ABSTRACT: During wartime, ammunition plants, key river crossings, and even entire cities are military objectives. Seldom does one think of archives as such an objective. However, the possession and exploitation of records and archives during wartime is an important means of military power and control. This article will introduce the concept of “intelligence value” as it applies to records, followed by an examination of military forces in Europe during World War II and their behavior towards archives and records, particularly those of civil and political origin.

Introduction

Archivist Ernst Posner, a German Jew who fled Europe in 1939, once mused that the smashing initial defeat of the French in World War II was due to the fact that the Germans “had entered the war with a better filing system.” Although the comment is tongue in cheek, it has an element of truth. Posner explained his conclusion by pointing out that “as early as 1935 the German authorities began the systematic exploitation of records of the First World War.” Meticulous record keepers themselves, the Germans brought a new degree of military professionalism into the wartime exploitation of records, ranging from standard military intelligence to the justification of genocide and cultural erasure. Clearly aware of the power such documents possessed, both for themselves and for their enemies, the Germans calculated their actions accordingly. Allied forces also recognized the value of archives and records in their military campaigns, although they did not directly address the issue until relatively late in the war.

This article will explore the concept of “intelligence value” as it relates to records, and examine a variety of ways military forces of both sides dealt with archives and manuscript repositories in their path. This will not be a balanced account: the vast majority of material published on the subject was produced during and shortly after the war, resulting in a distinctly pro-Allies slant to the subject. However, it is clear from these limited examples that both sides recognized the value of records and archives on a variety of levels: military, administrative, and cultural.
Intelligence Value: Records at Risk

Most archivists are familiar with the essential archival values such as administrative value, legal value, and historical value. To this list of values I would propose adding another: that of “intelligence value.” Used in a military or political sense, this is the value information has for enemies or opponents of the creating or possessing individual or agency. Intelligence value should not be confused with the narrower and more familiar term, “military intelligence.” A document can have intelligence value, not only for the military, but also for personal enemies (blackmail); for business rivals (trade secrets); for political enemies (scandals); and for others.

Documents with the greatest importance to the creator or possessor, particularly secret documents, also generally pose the greatest risk if the information is leaked to the press, obtained by enemies, or destroyed. The more important the documents are to the possessor or creator, the more volatile the records become. For instance, state secrets are deemed “top secret,” not only for their importance to the government and national security, but also because such information becomes a threat or liability if it falls into the wrong hands.

Because of this double nature, records with intelligence value don’t “behave” like most other records. During times of war or political intrigue, such records become not only legitimate targets of enemy forces or agents, but—and here is the irony—they can become targets for destruction or disruption by the very persons or agencies that created them! Certainly, many records are destroyed on a regular basis by their creators, but this is primarily because the records have lost their administrative or other practical uses. Seldom are records of current use and extreme administrative importance destroyed voluntarily, unless the creators or custodians of those records feel themselves threatened and fear that capture or use of these records by others will jeopardize their prestige, control, power, or existence.

Destruction, however, is usually an option of last resort. More likely, if records containing intelligence value are threatened, they may be removed from the rest of the fonds, taken to a place of safekeeping (a relative term, at best), or otherwise removed from their archival context. Though political intrigue or legal action can threaten records that have intelligence value, nowhere does the issue of intelligence value come into greater focus than in a time of war.

World War II: the Fate of Records

During World War II both sides exploited captured records in a variety of ways. Of course, there are many instances where captured records played a traditional military intelligence role. The famous “corpse that fooled the Axis,” dispatches and maps taken from captured prisoners, and secret codebooks all figured prominently in espionage and intelligence activities during the war. The history of these operations during the war is voluminous, and will receive only passing mention here.²

Of more interest are the ways civil affairs officers, military police, soldiers, government officials, and groups of private citizens dealt with caches and repositories of archival and manuscript materials in the path of advancing and retreating armies.
For example, captured records in secure sectors behind the lines served a valuable role in establishing and maintaining an occupation government, particularly when government or civil repositories fell into the hands of the occupying forces. At other times, treasured manuscript collections or archival documents were destroyed or protected in an effort to make a statement about the worthiness of a particular people or culture. In addition to the primary use of captured records, whether in a military, administrative, or cultural-political capacity, there was almost always a propagandistic spin put forth for the consumption of victims or supporters of the occupying force. Thus, the intelligence value of records can be put to a variety of uses, often simultaneously. Viewed broadly, the fate of records during the Second World War falls into four categories:

- The responses by record keepers to threats
- The capture and exploitation of records
- The deliberate targeting of records
- The protection of records

The rest of this paper will explore these four categories, the repatriation of records after the war, and the implications of this archival history for the present.

