

# NOT ONLY THE CENTRAL ARCHIVES – WAR AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ARCHIVES ON THE EXAMPLE OF CIVIL STATUS REGISTERS

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The historical discourse about archives war losses is mostly concentrated on the central archives or archives with a significant meaning for some territories. Nevertheless, the war did not also spare the small local archives, which were sometimes very important for both sides of the conflict. The article aims to show the fate of small archives on the example of archives of Civil Status Offices functioning at the former Prussian partition in Poland from World War I to the 1950s as well as operations taken on them by German occupant and the Polish government.

**Keywords:** civil status registers; local archives; historical sources

## НЕ ТОЛЬКО АРХИВЫ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНЫХ ОРГАНОВ ВЛАСТИ: ЗНАЧЕНИЕ АРХИВОВ ВОЕННЫХ И МЕСТНЫХ ОРГАНОВ ВЛАСТИ НА ПРИМЕРЕ АКТОВ ГРАЖДАНСКОГО СОСТОЯНИЯ

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Исторический дискурс об архивах военных потерь в основном сосредоточен на центральных архивах или архивах, имеющих важное значение для некоторых территорий. Тем не менее война не обошла стороной и небольшие местные архивы, которые иногда были очень важны для обеих сторон конфликта. Целью статьи является показать судьбу небольших архивов на примере архивов ведомств гражданского состояния, функционирующих на территории бывшего прусского раздела Польши с Первой мировой войны до 1950–х годов, а также операций, предпринятых в них немецкими оккупантами и польским правительством.

**Ключевые слова:** регистры гражданского состояния; местные архивы; исторические источники

The archival discourse on the war losses of archives and their subsequent revindication focused, understandably, on the archives of central authorities or archival institutions of outstanding value [1; 2; 3; 4]. These archives, as well as the archives of individual provinces or voivodeships, were also of particular interest to the legitimate administration and occupying authorities. However, it was not only these most important archives that became victims of war. Also, the archives of local authorities or offices often became the object of interest of

the occupier and the state authorities. On the one hand, this was of course, due to their current usefulness for administering the area. On the other hand, in these small, unnoticed archives were often stored, the memory and identity of the local population.

The archives of civil status offices are an excellent example illustrating this problem. Being the archives of the lowest, communal level, they are at the same time archives of extraordinary importance. They contain information about the civil status of the population, and thus about the most significant events in the life of each person as well as the consequences resulting from them. The article will present how the period of the two wars influenced the mentioned archives. In Polish conditions, the discussed problem occurred with particular force in the lands of the former Prussian partition and the so-called Recovered Territories, which were incorporated into Poland after World War II.

In the Prussian state, secular civil status offices were established by the Act of 9 March 1874 [5]. The offices began to function on 1 October of the same year. Initially, they were introduced only in West Prussia. It was supposed to be an experiment, the aim of which was to examine whether the new solution would work in practice. In connection with the positive result of the test, the network of civil status offices was extended to the entire German Empire by the law of 6 February 1875 [6].

It should be emphasized that it was the only utterly secular network of civil registries in Poland. The registers were organized on the commune level. Their jurisdiction covered the entire population of the state, regardless of their religion. The civil status offices kept the main registers, side registers, indexes and civil-status records. All these materials, except for the side registers, were held in the civil status offices archives. The side registers, as duplicates of the main registers, were transferred to the courts of the first instance for safekeeping. The archive of each civil status office, therefore, contained as complete information as possible on the births, marriages and deaths of the population living in its territory.

The first changes affected the archives of the civil status offices as a result of World War I. This war, which was generally less destructive for the archives, did not significantly affect its state of preservation. A problem arose after the war in connection with the incorporation of West Prussia and the Grand Duchy of Posen into Poland, which was reborn after the partition. This problem was all the greater because the state maintained the district character of the law. In the matter of interest, it meant that there were initially as many as five different systems of marriage law in one country [7]. What is essential, there has never been any unification of regulations in this area [8].

The rebirth of Poland after World War I did not bring about any mass movements to emphasize the belonging of these lands to Poland or to expel people of German origin from them. On the contrary, the young state sought to keep German officials working on its territory for as long as needed. Polish aim was in line with the German side, which was unable in a short time to accommodate all those who had decided to leave for Germany, not to mention the jobs provided. On 9 November 1919, Poland and the Weimar Republic reached an agreement that the existing German staff was to detain their positions temporarily [9].

The only recorded change in the period immediately after the First World War was their translation into Polish. The state did not distance itself from the German registers, but used them and continued the registers it had started [10]. Generally, it should be emphasized that the Polish state in the inter-war period had no problem with accepting the multiculturalism of the areas of the former Prussian partition and did not take extraordinary actions to administer the lowest-level archives. Its activity was a continuation of previous actions taken by the Germans.

