

Reconsidering Archival Classics

Ernst Posner's *Archives and the Public Interest*

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The first publication of *Archives and the Public Interest* was compiled in 1967 for the seventy-fifth birthday of the author. Ernst Posner had written the contributions during the two decades between his emigration from Germany in 1939 and his retirement from the American University in Washington in 1960. This new edition positions the thinking of Posner in the context of his time and his experiences, especially those before he was forced to leave his post in the Prussian Privy State Archives in Berlin and his work for the famous *Acta Borussica*, a scientific edition of sources for Prussian history.

This new perspective reveals Posner's role as a builder of bridges between the emerging archival profession in the United States and the European traditions. After the Second World War, he taught repeatedly at the Archives School of Marburg about American archives and thus opened the minds of his German colleagues, even if he rejected an offer to become the first director of the new Federal Archives of Germany which was founded in 1952.¹

Posner reflected in his writings the contradictions between American and European archival experiences and thinking. His new experiences after emigration allowed him to observe as an outsider what he had left behind, and these observations inform his first reports on European archival practices written for the National Archives' program of assistance in the administration of occupied territory. While this outsider's perspective never separated him completely from his roots, his curiosity and open mind helped him to feel at home and to be accepted as a competent expert on both sides.

¹ Astrid M. Eckert, *Kampf um die Akten. Die Westalliierten und die Rückgabe von deutschem Archivgut nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2004); Dagmar Giesecke, *Ernst Posner 1892–1980, Archivar in Deutschland und Amerika – eine biographische Skizze* (Potsdam 1997) (Brochure for an exposition).

Posner's Background in the Prussian Archives

Ernst Posner (1892–1980) surely would not have predicted his renown as an archival theorist. He was trained as a historian; however, military service interrupted his university studies, and shortly after the beginning of the First World War, he was severely wounded in Poland. Only in 1919 could he study again, and one year later he submitted a dissertation thesis on the registers of Pope Gregorius I (540–604). After his final examination, at the age of twenty-eight, he entered archival service in the Prussian State Archives where his uncle had been a member of the staff in the middle of the nineteenth century. He wrote finding aids on holdings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and answered questions from researchers. His thorough work on several volumes of the series of publications of sources for the history of administration in Prussia, the *Acta Borussica*, gave him an unparalleled and detailed knowledge of Prussia in the eighteenth century, and he was considered to be the only historian to read the most difficult handwriting of certain administrators of that time. He taught future archivists especially about the history of the holdings of the Prussian archives.² His experiences and the atmosphere in the archives at Berlin had a huge influence on him, working there as he did for fifteen years until persecution against him as a child of a Jewish family led to his emigration in 1939.³ He left Germany at the age of forty-six, returning ten years later as an American to become one of the first members of the new Society of German Archivists.

Posner's years on the staff of the Prussian Privy State Archives were among the most interesting in German archival history. After the First World War, voluminous masses of records swamped the archives with the dissolution of large agencies for the administrations of daily life during the war, triggering considerable debate on appraisal, and many interesting articles were published in the *Archivalische Zeitschrift*, edited by the Bavarian Archives. While these professional debates ceased after the National Socialist Party rose to power, this atmosphere of professional discussion was reflected in all the writings of Ernst Posner. Though it is impossible to identify the distinct personal influences of his former colleagues, one can recognize in his later writings certain ideas that were discussed in the Prussian State Archives at Berlin Dahlem.

² Wolfgang A. Mommsen, *Ernst Posner, Mittler zwischen deutschem und amerikanischem Archivwesen*, *Der Archivar* 3 (1967), 217–30. The author of this article for Posner's seventy-fifth birthday was a former student of Posner's and he thanks Ken Munden for the chance to use his yet unpublished edition of Posner's articles for his dedication. This article by Wolfgang A. Mommsen will be part of the *German Archival Reader*, a collection of translations from German archival writings to be published by the Society of American Archivists.

³ For more information on the biography of Ernst Posner with further references, see the introduction by James M. O'Toole to the reissue of Posner's *Archives in the Ancient World* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003).

