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**H-Diplo Review Essay on Astrid M. Eckert, *The Struggle for the Files: the Western Allies and the Return of the German Archives after the Second World War*** (translated by Dona Geyer). Washington, DC/New York: German Historical Institute/Cambridge University Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780521880183 (cloth, \$103.00); 9781107629202 (paperback, February 2014, \$34.99).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Klaus Larres**, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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**A**strid Eckert's book *The Struggle for the Files: The Western Allies and the Return of German Archives after the Second World War* is an outstanding achievement. In her award-winning volume, first published in German in 2004, the author traces the capture, transfer and eventual return of the German archives from the 1940s to the 1960s and beyond in meticulous detail. Essentially her book weaves together at least four strands that are of contemporary historical significance.

First, it is a book about the perceived importance of historical documents toward the end of World War II and the great efforts the American and British allies made to snatch these documents from destruction by the Nazis regime. It also is a book which demonstrates that the repeated and eventual successful attempts to achieve the return of these documents to West Germany were part of the Adenauer government's policy to obtain sovereignty for the new Bonn republic in return for loyalty to and integration with the western world. The diplomatic records were returned between 1956 and 1958; the military records slowly trickled back to Germany throughout the 1960s.

Third, the book contributes to the discussion about intra-western competition and rivalries within the general framework of the early Cold War years. The western alliance, including the evolving partnership between Washington, London, and Bonn, was by no means as united and free of friction as is still often believed. The Anglo-American squabbles about the German documents and whether or not to return them are part of this history. Last, Eckert's book looks at the importance that the historical profession (including archivists) possessed during the first two post-war decades. Part of this is the story of the publication of the important and initially highly controversial series *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, which was edited by a number of Anglo-

American historians. The latter story weaves itself throughout most of the book but could almost constitute a monograph in its own right.

As far as the individual collections of documents and various archives are concerned, Eckert's aim was not to provide a precise documentation for archivists and budding young researchers. While they undoubtedly would have found detailed information regarding the contents and former and current whereabouts of individual collections helpful, such material would surely have overloaded the book. After all, the volume is rather dense and packed with detailed information as it is. Indeed, *The Struggle of the Files* is a long and at times overly intense work of scholarship. The plethora of detailed footnotes is a case in point, despite their often enlightening nature. While this undoubtedly benefits the professional historian, it may hinder its reception among the general readership. The book shares this aspect with many recent books published by professional historians. There is a reason why many good history books consumed by the educated public today are frequently written by journalists rather than professional historians. This is to be regretted. Eckert has much to tell us which the general reader would also find of great interest.

In her first chapter the author writes about the Anglo-American plans for the confiscation and preservation of German records starting in 1944. Although careful and well-organized plans were drawn up, the author persuasively shows that once confronted with the reality of the collapse and chaos during the last months of the war, the capture of the German records of almost any provenance became part of the game for booty among the Soviet, American and British forces. Soon after the establishment of the new West German state in May 1949, as Eckert demonstrates in her second chapter, the new West German authorities, egged on by German archivists and some historians, asked for the return of the captured documents. They argued that it was the Germans who ought to have been in charge of writing and interpreting their own recent history, and that this ought not to have been left to allied historians. Early negotiations led to the offer of a piecemeal return of the German documentary record which was rejected by the Germans.

In her third chapter, Eckert focuses on the eventual ability of the American and British authorities to coordinate their policy on the German archives and develop a more coherent policy when faced with the demands for the return of the documents by the West Germans. The following chapter deals with the complicated Anglo-American-West German negotiations for the return of the documents. This is a complex story which the author delineates in an outstanding way. What eventually proved decisive for the progress of these talks, however, was the fact that the Soviets returned many (though by no means all) of their captured records to the GDR government in East Berlin. How could the West refuse to embark on a similar policy? Propaganda, public opinion and the need to present an acceptable Cold War image came into play.

Perhaps the most outstanding chapter in the book is the very last one. Here the historiographical dimension is persuasively outlined by means of a detailed history of the multivolume *Documents on German Foreign Policy*. The series focuses on outlining the development of Germany's foreign relations since World War I and in particular during

the 1930s and 1940s. By producing such an extensive documentary record in a relatively short period of time, American and British scholars wished to prevent any German efforts to create yet another 'stab in the back' legend which, of course, during the Weimar Republic had had such a malignant influence on the German interpretation of the country's defeat in World War I. German historians (not least Gerhard Ritter, the conservative doyen of German historians at the time) and the West German public were much incensed by the creation of the German documentary record without any input from German historians.

The huge microfilming project which was undertaken by the U.S. to preserve the German records before they were eventually returned was much lamented by the Germans, which is difficult with hindsight to understand. The latter felt perhaps instinctively that the microfilming project had less to do with making research easier and more convenient for scholars but was instead guided by the "latent mistrust toward German assurances that the records, once returned, would be made accessible for scholars from Germany and abroad" (7).

And indeed then as now, and despite all holy assurances about transatlantic cooperation, transatlantic mistrust is never far from the surface. The recent scandal about American espionage activities that targeted some of America's closest European allies comes to mind. But there also was the "Operation Rosewood" scandal of the years 1989-90, as Eckert briefly outlines in her introduction. Mysteriously the CIA obtained microfilms of the most important personnel files from the espionage department of the Stasi after the collapse of the GDR. Despite repeated German requests, the films were only returned ten years later in 2003.

Astrid Eckert has produced an outstanding book that is highly informative, convincingly structured, and a model of sober scholarly interpretation.

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