

Preserve and Destroy: The Acquisition of Documents

The ITS had searched for documents ever since it was founded. But from the 1980s and especially after the end of the Cold War, its activities in acquiring documents grew by leaps and bounds. For many inquiries from Nazi victims in Central and Eastern Europe the ITS was unable to find information in its own archive. ITS teams therefore traveled through Germany and Europe to acquire, copy or microfilm collections of original documents. But this document acquisition was also highly problematic, because of an outdated definition of who was a Nazi victim, one which had been overtaken by recent public debates.



Two ITS Employees Filming the Death Books from Auschwitz Concentration Camp in Moscow, October 1989

This photo symbolizes a breakthrough in the acquisition of documents. In autumn 1989, after lengthy negotiations, the ITS was able to film the death books from Auschwitz during a multi-week trip to Moscow. The Red Army had seized the documents in 1945. Before 1989, Soviet archives had been inaccessible for decades.

Microfilm Cases for the Filmed Death Books from Auschwitz, Labeled in October 1989

Before the introduction of digital technology in the 2000s, ITS employees acquired documents using microfilm cameras suspended in large frames. In autumn 1989, the two employees sent to Moscow filled 29 films, each with around 3,000 images.



Neue Dokumente für internationalen Suchdienst

Kopien bisher unter Ver- Arolsen. Im Gepäck hatte die 25 Jahre lang gekämpft wurde. schluß gehaltener Akten und Sowjetische Delegation die Zu- Bildmitte: Charles-Claude Bie- Kartellkarten präsentierte der sage an den Suchdienst, nach dermann, Direktor des Such- Direktor des Moskauer Gene- der Aufnahme von 46 Aus- dienstes in Arolsen - rechts: ralstaatsarchivs, Anatoli Pro- schwitz-Todesbüchern nun Alexei Krichafovitich, stell- kopenko (links), gestern beim auch Dokumente kopieren zu vertretender Suchdienstleiter aus der UdSSR. (Foto: sim)



Printing out Microfilm in the ITS Photo Lab, Arolsen, circa 1991

To incorporate filmed documents in its archive, the ITS had to print the microfilms document by document. The printouts were then given page numbers and stored in folders in the archive. Names in the documents were recorded on cards for the *Central Name Index*.

Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine Report on a Press Conference in Arolsen, November 10, 1989

In November 1989 the ITS negotiated with the Central State Archive in Moscow to film more documents, including those from Sachsenhausen concentration camp which had been taken to Moscow in 1945. Acquiring such documents helped many victims of Nazi persecution and their relatives.

Audio Station

Interviews

“ In 1994 I was in Moscow for four weeks. Then there were trips to the UK, several to Belarus – in Minsk. One time in Minsk I arranged a last-minute trip to Brest for a week in the same period; I was in Ukraine several times; Prague, twice in the Czech Republic. ”

Constanze Schmidt

“ Once, in Speyer, we were in a psychiatric hospital or something. ... I didn't have a clue about euthanasia or anything ... So you really just looked for the names – is that maybe a Polish forced laborer or a German Jew? – and you microfilmed it. ”

Jens Paul

Employees Describing their Document Acquisition Experiences in 2018

The ITS continued to acquire documents until 2006. In the end, the focus was on Eastern Germany and countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The two employees here describe their trips and the often unusual working conditions.

*“ When we were on the road, you never knew what to expect.
... In big companies, you were taken into the cafeteria. But in
some places you were taken down into the filthiest cellar, in the
winter, with open windows, and then you had to improvise. ”*

Jens Paul

*“ Back then in Moscow, I was totally irritated at the start by these
huge masses of German files. ”*

Constanze Schmidt

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Suchdienst in der Bonner Haftanstalt

Kurz vor Aktenvernichtung

11-14 Tage später wären sie zu spät gekommen. Dann wären die Akten vernichtet gewesen, die zwei Mitarbeiter des Internationalen Suchdienstes in Arolsen gestern in der Justizvollzugsanstalt an der Wilhelmstraße durchforsteten. Der Suchdienst, eine Einrichtung des Internationalen Roten Kreuzes, forscht in den Bonner Akten nach allen Ausländern, die zwischen 1933 und 1945 in dem Gefängnis waren. Der Nachweis dieser Zeit kann für eine noch unbekanntete Zahl von Menschen Bedeutung in Fragen der Wiedergutmachung oder der Rente haben. In Arolsen werden die Namen mit den dort gespeicherten verglichen.

