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The end of Ranke's history?

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THE BASIC WAY in which historians identify Ranke's approach to history with their own—to the extent that they do so at all—is related to his use of archives. The location, analysis, and interpretation of records created during or close to the time of the events to be described are seen as essential to the historian's craft. It may well be helpful to locate and to consult later accounts and interpretations, but the first concern of the historian must be the effort to find contemporary records.

This approach to the research and writing of history influenced the training of historians in the United States and throughout the world and also placed a premium on making records available. Locating, preserving, and utilizing archival materials have become central to the training of students as well as to the professional practice of historians. Governments and other institutions responded, at least to some extent, to the pressures created by this trend in scholarship. The modern system of archives, the development of finding aids for their use, the regularization of access procedures, and the concern for the transfer of privately collected manuscripts into generally accessible institutions all received a major impetus from this perception of the historical discipline.

The practice of history as it has evolved in the century since Ranke's death would be inconceivable without the emphasis on archival research associated with his work. In spite of this integral connection between archival research and the kind of history Ranke wrote, few who read his works today are likely to concern themselves with the preconditions required for the writing itself. The famous Venetian diplomatic relations to which Ranke turned in his search for evidence had survived into his lifetime and were accessible to him. Accessibility and survival of records are prerequisites for the historian, and both are presently endangered to such an extent that the discipline itself as we have come to know it is threatened.

The United States at one time took a proud lead in making its records openly and promptly accessible to the public. It was assumed that in a democracy the government's records were the public's. They should be open for use, and there should be no copyright in government records. The great wars of this century temporarily interfered with this concept as secrecy came to be considered essential. Security classification closed many records, but the basic belief in the principle of open records reasserted itself in the

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post–World War II era. A series of executive orders brought coherence into the classification system and then at least began to reinstate some reasonable procedures for opening the files. Whatever one might say about the specific details of each of these orders, they all went in the same general direction under Republican and Democratic administrations alike. This is not the place to recount the terms of the various orders; suffice it to say that until 1980 there was a steady development toward applying the principles that within a reasonable period of time the people should have access to the records of their government and that practical administrative and budgetary procedures had to be instituted to make this effective in reality.

This process has been dramatically and emphatically reversed. The new executive order on security classification, E.O. 12356, took effect on 1 August 1982 and reversed the post–World War II trend. Designed to get the people off the government’s back by keeping records closed to public access, this order did more than put a drastic halt to the process which had been under way in the preceding thirty-five years. It invited the reclassification of previously opened records. Overall, the order favored closing, not opening, records. It called for longer rather than shorter closing periods. In the original White House draft, it set no time limits at all; 1 that is, it showed the administration’s preference for the perpetual closing of records, a cherished goal only reached up to now by the exemption of the operational records of the Central Intelligence Agency from the application of the Freedom of Information Act. 2

Along with the reversal in the purpose of the rules there came an equally dramatic reversal in the budgetary implementation of the declassification process. The majority of declassifiers’ positions were abolished, so that the more difficult rules might be applied ever more slowly by fewer personnel. It is not surprising that the result, as intended, has been a great and continuing reduction in declassification actions and an equally enormous upswing in the annual net increase in classified documents. It was appropriately in the Orwellian year of 1984 that the Information Security Oversight Office (the agency charged with supervising this process), in its annual report, hailed the reduction in the opening of archives with “special delight” and asserted that it “looks forward to even greater progress” in the same retrograde direction 3—a prediction fully borne out by subsequent experience. The most recent report showed that the declassification process currently results in a net increase of almost 7 million pages of classified material in the stacks: to keep up with the current production of classified records, the National Archives would have to act on 10 million pages per year, but in fiscal year 1986 they were able to process just over 3 million pages. 4 For Orwell’s fans in the Information Security Oversight Office, the signs of “progress” are dramatic; for the other 230 million of us, they are disheartening indeed.

