

The German appraisal discussion since 1990: an overview

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ABSTRACT

The development of German archival appraisal theory since 1990 has been little discussed in the English-speaking world. This article provides an introductory overview of the Federführungsmodell developed by the Bundesarchiv (Federal Archives), the horizontal and vertical appraisal approach of the Landesarchiv (State Archives) of Baden-Württemberg, and the documentation plans typical of municipal and university archives. It also examines the new focus on records management and calls for collaboration in appraisal between different archives, levels of government and heritage institutions.

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Little has been written in English on recent developments in German appraisal theory, despite the fact that the discussion has been prolific, exciting and diverse.¹ Given the extraordinary abundance of the sources available in German, it is not possible to exhaustively review all the material on the subject; this is necessarily a selective survey. The discussion since 1990 has focused both on home-grown approaches and on foreign ideas (including Menne-Haritz's mediation of Schellenbergian concepts, the American documentation strategy advocated by Helen Samuels, the Dutch PIVOT strategy, the idea of the intermediate archive pioneered by NARA and Canadian Terry Cook's macro-appraisal approach). Owing to space constraints, the present article does not focus on the reception of foreign influences, concentrating only on German models and trends, while it also omits a discussion of appraisal in the DDR (the former East Germany, formally known as the Deutsche Demokratische Republik), since this does not fall within the relevant timeframe. It does not examine the controversial discussions at the German Archivtage of 1991 (notable for the partly politically motivated clash between East and West German appraisal theorists) and 1994, when Menne-Haritz introduced her interpretation of Schellenberg, sparking a long-running debate. These have already been more than adequately covered in English.²

The main initiatives have been the Federführungsmodell developed by the Bundesarchiv (Federal Archives), the horizontal and vertical appraisal approach of the Landesarchiv (State Archives) of Baden-Württemberg – not dissimilar to macro-appraisal – and the documentation plans typical of the municipal level and university archives.³ There has also been a new focus on records management and on the possibilities of collaboration in appraisal between different institutions (admittedly, this broad-brush outline is slightly simplistic, for

example, the documentation plan approach delineated by Becker in 2009 also countenances the use of horizontal and vertical appraisal and cooperation with other archives).⁴

The modern German legal context allows archivists wide discretion in their appraisal decisions.⁵ However, it also emphasises the non-delegable responsibility of archivists for appraisal.⁶ The provision of a legal basis for appraisal has in general made the lives of German archivists much easier, liberating them from the continual need to justify their appraisal decisions to other agencies in the face of concerns about data protection.⁷ This new freedom perhaps explains the extraordinary flowering of German appraisal theory since the introduction of archival legislation in the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, the influence of Bodo Uhl on the appraisal debate in the last 25 years has also been highly significant. In an article based on his presentation at the 50th Südwestdeutscher Archivtag in Biberach an der Riß in 1990, after a critical summary of the previous appraisal discussion, he argued against trying to find a final theory of archival value that would be applicable to all agencies, types of archives and situations, since this would require *as a prerequisite* a universally binding or recognised theory of value, which would be unimaginable in a pluralistic society.⁸ Instead the focus should switch to the elimination of redundancy through cooperation with other archives.⁹ Uhl also urged that archivists must avoid any one-sided appraisal that would privilege the research interests of any particular group of scholars, another much-cited statement in the subsequent literature.¹⁰

By the mid-1990s, formalised approaches to appraisal dominated over *Fingerspitzengefühl*, not only for reasons of archival theory but also owing to straitened resources: there was simply no longer time, owing to the enormous volumes of records, to undertake an autopsy of individual files.¹¹ A notable feature of the debate has been the way in which these models are differentiated according to type of archive, that is, based on the level of government (federal, state or municipal) of which the archive is a part.

The Federführungsmodell

During the 1990s, the Federführungsmodell of the Bundesarchiv was widely discussed, though the Bundesarchiv had already been using it since about 1980.¹² The documents of the highest federal public authorities, which fall within the Bundesarchiv's remit, are assessed based on task-related appraisal criteria.¹³ Here, the differentiation between lead administrative responsibility (Federführung), 'qualified involvement' and simple 'involvement' is the key.¹⁴ As Kreikamp notes, although many different administrative positions (Stellen) are collaboratively involved in the decision-making process, the final decision lies with only one Stelle and within it a special organisational unit which is obliged to undertake the administrative lead.¹⁵

It is important to note that the formal determination of lead administrative responsibility does not in and of itself establish archive-worthiness: that is, it does not automatically trigger a need to transfer the corresponding records from the fulfillment of the task, because the archivist himself poses the finally decisive question about the significance of the fulfilled task.¹⁶ Therefore, even if unambiguous Federführung is present, the task as represented in the records can still be evaluated as so insignificant that the records must be destroyed.¹⁷ It is, therefore, a two-part process: Federführung is established, and the significance of the tasks captured in the records is assessed.