During the Weimar Republic between the two great wars, the Prussian archives led the movement toward professional self-awareness and development of archivists. The Prussian State Archives as the central service, was surrounded by a network of provincial archives and had formerly been the archives of the Privy Council and as such was called the Prussian Privy State Archives. It bequeathed this name to the succeeding institution, even after the dissolution of the Prussian state as a consequence of the Second World War in 1947. The directors of the Prussian provincial archives met regularly, exchanged experiences, and discussed common problems. Famous are the resulting "Motivation Reports"⁴ on concrete appraisal decisions, which were copied and distributed to the other archives.

The Institute of Archival Science, the central archival training institution that offered courses to prepare candidates for the prerequisite examination required for a job as an archivist in the Prussian archives, underpins the relevance of the Prussian archives for the German archival profession. Several archivists of the *Prussian Privy State Archives* gave lessons at the institute. They talked about their experiences and were engaged to systemize them and to formulate general guiding ideas. One of the most influential among them was Adolf Brenneke (1875–1946), the vice director of the archives whose lessons, given in the 1930s, were edited and published by a former student only after the war and after his own death. Based on a minute description of German archival history concerning institutions, holdings, and archival thinking, Brenneke developed a synthesis of his observations in an early modern theory on archives.

Brenneke's greatest achievement was explaining provenance as a functional principle for the first time.⁵ He conceived it in such a way as to give it value irrespective of the physical character of the archives. The principle of provenance for him meant that records could be brought into such an order so as to show how they had emerged from actual businesses. That signified that the relations between the underlying actions were more important for their understanding by searchers in the archives than the actual arrangement of the papers in the originating agency. The physical order of the papers might be different from the internal relations. Thus, the original physical order was to be conserved only if it demonstrated the internal relations. In case the actual arrangement of the papers when they were transferred to the archives contradicted that aim, the order should be changed in such way that the internal structure and the underlying network of activities would become visible.

With this definition, Brenneke was much ahead of his time because he understood provenance in a way that opened it up even to virtual records

⁴ Cf. Bodo Uhl, *Die Geschichte der Bewertungsdiskussion: Wann gab es neue Fragestellungen und warum? Bilanz und Perspektiven archivischer Bewertung*, ed. Andrea Wettmann (Marburg: Archivschule Marburg, 1994), 11–35.

⁵ Adolf Brenneke, *Archivkunde* (Leipzig: Köhler & Amelang, 1953).

without physical appearance. We might say today he understood provenance as the processes of business-oriented communication during collaboration within organizations. By defining provenance in a functional sense, he freed it from the arrangement of paper and made it available for new forms of records that he himself could not imagine. He defined a purpose of the definition of provenance, namely to represent original relationships. Information about context was supposed to be visible in the structure of a description and thus should not need to be transmitted as a verbal description. The context should be evident, not necessarily explained verbally. This aspect shows the specific approach of the Prussian archives to see provenance from the researcher's perspective. By defining arrangement according to provenance as the means to help understand how the records emerged from businesses and thus to understand what happened when they were created, Brenneke assumed the perspective of archives users and accepted their needs as his guideline. This perspective had the potential to turn around the archival professional values of the time and to initiate a service orientation that might have rivaled the existing professional identity of archivists as scholars and historians with a specialization in auxiliary sciences. However, only decades later, after the war, could archivists link up with these ideas.

Brenneke also developed a taxonomy of the structures of archival systems in historical or present contexts corresponding to certain forms of governance. No less interesting than the principle of provenance, if less discussed, this analytical taxonomy of archival systems might even be of increasing value in the new contexts of electronic records. In this model, Brenneke distinguished, for instance, the differences between receiving archives and archives deriving from issuing papers and letters, the former collecting charters, diplomas, and other, mainly legally important documents, the latter accumulating internal preparative memos, drafts of outgoing letters, including to-do lists and dispositions for internal joint actions together with received letters that initiated actions. The first form provides the information upon which activities were based; the second reveals what happened. Brenneke also showed how centralized archival systems could enable the archives services to open their holdings to the public just because they were separated from the agencies as producers of the records. This separation forced the administration to decide about disposing of and transferring their records to the archives, giving up their control of them. Responsibility is transferred together with the records to the archives including decisions on appraisal, which can be made by the archival institutions exclusively considering open access and use.

