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Organization of Archival Records in the Opinion of Archivists of State Archives in Poland Based on Results of the 2018 Survey

Opracowanie zasobu w opinii archiwistów archiwów państwowych w Polsce w świetle wyników ankiety z 2018 roku

ABSTRACT

Due to the digital and post-humanist revolution observed over the recent years, the Polish state archives have faced a difficult problem of choosing the right direction in organizing archival records. A temporary break in their typical activity, which has been caused by the transfer of records to the digital version (retroconversion), enables archivists to reflect upon the ultimate way of organizing files. The first suggestions of methodological changes have already been put forward. How do archivists respond to these changes? The following article is based on a survey conducted among state archives' employees and discusses their opinions on the way records are and should be organized.

Key words: archival records, archival science, archivists, archival materials, archives

State archives – undergoing the shift in the domain of their activity resultant from the technological (digital) and cultural (post-humanist turn) revolutions – are facing a difficult choice as to the course of action in the organization of archival records. The hiatus in that task, forced by the retroconversion activity prompts questions of what that organization should be when the transfer of archival records to digital environment is complete. The early methodological proposals have already seen the light of day. An intriguing question, however, appears to be that about the opinions about those changes among archivists. The paper is intended as an attempt to present the attitude of the employees of State Archives towards the organization of archival records, the effort that used to define one as an archivist. As the basis for our observation we used the internet survey 'Opracowanie w archiwach państwowych AD 2018' ['Organisation in State Archives 2018 AD'], that I was able to conduct using the website www.survio.com in the period between 20 July and 17 September 2018 (over a period of 60 days)[1]. The survey was completed by 210 workers of State Archives, that is 13.5% of the total of employees as of the end of 2017[2], and it thus constitutes a representative sample for statistical evaluation.

The first piece of information provided by the survey is that only just under 40% of employees of State Archives deals with compilation of records. It cannot be a surprise for anyone who has dealt with the organizational structure of archives. However, before we go on to scrutinize other results of the survey, a presentation is due to the retroconversion program[3].

The average annual level of organizing records in all branches of State Archives in Poland in the period of 2010–2014 remained at the level of slightly above 156 thousand archival units (a.u.), amounting to five thousand a.u. on average for a single archive (including AGAD, AAN, and NAC). The record-breaking year of 2014 saw the processing of 220 thousand a.u. Starting from 2015, the number of files processed annually plummeted. As can be read in the report issued by the General Director of

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[1]   D. Magier, *Wyniki ankiety 'Opracowanie w archiwach państwowych AD 2018'*, http://archiwozofia.com/single-post/2019/07/17/Wyniki-ankiety-Opracowanie-w-archiwach-pa%C5%84stwowych-AD-2018 [accessed on: 16 I 2019].

[2]   *Sprawozdanie z działalności Naczelnego Dyrektora Archiwów Państwowych oraz archiwów państwowych w 2017 r.* [hereinafter: *Sprawozdanie 2017*], p. 83, https://www.archiwa.gov.pl/files/SPRAWOZDANIE_2017.PDF [accessed on: 26 I 2019].

[3]   'Na zastopowanie opracowania […] wpłynęło przesunięcie sił na realizację priorytetu retrokonwersji pomocy archiwalnych. Wiele archiwów zawiesiło prowadzone prace z tego zakresu i nie podejmowało prac przy kolejnych zespołach archiwalnych' ['The pause in compiling […] resulted from the transfer of workforce to the priority activity of retroconversion of archival aids. Many archives suspended the undergoing works in that domain and did not undertake tasks on subsequent archival fonds']. *Ibidem*, p. 12.

State Archives, these works include only the execution of plans developed and prepared 'several years before, particularly in the case of large archival fonds'[4]. The low point in the amount of processed records was reached in 2017, when it fell by ca. 36% year to year[5].

