

History Internal Assessment

How Useful are Declassified Documents to a Historian?

A Case Study of Declassified Documents Detailing Actions to be Taken Against the Jewish Population of Vichy France

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Plan

I decided to base this assignment on Jews in France during the Second World War after reading a book on Auschwitz and the 'Final Solution'¹. I later decided to focus on the anti-Semitic legislation put into place by the Vichy government and to examine how useful are documents to a historian from this era, in addition to how such information provides us with historical truth.

This case study is divided into four sections. The summary outlines how I went about my research and refined my question, as well as my investigation into postmodernism. The evaluation section closely examines part of a document source² describing anti-Semitic measures and an extract from a book on anti-Semitism in Vichy France for reliability and usefulness. I consider the general strengths and weaknesses of declassified documents as sources in the analysis, as well as how they can provide knowledge about history. I then conclude in the final section.

Word Count- [154]

¹ Laurence Rees *Auschwitz, The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'* BBC Books 2005

² The full document is quite long. The complete version can be found in Appendix 1

Summary

I began my research by reading through Laurence Rees' *Auschwitz*, with particular reference to France's actions during the holocaust. After reading about the deportations that took place from France to Poland, I examined a personal account of the deportations, to offset the factual nature of *Auschwitz*. Elie Weisel's *Night*,³ was perfect for this purpose.

I then decided to focus on the region in which I lived. After extensive research on the Internet⁴, I examined the Yad Vashem⁵ website⁶, which contains a great deal of information, including testimonies, diary entries and declassified documents. I found several document relating to partisan resistance in the Toulouse area. I then read *Rescue as Resistance*⁷, which gave details on many types of Resistance carried out by Jews throughout France, such as the formation of the AJ⁸ in Toulouse in 1941⁹. I also visited the *Musee de la Resistance* in Toulouse itself, which contains evidence from the deportations, identification papers and other historical elements from French revolutionary groups in the area. However, there was little information about Jewish partisan groups around Toulouse and the Haute-Garonne area, so I decided to redesign my question, and instead focus on anti-Semitic legislation as a whole in Vichy France.

I then returned to the Yad Vashem website and found an intriguing document¹⁰ which details laws passed to further oppress the Jewish population, including information on the Anti-Jewish Police (AJP)¹¹. I also read *Vichy France and the Jews*¹², which gave complete details of the anti-Semitic laws passed by the Vichy government and their effect on the Jewish population¹³. From this book I was able to find an extract to compare with the document to determine if it was of any use to a historian as an individual source (Source 2). In order to investigate the postmodernist argument that history is a literary creation and unknowable, I read *In Defence of History*¹⁴.

Word Count- [318]

³ Elie Weisel *Night* Hill and Wang 2006 (original version published 1958)

⁴ Websites visited available in bibliography

⁵ A very large museum in Jerusalem dedicated to the Holocaust (Shoa)

⁶ <http://www.yadvashem.org/>

⁷ Lucien Lazare *Rescue as Resistance* Colombia University Press 1996

⁸ *French- Armees Juives*

⁹ Lucien Lazare *Rescue as Resistance* Colombia University Press 1996, pgs 97-98

¹⁰ An SS report on Jewish organizations, which then became my first Source

¹¹ Such as the fact it was due to Dannecker's influence that a "Jew Police" department was created in the unoccupied Zone

¹² Michael R. Marrus & Robert O. Paxton *Vichy France and the Jews* Stanford University Press 1981

¹³ Including further information on the Anti-Jewish Police.

¹⁴ Richard J. Evans *In Defense of History* Granta 1997

Evaluation

Source 1, is an extract from a declassified report that gives details on French, German and Jewish organizations in France. The extract used concerns the French Anti-Jewish Police^{15, 16}.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this document is the identity of the writer-Theodore Dannecker, head of the Gestapo office for Jewish matters in France¹⁷. Dannecker would have had nothing to gain through fabrication of details, considering the power and resources already at his disposal. The information presented is impersonal, and recounts the development of the PQJ over the past year (1941-1942). This is both a strength and a weakness. Whilst the information is factual and accurate, it provides no detail as to the *effect* of changes made to the PQJ, such as the reaction of the French police when the PQJ came under the control of an SS-Fuehrer. The document provides impartial facts, but there is no information as to the exact operations carried out by this police force and the effect on the Jewish population of Vichy France. Like most declassified documents, the content of the document is entirely dependent on what *needed* to be known.

Source 2 comes from an academic text which again, is also quite impersonal and non-subjective. The writers were not present in France during the Vichy period and so have had no personal experience of it, which might be seen as a weakness. However, as this book was written after the events of the Second World War¹⁸, the authors would have had access to many different resources¹⁹ and are well qualified in their respective fields of knowledge²⁰. Therefore, they are able to form a much more complete picture of the PQJ²¹. For example, it is commented on that the PQJ operated far more freely in the occupied zone, and was “in direct contact with the Gestapo... ignoring the statutory limits imposed by Vichy.”²² The source’s credibility is also supported by the fact it was published by the Stanford University Press, cementing its position as an academic text.

Overall, Source 2 is more useful. Whereas the purpose of Source 1 was to inform someone of the progress being made, Source 2 was designed to provide information about this period in history, thus giving a more complete account.