In practice, all of this means that serious research in American history will be halted chronologically at some point in the early 1990s into the indefinite future. It also means that historians in other countries who, in the past, have often used the American example as an argument for earlier opening of their own governments’ records will no longer be able to do so. Quite the reverse. Instead of British historians arguing with their own government, eventually successfully, that it should shift from a fifty-year to a thirty-year rule so they would not have to cross the Atlantic to study their own nation’s history, there

1. Counsellor to the President, Edwin Meese III, “Memorandum: Executive Order on Classification,” 23 December 1981. A copy of this draft revision of the executive order was made available to the American Historical Association.


The British author Chapman Pincher provides numerous examples in his book, *Too Secret Too Long* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), of U.S. records that had been closed to him because of requests from the British to the U.S. government to close them. Presumably there is reciprocity.

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The mania for secrecy has other hidden, but in some ways even more dangerous, implications for the discipline of history. Ten years ago I was involved in representing the Conference Group for Central European History of the American Historical Association before the National Security Agency (NSA) for the declassification of German World War II cryptologic records. I warned NSA officials that they absolutely had to microfilm the large portion of records they were still refusing to declassify, because otherwise, by the time they did declassify them later during this or the next century, the records themselves would have disintegrated. One of these decades we will find out if the NSA did what they should have done. But the issue to which I refer is, of course, applicable to most records of this century: the physical deterioration of the acidic paper used for most records and books in the twentieth century, paper which is practically guaranteed to disintegrate chemically after thirty to sixty years, depending on original quality and the conditions under which it is kept.

This means that the records of this century, unlike those of the eighteenth century and earlier, simply will not survive. A couple of centuries hence, people may well conclude from the survival of a minuscule number of books and scanty archives from the 1980s that the overwhelming majority of people in our age were illiterate. They will assume that, as in most ancient times, only a minute minority could read and write, using acid-free stationery and printing books on acid-free paper. The point that is ignored far too frequently is the relationship between keeping records closed for long periods of time on the one hand, and their physical deterioration on the other. The present administration in Washington is beginning, we are sometimes told, to concern itself with President Reagan’s place in history. They need not worry; if they have their way, it is most likely to be blank. If the records are kept closed for as long a period of time as the administration prefers, all or almost all of them will have yellowed and crumbled into dust by the time historians are finally allowed access to them.

Far from being a peculiarity of this country, the problem is worldwide. Until the Chernobyl disaster, the leaders of the Soviet Union assured their people that only in profit-seeking capitalist societies could there be serious safety problems with nuclear reactors. It has now become evident that graphite can burn even under the watchful eyes of Lenin’s picture. When scholars are eventually allowed access to Soviet archives, they will discover that modern paper deteriorates in Eastern as in Western Europe depending on its acidity and conditions of storage rather than on the political and social system which produced it. Those European countries which are now carefully excluding their own and foreign scholars from their recent archives are, in fact, whether they realize it or not, destroying the basis for their own historical record in this process.

The same thing is true for what is often called the Third World; indeed,
it is almost certainly even more the case for these countries. Many Third World countries are in areas of higher temperature and often of higher humidity than the more developed countries, with the result that their records deteriorate even more rapidly since temperature and humidity are major determinants in the self-destruction of paper. The lack of resources for the proper care of records hastens the process, as do major hydroelectric projects which raise the humidity in nations like Egypt. If these countries keep their recent records closed, they face the ironic situation where eventually the only available records of their past are likely to be those papers of their former colonial masters which were generated before the introduction of wood acetate paper in the late nineteenth century. Independence no more guarantees survival of records than the imaginary advantages of a different social or political system.

There is more bad news to come. The turn to computerization in the last thirty years hastens the danger of societies being left with little or no material for the study of their own past. There is, quite obviously, the disappearance of preliminary drafts and stages in the preparation of important documents. This aspect of the computer eliminates one type of evidence historians have often found helpful, especially in tracing the process of policy formulation. But this is not all; it is the smallest portion of the problem. It is not just the drafts which vanish quite literally with the push of a button; it is the final clean copy which will disappear as well. Several aspects of the computer revolution combine to create this situation.