Diagram 1. Processing of archival fonds in the State Archives in the period of 2010–2017 (in a.u.).
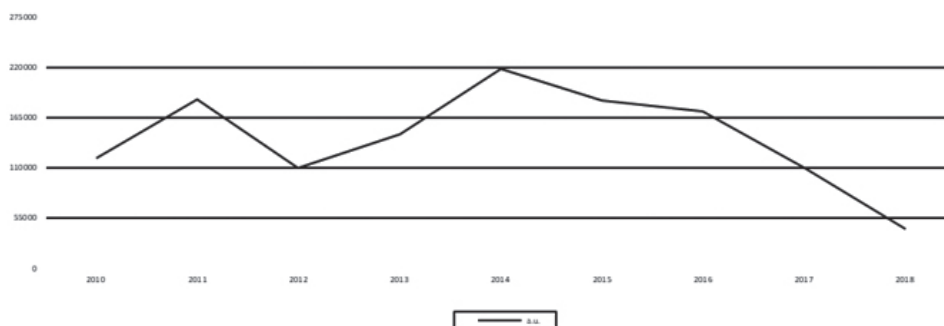
Source: Sprawozdania z działalności archiwów państwowych, following: https://www. archiwa.gov.pl/pl/o-nas/naczelna-dyrekcja-archiwów-państwowych/sprawozdania [accessed on: 16 I 2020].

The decreasing rate of processed fonds was, of course, an intended goal. Both *Strategia archiwów państwowych na lata 2010–2020* [*State Archives' Strategy 2010–2020*] adopted by the General Director of State Archives, Sławomir Radoń, on 23 December 2010[6], and the activity of subsequent

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[4] 'Kryteria wyboru zespołów do opracowania stanowią najczęściej: zainteresowanie użytkowników, stan ewidencji, a ostatnio także projekty digitalizacji. Zjawiskiem spotykanym jest też opracowywanie zespołów, zwłaszcza niedużych, nie ujętych w planach, jeśli zostały one przejęte bez ewidencji lub wyłączone z innych materiałów w trakcie ich porządkowania i klasyfikowania. Zmienia się nieznacznie struktura i tematyka opracowywanego zasobu. Największy odsetek, podobnie jak w strukturze całego zasobu archiwów państwowych, stanowi dokumentacja aktowa' ['Fonds selection criteria for processing usually include: the interest displayed by users, the state of evidence, and recently also the digitalization projects. Another encountered phenomenon is that of processing of fonds, particularly minor ones, omitted in the plans, if they were taken over without evidence or excluded from other records during their organization and classification. The structure and subject matter of the processed fond has been changing ever so slightly, too. The greatest fraction, much like in the structure of the entire fond of national archives is constituted by documentation files']. *Ibidem*, p. 10.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 12.

[6] 'W sposób zamierzony pominięto problematykę związaną z opracowaniem materiałów archiwalnych. W związku z obecnym stanem faktycznym środków ewidencyjnych – zostało ono w znacznym stopniu ograniczone na rzecz uzupełnienia i korekty ewidencji zasobu archiwów państwowych' ['The issues related to the processing of archival fonds were deliberately omitted. Due to the current state of affairs with evidential

Directors either omitted the activity or regarded it as of the secondary importance[7]. Therefore, the reports of activity of State Archives in 2018 brought information of continuing decrease in the number of archival records processed as compared to the previous years[8]. This way, there was a shift in the balance of the basic activity within the operation of State Archives, defined in Article 23 of the Act on National Archive Resource[9]. Obviously, it was only possible owing to the adoption of the principle that the rudimentary set of elements of an archival description found in the evidence of a unit is sufficient to provide access thereto. What more could one wish for in the times when providing access to records has become the main duty of archives? Hence, the questions started to arise of the

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sources – it was largely limited in favor of complementing and correcting the evidence of fonds of State Archives'], *Strategia archiwów państwowych na lata 2010–2020*; p. 4, https://www.archiwa.gov.pl/images/docs/Strategia_archiww_pastwowych_na_lata_2010_2020.pdf [accessed on: 26 I 2019].

