

Opening the Nazi archives at Bad Arolsen

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The International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen, Germany, was set up after the war to trace millions of deported and displaced persons. During the Cold War, its archives – personal files, transport lists, records of deaths from several concentration camps, and records of individual and mass graves – served to inform victims’ families and to substantiate compensation and pension claims. The archives have only recently been opened up to researchers, stirring up considerable interest in the international research community.

Bad Arolsen is a small town in the north of the state of Hesse, in a rural, wooded area of Germany. It’s only an hour’s drive from Dortmund, the gateway to the Ruhr Region, but visitors here are likely to feel lost in the depths of the German heartland. Bad Arolsen has been world-renowned for several decades now, though not for its local history or leafy environs: this is the location of the International Tracing Service (ITS) under the aegis of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The ITS is at once a crucial tracing center, a memorial to the victims of Nazi persecution, forced labor and the Holocaust, and a gigantic repository of archives. This institution was established in 1948 to finish the job of tracking down missing persons and reuniting families after the war. The service still exists, bearing witness to the perpetual quest for remembrance, to the survivors’ unremitting grief, but also to the German postwar reparation procedures.

The ITS is currently at a turning-point in its already long history, ever since it opened its archives for the very first time in June 2008 to a team of historians who came to assess its 27 shelf kilometers of original documents from the Nazi period¹. The last major archives of Nazi persecution were finally opened up to research after many years of tensions and even political and diplomatic crisis, some of which was relayed by the international media. How did it come to that? What is the history of this discreet and yet world-renowned institution? It is complex, reflecting the difficulties facing the Allies after their victory: difficulties in handling Germany, the Cold War and memories of National Socialism.

¹ The first historical research workshop using ITS files was organized in collaboration with the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, one of the departments of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. About 15 historians, sociologists, anthropologists and archivists (including myself) worked together from June 16–27, 2008. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the ITS and the Holocaust Museum for inviting me to that workshop. This article owes a great deal to the lively discussions I had with my colleagues, whom I would like to thank here as well.

Millions of displaced persons

Nazi Germany policy not only caused the death of millions of people, both civilians and military, but also the displacement of millions of others throughout Europe. At the time of the Allied victory in Europe, millions of foreign nationals found themselves on German soil. There were of course the demobilized soldiers and ethnic German refugees from Eastern Europe, who were fleeing the advance of the Red Army. There were also millions of Allied POWs, as well as collaborators with the Nazi regime who had fled from the American or Soviet troops and followed the victors of yesteryear in their retreat. In addition, there were hundreds of thousands of deportees, members of the Resistance, hostages and victims of racial persecution – at least those who were still alive. And there were also 8 million forced laborers who had been brought to Germany to take part in the war effort of the Third Reich.

The Allies knew precious little about the fate of all these people. The horrors of the concentration and death camps were not revealed to the world until early in 1945. From that point on, the various Allied states set up tracing bureaus to compile lists of those who had gone missing and were sought by their families. The bureau in France, which was part of the Ministry of Prisoners, Deportees and Victims of War, was directed by Henri Fresnay and located in Paris at 63 avenue Foch, on premises occupied just a little while before by the Gestapo. These national tracing bureaus went on to establish branch offices in each of the occupied zones of Germany. Besides these official services, dozens of other bureaus were created by various aid organizations, including the national chapters of the Red Cross and American Jewish organizations like the American Joint Distribution Committee. All these services, many of which had limited resources at their disposal, wrote frantically back and forth to one another exchanging information. Their history, which remains to be written, is all the more crucial because they compiled the first information about and the first eye-witness accounts of Nazi cruelty, the camps and the annihilation of European Jewry.

It was in this context that the International Tracing Service was established. The story of its emergence is as yet still unclear: the first plans to create such a service were drawn up in the Relief Department (an emergency rescue service) of the British Foreign Office, beginning in 1943, under the direction of Major Eyre Carter. The service was placed in Frankfurt, Germany, in the building of the Hoechst AG chemicals company. Then, after the victory, a service for displaced persons and refugees, under quadripartite management, was set up within the Allied High Commission for Germany in Berlin. It started out as a small office, tasked with coordinating search efforts between the four occupying powers, as the Soviet Union still agreed to work more or less together at the time.

