

The Potsdam Archive: Sorting Through 19 Linear Miles of German Records

Gerhardt B. Thamm

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German military and civilian authorities have always documented their activities in great detail. Despite the challenges of war, they continued to do so throughout WW II. We are familiar, for example, with the meticulous documentation employed by the Nazis to track their “final solution”—the mass killing of Europe’s Jewish population—but detailed German recordkeeping extended into every sphere of the war effort. As the war turned against Germany, these archives became vulnerable, first to bombing and then to Allied ground troops in the final months of the war.

During the occupation of Germany in spring 1945, Soviet, British, and American forces overran and captured not only large numbers of German soldiers and war materiel such as aircraft, vehicles, factories, replacement parts, and oil supplies, but also document archives. One such archive in Potsdam, southwest of but very close to Berlin, held “19 linear miles” of German military intelligence and German army personnel files. One of the US soldiers who exploited these files, Gerhardt Thamm, tells his personal story here.

While the US benefited from captured German files, the Soviets, too,

found their share of information in newly-occupied Germany. Soviet forces took custody, for example, of German Army corps and division level records that had been maintained in Zossen.

We know little of Soviet investigations into the records they captured, but among US and British forces, 120 different organizations exploited German military and civilian files. The US Army focused on German military organization, strategy, and tactics and produced 20 studies during 1945–46 alone, mostly on German WW II military operations. The Army exploited only the cream of the enormous crop of records, and was prepared by 1950 to deliver the entire collection to the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

The newly-created CIA agreed that the collection could be transferred to NARA as long as CIA retained access to what it might need. At the same time, the new nation of West Germany had begun agitating in 1949 for the WW II allies to return seized records, arguing that West Germany could not be a true nation if it could not house and examine its own records and its own past.

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US Army intelligence, composed of up to a half dozen separate agencies, controlled US intelligence activities in Germany before, and for several years after, the establishment of CIA in 1947. Thomas Boghardt reviewed these activities in “America’s Secret Vanguard: US Army Intelligence Operations in

Germany, 1944–47,” in Studies in Intelligence 57, No. 2 (June 2013).

The start of the Korean War in 1950 was reason enough for the Army to postpone its plans to move the Potsdam archive to NARA. Instead, the Army began exploiting the German documents for intelligence on what

the Germans had learned in WW II about Soviet military strategy and tactics. During 1951–52, and in support of operations in Korea, the Army completed 46 studies that addressed Soviet military doctrine and capabilities. People like Gerhardt Thamm made those studies possible, and we welcome his first-hand look at what it was like to work with the records seized at Potsdam.

The exploitation of captured documents taken from POWs and collected from enemy combatants killed in action has not always been a task fully appreciated by frontline riflemen. Most of the combatants never realized that these documents helped interrogators in extracting information from recalcitrant POWs. The extracted information assisted commanders in planning current and future operations.

Little has ever been revealed of an operation launched by a US Army G-2 who had taken (the Soviets said “snatched”) the entire Potsdam Archives from under the noses of the GRU (Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye), the foreign military intelligence directorate of the Red Army, and brought it to the United States.

According to my mentor, Staff Sergeant Alois Himsl, shortly after VE Day, the crafty US Army G-2 had emptied the Potsdam Archives and had the entire take—some 19 linear miles—crated and shipped to the United States. The G-2 had done this

“nefarious” act right under the eyes of Soviet occupation forces.

In 1948, as a 17-year-old who had recently come from war-torn Europe, I enlisted in the US Army. After basic training with the 3rd Armored Division at Fort Knox, Kentucky, I was transferred to Headquarters Company, US Army, South Post, Fort Myer, Arlington, Virginia. The transfer came as a surprise and disappointment, because I had been accepted by the 82nd Airborne Division and I hoped to supplement my meager \$75 per month basic Pfc. salary with the “50 Dollars Jump Pay” a recruiter had promised me.

I arrived in Washington, DC, on one of those gorgeous early summer days. A sedan picked me up at Union Station. We drove through the city I would learn to love, the city that would become my hometown. We crossed a great river into the Virginia countryside. Finally, the driver stopped before a typical old, one-story, wooden army barracks: it was the Orderly Room of Headquarters Company, United States Army.