At the time Brenneke was working out his new perspectives on the principle of provenance and on archival systems, neither could be expanded to its full capacity by the archival community. They might have been developed further if the normal continuation of professional work had not been brutally stopped by

the persecution and expulsion of colleagues such as Ernst Posner and the political and public climate created after 1933. However, Brenneke introduced into the archival thinking something of the emerging philosophy of the time known as systems theory, which posited that organizations had their proper rhythm of life like living bodies. Brenneke spoke of the organic body of the archives, and he distinguished accurately between the structure of the organization, the structure of its tasks and functions, and the structure of the paper records. These three different layers delivered three aspects of the same archival body, which archivists ought to make visible for researchers.

Another colleague in the Prussian Privy State Archives, a bit younger than Ernst Posner, was Johannes Papritz (1898–1992), who later became the first director of the Marburg Archives School, which was founded in the American occupation zone after the end of the war. After twenty years of teaching, Papritz laid down his own observations and thinking in the four famous volumes of the *Archivwissenschaft*.⁶

Johannes Papritz added his own contribution to archival theory by reinforcing its analytical capacity. His *Archivwissenschaft*, or *Archival Science*, demonstrates more than it explains the analyses of different record forms. He developed a taxonomy of purposes for using written communication and of forms of records and files. His very sharp distinction between the different functions written papers may have in the various situations in which they are produced and for the individual who writes something down can easily be generalized and enlarged for electronic communications. He identified three purposes for using writing: for keeping memory, for bridging distances of time or space, and for achieving greater precision. Among the first are writings for economic accountability or legal validity. Like letters, they are endangered in their longevity, because when they have been read or used for accountability, they may be thrown away. The last purpose might be relevant only for a certain time and for the same person. Nevertheless, tangible paper often assures the longevity of notes and messages because of their material condition and a certain hesitation to throw them away. Besides these three forms of writing, Papritz identified ephemeral notes, which did not use text to transmit a message, but used abbreviations, graphic signs, or jotted words to organize collaborative work. Such writings are especially endangered because they aim at initiating an action and when the action is complete, they are discarded, especially when they are written on scrap paper, notes, or yellow stickers, which are implicitly ephemeral. Organic reasons for keeping them might emerge, if they are placed on an incoming letter or if they are needed later on to recall what was done. Then they are kept as traces, not as messages, because they belong to a network of activities.

⁶ Johannes Papritz, *Archivwissenschaft*, 2nd ed. (Marburg: Archivschule Marburg, 1983).

One of Johannes Papritz's most inspiring ideas was that an item in the holdings, for instance a sheet of paper, may contain several recordings on it, each of which organized steps in joint action. Because they coordinated what should be done in an organization, they kept track as authentically as no deliberate minutes might do. The ephemeral scribbles on the margins meant for initiating something to be done by someone else were identified as the most trustworthy traces, just because they were not intended for endurance and posterity.

For Papritz, the single entry or recording was most interesting, not the physical unit of a document. For instance, after the author of a letter had sent it and the recipient had received it, the date of entrance might be placed on it. Further remarks might be added indicating what to do, and the draft of the outgoing letter with an internal signature might be placed on the same sheet of paper. One physical object or document might therefore consist of several records, each indicating a different layer of time and thus telling all together a whole story. This idea acknowledges formal parallels between more recent written letters and old registers, both consisting of entries that represent consecutive events, and again puts the main emphasis on the function of the recordings for internal communication in collaborating processes instead of on their physical form, accepting that both may differ considerably.

Before Ernst Posner had to leave his post and was forced to emigrate, he worked among these and other colleagues in an atmosphere of professional discussion and inspiration rarely paralleled by other archives. His colleagues were all archivists and not professors of archival science, yet they oscillated between their detailed practical experiences and generalized concepts that explained what they saw when they had to teach. This left its traces on the thinking Ernst Posner brought with him to America and endures as a resonant foundation in the latest writings of this volume. Characteristic is his admiring yet hesitating attitude concerning the *Handbook of Procedures* and the initiating steps of the National Archives and Records Administration on the then-unknown territory of records management.