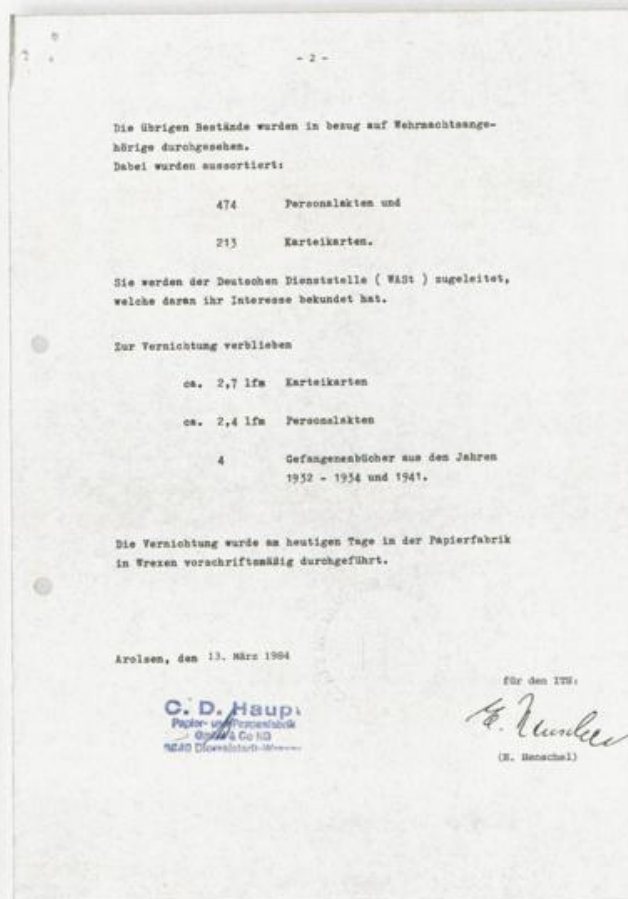
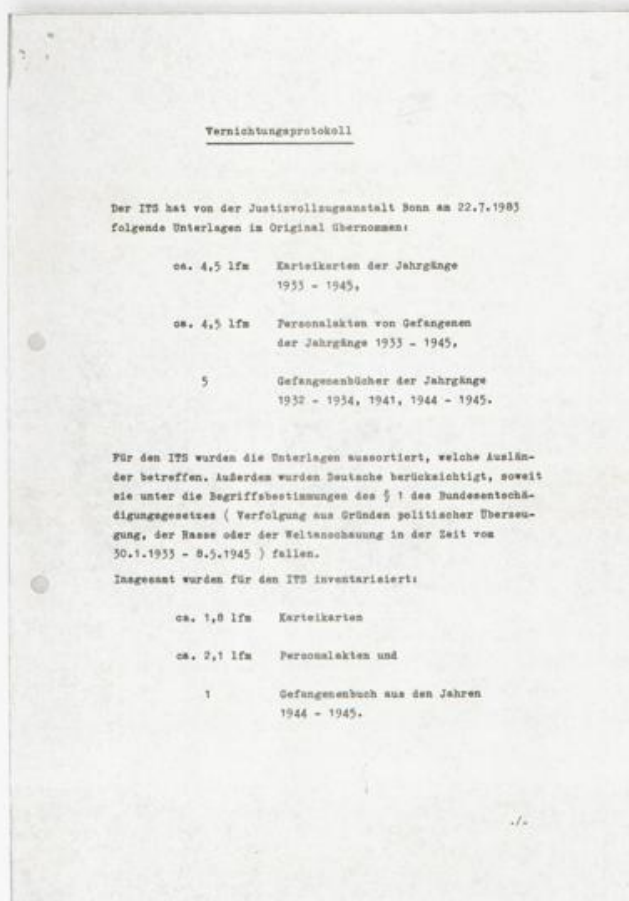
In der Haftanstalt, die in allen Bereichen unter Raumangel leidet, soll durch Aktenvernichtung Luft im Archiv geschaffen werden. Unterlagen, die 30 Jahre alt sind, werden freigegeben für den Reißwolf. In 14 Tagen, so Dr. Peter Höflich, Leiter der Justizvollzugsanstalt, wären die Aktenberge nicht mehr dagewesen.

The Bonner Generalanzeiger Reported on the Document Acquisition, July 22, 1983

Securing the files from Bonn Prison was one of the first new document acquisition efforts in the Federal Republic of Germany. The ITS often acquired files shortly before they were due to be destroyed, as was the case here. At the time, there were no laws requiring authorities to hand over their files to a state archive.

Redactions in the Original Prisoner Register of Bonn Prison from 1944/45

After acquiring the documents, ITS employees redacted the names of all prisoners not included in the target group of foreigners or victims of Nazi persecution. This action was based on a restrictive German compensation law from the 1950s, even though its narrow definition of persecution had been publicly criticized since the early 1980s.



**ITS "Destruction Log" for Bonn Prison Documents
that had been Separated out, March 13, 1984**

The Bonn documents were separated according to the dubious criterion defined in Paragraph 1 of the German compensation law, and many were permanently destroyed by the ITS. This shows how public debates and new research concerning the Nazi persecution of social outsiders and other "forgotten victims" had passed by the ITS in the 1980s.