THE PENNSYLVANIA WAR-HISTORY PROGRAM

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The present endeavor both national and local to record on a contemporary basis the history of the second World War is one of the most significant recent developments in the field of American historiography. It promises to revolutionize the entire technique of the historical profession in gathering and utilizing materials. In contrast to the traditional accumulation of sources relative to a particular subject long years after the events involved have taken place, current materials are carefully selected and preserved; and, in conflict with the common feeling that contemporary history can have neither objectivity nor perspective, considerable emphasis is placed on the preparation of current historical narratives. In other words, history is being written while it is made.

Virtually every important administrative division of the federal government, a majority of the state governments (through state historical societies, commissions, and similar agencies), and numerous private historical societies and like institutions are engaged in war-history programs of varying types. Plans have been worked out to collect, sift, and evaluate a large body of contemporary source materials in the form of government records and letters and other documents of great variety, newspapers, pamphlets, photographs, posters, and even motion-picture film. Not only is material thus being accumulated and filed, but also procedures for producing contemporary historical accounts have been formulated and in many instances are in actual operation.

America is by no means a pioneer in this type of activity. In Great Britain the Committee of Imperial Defense has been charged since 1904 with preparing what might be termed current histories of military operations. The practice has been extended to virtually every department of the British government—military, naval, and civil. There is reason to believe that the United States has been definitely influenced by the British plan. In March, 1942, Presi-
dent Roosevelt took steps to create a Committee on Records of War Administration for the federal government. Either independently or in cooperation with it a large number of the most important Washington departments and agencies have inaugurated records and history programs. These include such old established divisions of the federal government as the Department of State, as well as such wartime agencies as the OPA. Some of the most successful enterprises are in various divisions of the War Department and the Navy Department; Ordnance, the Quartermaster Corps, and Naval Operations are particularly active.

Pennsylvania was one of the first states to attempt to keep a record of its participation in the second World War. On January 21, 1942, the State Council of Defense designated the Pennsylvania Historical Commission as the official agency to undertake this task. At that time only one other state, Iowa, was embarked on any war-history program, and its work along this line was the result of accident rather than of design. So far as can be ascertained, Pennsylvania is definitely leading in the actual preparation of current war history. The most immediate use made by the Historical Commission of material in its file is the publication of a weekly review of “The State at War” in Capitol News, the official news bulletin of the state government, which has a wide circulation. Recent checks indicate that some fifty Pennsylvania newspapers are using the column.

Early in 1943 was published Pennsylvania’s First Year at War, a review of the commonwealth’s war activities to December 7, 1942. The work, motivated in part by a belief that for morale purposes it would be advisable to give the people of Pennsylvania something of an over-all view of the war effort in terms of the contribution of the state as well as some of the problems created by war, was based principally on government reports of various types, newspaper articles, and special reports and studies made in cooperation with other agencies, notably the Bureau of Business Research of the Pennsylvania State College. Since restrictions were very rigid at the time, there was much that could not be told. The bulletin has had a distribution of some twenty thousand and has attracted very favorable attention, newspapers, individuals, and organizations making extensive use of it. The sections on the contribution of industry and agriculture to the war gave impetus to the national movement to establish state war-history programs.
and has been responsible to some extent at least in stimulating several other states to adopt plans for preserving war history. Those responsible for the publication feel that it demonstrates the validity of the effort to write a competent historical account from current material.

In addition to presenting for immediate public consumption a broad view of the state's war effort, the publication would, it was hoped, test the completeness of the historical resources available. Every historian knows that not until one actually begins to compose a narrative are weaknesses revealed in the information at hand. In any extensive effort to direct the large-scale accumulation of current historical material it is particularly easy to overlook items which later might prove to be indispensable. The question as to what to put into his notes and what to leave out always has plagued the individual researcher. When this problem is multiplied, as it must be in a state-wide program to collect and preserve a great variety of significant source material for future use, it poses serious difficulties. Examination in Harrisburg of the contents of the many file cases of material pertaining to the first World War which was stored but never used reveals the danger inherent in any indiscriminate gathering of historical materials. Several other states have had similar experience. Preparation of the manuscript for Pennsylvania's First Year at War proved invaluable in testing methods and procedures evolved during the first year of the Pennsylvania war-history program.

One of the distinctive features of the commission's war-history activity is its use of the newspaper. While no state is ignoring the importance of this basic source, the usual practice is merely to establish files of newspapers intact. In some cases plans for making current card indexes of war information have been put in operation. Here, however, clippings are being gathered and organized on certain listed subjects from more than twenty newspapers of the state selected on the bases of geographical location, general news coverage, and circulation. Applicable items from virtually all other newspapers in the state are available through various sources for addition to the collection. Each clipping is mounted with proper identification and becomes a part of a well-organized flexible subject file, without the use of which writing contemporary accounts would be a difficult if not impossible task.

During the past few months attention has been concentrated
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on filling several gaps in the existing file of information. Especially valuable material is being secured, both by correspondence and by personal contact, regarding important military and naval installations in the state. The strategic position of Pennsylvania in relation to industrial and transportation facilities has resulted in the location therein of a large number of camps and supply depots. Frankford Arsenal, the Middletown Air Depot, Letterkenny Ordnance Depot, Deshon Army Hospital, Camp Reynolds, the Mechanicsburg Naval Depot, and New Cumberland are among those which have been visited by at least two members of the commission staff. Written reports containing observations, impressions, and items of information after being submitted to the proper officials for correction and additions are incorporated into the permanent file. Complete files of camp or depot publications are accumulated, with the addition of photographs, press releases, and other materials. In many instances permission to utilize histories of the installations already prepared has been secured, and in some cases scrapbooks and similar materials are being microfilmed.

