

USABILITY OF THE USABILITY OF THE ARCHIVES OF THE INTERNATIONAL TRACING SERVICE AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF BELGIUM

1. Prologue

For many years now, the policy of the Belgian State Archives has been centred on opening up contemporary archives for research to the largest possible public. The archives about the tragic events that occurred during the Second World War form part thereof and are of crucial importance for the history of our society and the preservation of our democratic principles. The State Archives therefore spares no effort in order to preserve the archives under the best possible conditions and to make them accessible via all means possible. To this end, the State Archives has acquired a digital copy of the ITS archives from Bad Arolsen, besides contracting a cooperation agreement with this institution.

As a result of the many and ever more pressing calls for opening up the ITS archives for research in the 1990s, the amendment of the Bonn Agreements on 16 May 2006 greatly expanded research possibilities and amongst others stipulated the possibility for member states of the International Commission for the ITS to acquire digital copies of the archives, thereby enabling a quicker consultation of the archival documents within the framework of national privacy legislation. The Belgian State Archives, eager to acquire such a digital copy, started preparing the groundwork for the ratification of the revised protocols by the Belgian authorities back in 2006. In practice, this meant the approval of the Bonn amendments by parliament, as well as by the Council of State and the Commission for the Protection of Privacy. In August 2009, an official demand to obtain a digital copy of the ITS archives on behalf of Belgium was introduced. Just a few months later, after the delivery of the hard discs containing all data, the implementation and testing of the copy could begin. By the end of 2010, our personnel was getting acquainted with the content and structure of the fully operational database. The official presentation and inauguration took place on 19 September 2011. From the following day onwards, requests for consultation started pouring down.

2. The structure of the implemented copy

The digital copy of which the Belgian State Archives currently dispose, is centred around four parts: the Central Name Index -the global search instrument for identifying persons- and three subfonds based on the three main groups of victims of the Nazi Regime, namely (1) persecuted persons, (2) forced labourers and (3) displaced persons. All data in the latter groups are XML-based.

The digital copy has been equipped with a search engine that scans the available metadata of the digital images in all series for corresponding information. Thus, a search can be conducted using a person's name or (parts of) a code found on a reference card in the Central Name Index. The amount and usability of metadata may vary strongly, but the individual documents in the section on concentration camps (series 1.1.x.3. – 1.1.x.5.), the post-war lists drawn up in execution of the Allied orders to register foreign persons in Germany (section 2.1.) and the *Kriegszeitkartei* (series 2.2.2.1.) provide good examples of series that are best consulted via the search engine. When using the search engine, one can also chose to refine the query to one particular section or even to a specific series.

The results themselves are presented in a list and sorted according to their relevance. For instance, when looking for a particular person the first results in the list will be the most accurate, whereas the rest of the results will start to phonetically differ more and more from the original key word that was entered. Each individual result in such a list usually contains the following metadata: a document ID number, an inventory number (whenever available), the folder number of the series in which the digital document can be found, the name, the first name as well as the date of birth of the person and finally the Document ID number once again. These metadata also appear in a column on the left of each individual image when the researcher clicks on a result. In turn, one can click on the digital image itself in order to zoom in, rotate it or have it printed.

When performing a “manual” query through a series, the available digital images are presented on the screen by lot and the first and last image of the lot are shown. For instance, in the Central Name Index, 971,778 digital images are filed under the letter A, grouped as follows: 1-160,000, 160,001-320,000, 320,001-480,000, etc. By clicking on one of these lots, the first and last cards are shown (for instance, 1-10,000, 1-1000, 1-100, etc.) and the researcher can “zoom in” on the cards the lot contains. This way, the researcher can delve into the structure of the document series to the lowest level, where images are grouped by ten. Thus, thanks to the first and last images of each lot, the search can be refined: first on the basis of the family name (alphabetically, while taking into account phonetic variations), then – within the series with the same family name – on the basis of the first name, and finally chronologically on the basis of the date of birth.

The same goes for the three above-mentioned subfonds on the main groups of victims. Each subfonds contains a number of sections, which are further divided into series and sub-series. For each (sub)series, a distinction can be made between the documents themselves (divided into lots showing the first and last image) and the available inventory descriptions. It must be noted that the latter are very partial and cannot always be linked to the images they describe.

3. Practical application

3.1. Processing personal data

The digital archive documents from the International Tracing Service contain personal data and information related to the privacy of individuals. Therefore, access to this information is subject to the relevant legal provisions. In Belgium, the law of 11 December 1998 implementing Directive 95/46/EC on the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data applies, as well as the stipulations of the Royal Decree of 13 February 2001 implementing the law of 8 December 1992.

In practice, this means that victims of persecutions or their relatives and descendants are granted access to the ITS archives under the condition that they produce a proof of identity (in case a person is directly concerned) or a proof of kinship (for relatives searching information). Other researchers and persons who wish to consult the archives must fill in a research declaration in which they explain their research request more in detail and commit to observe the privacy legislation in force. Researchers are thus personally responsible for abiding by the legal provisions.

3.2. Consulting the ITS archives

Given the size of the digital copy of the ITS archives, the processing of research requests takes some time. Indeed, due to the complex structure of the database, the personnel of the State Archives must carry out preliminary research in order to be able to best answer the requests. Researchers are asked to send a written request containing as much relevant information as possible about the research. Within two weeks, the researcher receives a reply from the personnel member in charge of the request. Despite its size, the database remains incomplete and contains no information about certain deported persons. In average, about half of all requests do not yield any result. If this is the case, the researcher is informed immediately.

If the database indeed contains information about the searched person, researchers can fix an appointment for consultation of the digital archive documents in the reading room of the National Archives in Brussels. For the consultation of a limited number of digital documents in the context of genealogical research, the requested documents are selected in advance from a list and can be viewed on screen in the reading room after the researcher has logged into the system with his or her user name and password. An appointment must also be made for general thematic research in the archives. The National Archives commits itself to giving each researcher an appointment within a reasonable period. Researchers may be assisted by an archivist if necessary or desired. Furthermore, there are other research instruments available in the reading room, including a full list of abbreviations and codes used in the ITS archives. Finally, for reproductions of digital documents, the tariffs of the State Archives as fixed by the Ministerial Decree of 2 September 2011 apply.

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