First there is the problem of changing hardware. Machine-readable records presuppose machines which are literate in those records. Given the present rate of change in this field, it is safe to predict that by the end of this century almost no machine-readable cards, disks, tapes, or wires generated up to now will in fact be readable. There will be no machines capable of reading them, and if any machines survive, there will be no spare parts for them, and if there are spare parts, no one will know how to make them work. This situation is already with us. One can work with U.S. census schedules of the nineteenth century but not with those of the 1960 census. Of the two machines left in the world which can handle those tapes, one is in Japan and the other has been retired to the Smithsonian Institution. Sixteen years ago there was a scheme to convert these tapes to a format compatible with the machines of the early 1970s, but the money was never appropriated. It is just as well that this was not done, partly because the machines now in use would be as illiterate with these tapes as with the original ones, and partly because of another aspect of this catastrophic situation.

The various types of tapes, wires, and disks not only change at such a rate that the new generations of hardware cannot handle them after a few years, but they themselves deteriorate. We do not yet have full experience with this only slightly slower variant of the self-destructing tape used to open each episode of the television series “Mission Impossible.” The proud promises on the cartons of floppy disks, however, guaranteeing the disks to last five or even ten years, provide a clue. No doubt some of the disks and tapes will last longer, but it is unlikely that many of them will be in physical condition for use in fifty years. Currently known methods of transferring existing machine-readable information on to new tapes, disks, etc., do not provide a realistic solution to the problem, because for the most part this is simply

not done. There is here an exact analogy to our knowing how to make acid-free paper but rarely using it.

We are now repeating the disastrous story of the early movies made with nitrate-based film, a kind of film that deteriorates rapidly even when it does not destroy itself and anything stored nearby by spontaneous combustion. With movies as with microfilm, we have shifted to silver halide film, a subject which will be reviewed later; but a similar emphasis on long-term survivability has barely begun in the world of machine-readable records. This text was printed from a floppy disk prepared on an IBM Personal Computer. Even if the historian two centuries hence who is researching the disappearance of most twentieth-century records could locate a machine that can read a floppy disk from the 1980s, the disk itself will have long since vanished into dust. These dire predictions can be tested against experience only if this essay has in the meantime been printed on acid-free paper by the Syracuse University Press.

There is still another aspect of the machine-readable records disaster for historians. The information maintained in one or another form of automated storage is frequently accessible through indexing or other entry devices which are in the form of software programs or special scan-sensitive markings on tape or other material. If these software and indexing scan systems are themselves lost or cannot be manipulated by a later generation of machines, the originals are basically lost even if they survive physically, because no one can access them. Calamities of this type are already upon us; examples involving important records from the Vietnam War are described in a suggestive report of the Committee on the Records of Government.¹ It is safe to assume that there will be more incidents of this kind.

We are faced with the need to rethink the requirements for the discipline of history as Ranke developed it. Whatever else they need, historians must have access to a surviving record. The reader is invited to imagine Ranke going from his library at Syracuse to Washington to negotiate access to Venetian diplomatic reports on acidic paper or seventeenth-century magnetic tapes. Some of these reports will pertain to Venetian intelligence operations at the Court of Naples and, hence, under United States law proposed by the administration and enacted in 1984, still closed to research. In the case of such materials, neither mandatory review nor the Freedom of Information Act would help; as the executive director of the American Historical Association attempted to explain at a hearing, perpetuity is a very long time.¹ But for those records not covered by continuing security restrictions, there would still be nothing on which to work. Any paper reports would have vanished by self-destruction, and even the Smithsonian has no machinery for reading surviving seventeenth-century magnetic tapes. This is the situation any historian working on the current decade will face a mere seventy-five years hence.

There are two possible ways of engaging the prospect unfolding before us. Historians can continue to ignore it—as they largely have. If no basic changes are made, it will be necessary for future historians to be trained and to work on the twentieth century essentially in the way ancient history is done now. Combining careful analysis of a few fragmentary surviving texts

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¹The statement and testimony of Dr. Samuel R. Gammon may be found in 98th Cong., 2d sess., Legislation to Modify the Application of the Freedom of Information Act, 71-82.

7. Ibid., 31.
with archaeological and numismatic evidence, historians will have to attempt to recover a society characterized by enormous volumes of records. They will be working with surviving materials that will be proportionately much smaller than those surviving from Athens or Rome and minuscule when contrasted with the comparatively voluminous papyri and cuneiform tablets of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Only the occasional university press book on acid-free paper will remain of the millions of tomes in the libraries, and only letters on rag bond paper will survive out of the vast paper production of the world’s Pentagons.

