and they also searched my private house. They may have carried off and perhaps destroyed my personal collections of manuscripts and historical material. But almost all of my political papers were in the department and were taken away with the department records. That is particularly true as to many secret military papers which I had in my possession as ex-officio member of the war board of Norway. Consequently, when the German Foreign Office in the spring of 1940 published a White Book containing documents that were intended to prove that Great Britain and France had planned an occupation of Norway that was only at the last moment prevented by the German invasion, and that the Norwegian government had conspired with the two Western Powers for this purpose, there was not a single document from Norwegian archives in the book.

Incidentally, the documents published proved nothing of what the Germans read into them. All of them were papers found in the possession of British officers captured in Norway. In the White Book it is pretended that one of the documents was actually found in the Norwegian Department of Foreign Affairs. But that is not true. As

a matter of fact, it was found in the private house of our prime minister, and it was not an official document at all. It consisted of personal notes made by a member of the cabinet during a discussion about the French-British demand for permission to send troops through Norway to the assistance of Finland against Russia. The only damaging word in these notes, according to the Germans, was a reported utterance by me, saying that if Norway should be forced into the war, we must take care not to come in on the wrong side. Ribbentrop declared this a highly cynical remark because he concluded—and I would not challenge his conclusion—that "the wrong side" evidently meant Germany.

The three trucks with the documents that Mr. Omang took along from the department followed the Norwegian government for a couple of days. But when it proved impossible to find a safe residence for any length of time because of the steady pursuit by German bombers, he took his archives across the frontier into Sweden. There they remained for awhile but were later safely taken over to the government residing in London where, still under the care of Mr. Omang, they now are at the disposal of the foreign minister.

On the way through Norway one particular part of these archives was separated from the main bulk of them. We had found it necessary to prepare a radical change of our secret cipher system, and it seemed risky to carry the material worked up for the new system into a foreign country. So this material was hidden at a certain place high up in Norway, and there I think it is still. Besides me, only two people know where it was stored.

The fate of the archives of foreign affairs that were left in Oslo is somewhat uncertain. The building of the Department of Foreign Affairs was taken over by the German Gestapo and in that way came to be used for deplorable and shameful purposes. Of course, even though the Germans set up a puppet government in Norway, they did not leave to these miserable stooges any conduct of foreign affairs. The bureaus of the former Norwegian department which still were allowed to function were transferred to the Department of Interior. Whether only a part or the whole of the department archives were transferred there at the same time, I don't know. I am afraid much was left in the original department building and presumably was destroyed by the British bombing of September 25, 1942, which I have mentioned. Naturally the office of the Gestapo

was one of the buildings chosen as a target of the bombers, and it was completely blasted.

I must add some words about the local archives of Norway, although the positive information I am able to give is very slight. Of course, there are all kinds of archives around in the country, in every city, town, and parish. Outside Oslo there are three public archives organized to receive documents of public administration. They are located in Christiansand for the south, in Bergen for the west, and in Trondheim for the north of Norway. Of these cities, Bergen has been bombed at least three times by the British, and, besides, a large part of the city was wiped out by an explosion in the port in February of this year. Consequently, I have great fears about what may have happened to the archives there.

Several of the smaller cities and towns of Norway were destroyed by the Germans during their invasion. They had to fight for two full months before the occupation was completed, and in the course of this warfare they bombed mercilessly both military and non-military places. In fact, very few places in Norway were fortified or occupied by military forces, but the Germans did not feel bound by any laws of war or any of the treaties they themselves had signed. In many cases whole cities were completely burned down simply, as it seemed, for the pleasure of destruction. No doubt, in such cases the local archives were reduced to ashes together with the cities.

Personally I saw the whole little city of Molde being consumed by fire from the one end to the other, and I was very sorry about its archives. Molde was the capital of one of the twenty counties of Norway and so it preserved, besides the city archives, the county archives as well. I happened to have worked in these county archives, thirty-five years earlier, in the course of my historical researches. The country around Molde was the district where, about 1830, the farmers' movement had started that really was the beginning of the great democratic rising which came to shape Norwegian politics for the remainder of the nineteenth century. The archives of Molde had a particular importance for this history. Now, probably, they don't exist any more.

This is only one instance of what local archives may mean for the study of the national history of a country. Therefore I could not

be silent about the destruction of such local archives at the hands of the Germans.

Last month, the war again started in Norway, and already we have heard about three small cities in the farthest north-eastern part of the country that have been completely burned down. Obviously, the Germans pursue the same policies there as we have heard they are pursuing in Holland. Wherever they are forced to pull out, they leave the land behind them as completely devastated as possible.

Thus, the danger to the Norwegian archives is not yet over. We may be prepared to lose still more of them. Of course, we have to be glad that until now they have not fared worse than they have. But every loss of archives is an impediment to future administration and makes national reconstruction more difficult. The loss to historical studies is evident to all archivists. Here is a field where reparations cannot help. Lost archives cannot be replaced.

Those are considerations that will make archivists just as anxious as other people for the establishment of a lasting peace.

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