

“Die Schließung von Überlieferungslücken am Beispiel des Schriftgutes der Luftwaffe 1933-1945” (“The Closing of Gaps in Returned Collections Using the Documentation of the Luftwaffe 1933-1945 as an Example”)

Von Wulf-Dietrich Noack¹

(Translated by: Henry L. deZeng IV)

Up until February 1945 the archived documents of the 8th (Military Science) Branch of the Luftwaffe General Staff had suffered no losses because they were removed in a timely fashion from Berlin, where the 8th Branch was located and its records stored. The greater part, including some 80,000 new files containing tactical documents, were taken to Karlsbad around August 1943.² The technical documentation from the First World War and those from the Generalluftzeugmeister's Department from the period after 1933 were stored in Herwegen in Silesia. A not insignificant collection of documentation was safeguarded in the branch archive in Vienna, this including the files of Luftflotte 4 and Luftgaukommando XVII. Remaining behind in the archive building on the Kronenstraße in Berlin were some 60,000 file volumes of documents of the former German air forces (Luftstreitkräfte) from the period before 1920, some 20,000 of the Legion Condor and some 15,000 of the Reich Luftfahrtministerium (RLM) dating from 1933 and after.

The situation on the Eastern Front and the possibility that Karlsbad was to be turned into a hospital and convalescent center, led to a decision to surrender the storage facilities there and transport the files to Heldburg near Hildburghausen.³ The entire holdings from Karlsbad and Herwegen arrived there during the period between 21 February 1945 and 8 March 1945, but not the large collection that had remained behind in Berlin. That had fallen victim to an air raid on 3 February 1945. No plans were made to move the collection stored in the branch archive in Vienna.

At the end of March, the entire archive collection was hastily transported into the Alps on the basis of a strict order issued by the Intelligence Branch of the Luftwaffe's Command Staff (Führungsstab) that the holdings were not to be permitted to fall into enemy hands. Part of the collection remained behind at each intermediate station along railway line toward the Alps. Most of the collection eventually found its way back to Karlsbad, then on 11 April it was moved to Hohenburg near Lengries, and then forward and backward along the rail lines in an attempt to find a temporary haven for the collection. On 30 April, as the Americans took Garmisch-Partenkirchen and were advancing on Mittenwald, the order was given to destroy the holdings. The burning took place over the next several days until 3 May, when the top secret policy papers of the 8th Branch, which had been held back until last, were finally put to the torch.

Oberst Mittmann,⁴ commander of Detachment South (Teilkommando Süd) of the 8th Branch of the General Staff of the Luftwaffe, submitted the following report on 5 May 1945: “It can be determined today that the decision to destroy the files – an estimated 50-60 tons of paper - at the last possible moment by fire in the space of a few hours is technically impossible. Rather, the complete destruction of the holdings, including the top secret planning documents, was only possible after detailing the help of over 100 men

¹ This is an article appearing in the following anthology: Heinz Boberach and Hans Booms (eds.), *Aus der Arbeit des Bundesarchives: Beiträge zum Archivwesen, zur Quellenkunde und Zeitgeschichte*, Schriften des Bundesarchivs Nr. 25, Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt Verlag, 1977. ISBN 3 7646 1690 3. Wulf-Dietrich Noack was born in 1914 and in 1977 held the rank of Archivoberrat (senior archive official) in the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg, where he had been on the staff since 1966.

² Karlsbad is in the Sudetenland (Czechoslovakia) and is today called Karlovy Vary.

³ Heldburg and Hohenburg are both estates or castles.

⁴ Karl Mittmann, Oberst, DOR 1 June 1942, signals branch, and long-time employee of the Luftarchiv.

who took 44 hours to complete the work.”⁵ [TN: Mittmann’s report continues, but it’s mainly a continuing complaint about how hard they all worked and really adds nothing to the subject.]

Also lost were the files that had remained behind in Karlsbad, these being mainly captured Italian, French and Russian document collections. On the other hand, the files that had been stored at Heldburg, mainly those of the Generalluftzeugmeister, and several significant collections that had been at Hohenburg, were seized by the British and the Americans, respectively, and survived. Together with fragmentary files that had been captured by the victors in the field, these collectively form the surviving holdings of Luftwaffe documentation once everything had been returned to the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv from Allied custody. All together they consist of some 15,000 archive items comprising an estimated 2-3% of the Luftwaffe’s original mass of files and approximately 7.5% of the Luftarchiv’s holdings that were on hand up to January 1945.

[TN: The article continues for another 8 pages and describes in some detail how BA-MA set about cataloguing and indexing the documents and developing finding aids (Findbücher) for the collection, of which 45 had been prepared by 1977. These details are not germane to the subject and would mainly be of interest only to professional archivists.]

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⁵ Extract from Chef Genst. 8.Abt., Teilkommando Süd, Kommandoführer: “Bericht über die Vernichtung der Aktenbestände der 8. Abt. des Oberkommandos der Luftwaffe” (“Report Concerning the Destruction of File Holdings of the 8th Branch of the High Command of the Air Force”). It is known from other postwar sources that the men “detailed” to help with the destruction were from a nearby Army engineer unit and that a large quantity of gasoline was used to burn the files, presumably after they had been unloaded from the train that had been used to transport them.