This prospect seems especially sad to me because my own current research field, the Second World War, will be affected dramatically. The paper of all the belligerents was particularly bad in those years of wartime shortages. This is as true for the United States as it is for other countries. Only one office comes to mind as having been equipped with an exemplary stock of paper: its head was appointed by Heinrich Himmler and had the title Bevollmächtigter des Reichsführers-SS für das gesamte Diensttunde und -Taubenwesen, the Plenipotentiary of the National Leader of the SS for All Military Dog and Pigeon Affairs. It will be interesting to read histories of World War II based on the surviving records of this agency, appropriately bound in leather and chained to a reading desk in the Laurentian Library in Florence. Too bad none of us will be around to read them!

There is a second possibility. Historians can work together with archivists and librarians in a major effort to publicize the problem as a whole and the possible solutions for it. There exist today feasible solutions for each of the three aspects of the basic problem: long-term closure of records, disintegration of records, and disappearance of machine-readable records. The answers to each of these are not necessarily the only possible ones; it is just that no other currently feasible ones have yet been proposed.

**LONG-TERM CLOSURE OF RECORDS.** The only realistic answer to the practical problem of declassifying the enormous volumes of records generated in ever-increasing quantities by the modern state is the legislative imposition of a requirement for self-declassification, a requirement that in this country would mean amending the Federal Records Act. Every document that is classified must include in the initial classification a dated declassification schedule. No other form of classification would be valid and no penalty would be imposed on the publication of documents not carrying such a declassification schedule. A document would therefore carry a notation, for example, that it was top secret, would go down to secret on 1 January 1997, and would be declassified as of 1 January 2007. No further review of the document would be needed unless the declassification were to be either speeded up or postponed. The overwhelming majority of the millions of pages of classified documents created each year would never need to be reviewed again, and the burden of examining the endless pages of classified paper would be placed on those who wish to hasten or slow the previously established pace. Since any extension of classification would also have to have termination dates to be valid, the volume of truly long-term document closures would shrink steadily. The backlog of records classified before the imposition of the self-declassification requirement would at least be a finite quantity, however huge, and could be addressed over a period of perhaps

The series Findbücher zu Beständen des Bundesarchivs (Guides to Record Groups of the Federal Archives) is published by the German Federal Archives in Koblenz.

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It should be clear that all modern societies which expect to make their records accessible will eventually be forced by the practical problems posed by the classification mess to adopt some variant of the self-declassification system. And they will also find it essential to include the costs of declassification in the budgets of the agencies which create the classified documents just as they now include the cost of safes in their budgets. Again, all modern societies will find that their archival institutions either will not have the resources for this or would otherwise have to divert an inordinate and increasing proportion of their resources to it. The management and servicing of the mountains of paper which the modern state creates is quite enough for archives; the costs of declassification will have to be considered a part of the cost of classifying. The sooner self-declassification becomes the legally required norm in any country, the sooner that country can look forward to a day when the pile of closed records will start to shrink rather than continue to grow; the longer it waits, the bigger the pile will become in the interim.

DISINTEGRATION OF RECORDS. There have been some encouraging experiments with the de-acidification of paper to save books and records from complete destruction by halting the process of deterioration. Certainly such techniques need to be applied, especially to library holdings. 9 It is, however, unlikely that such methods will ever be applied on an adequate level to archives. In any case, since they can only halt, not reverse, the deterioration, the available effective technology must take precedence over procedures possibly appearing in the future. That available effective technology is microfilming. Even if all future Ph.D. students must be provided with a seeing-eye dog along with their doctoral hood, this is the one practical way to cope with the problem. Silver halide film lasts, and copies can be made for readers and for eventual replacement.