**Response to Threats: Escape, Disruption, and Self-Destruction**

As German forces entered Norway in 1940, Halvdan Koht, Minister of Foreign Affairs, knew his office possessed documents that would be of great interest to the enemy. Koht described to the Society of American Archivists in 1944 the plight of records under his custody during the German invasion. The Foreign Affairs records “contained a number of secret documents that ought not to fall into enemy hands.” Still earlier in the war, Koht’s department already was discussing what to do with these records should Germany attack or invade Norway. Archivist Reidar Omang drew up a list of records that should be evacuated, and prepared by obtaining boxes of appropriate size. On April 9, 1940, the government evacuated Oslo and, in a matter of a few hours, the necessary records were boxed and on their way out of town on three trucks—just as the Germans were marching in. Despite the despair of retreat, there was relief, for “the Germans were prevented from finding any papers there [at the Foreign Affairs office] which they could use for political purposes.” The fleeing administration removed a small portion of the safeguarded records concerning codes and ciphers and secreted them in the Norwegian countryside. It was deemed a greater risk to cross the border with the materials than it was to keep them in Norway at a secret location. The remainder of the evacuated archives were taken into Sweden in an effort to protect them from German bombs, and eventually made their way to the exiled government of Norway in London.3

This brief example demonstrates many aspects relating to records containing intelligence value. First, the documents—though dating back as far as 1905—were of current importance to the Norwegian Foreign Affairs office. They were important for ongoing foreign relations—even though Norway was a government in exile—and, it was feared, such records might endanger many of Norway’s friends and allies if the documents fell into German hands. Here we see the overlapping administrative and intelligence values of these records. They were necessary for the continued activities of the
Norwegian government (administrative value), but posed a threat—more to allied nations than to Norway—if they fell into enemy hands (intelligence value).

It is quite possible that the intelligence value given to records by their possessors or creators is not given equal importance by the very enemy that they fear. For instance, in this case, the Norwegians clearly felt that German possession and exploitation of these records would endanger Norwegian allies and, therefore, Norway itself. However, does it then follow that the Germans must necessarily see such intelligence value in these records? Is intelligence value a two-way street? No. The creators know their records; they know the value of the information in the records and what it could mean if that information fell into the wrong hands. In general, the enemy does not know the exact contents of the records and can only predict what records will be of use, usually based on experience or analogous record-keeping practices by their own forces and government. In this case, however, the Norwegians’ fears were well-founded. In 1940 the Germans published a propagandistic “White Book.” The book claimed that France and Great Britain planned to occupy Norway and that such an occupation was prevented only by the timely arrival of German troops. The Norwegian government was said to be collaborating with the French and English, yet no Norwegian documents appeared in the book. Their absence, Koht claims, is because of the timely evacuation of important documents from the Foreign Affairs office.

Documents in other government offices met a worse fate at the hands of their own creators. During the launching of Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of Russia, personnel in both the German embassy in Moscow and the Soviet embassy in Berlin destroyed key documents, as staffs of both embassies knew a swift evacuation was necessary. Later, in the war on the eastern front, nearly 750,000 files from the Soviet Supreme Council (Verkhovniy Sovet) were destroyed, while a mere 5,000 were saved. At the Main Administration of Labor Camps and Colonies (GULAG), over 95,000 files were evacuated and over a million destroyed. These actions were a desperate effort to prevent the capture of important documents by the Nazis as Soviet forces retreated. Other Russian records became casualties of war when Luftwaffe bombing runs destroyed Soviet government offices and other repositories. Ironically, documents that survived to be captured by German forces often outlasted the war.

During the war the Nazis captured or looted large quantities of records and cultural artifacts. German forces often sought to protect archives and other cultural objects from Allied bombs by secreting them in abandoned mines and other locations. For instance, in a mine at Heimboldshausen, there were “over a million books, maps, and manuscripts of the Prussian State and other libraries.” At the Fortress of Ehrenbreitstein, another large cache was found containing the archives of numerous large cities such as Bonn, Dusseldorf, and Koblenz, the Royal Archives of the House of Orange-Nassau, and the archives of the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg, all totaling “several million items.”