In late 1945 a new service emerged: the Child Tracing Service. International opinion was stirred by revelations of the Lebensborn program, put in place by Heinrich Himmler, and which had not been forgotten. Lebensborn encouraged young German women to procreate and donate their infants to the Führer. The babies were placed in Nazi re-education camps and then adopted by “racially pure” German (especially SS) families. But the main thrust of the operation consisted in kidnapping from Polish and other Slavic parents children whose “racial characteristics” corresponded to the putative traits of the “Aryan” race. So the Child Tracing Service undertook to question

and run checks on some 200,000 small children and adolescents whose background was suspicious and who had been placed in orphanages or, more often, in German foster families.

Counting graves

Beginning in late 1946, a committee was also set up within the service for displaced persons and refugees to make plans for the creation of a Central Tracing Service. The small town of Arolsen (as it was called till 1997) was chosen because it was still intact and had some large vacant buildings: an SS barracks, a “new castle” dating from the 19th century, and even a Baroque castle, whose owner, a Nazi general, had been put in prison. Arolsen also had the advantage of being situated in the American zone of occupation, and yet not far from the other three zones. The Central Tracing Service in Arolsen was placed for a time under the aegis of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and, from 1 July 1947, the International Refugee Organization (IRO).

The ITS was officially established on January 1, 1948. The service returned to Allied control in April 1951. The 1948 mandate was provisional: the ITS was to finish the job it had begun in early 1945. The institution was set up at that time on a provisional basis just as the situation of displaced persons was beginning to be settled, with the creation of the State of Israel in May 1948 and, above all, the revision of US immigration policy in the summer of that year. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union had withdrawn from the administration of the organization, a sign that the Cold War was setting in there as well. The predecessors of the ITS had begun to understand the scale of the European catastrophe, of the massacres and displacements of whole populations, and undertook to concentrate all the archives that might be useful for tracing purposes. Those documents – and this is crucial to understanding the very intense disputes over the institution at the time – include personal files, transport lists and registers of deaths from several (but not all) concentration camps.

In late 1945, the Allied authorities, each in its occupied zone of Germany, had ordered the mayors of every German municipality to conduct a census of all foreigners in the country from Allied states. The lists were passed on to the Central Tracing Service. A little later, a census was taken of the individual and mass graves of all foreigners who had died on German soil, for which it was necessary to retrace the transports from one camp to another and the itineraries of what would later be known as the “death marches”, i.e. the evacuation of the camps towards the interior of the Reich. The grave counts were also supplied to the service that would subsequently become the International Tracing Service. For the ITS in Arolsen, the tracing of murdered and surviving Jews was part of the broader task of tracing all non-German victims of forced displacement, particularly forced laborers and displaced persons, among whom Jews were numerous, but not the majority. Meanwhile, the Red Cross in Munich set up a service to trace German refugees and expellees from Eastern Europe.

International control

Beginning in 1952, the International Tracing Service in Arolsen was assigned a new task. The first major West German law to indemnify victims of National Socialism

(*Bundesentschädigungsgesetz* or BeG for short) was passed that year. It provided for what was in some cases substantial compensation to German victims (and those who had been German nationals) of persecution of any kind, from being deprived of university education to incarceration in a ghetto or concentration camp, including consequences for the victims' health and even compensation for having been forced to wear the yellow star or any other distinctive insignia². Israeli citizens (but not other non-German victims) were also entitled to assert claims under this law. To claim compensation or a pension, claimants had to produce proof of internment, and the ITS, having preserved so many documents from the concentration camps, was able to provide them. The range of inquiries addressed to the ITS subsequently became more varied as a result.