When I first visited the German Federal Archives in Koblenz, I warned the archivist then in charge that any major record groups which had not been processed by the microfilm projects in Britain or the United States would have to be filmed by the German authorities for preservation purposes. He refused to believe me. He was certain that once the German records had been saved from Allied clutches and were in the beautiful surroundings of Koblenz, they would—like carefully kept medieval parchment—last forever. And he was not about to follow me into the stacks when I offered to show him examples of paper continuing to deteriorate in spite of its return to German custody. The current leadership of the Bundesarchiv fortunately has a more realistic view of the issue. Their great microfilming program, together with the accompanying series of Findbücher, or guides, could serve as a model of what ought to be done everywhere. 10 The National Archives in Washington at one time operated similarly but has more recently turned to private microfilm projects, which leave the reader uninformed about the identity of the editors as well as the principles of selection and omission, a disastrous departure from the fine microcopy program the archives once operated. Microfilming done properly and according to archival preservation standards is something done best under the control of archivists, not salespeople, and, with...
the funds again charged to the records-creating agency, must be seen as a function of the permanent custodians of the film.

In the future, it may be possible to reduce concern over this issue by enacting into law the suggestion of the Committee on the Records of Government that "archivists and record managers could be given the authority to require archival-quality paper for the production of all government records deemed important enough to justify retention in their original form." Even if such a procedure were ever adopted by the United States or any other country, however, there will always be masses of records unlikely to satisfy that standard. Microreproduction in some form is likely to remain a major part of any preservation program. Whatever changes in technology may develop, we can be certain that magnification will always be possible. It is essential that this crucial point always remain in the forefront of archival preservation projects: as long as the original letters are maintained in the original form, they can be brought back by magnification.

DISAPPEARANCE OF MACHINE-READABLE RECORDS.

There are observers who hope that at some point in time standardization of hardware will ensure the long-term maintenance of accessibility and, with periodic duplication, the physical survival of machine-readable information. This happy event is most likely to take place some decades after the Greek calends; but even if it does come, there will be all the vanishing material created in the meantime. The video disk with laser-imprinted information under an acrylic shield is supposed to be a possible remedy for all these problems and is currently being utilized by the Library of Congress for the long-term preservation of books and other materials. One cannot help wondering about the machines of future centuries scanning these video disks with a technology not presently imaginable. What would we do with a stack of seventeenth-century disks today?

There appears to be no alternative to the recourse to currently available technology that does not change the format of the text. Thus, agencies that create records of machine-readable disks, tapes, or wires would be obligated (by the national archives of the country where these are to be kept) to produce and turn over a hard paper copy and funds for the archivists to prepare a microfilm of those records deserving permanent retention. Alternatively, computer output microfilm (COM) can be prepared directly from machine-readable records; but this procedure will produce usable film only if it is carried out under strict archival control and according to high standards.

Film we know we can preserve and make accessible. By the time any other currently anticipated solution to the problem has been developed technically and applied in practice, the majority of existing machine-readable records and those created between now and that ever-receding horizon will be inaccessible by available hardware or deteriorated beyond recall (more likely both). A major study commissioned by the National Archives has recently come to essentially the same conclusion. Here is a challenge to daunt the brave; but as we enter an era in which technology is greeted not only with enthusiasm but also with a little skepticism, it ought not be impossible to engage a problem far easier than that of disposing of high-level radioactive waste. In this field we at least have a known and workable procedure.


The problems spelled out in this paper are both difficult and massive. They threaten to put an end to the discipline of history as we have come to know it, at least as it is applied to the last decades of the nineteenth century and to the twentieth century as a whole. Unless historians take these matters seriously and begin to work on them energetically and successfully, the future of the discipline is dim. The line of those wanting a seat in the Laurentian Library to inspect the few remaining records of this century could be a very long one.

Delle Famiglie di Principi di Roma. This Roman manuscript was composed between 1664 and 1676 and contains twenty-three genealogies of distinguished Roman and Papal families with coats-of-arms. The Ghislieri and Bonelli family (pages 276-77) is illustrated here.
My dearest Schoolmistress,

The first English letter I ever wrote, is sent respectfully to you; it will be more weak in grammar and style, a half English letter, but not empty of some substantial news. Mean!

You remember that I gave account of my future arrival at London to the Rev. Mr. Denison, minister of mission in England.

His answer of my present journey not only, that he is well satisfied with my