A few days later, my first sergeant ordered me to report to the Mall entrance of the Pentagon where a sergeant would escort me to my duty station, the GMDS (German Military Document Section). It was another one of those beautiful days in the middle of June. Dressed in a heavily starched and well-pressed khaki uniform, my brass shined, wearing spit-shined low quarter shoes, I walked through the tunnel that led under a Virginia highway to the Pentagon. I walked through the huge brass doors of the Mall entrance and came into a reception area richly decorated in dark wood. There, Staff Sergeant Walter Wende awaited me. To my utter surprise, he greeted me in fluent German.

He saw my surprise and laughed, “Wait till you get to the office.” We walked along a wide corridor toward the center ring. For me, barely four months out of war-torn Europe, it was surreal. I glanced in wonderment at both sides of the corridor; they were decorated with large oil paintings of battle scenes and what I assumed to be famous generals and

War Department civilians. We arrived at A-Ring, and through large, almost floor-to-ceiling windows, I saw a five-cornered park with a gazebo in its center.

1. Onward we walked to the tenth corridor. There we made a slight left turn and entered staircase #10. Walking down two flights of stairs we arrived on the Mezzanine floor. At room MB-I026, Sergeant Wende stopped at a steel vault door. Then we walked into a large, windowless, office where Sergeant Wende introduced me to Sergeant Major Ignaz Ernst and to Mr. Brower, a civilian, the boss of GMDS.

The sergeant major, a jovial giant of a man, had come to America from Westphalia long before WW II. He crushed my hand and welcomed me to his unit, again in fluent German. To me the entire scene was surreal. Here I was, in the center of the United States War Department, and everyone conversed in German. Sergeant Major Ernst (everyone called him “Iggy”) introduced me to everyone. There were some 20 men in the office, with few exceptions, all veterans of the last war. All but one spoke fluent German. The one who did not, Mike Halyshin, was a cheerful master sergeant who specialized in Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian.

Sergeant Wende had me properly documented with a photo identification badge, a rarity in those days—only the very few had a military

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photo identification. The sergeant major assigned me to work with Staff Sgt. Alois Himsl. Sergeant Himsl was a fourth- or fifth-generation American from Minnesota, whose family had come from Austria during the 1880s. He spoke German with the soft inflection of the Austrians. From him I learned that we would be exploiting German military and Nazi Party documents captured at the end of World War II.

The records had arrived in railroad boxcars at the US Army Cameron Station warehouse complex on Duke Street, which in those days was outside the western city line of Alexandria, Virginia. Long before my arrival, our German-speaking crew had already selected some of these records and stored them in Room MB 1026 of the Pentagon. The greater part was still in original wooden crates at Cameron Station awaiting exploitation for military intelligence information. Around the middle of 1948, the Army had amassed a sufficient number of expert linguists who could recognize valuable information and could separate the treasure from the trash.

A week or so after my arrival, Sergeant Himsl and a small crew—including this new Pfc.—rode in a small truck from the Pentagon Motor Pool to the Cameron Station warehouse. I stood in amazement inside the cavernous repository. I saw rows

upon rows of wooden crates, each about three feet high and four by four feet wide, stacked on wooden pallets, about 10 to 15 feet high. I learned to operate a heavy forklift and pulled heavy wooden crates filled with all sorts of papers from the stacks.

Sergeant Himsl broke open the crates, and he and his helpers sorted through piles of every conceivable thing that the Army G-2’s helpers had loaded into these wooden boxes. We could tell that they had hurriedly shoveled these documents into the boxes with pitchforks: we saw dirty pitchfork marks on the folders. Obviously, they had hurried to get them away before the Soviets realized what a vast source of information they’d had in the Potsdam Archives.

The Gold Mine

We had a gold mine. The Army G-2 in the Pentagon told us that the files of Reinhard Gehlen’s *Fremde Heere Ost*^a were of primary interest to Army intelligence, closely followed by the espionage activities of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris^b, head of *Ausland/Abwehr*^c. Every day was like Christmas. One of the first tasks was to unload the crates and find the index files for all documents. We spent some weeks searching for

^a Foreign Armies, East, the intelligence branch that dealt with the Soviet Army. After the war, Gehlen directed the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND), the intelligence service of the German Federal Republic.

^b Wilhelm Canaris, head of German Armed Forces Intelligence, a longtime naval career officer, entered the Navy in 1905 as a cadet; he was involved in the attempt to kill the Führer and was executed by the Nazis on 9 April 1945—less than one month before Germany capitulated.

^c German Armed Forces Intelligence.

