

BOOK REVIEW

Rudolf Schatz: Behordenschriftgut - Aktenbildung, Aktenverwaltung, Archivierung.* (Schriften des Bundesarchivs No.8). Harald Boldt-Verlag, Boppand am Rhein, 1961.

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This new work is one of a series of the publications of the Bundesarchivs of the Federal Republic of West Germany. The work is aimed at the archivist working on departmental records and the author therefore deals with all aspects of file management from the receipt of papers to the final deposit of permanently valuable records in the archives. As Dr Bruchmann, Director of the Bundesarchiv, says in his foreword, however: 'The necessities of current administration in the department itself, not the archival point of view, remain in the foreground'. The chief value of the work to Australian archivists is the insight which it gives into German registry history and methods, particularly the esoteric mysteries of the Aktenplan. Incidentally, however, there is sound commonsense discussion of a number of universal problems such as the difficulties of dealing with records held in the custody of senior officials. It is also worth noting that the author is not at all enthusiastic about our beloved annual single number system, which he refers to as 'mechanical arrangement'. He appears in fact to regard it as a rather primitive survival of a more barbarous age.

Besides the discussion of registry practices proper there are also quite considerable chapters on disposal, methods of fastening files, and the use of microfilm.

Unlike most German writers on archives, the author's style is thoroughly lucid and the reviewer, who is by no means expert in German, has found little difficulty in reading it. It may indeed be possible in the foreseeable future to publish translations of selected extracts in Archives and Manuscripts providing that the permission of the author is secured.

I have prepared a translation of the Foreword, and of the Table of contents, and these are appended, in order that readers of Archives and Manuscripts may know more of the book's scope and approach.

FOREWORD

When the Federal Archives began to operate in June, 1952, it became evident at once that it could not confine itself to taking over and administering the archival materials from the time before the establishment of the Federal Republic passed on to it by the Federal Government. From the beginning it regarded the records which were

* Departmental records; file building, file management and transfer to archives.

beginning to arise as the archives of the future. In this way could its officials fall back on to the experience and knowledge of the time between the two World Wars. Even then the departmental record systems threatened to get out of control through the enormous extension and multiplication of public business and even then the city and communal archivists were confronted by the bulkiness and perilous situation caused by increasing file output which was coming to them because of a host of new problems. The time for a predominantly waiting role, a passive holding of archives as opposed to the record production of the departments was over. Among archivists the conviction had spread that their field of activity should be moved forward temporally and locally, that they would have to exert some influence on the growing body of archives in the departments.

The Federal Archives had considered this change of policy in its consideration of the planning and distribution of business. So far as the available resources permit, a senior officer covers each Federal ministry and looks after the relations with it, keeps up to date with registry conditions and works on it where necessary. It usually works out in this way that the archivist, for example, who attends the files of the National and Prussian ministries of Justice transferred to the Federal Archives is also responsible at the same time for the Federal Ministry of Justice.

Earlier on the departments would have met such efforts, if not by repulsing them, at least with reticence. To-day, on the other hand, they accept all assistance from the archival side willingly, because their flood of files grows continually more enormous and also becomes ever more difficult to control and channel in the course of current business. The conviction that in this area there is room for much improvement has become general. But they still evade the inference which, in the opinion of the Federal Archives, must clearly be drawn from modern conditions: that of course very great and general exertions are necessary in order to achieve an orderly situation again. And, as in other governments, especially in the United States, a close co-operation between archival and departmental record management, based on laws and regulations, has already been determinedly established, so the Federal Archives desires, without a slavish adherence to foreign patterns, to spread the word that also here in Germany relief must be sought in the same direction.

It is a lucky circumstance that the Federal Archives possesses in Rudolf Schatz a staff member who is particularly competent for this whole area of enquiry. His proposal to examine and to present modern comprehensive departmental records management within the framework of our series of publications was the more gladly taken up and substantially encouraged by the venerated former director of the Federal Archives, Georg Winter, as he himself, as his publications prove, had always shown a lively interest in the problems here discussed. It is now one of my first official tasks as his successor to present the complete result with this publication.

While the author concentrates on three areas of activity - on the construction of files, on registry methods, and finally on the preservation and selection of old files - he explains the principles on which departmental records management will be developed in the future. But the necessities of current administration in the department itself, not the archival point of view, remains in the foreground - this is his conscious aim. He tries to reconcile archival needs to the necessities of current administration in this way that the archives also, where possible, either look after the departmental interests or, at least, do not prejudice them. What distinguishes the work from other writings of a similar sort is simply this, that it always keeps in mind in all proposals and recommendations the entire life cycle of the file from its creation to its disposal.

The book applies therefore also in the same way in the departments as in the archives without claiming the right for itself to have the last word in everything and to offer final solutions. It will and should stimulate discussion about the questions treated in it, a discussion which will then, it is to be hoped, soon develop into energetic action. The innermost concern of the author is to rescue the traditional and proven principles of the good old German registry tradition which threatened to be forgotten, where necessary suitably to reform the altered conditions and, where possible, to combine it with new rational methods.

The director, Dr Winter, and Senior Archivist, Dr Rohr, have assisted the author in a friendly way with many suggestions and reminiscences from their rich experience gleaned from long years of archival activity. May I therefore express to the two gentlemen my very deepest thanks.

Koblenz, January, 1961.

Dr Bruchmann
Director of the Federal
Archives.

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*The word here is Aktenbetreffseinheit. The meaning is not completely clear but I am assuming that where Aktenkorper (4th section) means the body of files of the department which are covered by the Aktenplan, the Aktenbetreffseinheit means the second stage of classification within the Aktenplan which amounts, in fact, to our series.

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