Ernst Posner was firmly rooted in the traditional German self-understanding of the archivists of his time as qualified scientific historians. Historical qualification and practice remained inseparable for him in both his personality and his professional satisfaction as an archivist. This unquestioned characteristic created some interesting contradictions in his contributions to the professional debates of his time. Still, in his 1956 presidential address to the Society of American Archivists, he sees himself as a "detached observer" of the American archival situation. And, when he makes recommendations for a modern training syllabus in his 1940 report, *European Experiences in Training Archivists*, he stresses the combination of historical research methods, social sciences, and administrative history as well as the history of records making and records administration,

without taking the next step and acknowledging that the study of historical forms and developments may serve as a basis for a methodology of analyzing different forms in their contexts independent of the time when they occurred.

A Builder of Bridges

The first texts of this volume are Posner's reports on European archival conditions. The later ones comprise speeches made on several occasions, so they were not meant as parts of a theoretical debate. Throughout, Posner treats three main topics repeatedly in different contexts.

The first topic is the development of the principle of provenance, its roots in the French Revolution, and its meaning in the Prussian tradition. He honors his predecessor in the Prussian Privy State Archives, Max Lehmann, perhaps often underestimated in the German archival tradition, as an author of regulations for the Prussian archives who introduced the respect for original order in 1881 as the "respect for the historical growth of historical sources that had come into existence in the course of historical events" (p. 41). Posner describes how this idea injected all of a sudden an incredible amount of vitality and individuality into the entire archives so that every fonds became a living organism of its own with its particular principle of life. Even if he did not intend to theorize, his is one of the best explanations of the principle of provenance, full of the innovative spirit of the former Prussian archives.

The next topic Posner treats in several articles is the question of training. He explains the European traditions and gives an overview of the situation in the United States in the 1950s. His systematic approach distinguishes two main forms still valid today. The first consists of a body of courses, often held at universities and offering a specialization in a broader field, at that time historical research. As in France and Austria, such courses provided qualifications in auxiliary historical sciences, the treatment of medieval material, and the techniques of reading and describing them. Those courses were open to historians of art, future librarians, and those expecting a university career. Archivists were trained among them, but were not guaranteed employment in an archives after the examinations. The other form of training grew out of entrance examinations for the profession, which led to the establishment of preparatory courses that were much more specialized than the university courses. Archival institutions often offered these courses, and passing the examination was the entrance to the post. This was the character of the Berlin Institute of Archival Science, inherited by the Marburg Archives School for the Federal Republic of Germany after the war, while in East Germany the training was later transferred to the university.

The difference between the system of university courses with broader qualification on the one hand and preparatory courses offered by a hiring

institution and followed by an entrance examination on the other is still valid today. University-based training always seeks to find a broader basis, such as history or information science, while training institutionally or structurally linked to archives systems, such as the Marburg Archives School still offers today, can provide a more concentrated preparation for the practical work, including a sound theoretical reflection.

Posner saw the advantages of being able to prepare for fields such as preservation, archival management, and work with modern records in specialized preparatory courses given to a large extent by archivists, because he was accustomed to this at the Prussian archives. He calls all these subjects “the archival economy” and regards description and processing of modern records as part of the practical training. Archival science for him, however, still comprised mainly historical analyses of archival forms and their contexts, so scientific qualification as a historian was, for Posner, the basis for all archival achievements. He accepted the relevance of archival economy, but it stayed a bit outside of his professional self-understanding. He felt the need for a methodology built on the scientific grounds that might emerge from, for instance, the combination of historical experiences with records creation in Prussian agencies, and guidance through the practical work. He felt the need for a theory linking the past of Prussian archives and the innovative steps he observed in the United States, yet, separated from his roots and without the possibility of joining forces across the Atlantic, he could only stay where he was when he emigrated and leave everything behind. When he returned to visit Germany after the war, all traditions were broken, the Prussian archives was no longer the same, and German archivists were occupied with trying to rebuild their institutions, their holdings, and their professional self-understanding.