However, this procedure does not succeed in overcoming the problem of massive record volumes, particularly of case files, which face *state* archives (that is, archives on the Länder level).¹⁸ For this context, a different approach is required.

Horizontal and vertical appraisal

This leads to a consideration of the major recent model developed on the state level, the Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg's horizontal and vertical appraisal model, which developed partly in response to Uhl's plea in 1990 that archivists should occupy themselves much more intensively with records management in government agencies and public administrative practice in general.¹⁹ According to Kretzschmar, the model's application began in 1995.²⁰ The goal of the model is to achieve a condensed archival transfer which reliably reflects the section of life's realities to which a government agency's task is related, and archivists can only attain this if they have precise knowledge of the processes carried out by the administration.²¹ Simply examining the documents (Aktenautopsie) cannot provide such knowledge.²²

Ideally, the archival worth of a file is judged prospectively, at the time of its production, not years or decades after the file has been closed, a point emphasised by Treffeisen.²³ A team of three to four archivists is usually involved.²⁴ To begin with, the tasks, functions and competences of the individual agency branches from which the archival material is to be transferred are analysed and compared.²⁵ For this purpose, the first step is to detect the administrative entities (Stellen) involved in the fulfillment of the tasks to be portrayed.²⁶ Through the alignment of duties with functions in the vertical administrative band, that is, superior vs subordinate administrative entities, and/or horizontally between administrative entities and departments (in descending order, Federführung – administrative lead – involvement and written opinions), the most informative possible transfer of archival material is researched.²⁷ Thus the appraisal is carried out on the basis of the procedure's context. The analysis of tasks, functions and competences is conducted by reading regulations, laws, file and business plans, as well as further written pieces of information, followed by targeted interviews of the employees entrusted with the tasks.²⁸ Rehm explains that in conducting the interviews, attention is focused on systematically developing the traditional interview of those responsible for the registry, or the case workers, into an intensive discussion in the relevant agency about the tasks carried out there, so that the subject knowledge of the files' internal users can flow into the archivists' appraisal decision.²⁹ However, it is important to emphasise that this analysis of the administration is of necessity recursive: given continuous administrative change, archivists must constantly conduct new analyses to take account of it.³⁰

As a second step, the documents generated in the course of carrying out the administrative task are looked at, described and analysed.³¹ The fundamental difference between the Federführungsmodell and horizontal and vertical appraisal is that while the former focuses on the administrative lead, horizontal and vertical appraisal is based on the recognition that in the state civil service, several agencies are usually involved in the fulfillment of a public task and the most informative documents may not necessarily be found at the highest level.³² If further government agencies beyond those chosen are involved in fulfilling the task, their documents are marked for destruction. For example, in the case of tasks relating to water resources management, the archival appraisal would focus on the lower administrative

authorities directly responsible for carrying out the task, while associated documents from higher levels could safely be destroyed.³³

As this suggests, the Federführungsmodell was not adopted for state government administrations because (apart from the problem of mass files already noted) it proved to be insufficient for capturing the complexity of government administration on the state level, in which administrative levels *outside of* the state administration – such as municipal administrations, for example – may also be involved: in the processing of citizenship applications before 1990, two levels of the state (Land) government administration and one level of municipal government administration worked together.³⁴ Indeed, the mere identification of a competence is insufficient, since it only offers one clue; a competence arises out of an official norm and may or may not in fact be exercised.³⁵ The decisive factor is the *function* within which a government agency is involved in fulfilling a task, a concept which had already been used by the earlier archival theorist Georg Wilhelm Sante and describes the way in which the agency is *actually* involved.³⁶ The planned archival transfer aims to represent those agencies whose actions shape the course of an administrative procedure or a project.³⁷

This still leaves the question of how the appraisal is conducted concretely in practice. In the case of the police, for example, the Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg states that it examines each individual task, such as Operations, in the government agency's hierarchy vertically (Ministerium → Polizeipräsidium → Polizeidirektion → Polizeiposten) and horizontally on steps of the same level (for example, Allgemeine Polizei → Bereitschaftspolizei → Spezialeinsatzkommando-SEK).³⁸ Yet this does not adequately capture the complexity of the approach. Schäfer describes how, in the case of the Regierungspräsidien (regional councils), their tasks and functions are compared vertically with those of the ministries as well as subordinate government agencies and subordinate special agencies.³⁹ Furthermore, the vertical comparison must be complemented by a horizontal comparison across three different levels: for example, the tasks and functions of the Regierungspräsidien are compared with the state government agencies and the dependent state institutions, while the tasks and functions of subordinate administrative authorities are to be placed opposite those of the subordinate special government agencies, and, in those cases in which several ministries are involved in one task, a horizontal comparison is also to be carried out on their level.⁴⁰ Similarly, if different *divisions* of a Regierungspräsidium are involved in one task, they are equally to be compared horizontally.⁴¹

