

Tensions Rise In Long Feud Over Access To Nazi Archive

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BAD AROLSEN, Germany -- Boxed away in a former Nazi SS barracks in this central German town is the core of one of the largest collections of historical documents from World War II. All told, the archive contains 50 million records that list the names of 17.5 million people, including concentration camp prisoners, forced laborers and other victims of the Third Reich.

For 60 years, the International Committee of the Red Cross has used the documents to trace the missing and the dead, especially those of the Holocaust. But the archive has remained off-limits to historians and the public, fueling an increasingly bitter dispute among Holocaust researchers, Jewish groups and the 11 nations that oversee the collection.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and diplomats from the United States, France and the Netherlands are pressing to open the archive to researchers and make digital copies of the collection available for inspection outside Germany. Possessiveness and a refusal to change with the times have kept the records closed, some critics contend.

Some German officials and other people argue that disclosing intimate details about the fates of concentration camp inmates and slave laborers would violate their right to privacy.

The dispute has percolated for nearly a decade. Unless a settlement is reached within a few weeks, a political brawl could break out next month in Luxembourg at the annual meeting of the commission that oversees the International Tracing Service, as the archive is formally known. German Justice Minister Brigitte Zypries is to meet in Washington on Tuesday about the issue with the director of the Holocaust museum, Sara Bloomfield.

Keeping the records closed "is absolutely scandalous," said Karel Fracapane, a Polish diplomat and executive secretary of the 24-nation Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research.

"This is about the memory of the most appalling event in human history and about respect for the survivors today," he said. "It's extremely important for the archives to become open as soon as possible and give survivors and their families relevant information before they die."

The International Tracing Service provides a unique window into the Nazis' obsession with documenting all facets of their rule, including lice inspection reports from concentration camps and records of insurance policies that German firms were required

to maintain when they used conscripted workers. The bulk of the collection is German papers seized by Allied forces; it also includes meticulous Allied records on efforts to settle refugees after the war.

The archive is managed by the Red Cross and financed by the German government. It continues to receive about 150,000 requests a year from people seeking information about missing relatives or confirmation of what happened to them under Nazi rule. In part because of funding cuts from the German government, a severe backlog has developed; administrators said an inquiry into an average case can take up to four years.

The service is technically owned by 11 countries: the United States, Britain, Belgium, Israel, Italy, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Greece and Luxembourg. Eight years ago, the governments agreed in principle to open the archives to historical researchers, but they have missed a succession of self-imposed deadlines to do so.

Part of the problem is that officials from the countries meet for only a day each year to review the archive's operations. They also require a unanimous vote to take action on most issues.

Germany and Italy have resisted proposals for opening the archives, including a plan to share digital copies of the records with each of the 11 nations. German diplomats said they worry their government could be sued if the privacy rights of individuals named in the documents were not protected.

Many leading Holocaust researchers dismiss such concerns, noting that archives around the world successfully protect privacy. They blame bureaucrats from the German Interior Ministry for the impasse.

"They are the principal opponent to the whole thing, and it's very difficult for me to understand why," said Paul Shapiro, director of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the Holocaust museum in Washington. "Invariably, at the end of the day, the German representatives always put restrictions back on the table that they are absolutely insistent about."

German Interior Ministry officials involved in negotiations declined to comment. Sonja Kreibich, a spokeswoman for the German Foreign Ministry, said the government favors opening the archives. But "what has to be found is a common solution toward the legal questions, including issues of privacy and liability," Kreibich said. "Finding that solution is quite complicated."

Germany does not need to worry that documents in the archive would trigger a new round of compensation lawsuits, experts say, because deadlines in most class-action settlements have passed.

Researchers and diplomats point to the director of the tracing service, Charles C. Biedermann of Switzerland, a Red Cross employee, saying he has worked behind the scenes to keep the records bottled up.

Johannes Houwink ten Cate, director of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam, said Biedermann and the tracing service staff were reluctant to give up control because of an insular culture and fear for their jobs. He said the original mission to trace the whereabouts of refugees had inevitably changed but that the service was unprepared to adapt to a new role as a historical research center.

"They're not unlike the Japanese soldiers who stayed behind in the jungle and were finally discovered" after decades in hiding, he said. "They are continuing to ignore the outside world. The outside world has changed, but they have not."

In an interview last week, Biedermann said he wanted the service to open to the public but that the decision was up to the 11-country commission. "I absolutely hope it will be done," he said. "I'm sure if there's a will, there's a way."

He said his critics misread his motives. He said he had led efforts to scan the records, which would allow easy sharing of the documents with other countries. "That's the best proof that we are for opening the records," Biedermann said.

Meanwhile, Dutch, French and American diplomats are pushing a group of scholars and legal experts to find a compromise to submit to the tracing service's annual meeting May 17 in Luxembourg.

"It's been almost 61 years now since the end of World War II and the Holocaust," said Edward B. O'Donnell Jr., the State Department's ambassador and special envoy for Holocaust issues. "It's time to open all records of the Holocaust, and that certainly remains a priority for the United States."

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