The third topic Posner treats repeatedly in the contributions to this book is the role records management has to play in archival professional self-understanding. On the one hand, he describes how, in Berlin, training in the analysis and understanding of the techniques of records creation in agencies of the past has always had an important place. In contrast, he observes the approach of the National Archives in Washington in taking over responsibility for the administration of current records as a task for the institution. His approach was historical, trying to see differences and to explain them, while he was confronted with guidelines telling how to do it. He tries to understand the difference, but does not really succeed, reasoning its cause as the obvious neglect of records in the American agencies. This leads him to say that the care of records in their creation phase and in their archiving phase are obviously the same thing. So he pleads for a unifying perspective. However, he concludes that records administrators and archivists have to work together closely, because “neither of them can succeed if he does not have a complete understanding of the other’s functions or problems” (p. 65). So they need to understand each

other, but not to merge. It is obvious that he does not feel comfortable with the idea of archivists in the role of registrars or records managers, but he is not sure of being able to criticize the concept convincingly and successfully.

It is obvious when reading the articles today that Posner saw both sides as an observer noticing details that are hidden in regular daily work. He observed German as well as Italian archives very attentively because he wanted to explain them to his American colleagues, and he remarks on details in the American development that might not have seemed important from an internal perspective. With this approach, he is one of the first to open vistas across national frontiers and to encourage curiosity about other practices. In his postscript to the edition edited by Ken Munden in 1967, he outlines his perspectives on international cooperation, mainly pointing to the increasing body of professional experiences and know-how common to archivists of all lands. The most important fields for him are preservation and reproduction, as well as the care of records in their earlier phases. He calls for a sophisticated common philosophy of appraisal and for new methods for treating automated records. Ernst Posner sought fields in which the exchange and joint development of common know-how was necessary and useful, and these fields were treated in many sessions of the later International Congresses on Archives, where many commonly accepted new developments occurred since the first publication of this volume.

Today, in addition to those things archivists all over the world have in common, acknowledging and understanding their differences and their regional or national identities can create an even firmer cohesion. Ernst Posner demonstrated the curiosity and understanding of differences that is deeply rooted in the profession. His observations and ideas have their roots in the analytical approach and the respect of provenance of the material that archivists care for. Archivists understand that differences are interesting and that comparison of different things creates useful information.

International cooperation depends not only on common approaches and on doing the same things, but also on curiosity about and mutual understanding of differences. The efforts to harmonize, for instance, library and archival working methods, as undertaken during the 1980s and 1990s under the umbrella of the emerging information discipline, did not work in practice. Instead, if practitioners had understood each other and perceived the reasons for their differences, both sides could have learned from each other and thus enhanced their own productivity. The technological developments of the last ten years with the increased use of the Internet show that standardization is useful on the technical level. However, common technical approaches allow even better comparison of regional differences. Differences demonstrate contexts and give supplementary background explanation that deliver useful information and enhance considerably the understanding of what can be perceived.

Solon Buck's "Archivists' One World," cited by Ernst Posner at the closing of this book, describes what he initiated: the interest in and curiosity about different developments and mutual learning, not just by imitating, but by understanding.⁷ This typical archival perspective toward life and growth, toward the organic body not only of records, but of the actions and communications behind them, is the attitude of passionate impartiality and analytic approach to unknown realities. What is not understood cannot be judged. This open curiosity is prerequisite for life in a globalized world. In democratic societies today, people can and must decide about their position in ever-changing situations, and open and easily usable archives are needed, not just to deliver information on what, when, and where, but also to enable whoever wants to know it to discover why something happened the way it did. Ernst Posner's professional self-understanding was firmly based in this attitude of an archivist's curiosity. Therein lies the main reason why he was able to profit from the injustice of persecution to become a builder of bridges between the old and the new world of archives.

⁷ The reference was to Solon J. Buck's 1946 presidential address to the Society of American Archivists, published as "The Archivist's 'One World,'" *American Archivist* 10 (January 1947): 9–24.