As the tide of war turned against them, the Germans would often attempt to destroy their stockpiles of documents and other treasures such as works of art, at one point going so far as to label crates with the warning “Marble: Do Not Drop.” It was a ruse. The crates contained bombs that were to be detonated as the Allies approached. Sometimes, German troops would pile documents and works of art into recently evacuated
military installations, such as anti-aircraft towers, which would likely be destroyed by enemy fire.

But, like the Russians, retreating Nazis went to great lengths to destroy their own records as well. In October 1944, Russian forces advanced into eastern Poland and neared Warsaw. In response to the approaching Russian army, the Nazis at Auschwitz began a desperate and “systematic destruction of the evidence of mass murder” that had taken place there during the last four years. With the Russians coming closer and closer, the Nazis gathered “the files about individual prisoners, and the death certificates of hundreds of thousands of people, Jews and non-Jews alike, [which were] brought to one of the two remaining crematoria and burned.” The Nazi goal was that “all trace of the documents, as all trace of the corpses, was to be obliterated.” The bitter irony in the Auschwitz example is that, since the Nazis could do nothing further to destroy their victims once the bodies had been cremated, they destroyed every shred of evidence that the victims ever existed.

**Occupation: Capture and Exploitation**

In many other instances records were not evacuated or destroyed, but were put to immediate administrative use by the occupying force. This is because civil documents contain information on public policies, natural resources, the local population, and the structure and operation of the government. Indeed, in the modern era, records and archives are the very machinery of government and, like a munitions plant or other industrial resource, the machinery of government can be readily exploited by an occupying force. In times of war, records and archives may be a nation’s only remaining and practical manifestation of power. Heads of state may flee or die, but the records often remain.

Posner observed that public records become “the continuous source of information for the regime of occupation.” They provide immediate information about residents, government structure, government officials, and more that can be put to instant use by an occupying force. Perhaps the greatest value of records to an occupying force is that they enable the invaders to make use of preexisting government structure. For instance, when Belgium and France came under German occupation, many local authorities remained in their positions and were held responsible for the loyal behavior of their subordinates and citizens.

Military and civilian officials realized the administrative value of records for occupation forces and the role of records in documenting the cultural heritage of various nations. So important were these matters to the contending forces that both sides established special military units devoted to the identification and security of archival materials. After an initial assessment by these units, decisions were made concerning the ultimate disposition of the records, depending upon the overall goal of the military force. If an occupation government were to be established, military intelligence or civil affairs officers might take over custody of the records in order to investigate activities of enemy forces that had recently evacuated the area or to identify loyal or disloyal citizens.
The value of an occupied country's records was clear to the Germans early in the war when they invaded Poland. The Germans implemented a sweeping program of securing and exploiting Polish records for their own purposes, both administrative and cultural. Posner found that the Germans went "considerably beyond what has been considered legitimate on the part of an invader. They have established the tightest, most thoroughly organized, and most active system of protection and utilization of records of which we know. . . . it is evidence of the importance they assign to records in their regime."11

Rebellious citizens chafing under the oppression of the Nazis also recognized the importance and power of records to the administration and authority of an occupying force. In the Netherlands, "patriots" launched attacks on German-held "'documentary nerve centers' to hamper the enemy-controlled machinery in carrying out the conscription of labor." The Dutch citizens raided the Bureau of Vital Statistics, destroying "population registers and other records of the greatest importance." They were reported to be wearing police uniforms—a symbolic mimicking of state authority.12

In this situation, the concept of intelligence value and the administrative value related to it functioned on several levels. Here the records possessed:
- Original administrative value to the government authorities of the Netherlands
- Intelligence value to an occupying German force
- Administrative value to the occupying Germans who took custody of the records
- Intelligence value to the local citizens who readily understood the administrative implications of having these records fall into German hands

The citizens, in turn, attempted to sabotage this administrative power by destroying records that were of earlier use and significance to them, but then rendered dangerous by German possession.

German troops moved in a blitzkrieg across much of Europe, entering many capitals and urban centers rapidly and with little resistance. The Germans generally did not face prolonged battles for sites that were likely to have large archival holdings and, therefore, the archives were found in relatively good condition and could be readily exploited.