Certainly one of the most important phases of Pennsylvania's war effort is its industrial production. Peculiarly significant is the variety of the commonwealth's industrial resources; some two hundred types of production are involved. All firms in the state which have received the Army-Navy "E" award for excellence have been contacted, their names having been secured through the cooperation of the several Army district offices and Navy authorities. Complete files of plant publications dating back to 1941, photographs, and posters—all valuable not only in war history but also in general industrial history—have been obtained. In many cases companies have given rather detailed accounts of their war-production activity and supplied excellent information on the conversion of industry to war needs.

The operation of the civilian agencies of the federal government within the state is another integral part of the war activities in the commonwealth. The employes of federal agencies in Pennsylvania now exceed in number the total of those of the state and local governments. Offices of the United States government are the only sources for a great deal of needed material—for instance, the story of rationing. The tendency toward regional organization for national administrative purposes makes for no little
difficulty; statistics and reports are not as a rule prepared on a basis of state lines, and therefore much overlapping occurs. To make matters worse, no two offices use the same regional organization. An effort is being made to solve this problem through direct contact with both regional and national offices of the OPA, the WPB, and other agencies.

The numerous state-wide associations of business and professional groups, such as the Pennsylvania Newspaper Publishers Association, the Association of College Presidents of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Retail Grocer's Association, the Public Charities Association, the State Medical Society, and the Pennsylvania Electric Association, have been of great assistance in providing material for the war-history file. Many of these issue publications, files of which have been contributed generously. Others have cooperated in making special surveys for basic information.

A very interesting experiment recently undertaken has been the systematic preparation of brief but comprehensive narrative accounts on selected subjects. "Short histories" of wartime health conditions in the state, shipbuilding, retail business, and similar topics have been written. Based on information already accumulated, each study is submitted to individuals concerned for direct criticism and comment based on actual experience. After all suggestions have been taken into consideration, the final approved narrative is filed. Additions are made as the occasion arises. This system, which is being followed for as many topics as staff limitations permit, has two advantages: first, the early discovery of gaps in information, and, second, the opportunity to correct any errors in fact or in interpretation.

The project being pursued by the Historical Commission is clearly not a military one. Wartime industry, agriculture, labor, and education are only some of the fields investigated. The organization and development of the civilian-defense program is receiving special attention in cooperation with the State Council of Defense. A definite effort is being made also to provide an adequate coverage of the impact of the war on social, economic, educational, and political structures and to survey some of the resulting problems; for example, through contact with a variety of social and relief agencies, including the community welfare councils, a rather extensive file on wartime social questions is
being built up. A selected file of newspaper clippings reflecting public opinion in Pennsylvania on affairs both at home and abroad has been created.

Publication of contemporary studies based on accumulated sources will be continued. *Pennsylvania's Second Year at War*, which will appear in the spring of 1944, will not repeat information contained in the preceding volume. While some subjects regarding which entirely new information is available may be treated without too strict a regard for chronology, it will be in general the story of Pennsylvania at war during 1943. It is to be kept in mind, however, that the commission war-history program includes more than this immediate activity. Early publication at the end of the war of a rather comprehensive war history of the state is anticipated.

The preparation of studies for current or future publication is not the only objective of making as complete and detailed a collection as possible. By no means will all the material which is accumulating in the Pennsylvania war-history file be exhausted in any general historical bulletins. It is hoped that in the years to come students of special phases of the war will be able to find in it much rich ground in which to pursue special research. In other words, the intention of the commission is to create a permanent war-history archive for future as well as present usage.

It is interesting to conjecture as to whether the results of the experiment of accumulating current historical sources will not justify the continuation of the work after the war. Governmental records are today so voluminous as to defy the ability of either archivists or historians to keep abreast of them. Microfilming will of course simplify the storage problem, and for the sake of obviating the necessity for the researcher to wade through overwhelming quantities of material it may continue to be advisable to evaluate records on a contemporary basis and eliminate those which are nonessential. The war-history projects have demonstrated the value of systematic contemporary collection and organization of newspaper materials, various reports and documents, letters and other personal and business or institutional papers, and other items of more or less ephemeral nature. It is reasonable to suppose that this type of activity should not be abandoned with the cessation of the war.
Under the conditions of modern life it is questionable that the historian and the archivist can in the future depend on the haphazard accumulation and preservation of source materials. The day of family preservation of personal papers is past. Present-day homes and modes of life do not tend to encourage people to keep them. In modern business establishments microfilming of records is on the increase, but the executive microfilms mainly those items important to the administration of his business. Hundreds of small enterprises will never use the device at all. A considerable body of records important to the economic historian will be in constant danger of destruction. The same is true of institutional and organizational papers. Unless some plan for contemporary evaluation and preservation is worked out, even more significant historical material is going to be lost in the future than has been in the past. Historians, local amateurs as well as professionals in the schools, colleges, and universities, should therefore reconsider the entire method of accumulating and using historical collections. It should be keenly appreciated that letters, documents, newspapers, and other source materials do not have to be tinged with age to have value. Increased attention should be devoted to researching and writing on relatively recent subjects. The task of writing history can be simplified and improved if some of the experience gained in the current war-history activity throughout the state is carried over into the peacetime days to come.