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index files, or lists of descriptions for each crate—alas, without success. No doubt in the rush to get the shipment out of the archives there had been no time to index or describe what was in these crates.

At this work, we were novices. Sergeant Himsl decided to break open all the crates, searching for the most important *Fremde Heere Ost* and the *Ausland/Abwehr* files. We had thousands of Leitz^a folders of various signs and titles spread all over the warehouse floor. We separated books, cook books, children's books, love stories, propaganda leaflets, and debris apparently from bureau drawers of all sorts that had been scooped up along with the documents and stacked them in a corner of the warehouse.

In another section of the warehouse we found long, heavy, narrow crates filled with photographic glass plates; they were from Heinrich Hoffmann, the official Nazi Party photographer. It was said Hoffmann had taken some 2.5 million photographs of Hitler, and we had a considerable number of the plates in that warehouse. We shoved those crates to the side as unimportant.

We found files deposited by many German agencies and departments.

We discovered the entire German Army Officer Personnel file collection. In other crates were combat situation reports, combat capability assessments, intelligence files for all fronts—including the “Eastern Territories.” We found enemy combat assessments of troops and equipment from the Afrika Korps—Field Marshal Rommel’s unit, evaluations of US Army and Royal Army units on the Western Front, the situations in Norway and the Balkans, and geographic/demographic studies of the Soviet Union.

We found battle plans and combat intelligence reports from the Eastern Front. We had thousands of military situation maps from every German front: east, west, north, south, Africa, the Mediterranean, and southeast Europe. We had three maps of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht’s^b morning, midday, and evening reports of the military situation for every day of the war and for every front. We also had specialty maps for the Mediterranean theater of operation and for Crete, Yugoslavia, Norway, Normandy, and more.

We never knew what morsels we would find when we cracked open a new crate. We opened a set of wooden crates containing neat folders, akin to personnel jackets—all

indexed. They were the interrogation records of the Luftwaffe’s *Auswertestelle West*,^c although everyone called it *Dulag Luft West*.^d

All American and British airmen shot down over German territory first came to this POW interrogation center at Oberursel, north of Frankfurt-on-Main, for debriefing.^e With German efficiency, each folder had a letter and a number. The letter identified the type of aircraft, e.g., B-17, B-26, P-51, etc., filed in sequence by date the shoot-down was recorded.

We found several thousand folders. Each jacket contained everything collected from a particular aircraft—the tail number, description of items and equipment found, and whatever else survived in the crash. Then followed a report of items found on the POWs—whatever the crew carried on them that was of intelligence value, including the usual photos of girlfriends, newspaper clippings, good luck charms including the occasional rabbit’s foot, communications books, paper, messages found in the aircraft—items the crews were warned not to take on the mission. If the crew member had a USAAF watch, it was taken for examination.

The Luftwaffe recorded crew members’ complaints, but crews were told their watches were government issued property, not personal items. The captured interrogation reports revealed exactly how much

^a Leitz, a trade name for a gray-black hardcover archive folder with a label at the back and a metal-framed hole at the bottom to facilitate pulling the folder from the shelf.

^b German Armed Forces High Command.

^c Evaluation Site West.

^d The Luftwaffe’s Transient Camp, Air, West.

^e For interesting reading, see Raymond F. Toliver’s *The Interrogator: The Story of Hanns Joachim Scharff, Master Interrogator of the Luftwaffe*; Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, Ltd., 1997.

each of the men in the aircrew talked. Most often, it seemed as if the higher the rank of the flyer, the more he talked. Some entries read, “Young, arrogant second lieutenant, will not say anything except name, rank, and serial number.” Others had page upon page of information. It was a rather curious mixture.

After the recently established US Air Force became aware of the existence of these files, it tried to court-martial some members for talking too much. They brought the chief Luftwaffe interrogator, Hans Joachim Scharff—the airmen called him “Pokerface Scharff”—to the United States. He testified, but for the defense: he accused high officials in the Army Air Corps of being more at fault than the crew members.

The USAF decided to skip the court-martial idea. I heard the USAF convicted only one officer, who had defected to Germany. Later the USAF asked, “What was the magic spell or formula used by Pokerface Scharff that made the prisoners drop their guard and converse with him even though they are conditioned to remain silent?” Pokerface Scharff broke down barriers so effectively that the USAF invited him to make speeches about his method to military audiences in the United States.