American forces had a different experience. They fought their way into and across the continent of Europe against fierce German resistance. Entire cities were virtually destroyed as Allied forces carpet bombed strategic centers and shelling intensified as opposing forces battled for control. The scope of the war in Europe also meant that a gain in territory usually covered a wide area, while localized record keeping meant that the occupied area contained many repositories. Advances were often rapid, though highly destructive, and Allied troops had to deal with German forces who often secreted their own archives and papers, as well as other captured archives.

Americans often were prevented from making quick, exploitative use of the archival materials they found because the records had been destroyed or removed to an unknown location prior to the arrival of American troops. Those archives left behind by the Germans often were poorly housed or extremely disorganized due to rapid evacuation or combination with other archives. Complicating matters, the American forces
rarely had adequate numbers of trained personnel to handle the massive amounts of archival materials that came into their possession.

Despite these handicaps, as Allied forces advanced in Europe, they captured and exploited archival troves for their own benefit. So important was the rapid identification and security of official or makeshift German repositories of “cultural treasures” (including art, archives, and other materials) that a special detachment of Civil Affairs officers from British and American forces was created in 1944, entitled the “Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives” (MFAA) program. Better known for its work in locating and returning plundered works of art, this organization was also charged with securing and protecting libraries, archives, and other objects of cultural significance from the hazards of war.

Woefully understaffed for the task in front of them, one veteran states that the MFAA averaged a mere 10 officers on duty for the entire continent of Europe. Despite states that there were never more than 35 men on duty at any one time, though total MFAA numbers reached approximately 185 servicemen. Some idea of the enormity of the task confronting the MFAA can be seen in a summary of operations from their first four months, when “a total of 1,240 sites and 597 towns were examined by a statistical average of two and a half MFAA officers.”

MFAA personnel faced a tough battle. Not only did this small group face an enormous task, the reporting structure and authority of MFAA officers were vague. Though given the clearly defined mission of protecting cultural treasures, MFAA officers were not granted enforcement authority and relied upon cooperation with superior officers in other branches of service.

There were also internal squabbles among MFAA officers. About half of the MFAA staff had been in the armed forces when the MFAA was organized and were transferred into this new unit. These staff retained their rank and military insignia and often found that their emblems and patches from their old unit served them well in relations with superior officers. The other half of MFAA personnel was composed of men who had been commissioned directly from their curatorial and archival jobs in civilian life into MFAA service. These newly commissioned officers were often derisively called “bird-in-a-gilded-cage” officers by their colleagues, because they lacked a branch of service insignia, and their distinctive patch consisted of “a circle containing parts of an eagle.”

Initially, these men from civilian life found their jobs more difficult due to a lack of familiarity with front-line military operations and rebuffs by MFAA colleagues who had military experience.

Despite internal squabbling and inadequate numbers for the task before them, MFAA officers took their work seriously. They considered it an essential part of their duty to follow just behind front-line troops in an effort to rapidly identify and secure threatened sites of cultural significance. Their dedication to this task cost two members of the MFAA their lives. U.S. Capt. Walter J. Huchthausen was killed by a sniper when he responded “to a call for technical artistic assistance,” and British Maj. Ronald E. Balfour died from German artillery fire while on an art salvage mission at Cleves, Germany.

These deaths were more than noble sacrifices in an idealistic crusade to save Europe’s cultural institutions. Captured documents were crucially important to the war effort and to the continuation of successful, efficient military operations. One MFAA veteran
summed it up this way: “Every military government activity in the occupied areas entailed the use of public documents, business papers, files and records of every kind, both official and unofficial.”18 Many of the captured records later proved invaluable in the trials and indictments at Nuremberg.

For their part, the Russians sought to use captured records for traditional intelligence gathering operations and to assist in the establishment of occupation governments in eastern Germany and other areas, but their confiscation of German documents went beyond these strictly military uses.

Towards the end of the war, Russian troops felt justified in confiscating German records, since Germans had ransacked Russian repositories during their advances in 1941 and 1942. In the words of NKVD Deputy Commissar for Internal Affairs Sergei Kruglov, Soviet troops were to “search thoroughly . . . all German archives and libraries . . . and bring to the Soviet Union materials . . . that have scientific-historical and operational significance for our country.”