The next chapter in the already quite complicated story of the ITS was ushered in by the Bonn-Paris Conventions signed in 1955, which restored West Germany to sovereignty. Under the terms of the conventions, the Western Allied powers required Germany to take over the administration of the service in Arolsen. However, it was decided that the organization should be run by the International Committee of the Red Cross to guarantee its impartiality, but also in all likelihood because the Committee had experience in handling a big tracing service of this kind: the one it maintained in Geneva for prisoners of war had been set up back in 1914. It was also a matter of keeping the ITS files under international control so as not to have to trust Germany a mere ten years after the end of the war. The ICRC may well have wished to be entrusted with this administrative task, but without having to make any substantial financial commitments³: starting right after war, the Red Cross was hauled over the coals for its almost utter disengagement with the victims – especially Jewish victims – of Nazi persecution. The Red Cross had been absent from the concentration camps and death camps, and its reports on the camps were actually reassuring, to say the least. From 1947, the ICRC felt obliged to put out a report justifying its activity in the camps⁴. This controversy was to reappear with a vengeance 30 years later⁵.

In any case, an official agreement was signed on June 6, 1955 by and between the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Federal Republic of Germany and eight of the victorious nations. West Germany was to bankroll the ITS, paying its operating expenses and the salaries of its staff (except for that of its director, which was paid by Geneva). The ICRC insisted on having a Swiss director and appointed Nicolas

² For a comprehensive look at the whole complex legislative edifice of German reparations, see Constantin Goschler, *Schuld und Schulden. Die Politik der Wiedergutmachung für NS-Verfolgte seit 1945*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2005.

³ The negotiations that led to the 1955 agreement were thorny indeed: the FRG demanded control over the ITS while the International Committee of the Red Cross brought all its influence to bear to ensure that the director would be Swiss.

⁴ Internationales Komitee vom Roten Kreuz, *Die Tätigkeit des IKRK zugunsten der in den deutschen Konzentrationslagern inhaftierten Zivilpersonen (1939-1945)*, Geneva, 1947.

⁵ In response to the accusation and all the questions they were asked, and even though the archives remained closed to researchers, the ICRC commissioned an in-depth report by Jean-Claude Favez, who was given access to all the wartime documents. The publication of the report, which was severely critical of the Red Cross, put an end to the controversy (Jean-Claude Favez, *Une mission impossible. Le CICR, les déportations et les camps de concentration nazis*, Lausanne, Payot, 1998).

Burckhardt to the post⁶. The ITS was supervised by an International Commission comprising representatives of nine Western countries⁷.

Having gone through the transport lists and the files from the camps, the ITS compiled an enormous Central Name Index of missing persons, whether presumed dead or alive. As the range of potential beneficiaries of German reparations had broadened since 1956, requests for information and certificates continued to pour in. At the end of that decade, it was the victims of the Nazis' pseudo-scientific medical experiments who were awarded compensation. A UNRRA fund was established to that end, and Arolsen complied with the requests by furnishing certificates, including death certificates.

1.3 million inquiries

Researchers began taking an interest in the ITS documents from the mid-1950s. The Comité d'Histoire de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale (Committee on World War II History) in Paris, under the direction of Henri Michel, got in touch with the ITS, which published a first multi-volume "Dictionary of Nazi Camps and Places of Internment", which was subsequently updated several times. This dictionary long remained the standard reference work on the subject. It was used to draw up an index of libraries containing material on Nazi deportation and persecution. Likewise from the mid-1950s, Yad Vashem, the Israeli authority for the commemoration of the Holocaust and the Resistance, requested and obtained microfilm copies of documents from Arolsen (though we do not know exactly what was copied and whether that included all the documents collected up to that point). The ITS had done a considerable amount of work by that time. In 1960, the 1955 agreement was renewed.

The ITS was, in other words, established on a provisional yet enduring basis. It continued to receive various archives, e.g. those of the French Liaison Mission located in Bonn, which was part of the French embassy. By 1970, Arolsen had already received at least 1.3 million inquiries from all over the world, half of which were from private individuals and half from a wide array of organizations – ranging from administrations in charge of compensation claims to former deportees' associations endeavoring to compile historical documentation. The chronology of these inquiries merits closer scrutiny. A marked increase ensued from 1954, with 103,363 inquiries that year⁸, 70% thereof in application of the BeG law to indemnify victims of National Socialism, to a 1974 peak of 210,465 registered inquiries (over half of which were for the writing of personal memoirs or for printed lists of names of Jewish victims in a given municipality or region).