Creating an Index

We had everything that was stored at the Potsdam Archives, except, as we would discover, the index card files of the archives. We assumed that the G-2 and his crew had hurriedly crated whatever was in the

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building, and that the index cards were in a different building.

There was much scratching of heads. Without the index files, properly sorting this many documents was extremely difficult. We had no archivists in the organization to assist. No one had the solution to this momentous problem. Finally, Sergeant Himsl, a good old Minnesota farmer’s son, said, “We’ll sort all the Leitz folders by the markings on the labels. Sort out all the folders that have red diagonal lines from right to left on one pile, those with the red diagonal line from left to right on another, then those with blue lines, yellow lines...after we are finished with the Leitz we’ll get to the other stuff.”

After months of breaking crates and sorting the files, we had Leitz folders stretching in multiple rows on the floor of the huge warehouse from one end to the other. After completing the sorting and arranging, we had those 19 linear miles of documents, sorted by office of origin and office of responsibility, on the floor of the warehouse. It was pure genius: Sergeant Himsl, not an archivist, solved the problem in his own unique and efficient fashion.

Among these files we finally discovered the clandestine reports from *Fremde Heere Ost*, General Gehlen's intelligence specialists deep inside Russia. Our G-2 was happy. With our first mission completed, we sorted the rest by color and symbol on the Leitz folder. Eventually, the rows of folders became the base for a new index file. Much later, after we had done

the groundwork, the Department of the Army hired German-speaking civilian employees to recreate the indexes for the various German departments. In essence, they created a mirror image of the German archival system of indexes—except ours was in English.

Once Organized

A Trove of Maps

We alerted the G-2 that several crates contained hundreds of ingenious little booklets in the *MilGeo* Collection, the German Army’s military geography collection. All were uniformly reddish purple, of a size that would fit into the breast pocket of a German Army tunic—designed for company-level officers. There were booklets for every city, town, and village in Poland and Russia (up to the Ural mountains), which contained a description of the location, a little map of the fastest route through town, the town’s important features, the number of horses and troops that could be quartered in the town, important military intelligence information, bridges, river crossings, militarily important geographic features, and more.

We discovered a pile of engineering maps of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. German civil engineers had designed this railroad. We found construction plans for whole sections of track. (Years later, the Central Intelligence Agency picked up these plans and used them to cali-

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brate U-2 reconnaissance aircraft navigation and photography.)

These maps had their own importance because the Soviets, in their paranoia, had offset their map coordinates by several miles to prevent the world from knowing the exact locations of their “strategic” sites. They were not secret to us; we had the engineering surveys.

War Crimes Evidence

Other crates contained *Gestapo* files with indisputable evidence of wartime crimes committed by the Nazis; Nazi Party files; several photo collections, and much more. We also found files from civilian administrations, from the *Gestapo*, the Nazi Women’s organization, scientific research foundations, every imaginable type of printed and handwritten material, items from before WW I, through the growth of Nazi power, to the very last days of the war.

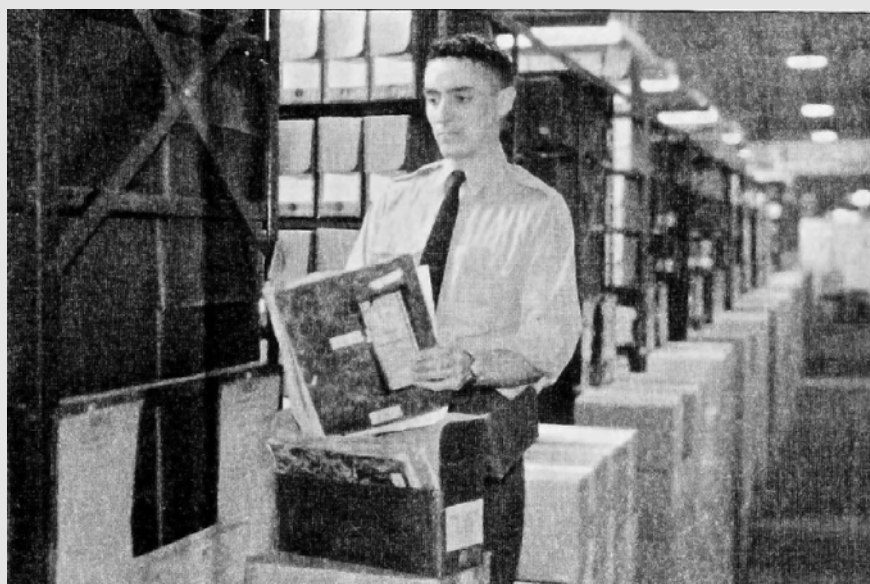
Years later, by that time we had outgrown the storage capability of Room MB-1026, we moved the entire collection to the old Torpedo Factory on Union Street, in Alexandria, Virginia. There, we stored these documents—still in their original Leitz folders—on 10-foot steel shelves.