The treatment of the registry of civil status after World War I contrasts with what happened to him during World War II and until the mid-1950s. As a result of warfare, in September 1939, the territory of the Second Polish Republic was occupied entirely. Under the decree of Adolf Hitler of 8 October 1939 on the organization of the administration of the eastern territories incorporated into the Reich, part of the occupied territory was directly integrated into the Third Reich (including the territories of the former Prussian partition). On these territories, the occupying authorities took action to Germanize them. To this end, among others, Polish citizens were forced to sign the Volksliste under the penalty of deportation to the General Government [11].

The actions of the occupation authorities were not without influence on the archives of the civil status offices that are of interest to us. The law on registering civil status changed with the entry into force of the Führer mentioned above Decree of 8 October 1939 [12]. The regulation assumed that the existing law would only apply if it did not prevent Germany from taking over the administration. The law on the Civil Status of the Population of 3 November 1937 and the Decree of 8 October provided the legal basis for the Decree of 4 November 1939 on the Implementation of the Law on the Civil Status of the Population [13]. In the result of the law change in the annexed territories was introduced the regulations connected to civil status registers in force in the rest of the Reich.

Apart from the changes in the functioning of the offices, the Germans also started to interfere in the existing archives by translating the Polish registers kept

since 1920 into German. The fact that the Germans took steps to Germanize civil status records as evidenced by the fact that many registers were translated into German during the war and according to German patterns. This practice would not have been particularly strange if it had been a matter of making duplicate registers that had been destroyed. At the example of the fonds kept in the State Archives in Toruń, it can be concluded that the German translations are often the third copy, alongside the main and side registers. Rarely do they constitute the only copies [14; 15; 16; 17].

The local population counteracted against the invader's interference in the local archives. It was almost common, or in any case very common, to hide civil–status registers from the German administration. This was particularly evident in rural areas. Although no direct transmissions were preserved in the documentary sources, there were clear traces of these activities in the archives. Many of the surviving records are still muddy today, or even have pieces of straw between cards. The archives of the civil status offices have survived the turmoil of the war, hidden at various farm buildings such as hens and barns. The protection of the archives of civil status offices in rural areas was facilitated for several reasons. The village registers were generally thinner and had fewer volumes than the city registers, so it was easier to move them. Moreover, the officials were not obliged to live and work in the villages that were formally the seat of offices. Therefore, they could store the registers in their own homes or to reach them relatively easily before a hostile state seized them.

Both of these phenomena are an expression of contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, they lead to the Germanization of the annexed territories by falsifying the testimonies of origin and family relations of the local population. On the other hand, to the preservation of the memory of their Polish roots.

Similar tendencies were also visible after the end of World War II. As a result of the peace provisions, the borders of Poland were shifted to the west by incorporating the so–called "regained territories" into it [18]. The problem faced by the Polish authorities, however, was to make the local population Polish and to prove the eternal Polishness of the occupied territories. One of the elements of the struggle for Polishness in the western part of the country was to locate Poles who were displaced from the eastern borders of the former Second Polish Republic or the Soviet Union [19]. Although these people, to a large extent, replaced the people living in these areas earlier, the point of honour of the Polish authorities was to prove the rights to the areas. To this end, the state also decided to interfere with historical testimonies. These efforts were particularly intense in the 1950s.

To prove the Polishness of mentioned territories, the government carried out the action of translating civil status registers and removing German

originals. In the first phase, the administration recruited employees to collect the civil–status registers corresponding to the new division of the network of offices. Then, these registers were translated and entered into common books. The translation also involved changing the variants of German names into Polish names. It should be emphasized that mistakes often occurred during the translations. Not only were such information as the names of professions misinterpreted, but it also happened that the names of people who had already used Polish names were changed. The second stage was the destruction of old German registers [20]. The effects of these actions are evident. Many fonds in the state archives are deprived of original registers, whose main books were replaced by Polish copies. Luckily, the side registers have been preserved in better condition and have not been destroyed.

To summarize, it should be stated that the archives of civil status offices, which store peculiar material such as civil status registers, underwent in the period of the first half of the twentieth–century changes resulting from the policy of successive state authorities. While they survived the First World War and the inter–war period without much problems, the Second World War already brought considerable direct losses in terms of records as well as destruction resulting from poor conditions of their storage. These actions were motivated by the desire to defend the testimonies of Polishness against the German authorities' efforts to forcefully assimilate the population living in the territories annexed to the Third Reich. However, the most active intervention in the USC archives was made by the communist Polish authorities, which directly sought to destroy the testimonies of history in the name of proving the eternal Polishness of the western territories annexed to Poland as a result of World War II.

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