Archival Terms and their Meaning in the ITS-Tradition

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This text is a summary of my talk given at the "Usability of the Archives of the ITS"-Workshop at the ITS on October 10th 2011.[1] Its subject was the terminology the ITS has utilized to describe its records in the course of its history.

The main issues addressed in this summary are:

- the historical factors that resulted in the creation of the ITS's own terminology
- the professionalization since the opening of the archives
- as well as the discrepancies between the ITS terminology and archival expert terms and the problems arising from the use of this specific terminology which prompted criticism in 2011.

From the outset, the commitment to the classification and preservation of the records entrusted into its care had been integral to the ITS mandate. However, a methodology and a terminology specific to archives failed to be applied for almost 60 years. Although those in charge of the service must have been aware of the importance of the documents, they primarily considered them to be working papers serving the fulfilment of the humanitarian mandate, the answering of person-related individual requests.

Researchers were able to gain access to the ITS archives during the early years of its existence. However, in the mid-1970s its contractual basis, the Bonn Agreements, was newly interpreted in a purely juristic sense. As a consequence, the archives were virtually shut to research. Furthermore, the ITS refused to play an active part when in the late 1970s society and its institutions started to reappraise the crimes committed by the Nazi dictatorship. Instead, the ITS identified itself strictly as a pure tracing service, collaborating with other institutions only within the scope of information exchange and document acquisition. Neither historians nor archivists were employed during this time. As a consequence of this self-imposed isolation, no specialist knowledge or methodology was introduced.

Instead, over several decades the ITS developed a terminology of its own to describe the documents in its care which was never completely documented. The 'archival language' of the ITS is a conglomeration of neologisms and technical terms borrowed from the practise of inventorying. Without profound knowledge of the history of both the institution's records and acquisition-strategy, grasping its "linguistic pattern" is not an easy task. I will explain this further by giving some examples later on.

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The introduction of the OuS Research Client marked the beginning of digital data management at the ITS and involved a premiere for the institution: for the first time archival order criteria were applied and used. The Software reflected the physical collections and applied parts of the ISAD-G standard to the accession units sorted in accordance with the principle of pertinence.

The opening of the ITS to research that resulted from the decisions made by the International Commission in 2006 was meant to usher in a phase of professionalizing the institution. To satisfy the new need, the ITS employed an archivist for the first time in its history in December 2008. In spring 2009, the division for describing the documents was established. Late in 2009, two more archivists were hired, whose employment contracts will expire in late 2011. The first groundwork was laid by adjusting the guidelines governing the work to international standards and the development of an archival description software. The right path was chosen.

Early in 2011 criticism accusing the ITS of arbitrariness and non-transparency was voiced. A crucial argument put forward was that the ITS re-defined technical terms taken from archival specialist vocabulary with a view to satisfying its own interests and preventing reprographies from being handed out to researchers.
What did actually happen here and how could it happen?
The reason for the dispute were the ITS' rules on fees and tariffs. They were introduced in October 2010 for the service to have a uniform regulation for working on and invoicing requests for copies. No archivists were involved in the process of defining and wording these rules.
The most controversial statement made in these rules could be found in Article 3 which read "Handing out copies of entire record groups or collections is not admissible" – something that is common practice in many archives. In the German translation, the term "Aktenbestand" was used in place of the term record group. In German archival terminology "Aktenbestand"simply means a record group made up of files. The problem here was that the term "Aktenbestand" was not used in the generally acknowledged archival sense, but in the sense of the previously addressed ITS specific terminology only! In the traditional ITS language "Aktenbestand" mostly stands for a single item recorded from an accession or for a part of an accession unit, irrespective of its actual incorporation into the collections. In the extreme case, a single piece might have been given an inventory number of its own when

received and recorded. Going by a strict reading of the rules on fees and tariffs, the ITS would have had to explain to the user that this piece – irrespective of its integration within the collections as a whole – is a “record group” of its own. Additionally, in cases where multiple individually recognizable records were registered as a single accession unit, it was possible that not the accession unit as a whole but every single individual record belonging to it, was defined as an "Aktenbestand" – another supposedly obsolete ITS-own practice which further confused the users. In either case it would not have been possible to hand out copies of it. This practice deviated from acknowledged principles.

External users who had a look at the physical documents on the shelves or surfed the OuS Research Client couldn´t directly comprehend why the record groups were defined that way. Thus, non-transparency and the application of obsolete principles have come to cause a strategic break.

What has changed since then?

First, the ITS has revised its rules on fees and tariffs in October 2011 without restricting access and also has publicly avowed and elucidated its faults to show its willingness to create transparency. Additionally, the ITS will try to use established expert terminology only in future and explain what is unclear.