For several years we concentrated our research on intelligence matters; later, we turned our attention to war crimes. All of us—young soldiers and old, alike—regarded as utterly disgusting what the Nazis had done to people and to nations and were unable to understand how they had besmirched the whole of Germany for their own shameless ideology. The documentation we had in this warehouse was proof beyond any doubt: evidence written and imaged by Germans who were proud of their despicable acts—acts which would haunt all Germans into eternity. It made us ashamed of our German

roots, ashamed even to be members of the human race.

We found convincing, undeniable, evidence, of Nazi crimes. For some months, it was my task to work through the records of Nazi activity in the Baltic countries. We discovered that the SS had allowed locals, Latvian, Estonians, Poles, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians to do much of the dirty work. These locals tried to outdo the Nazis in torturing and killing poor hapless men, women, and children.

Among the *Gestapo* files, I found a stack of green, linen-covered ledgers from concentration camps in the Baltic countries. Each had, on page after numbered page, in neat handwriting, the names of persons, thousands upon thousands, who had perished in these concentration camps. It listed first name, last name, date of death, and cause of death—*Herzinfarkt*—cardiac arrest—written after each prisoner’s name. Some camps provided photos



Gerhardt Thamm in the Torpedo Factory file room and as a Sergeant First Class in 1952. Photos courtesy of Thamm.

of prisoners undressing before going into the “showers,” the euphemism for “gas chambers.” These inhuman creatures in fancy black uniforms sent a “show and tell” of these images to their beloved leader, *Reichsführer, SS und Chef der Deutschen Polizei*, Chief of the SS and Head of German Police, Heinrich Himmler, aka the “chicken farmer.”^a

With typical German efficiency, scientists tested various killing methods. They discarded death by shooting as inefficient, too costly, and too time consuming. These scientists determined that poisonous gases were the most efficient way of mass killing “undesirables.” They tested various chemical combinations on prisoners and finally settled on one that was easiest to administer. *Gestapo* headquarters then commissioned German architects to design the most efficient gas chambers possible. The architects drew detailed blueprints of gas chambers, and many of these blueprints were part of our depository. We submitted the evidence to the various war crimes commissions, which tried the guilty parties. They hung some Nazis, but far fewer than deserved execution. Most of them received

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long prison terms, later commuted to time served. Many of those executed for war crimes were low-level guards conscripted into the SS, often with prior criminal records.

At one point, my boss assigned me to work on “Kommando Dirlwanger,” the most despicable among countless despicable Nazis. The German Army had refused to accept Herr Dirlwanger for service: under an old German law, certain criminal acts precluded service in the *Wehrmacht* (the armed forces). By army regulations, dating back to the days of empire, those convicted of poaching received not only prison terms, but also “loss of honor” and loss of citizen rights, such as voting, holding public office, and serving in the armed forces. Yet those ineligible to serve in the *Wehrmacht* found homes—and fancy uniforms—in the *Waffen-SS*, the armed services of the regular SS: Hitler’s uniformed henchmen. This was where Dirlwanger found his home. Dirlwanger was “famous” for his short, descriptive reports, each a half a page long, with the subject, Juden-

säuberung—“Jew cleanup.” *Heute hat Kommando Dirlwanger 234 Juden umgelegt.*” “Today, Commander Dirlwanger has knocked off 234 Jews at [location].”

Many of these low-level concentration camp guards were indeed executed, but scores of high officials had carefully prepared their departure “just in case we lose” and escaped to foreign lands, South America being one of their favorite destinations. This seemed to confirm the truth of a German proverb, “They hang the little ones, but the big ones they let go.”^b

Working in GMDS I came to realize that we must never forget that there is but a thin line between the cultural elite and the mass murderers of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In recognition for my work, I received one set of 42 volumes of the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials; it is now the only German-language set in the Library of the US Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.



^a So called, because of his occupation before becoming the Nazi’s top killer.

^b “Sie hängen die Kleinen, sondern die Großen sie gehen zu lassen.”