The application of the model is quite time-consuming in practice, while it does also presuppose a certain amount of coherence in the government agency's recordkeeping system.⁴² The development of the appraisal model is helpful to the government agencies themselves, however, because in determining the archival worth of files at their creation it saves them a great deal of time: the government agency can easily implement the records retention plan which the archivists have developed.⁴³ Using the horizontal and vertical appraisal approach, the Landesarchiv has developed a number of different appraisal models for various sections of government administration (such as schools, police and forest administration).⁴⁴

Documentation plans

Despite Hans Booms's lack of success in convincing the wider archival world of the usefulness of documentation profiles, they are in fact already used for appraisal in archives at the municipal level in Germany, (for which an important model was developed in 2009) and in institutions of further education (which form the focus of another set of model documentation requirements).⁴⁵ Indeed, the use of individual documentation profiles at the municipal level in particular has been much discussed in archivists' professional journals. The municipal archives confirmed their use of this approach in the Bundeskonferenz der Kommunalarchive's position paper in 2005.⁴⁶ In the early development of this approach on the part of municipal archives, the influence of Peter K Weber was crucial, while it was Becker who developed a concrete approach for implementing documentation profiles in the municipalities.⁴⁷ Becker explains their use in detail: archival representation on the municipal level has the task of comprehensively representing local society and realities of life, to document its events, phenomena and structures, whether big or small, and thereby do justice to local plurality (political, economic, cultural and social).⁴⁸ In her *Archivar* exposition of the method, she provides a plan of the categories that such an approach must include: city and space, population and population groups, economy, administration, politics, the judiciary/law, property and finance, education and raising children, culture, religion, media, social issues, health, sport and leisure.⁴⁹ Each of these categories is divided into further sub-categories: for example, property and finance embraces both public property and private property.⁵⁰ It might be noted that the records thus appraised do not exclusively derive from official (*amtliche*) provenances but apply to the municipality as a whole – containing information relevant to securing the rights of the municipality and its citizens, and depicting their and its historical and current development – and thus include records from private provenances as well.⁵¹ Although a municipal archive has been involved in the Baden-Württemberg horizontal and vertical appraisal project, the dedication of municipal archives to documentation plans has remained constant.⁵²

While the role of documentation plans is uncontroversial on the municipal level, the same is not true for other levels of government. While Booms's idea of a documentation plan, as reintroduced in 1991, has not been adopted, it has resurfaced in articles by theorists including Schockenhoff, Schulze, Schöntag, Weber and Kretzschmar.⁵³ The latter argues that private records are becoming increasingly important owing to a number of administrative changes, such as privatisation and greater citizen engagement, so that there is a need to develop documentation plans in order to take account of them.⁵⁴ However, Kretzschmar's interest in integrating documentation plans 'as a planning instrument and for prospective macro-appraisal' has not yet been implemented, and remains a subject of discussion.⁵⁵

Kretzschmar's view of the documentation plan is different to that of Booms, however. His article 'Tabu oder Rettungsanker?' ('Taboo or lifeline') suggests that Booms's goals are hardly possible to achieve, so that Booms-style documentation plans cannot be the basis for appraisal.⁵⁶ Because of the complex nature of archival material, documentation plans cannot be the point of departure from which every subsequent appraisal procedure can be derived and applied, but they can be experimented with, albeit in a more modest and limited way than that suggested by Booms.⁵⁷ According to Rehm, Kretzschmar believes that the rejection of Boomsian ideas was justified, but that a public discussion on appraisal questions is still needed.⁵⁸ Kretzschmar disapproves of the pertinence-based documentation plan approach