It should be noted that, from 1953, the ITS began replying to inquiries concerning historical research, of which there were 205 in that year and as many as 5,325 by 1976. From July 1970 to the end of 1977, the ITS, under the direction of A. de

⁶ Re the conclusion of this agreement, see: R. B., "Le Service international de recherches", *Revue du Comité international de la Croix-Rouge*, August 1955, p. 514-525.

⁷ The nine countries were Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. Greece and Poland joined the International Commission later on.

⁸ Statistics provided by the ITS based on data published in its annual reports.

Cocatrix, engaged in ample correspondence and received visitors, who would return to their countries raving about the renowned and ever-growing Central Name Index. After he left the ITS, its policy changed markedly, probably owing to the personality of the new director, P. Züger. The latter remained till 1985, and the number of inquiries diminished significantly under his management, from 162,854 in 1976 to 38,380 in 1982. His successor, the highly controversial Charles-Claude Biedermann, began his reign of over 20 years in 1985. Under Biedermann, access to ITS files became increasingly restricted. Visitors were now only allowed to see the famed Index, and some of the buildings were off limits without the director's express authorization.

Mounting discontent

Arolsen was relatively sealed off from the outside world, which corresponded to a change in social and memorial demand with regard to World War II. 35 years after the end of the war, the survivors began responding to their families' desire to find out exactly what happened to relatives murdered in the camps. Many of them wrote to the International Tracing Service, which replied sometimes promptly, sometimes sluggishly, but carried out an in-depth search in each case. It should be noted, however, that roughly half the inquiries were answered in the negative: there was no available information about the person sought. In Western Europe and the US, the 1980s saw growing demand for access to the archives concerning Nazi persecution in general and the Holocaust in particular. In all the Western countries, controversies broke out over archives that were largely or even wholly inaccessible under the restrictive laws in force (including the archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross). On the other hand, the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe made it possible, from 1989 on, to access whole collections of archives that had previously been off limits. The situation at the ITS increasingly contrasted with the buzz about the masses of documents produced by the Nazi bureaucracies. Associations of former deportees protested and some diplomats expressed their displeasure as well. In 1992, the International Commission made an abortive attempt to get Biedermann fired. Then, in 1998, the French National Federation of Deported and Imprisoned Resistance Fighters and Patriots launched a campaign and put out a brochure calling for the Bad Arolsen archives to be opened up for research purposes. But the director remained entrenched in his narrow construction of the 1955 agreement and the priority accorded therein to tracing missing family members "for humanitarian ends". The leading institution for archive-based tracing of missing persons was the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, which undertook to reproduce all available archives, throughout the world, relating to the Holocaust. This colossal project, still ongoing, requires the signing of reproduction agreements. The country that holds the archives in question usually receives a copy of the microfilms⁹. In many countries, these efforts make it possible to preserve archives that have worn away over time and can now only be consulted on microfilm.

The situation became all the more paradoxical in that the ITS's activities had diversified after the collapse of communism. In particular, Germany was gearing up to compensate, at long last, the erstwhile forced laborers of Eastern Europe. After years of

⁹ In France, agreements to this end were signed by and between the US Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, the French Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah and the French Archives Nationales.

debate, what was perhaps the last important foundation of its kind was established to pay lump-sum damages to Ukrainians and Byelorussians who had toiled unpaid for the Reich's war economy¹⁰. Arolsen's services were requested and the ITS received a record number of files, which it processed in a simplified manner by verifying its own records of forced laborers. Beginning in 1991, the ITS processed over a million inquiries regarding force labor, simply checking to see whether the claimant's name turned up in its Central Name Index.