Soviet forces not only raided German repositories of Nazi party materials but also seized items from educational and scientific institutions not directly linked to the Nazis, as well as German-held records captured from other Allied nations. Approximately 30 wagonloads of documents were removed from the office of the German intelligence division, which also contained captured French and Belgian records. About 10 wagonloads of materials were taken from the German naval department. A report for the year 1945 indicated that 55 wagonloads of German and Romanian materials had been shipped to Russia, together with 45 wagonloads of “other foreign materials,” mostly of French and Polish origin.19

**Destruction: Military Targeting, Cultural Erasure, and Revenge**

On several occasions British bombers made the destruction of records their prime objective, targeting Gestapo headquarters in occupied nations in an effort to destroy records relating to resistance movements. During the spring of 1944, British bombs destroyed “almost all” of the files relating to the Dutch resistance movement that were housed at Gestapo headquarters in The Hague. This raid saved many Dutch lives by seriously hampering Gestapo efforts to detect and stamp out resistance activities. Later, in the fall of 1944, Dutch resistance leaders in hiding in Denmark appealed to Britain to bomb Gestapo headquarters in Aarhus for the explicit purpose of record destruction. In response to the request, the R.A.F. sent 24 bombers that dropped their payload “at roof-top height,” successfully destroying the records. This raid killed over 150 Germans, together with 20 Danes—most of whom were informers.20

The fact that the British were willing to risk their bombers and crews in an effort to destroy Gestapo records clearly demonstrates British concern and understanding of the power these records held—for the Gestapo, as well as for the resistance. But destruction of records by advancing forces was not only the result of military necessity. On September 30, 1943, a German squad entered the villa of Montesano, Italy, to which the Naples State Archives had been removed for safekeeping. The repository was said by Italian officials to be “purely cultural,” full of “the most valuable historical documents,” containing 30,000 volumes and 50,000 parchments. Within 15 minutes, it was
engulfed in flames. Count Riccardo Filangieri, the Italian archivist in charge of the documents, was helpless. Bystanders managed to save over one hundred cases of documents, but it was a frightfully small amount compared to the loss. Filangieri called the act "a crime" and a "wanton outrage," and mourned: "the extent of the disaster is enormous," creating "an immense void in the historical sources of European civilization."21

Although the events at Montesano appear to have begun with a German squad stumbling upon a large trove of manuscripts, the destruction of archives, manuscripts, and related materials—even those of cultural, rather than administrative, importance—was a specific part of the Nazi agenda. In Nazi-controlled Poland, eastern Europe and Russia, the goal was the complete obliteration of a people's heritage. Sometimes, as in the Netherlands, the overall Nazi goal encompassed both obliterating a people's cultural identity and establishing a military regime.

As early as the winter of 1939–40, German troops scoured Polish repositories in a widespread but organized effort to remove all vestiges of Polish national identity. Nazi forces seized books and documents from the Polish Parliament, and "the Diocesan Archives in Pelilin, containing 12th century documents, were burned in the furnaces of a sugar refinery."22 The pillaging of documents and other materials spread throughout the ever expanding Reich, particularly into eastern Europe and Russia. Such actions also took place in western Europe, although Nazi goals there seem to have been more in line with standard military intelligence and occupation government functions, rather than with sheer destruction and pillaging.

The Ribbentrop Battalion, a special German unit, consisted of four companies that were "to seize and to secure, immediately after the fall of large cities, their cultural treasures and all objects of great historic value" and send them promptly to Germany. In 1942, one company was sent to Russia, where Obersturmführer Dr. Norman Paul Foerster was captured by Soviet forces in November. During interrogation, Foerster testified that, in 1941, his unit received an order from Reich Minister of Foreign Affairs Joachim von Ribbentrop to "comb out" everything of "definite value" from Russian archives, libraries, and other institutions. Foerster also told Soviet authorities that "we reaped a rich harvest in the library of the Ukrainian Academy of Science, treasuring the rarest manuscripts of Persian, Abyssinian, and Chinese literature, Russian and Ukrainian chronicles, the first edition books printed by the first Russian printer, Ivan Fjodorov," and many other rare items.23

The Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR), another German unit devoted strictly to cultural looting, was so efficient it established regional, subregional, and local offices for collecting and processing captured archival and other cultural items. A 1942 letter from the Reich Minister for the Occupied Territories explains the goal of this unit as follows: "I have entrusted the Einsatzstab Rosenberg for the Occupied Territories with the listing and detailed handling of all cultural valuables, research materials, and scientific work in libraries, archives, research institutions, museums, et cetera, found in public and religious establishments, as well as in private houses."24 Under the overall command of Reichsleiter Alfred Rosenberg, the activities of these units were later found to be in violation of the laws and customs of war.
Documents captured by the Allies were essential in providing evidence of cultural looting by the ERR. Led by a reliable informant, American Lt. James J. Rorimer came to King Ludwig’s Neuschwanstein Castle in the village of Füssen where he found not only looted art treasures but extensive documentation of the ERR’s activities. One room of the castle contained a large quantity of ERR records. Rorimer used these records together with careful questioning of local residents to discover the whereabouts of two men involved in ERR activities. Rorimer located one of the German men and, thereby, obtained additional information and documents concerning the ERR’s activities, including a complete report of Rosenberg’s activities in France in July 1944. Maj. Gen. William J. Donovan, head of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), said that the documents obtained by Rorimer’s shrewd detective work were “the most damaging evidence of Nazi looting that had been acquired.”25 These documents and others were essential in the prosecution of Rosenberg before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg on four counts. One of these was the charge of War Crimes, “on the basis that [Rosenberg] authorized, directed, and participated in” the plunder of public and private property, which included libraries, archives, and art objects.26 Found guilty, Rosenberg was sentenced to death by hanging.

Despite organized military attempts on both sides to seize, protect, exploit, or destroy archives and repositories, individual units or soldiers sometimes took matters into their own hands—particularly the less disciplined American troops. According to research by Kenneth D. Alford, even members of the MFAA were not exempt from the temptation of selecting a few items for their own personal use and enjoyment. In activity that could be termed criminal in view of his military duty, MFAA officer Capt. Norman T. Byrne apparently felt free to plunder art and archival materials from the collections under his control. While stationed in Berlin, Byrne supposedly “confiscated” files of the Schantung Trading Company, which sold art on consignment. These records would be essential in tracking some of the plundered loot from families and museums throughout Germany and Europe that found its way into the Schantung inventory. The files disappeared completely once Byrne was on the scene and have never been recovered. Alford claims that the files were taken so that Byrne could freely take art from the Schantung Trading Company for his own personal enjoyment, without care or concern about payment, restitution, or repatriation.27

While Alford makes the case that Byrne was acting in conflict with his own official military duty, other soldiers not associated with the MFAA made requisitions for more pragmatic purposes. Papers written in a foreign language made ready souvenirs that could be easily carried about or sent home and, if portions were left blank or only one side written on, such paper became instant stationery. Always utilitarian, soldiers occasionally found novel uses for captured documents. In the village of Coriano, Italy, large file bundles were reportedly used by Allied troops to corduroy a muddy road; in Kunzelsau, Germany, ancient paper from archival bound volumes was used as a blotter for drying film, though it is not clear whether the perpetrators were German or Allied troops.28 In most instances, such appropriation of archival materials was usually on a small scale: soldiers simply took such materials to put them to better use from their point of view.
Protection: Securing Goodwill

With acts like the destruction of the Naples State Archives at Montesano receiving dramatic attention and being labeled as "crimes," it is no wonder that the American and British forces found much to gain by protecting cultural monuments, encompassing historic buildings, statues, and other works of art, as well as archives. Politically, the Allies could become the "saviors of western civilization," preventing destruction of Europe's cultural treasures, while the Axis forces sought to undo the proud heritage of western civilization by destroying such works.

Though clearly an opportunistic issue for propaganda, such sentiments found their way into official documents. At the start of the campaign for Rome, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower explained the issue of protecting cultural monuments. Eisenhower saw this as an important task of his troops. Italy was "a country which has contributed a great deal to our cultural inheritance," he declared, and such monuments "illustrate the growth of the civilization which is ours." Prior to the invasion of France, Eisenhower expressed a similar theme. He wrote in a directive to all commanders that "in the path of our advance will be found historical monuments and cultural centers which symbolize to the world all that we are fighting to preserve" and should, therefore, be carefully protected whenever possible. Oliver W. Holmes, of the National Archives, reflected shortly after the war that:

It was clearly up to the Allies, now as victors, in their reconquest of the lands and countries Germany had overrun, to minimize, if possible, the destruction of the records of that civilization and culture for which we fought. A precious part of our heritage was there within "Festung Europa," threatened by our own armies.