in the DDR, but views with some interest Booms's later, less ambitious concept, integrating an emphasis on provenance in the context of a *Zeitchronik* (chronicle of important events, persons and phenomena).⁵⁹ He argues that German archivists ought to have an ever-present consciousness of the *Zeitchronik*, but that such tools are to assist in making archivists aware, rather than serve as a strict guide to appraisal.⁶⁰ He views the *Dokumentationsplan* of Weber, the *Problemkatalog* of Haase, the *Zeitchronik* of Booms or the 'Catalogue of typical contemporary phenomena and problems' (the term that he himself would prefer) in the final analysis as one and the same.⁶¹ The decisive factor is that everyone who works with such a catalogue must remain aware of, and open to, the vestiges of archival material, and this per se requires continual reflection.⁶² Such an aid would provide pointers to topics for consideration in appraisal, for example to indicate gaps that ought to be filled and spark reflection on how to fill them, but it should not be slavishly followed.⁶³ This 'questions and topics catalogue' could also be useful in prioritising appraisal of different provenances in a time of limited resources.⁶⁴ It would not be a static tool but a constantly expandable and modifiable instrument, continually updated with information gained from direct appraisal practice, and could play an important role in developing a discourse between archives and the public, including researchers and potential users, as well as foster the development of an archives-transcendent appraisal of non-state produced materials.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, in Kretzschmar's theory, documentation plans are only to be viewed as an aid in the preparatory phase and for checking the results of appraisal, which may, indeed, unfold in a completely different manner to the course suggested by the documentation plan.⁶⁶

Fundamentally, Kretzschmar's main point is a plea for the discussion of documentation plans' possible usefulness on the state level: whether they might be suitable as a methodical approach, as a tool, in the documentation of appraisal and/or as a means to a collaborative approach, and he describes the absence of such a discussion as 'noteworthy'.⁶⁷

Collaboration in appraisal

Regardless of the precise appraisal model advocated, strengthened cooperation in appraisal has been a major theme in recent years, reviving the call issued in 1971 by Kahlenberg, whom Kretzschmar views as having laid the basis for a collaborative approach to appraisal.⁶⁸ (Niebuhr takes this idea to its extreme, in a call for cooperation between archives, museums and libraries in appraising and accessioning materials, so as to maximise the usefulness of their efforts.)⁶⁹ In a similar vein, Kluttig argues that functional analysis of records creators can be approached on a collaborative basis.⁷⁰

In order to cope with the appraisal challenges posed by increasing administrative complexity, the growth of importance of private records, and greater integration between government levels following reunification, a 2011 position paper from a Society of German Archivists Working Group advocated cooperation in appraisal between archival institutions in different levels of German government, echoing Booms's 1972 suggestion.⁷¹ Sudmann extends the debate by suggesting that a cooperative approach to horizontal and vertical appraisal can be applied to important private records, such as those of NGOs.⁷² Two points from Kluttig are particularly interesting: that models should be developed for registry materials that are, to a large extent, of the same form, and that agreement should be sought about the documents of authorities which transcend the federal-state division, in order to avoid redundancy.⁷³

Records management

As already stated, another important theme in recent years has been a renewed focus on records management in order to eliminate the redundancy that bedevils archivists in appraisal.⁷⁴ Bodo Uhl argued that redundancy can only be effectively eliminated if archivists more intensively preoccupy themselves with the record-keeping practices of public administration, to the extent of intervening in agencies' recordkeeping.⁷⁵ Interestingly, Uhl's conclusion is that the very nature and picture of the archival profession must change, and become oriented away from historical research and towards a greater focus on records management.⁷⁶ Kretzschmar argues that efficient records management practices must become the prerequisite for appraisal, while Kluttig highlights the urgent need to advise government agencies in the management of electronic records in order to ensure the quality of the records thus produced, and to highlight the expertise of archivists.⁷⁷

Finally, there have also been repeated calls for greater transparency in appraisal, so that the public might more easily understand appraisal decisions.⁷⁸ Therefore Bischoff advocates detailed documentation of appraisal decisions as part of the 'minimum standard' of archival appraisal and accessioning, to communicate the criteria for appraisal decisions to users.⁷⁹ Similarly, Brübach and Schmider plead for appraisal decisions to be documented and the documentation published, like the *Motivenberichte* of the old Prussian archival administration, thereby allowing for the comparison of different archives' appraisal decisions.⁸⁰

Conclusion

In the period after 1990, German appraisal models became more practical, schematic and sophisticated. Elements of previous appraisal practices were integrated into formalised models, of which the most intricate was the horizontal and vertical appraisal model developed by the Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg. There were now clear distinctions between different schools of thought, each focused on a specific sector (federal, state or municipal) of the German archival world, and the appraisal debate reignited in a particularly lively and prolific fashion. Nevertheless, the development of increasingly chaotic public record-keeping following the advent of IT began to pose new challenges, which are now starting to be addressed. A new chapter of the German appraisal discussion is beginning, here again prefigured by Uhl in 1990.⁸¹

Endnotes

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81. Uhl, 'Bewertung von Archivgut', 538. Column 538.

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