As a result, the Tracing Service came to be mentioned more and more frequently at major conferences on the Holocaust in the late 1990s. The closing declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on Holocaust Education, held in the year 2000 and attended by over 30 heads of state and government, called for a commitment to further open up persecution-related archives that were still inaccessible to researchers. This was clearly an allusion to the situation in Arolsen. But Charles-Claude Biedermann held his ground. At the present point in time, it is difficult to determine exactly why it was impossible to influence this closed-door policy despite all the protest it incurred. Rumors were legion at the time: it was alleged that Western secret services had always had access to the archives and didn't want it to transpire that there was information there about war criminals; it was also rumored that the Germans were loth to pay more damages and that opening up the archives would invite a slew of new compensation claims. These inaccessible and increasingly mysterious archives gave rise to all manner of conjecture: that they contained crucial hitherto unpublished documents about Hitler's policies, about the Western powers' responsibility for the Holocaust, about criminals and so on and so forth. Secrecy, as always, fuelled speculation. The ICRC's stance was baffling (and still is). France came out in favor of opening the archives and Italy against it.... At any rate, the provisional status of 1955, renewed in 1960, no longer seemed adapted to the present circumstances, but it was easy to take refuge behind it, and no-one knew which authority was empowered to take the decision to open up the archives. As inquiries kept pouring in, and perhaps to provide a supplementary reason for denying access, the backlog of unprocessed inquiries kept piling up. There were as many as 400,000 awaiting an answer, whilst the German Ministry of the Interior, to which, curiously enough, Arolsen was answerable, was cutting back on labor costs and shedding staff.

From 2004, the Holocaust Museum began stepping up its campaign to open up the archives. Paul Shapiro, director of the museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, tried to publicize the story and, more importantly, to enlist the aid of US State Department. In his public statements Shapiro went as far as to argue that sealing off the archives was a form of denying the Holocaust, that in persisting in this closed-door policy the Germans could not avoid a second Holocaust etc. In the sequel to these statements, there was even a diplomatic incident between the US and Germany, even though the latter promptly gave all sorts of assurances as to its interest in remembering and commemorating the Holocaust and in promoting historical research¹¹. Ultimately,

¹⁰ In 2000 the *Erinnerung, Verantwortung, Zukunft* ("Remembrance, Responsibility, Future") Foundation, endowed with €10.1 billion, was established by German law. By the cutoff date for the submission of compensation claims, July 12, 2007, €4.4 billion had been distributed to 1.6 million former forced laborers.

¹¹ Roger Cohen, "US-German Flare-Up Over Vast Nazi Cam Archives", *New York Times*, February 20, 2006.

the crisis blew up to such proportions that even the Red Cross in Geneva was compelled to react: Charles-Claude Biedermann was summarily sacked, after nearly 25 years of service, and replaced by Reto Meister, a Red Cross official experienced in crisis situations (having previously served in Bagdad during the Iran-Iraq War, in Beirut during the war in Lebanon, in Central America and in Nepal). An agreement was reached at long last: the representatives of the 11 member states of the International Commission agreed to open up the archives. An amendment to the 1955 agreement was drawn up and the opening of the archives finally took effect in the spring of 2008.

A mine of archives

Shortly after the draft agreement was signed on March 18, 2007, Paul Shapiro testified before the Foreign Affairs Committee (Subcommittee on Europe) of the US House of Representatives. In an ambitious presentation, he stressed the necessity, both moral and scientific, as he saw it, of opening the Bad Arolsen files up for researchers and reproducing them so they would be available to survivors. He made it plain that, in his estimation, only the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC was capable of performing this task, while the last remaining survivors were disappearing one after another. The collections are now in the process of being digitized using a procedure that will permit place-based searches (from 1948 on, all the documents at Arolsen were filed by name of person to be traced). The first shipments of copies have already been made to Jerusalem and Washington, and it was announced that the rest would follow in installments.

But the question remains: What are these 17 million documents? What new information about the Holocaust and about persecution in general do they contain? The archives, hitherto nearly completely sealed off, were now completely opened up, with a delay of 20 years, i.e. less than the usual period (30 or 40 years) for what are for the most part, by definition, personal files and lists of names. The status of the ITS remains to be redefined. A strategic committee was to convene in September 2008 for this purpose. Shouldn't these archives deserve to be listed as UNESCO World Heritage Site?

A quarter of the files apparently concern Jews. The documents are extremely diverse. The Central Name Index at Bad Arolsen uses a complicated method to enable seekers to get their bearings amid the daunting complexity of the spellings of family names from all over Europe. The name "Schwartz", for example, can be spelled in 156 different ways, all of which are transcribed in a single spelling in the Index in order to facilitate searches: "Svartz". The ITS has put out a whole book, several hundred pages long, explaining how first and last names are transcribed in the Index. It takes at least four months to begin finding one's way through the archives and to be able to actually carry out a search. Computerization should make things easier, but in the meantime one cannot help wondering how it will be possible to do without the ITS's experienced staff to find a file based solely on a person's name.