The Allied commanders recognized that active protection of such cultural resources bode well for an Allied occupation. Not only would the protection of archival collections later be of functional value as governments of occupation were set up throughout conquered territory (the Allies could not yet know the great disarray of archives they would find as they advanced), protection of archival institutions and other cultural treasures also made the Allies "look good" to the local populace. Such a philosophy was articulated in orders to the troops, like that expressed to the Acting Director of the Civil Affairs Division on April 1, 1943: "... it is believed that the Army will gain in good will if adequate steps are taken." Thus, with such orders on record and the discoveries of poor or haphazard storage or willful destruction by the retreating Germans, the Allies were able to easily cast themselves in the role of "saviors of western civilization" long before the liberation of France and the discovery of the concentration camps gave more credence to the claim.

Repatriation of Captured Records

As early as 1945, efforts were under way by the governments of Great Britain and the United States to return some captured documents to their home countries. One of the first shipments from the United States Army was four freight cars of approximately
1,000 archival “packages” to the Soviet Union, consisting of items taken by German forces in 1943 from Novgorod. Larger quantities of archival materials followed this shipment in subsequent months during the fall of 1945.33

Not all records were returned to their country of origin, however. Records taken from the YIVO, a Jewish research institute in Vilnius, were sent to its successor organization in New York City rather than being returned to the Soviets. Other materials were transferred to Israeli custody under the aegis of the Commission on Jewish Cultural Reconstruction. During the Cold War, the western allies refused to return materials taken from the Baltic states because Soviet control of this region was not recognized by the West.

Soviet repatriation of records has been slow. Cold War hostility to the West hindered the willingness and interest of Soviet authorities in repatriating captured documents to countries considered hostile or untrustworthy. Furthermore, the suffering of the Russian people and their culture at the hands of German invaders remains a bitter, painful memory. Retaining custody of German documents was a way to dispossess their wartime enemy of their cultural heritage and, in Russian eyes, was justified since many Russian materials were destroyed during the war and could never be replaced.

Not until the past 10 years, with the fall of the U.S.S.R., have repatriation efforts from the former Soviet Union to western countries been seriously considered by Russian authorities. Still, there appears to be lingering suspicion of the West and doubt as to the validity and truth of repatriation activities that have been ongoing in the West during the Cold War. More than 50 years after the war this issue is still evolving. With greater openness in both the East and West concerning records of the World War II era, the outlook is hopeful.

Implications: Future Research and Present Concerns

The cases examined in this paper are only brief anecdotes. This essay is only a starting point for discussion and research, not the final word.34 Very few materials, particularly since the 1950s, have been published on the specific subject of archives and the war, despite a proliferation of materials about looted and repatriated art.35 Future studies might examine not only the fate of archives and records during wartime in further detail, but also further explore the concept of intelligence value as it applies to other (e.g., business and political) realms of society.

The recent conflict in Bosnia and Kosovo, particularly the destruction of Kosovar passports, vital records, and other essential identity documents, gives this subject special relevance. Efforts to reconstruct the Bosnian library and its manuscript collections, as well as work to restore lost identities to those persons whose legal papers were destroyed in their exile from Kosovo, further demonstrate the special power and fragile nature of records during wartime. Recognizing the value such records hold for “the enemy”—whomsoever that might be and whatever their goals may be—may help anticipate and prevent such actions in the future.

In the mere custody of records, there is power. This power can come in many forms, including the use of documents against their former owners or creators; the destruction of documents in an effort to rob a people of their cultural identity; or the preservation
of archives and other cultural monuments in a threatening time. Though not often thought of as a military objective, it is clear that archives and records—through their exploitation, destruction, and protection—played an important military role in the European crisis of World War II.

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**NOTES**

8. American Commission, 141.
17. Kunzelman, 57.
18. Poste, 189.
23. International Military Tribunal, 58.
24. International Military Tribunal, 60.
32. “Protecting Europe’s Cultural Heritage should be a Function of the Civil Affairs Division,” in Coles and Weinberg, 86.
33. For this and following paragraphs in this section see Grimsted, 246–247.
34. There are numerous resources at the National Archives that the author did not have the opportunity to explore, which would undoubtedly shed additional light on the subject. Some promising records are: RG239, Records of the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas and various series within RG260, Records of U.S. Occupation Headquarters, World War II. See particularly the series PHOAD, Photographs of the Operations of the Offenbach Archival Depot.
35. To the author’s knowledge, no book has been published about the fate of libraries and archives during the war in Europe. The most extensive examination of the subject is Leslie Irlyn Poste’s unpublished Ph.D. thesis, previously cited, written in 1958.