Word Count- [377]

¹⁵ Also known as Police for Jewish Affairs, “*Police aux questions Juives*” or PQJ

¹⁶ http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/R%C3%A9gime_de_Vichy, Section- La Collaboration Policière

¹⁷ Adam Rayski *The Choice of the Jews Under Vichy* University of Notre Dame 2005

¹⁸ It was originally published in 1981

¹⁹ Including document sources like Source 1

²⁰ Both authors are university History Professors

²¹ Including not only the facts presented in the Source 1, but also such details as the differences between the actions of the PQJ in the Unoccupied area of France and the Occupied zone

²² Michael R. Marrus & Robert O. Paxton *Vichy France and the Jews* Stanford University Press 1981
pg. 136

Analysis

One of the greatest strengths of declassified documents is that they can provide detailed inside information that may not have been made available to the public at the time. This includes information about the party sending it, the reasoning behind certain actions, or details on actions that were *not* carried out. These can then be used in forming a clearer picture or new perspectives of the motives of the writer, as well as the events or plans themselves. For example, in Source 1, a representative of the Jewish referat is described as having been successful in influencing “in a certain direction” leading and subordinate officials after having been sent to the Paris Prefecture de Police²³.

Another obvious benefit is that they also give figures that would have been very difficult or impossible to gather otherwise through oral sources. One example can be taken from a document sent to the Main Reich Security Office concerning the deportation of Jews from France, stating “The deportation of Roumanian Jews will take place immediately, but will not exceed the number 3,000.”²⁴

In this way, I believe it is possible to know about the past. History is a literary creation giving one observer’s impressions, perhaps only constituting “narrative truth”²⁵. However, figures and facts such as the ones present in this document are hard to fault, especially when considering its provenance and if it is justified by other sources. In addition, it is part of a historian’s job to make their own interpretation of the source and come as close to the truth as possible.

Nevertheless, declassified documents have several important weaknesses. The quality of the information provided depends very much on the document²⁶. For example, the Nazis were careful about being vague in their communications. If we take the first example given in this section, we are not actually told the “certain direction” in which officials have been influenced. We can make the assumption that it is one that will give the Nazis more control, but there are no details of how this was achieved or what they gained from it.

In addition, the fact declassified documents often provide no human perspective and are very impersonal can be seen as a weakness. The effect of certain actions or information described in documents on individuals may not be described, such as the arrest of the 3,000 Roumanian Jews. The *results* of the action may be recorded elsewhere, but this doesn’t give the historian an account of how people individually experienced events. For instance, in order for a historian to gain a true insight into the effect of the actions of the Jewish referat on individuals, the historian would have to gather the information from those individuals. Often, an extent of the information²⁷ present in declassified documents can be found from other sources, perhaps with a personal aspect.

All this is significant, but it does not address the greater issue. The single most important factor in deciding a declassified document’s significance is *the fact that it*

²³ Source 1, http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205226.pdf, Page 2 (Page 3 of original) – APPENDIX 1

²⁴ http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205597.pdf, Page 2 (original was teletype)- APPENDIX 2

²⁵ Alan Munslow, in a review of *The New Nature of History* by Professor Arthur Marwick www.history.ac.uk/discourse/munslow5.html

²⁶ As with all sources

²⁷ Apart from figures and exact times perhaps

was classified. We must ask ourselves why this was. The act and motivation of classifying the document can reveal a great deal about an organisation's concerns and overall aims, especially when given the context of the information in the document, giving it significance beyond the information it contains. For example, several conclusions can be drawn from the classification of the document with information about the PQJ. Dannecker perhaps did not want any Jewish resistance groups to know of the measures to take place, out of fear that they may try to organise resistance against certain actions. From this we can deduce that the resistance groups *did* pose some sort of threat.

In addition, a historian can also examine the reasons for *declassifying* the document. The time of declassification could highlight that it was at this point that the organisation stopped being worried about their reputation. On the other hand, the reason may be that the information was now useless or has been updated, making it harmless. If the information is released a significant time after it was classified, it may mean that a country is willing to let others present their analyses of the reasons why events referred to in the documents occurred - the job of a historian. In this way, it could be seen as a country or organisation hoping to re-write history out of a desire for true knowledge of past events, or simply as a way of transferring blame.

This is significant, as it gives us an insight into the motives of not only past bodies who ordered such documents to be classified and declassified, but into those of the people in the *present* that declassified them, and their motives and relationship with the past. In this way, what has happened in the past can be used to discern what is occurring in the present. Declassified documents are highly significant in allowing us to understand and know history, due to the nature of the information they contain. In the context of this study, documents such as the Source I examined show us the *exact* extent of actions against the Jewish population in Vichy France, which can't be found elsewhere. However, they are also significant in allowing us to know the present.

Word Count- [878]

Conclusion

Declassified documents, in isolation are often little but numbers and facts. These facts can provide vital raw information about a group, an action or a reason for an event occurring, which is not available elsewhere. Sometimes the information provided is raw data, and needs other sources in order to provide a context for what is in the document. However, there might not be any further information, if the document truly was private. For example, Laurence Rees comments on the figure of 100,000 French Jews who were eventually going to be deported²⁸, “The exact thinking behind these figures...has never been uncovered”.

How useful a declassified document source is depends on the information within it, the author and whether there is any chance of “spin” on the information. One should not underestimate the importance of the document being classified and declassified. Overall, I believe the complete academic text is more useful, as it will contain a great volume of complete information from a range of sources, much of which would not be available in single documents.

We should not underestimate their use in the *creation* of a text, and in aiding a historian in finding as close an interpretation of the truth as possible. It is clear from such sources that we can know about the past and the present; regardless of a person’s own interpretation. As Professor Arthur Marwick writes in *The Fundamentals of History*, “knowledge of the past is *essential* to society ...Without knowledge of the past we would be without identity.”²⁹

Word Count- [254]

²⁸ Laurence Rees *Auschwitz, The Nazis and the Final Solution* BBC Books 2005- the information comes from a meeting at which Adolf Eichmann was present, thus the actual numbers are most likely to have been found on a transcript.

²⁹ Arthur Marwick *The Fundamentals Of History*
<http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/marwick1.html>, paragraph 2

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