In the section of the archives on displaced persons, there are 35,000 envelopes containing information about specific individuals. There are 4,436 boxes containing lists by country and 230 boxes containing lists of (mostly Jewish) people from postwar files, 16,000 files from the International Committee for European Migration, 10,650 from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as well as a wide variety of

files from several hospitals and sanatoriums. In addition, there are so-called “shipping lists”, i.e. lists of displaced persons who emigrated overseas, which are important sources for the history of postwar migrations as well as for family histories (though there are equivalent lists in the corresponding countries of arrival as well). And let us not forget the files of the UNHCR in Hong-Kong – though how they got there is anyone’s guess!

The section on forced labor brings together the lists of foreigners who found themselves in Germany at the end of the war in 1945, but the lists for the Soviet zone are far from complete. It also holds certificates of birth, marriage and death issued by the German authorities for forced laborers, in addition to hospital records and plenty of other documents as well.

The section on the concentration camps contains original archives from the camps, files, records of deaths (kept by the prisoners themselves) and transfer lists. However, the amount of extant material varies widely from one camp to another. Nearly all the archives from Buchenwald are preserved at Bad Arolsen, whereas there is virtually nothing to be found here from a camp like Majdanek. The bulk of the archives from Natzweiler-Struthof is kept in France at the Archives Départementales du Bas-Rhin (Departmental Archives of the Lower Rhine), and there are almost no original documents about Auschwitz at Bad Arolsen.

75% of the documents at Bad Arolsen are originals. Some of these originals, such as the Gestapo files, have long been easily accessible in the form of copies held by the archives of the respective German *Länder*. Again, it should be recalled that most of the documents were reproduced and provided to Yad Vashem in 1956. Moreover, it would be erroneous to reduce this collection of documents to Holocaust archives: they cover all sorts of victims of persecution – as well as persecutors, since the displaced persons included a great many who collaborated with the Germans, or with ethnic Germans and minority nationals from the Soviet empire. Ivan (“John”) Demjanjuk, who was tried and acquitted in Israel for crimes against humanity, has an index card in his name, on which it is noted that he had indeed worked as a guard at Treblinka!

Lastly, there are all the inquiries addressed to the ITS: 2.4 million chronologically arranged “tracing and document files” (or “TD files” for short), to which must be added 105,000 inquiries made prior to the creation of the ITS (in 1948) and a few hundred thousand inquiries that were answered in the negative and filed separately. Half the inquiries are from private individuals, the other half from institutions of all kinds, requesting information about a deported ancestor, the location of a grave, or a certificate of internment or forced labor. It is quite moving to see them all stacked up and painstakingly filed away, for they are a silent testimony to the enormous amount of work the ITS has carried out since its commencement, a humanitarian undertaking on a scale unequalled to this day. They bear witness to the tragedy of World War II and Nazism, as well as to the endless task of managing and funding the remembrance thereof and its abiding consequences. They are, for the most part, humble queries stuck into a bottle and flung into the sea by survivors hoping to obtain a precious snippet of information about a family member they last saw getting off a deportation train, or in some cases en route from one camp to another where they’d been incarcerated themselves, having lost count and lost track of all the camps they went through. These

inquiries constitute in and of themselves important historical material on the consequences of the Nazi persecution and madness, which it will be up to historians to explore.

The other millions of documents at Bad Arolsen are unlikely to open up new fields of investigation: Hitler's order to exterminate European Jewry certainly won't be found, nor will Schindler's list (contrary to what has been claimed in certain articles in the press). However, the Bad Arolsen files will help complete already existing research based on different archives and, above all, will prove a prime source for new research. They will make it possible to pinpoint the geography of the persecution, arranged as they are by geographic zone. They will significantly facilitate prosopographical studies of a given camp, work Kommando, deportation convoy, displaced persons camp etc. There is still a great deal of work to be done before historians will have a complete and usable inventory, and of course the history of the institution itself remains to be written.

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