[7] W. Stępniak, *Koncepcje działania na stanowisku Naczelnego Dyrektora Archiwów Państwowych oraz metody jej realizacji*, 'Archeion' 2011, 112, pp. 347–357; idem, *Najważniejsze zmiany w kierunku działalności archiwów państwowych w latach 2011–2013*, 'Archeion' 2013, 114, pp. 23–36; W. Woźniak, *Koncepcja działania na stanowisku Naczelnego Dyrektora Archiwów Państwowych oraz metody jej realizacji*, 'Archeion' 2016, 117, pp. 9–17. On the policy of the management of State Archives during the last two decades, see: H. Ciechanowski, *Działalność naukowa archiwów państwowych w koncepcjach Naczelnych Dyrektorów Archiwów Państwowych w XXI w. (artykuł dyskusyjny)*, 'Archeion' 2018, 119, pp. 317–329.

[8] Already the 2017 report featured an explanation, according to which: 'przy okazji retrokonwersji pomocy archiwalnych podejmowano w koniecznych przypadkach prace uzupełniające w zakresie opracowania, mające jednak wycinkowy charakter. Były to np. korekty oznaczeń rodzajów materialnych – stąd zmiany w rozmiarach różnych rodzajów materiałów archiwalnych. […] Jednocześnie inwentaryzowano materiały archiwalne w ramach prac wynikających z długoletnich planów opracowania lub potrzeb powstających w trakcie roku sprawozdawczego' ['due to the retroconversion of archival aids, in the necessary cases complementary works of compiling were undertaken, though only of partial character. These included corrections to the labelling of material types – hence the changes in the sizes of various types of archival records. […] Concurrently, archival fonds were catalogued within the framework of long-term organization plans or the needs arising during the reported year']; *Sprawozdanie 2017*, p. 13; In 2018, the number of processed archival records increased by a mere 43,412 a.u., thus reporting a 60% decrease compared with 2017, *Sprawozdanie z działalności Naczelnego Dyrektora Archiwów Państwowych oraz archiwów państwowych w 2018 r.* [hereinafter: *Sprawozdanie 2018*], https://www.archiwa.gov.pl/files/SPRAWOZDANIE_2018_.pdf [accessed on: 16 I 2020].

[9] 'Działalność archiwalna obejmuje gromadzenie, ewidencjonowanie, przechowywanie, opracowanie, zabezpieczenie i udostępnianie materiałów archiwalnych oraz prowadzenie działalności informacyjnej' ['Archival activity includes the collection, recording, storing, compilation, securing and providing access, as well as performing informative actions']. *Obwieszczenie Marszałka Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 11 stycznia 2018 r. w sprawie ogłoszenia jednolitego tekstu ustawy o narodowym zasobie archiwalnym i archiwach*, 'Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polski' 2018, no. 217, art. 23.

relevance of classical processing, commonly regarded as difficult, lengthy, and not recognized as all that useful anymore.

There is no doubt that the crisis in compiling of archives is associated with the imbalance in archival dichotomy, i.e. the constant, and particularly increased since the mid-1990s emphasis on transforming archives into *sensu stricto* administrative units, at the obvious expense of academic activity. Such a process, lasting over the last two decades, i.e. since the archivists of State Archives were incorporated in the host of civil servants, was bound to introduce changes not only in the practice of archival work, but also in the awareness of the employees thereof. It was to occur particularly with the simultaneously occurring generational transition within both the managing and executive staff. It was only a matter of time before the assumptions for a project of a new Act on Archives could claim that archives 'may (sic! – author's note) compile' archival records[10].

The official position of the institution in charge of the archivist service may be identified as the willingness to terminate compilation performed solely for the purposes of providing manageable data for statistics, in favor of such an effort that would result in deep archival descriptions. Thus, according to that approach, the strategic objective of compilation was to meet the society's demand for information by providing in-depth archival descriptions, whereas the method of its performance was: the appropriate selection criteria for archival records to be subjected to the above process and the new tools, such as the harnessing of users' potential, document tags, automatized descriptions[11]. However, in practice it was quite simply limited in favor of the inventory work.

However, statistics do not favor traditionalists' calling for a return to the previous system of compiling records, as the collected data lays bare its very poor efficiency when faced with new archival acquisitions and the growth in the archival backlog. At the end of 2018, the amount of compiled archival records reached the meagre 26%, with the highest ratio of archives processed – besides AGAD – of 70% (by the State Archives in Szczecin), and the lowest 7% (by the National Archives in Kraków)[12].

Now, what kind of processing are we talking about, and the design intended for whom, considering that nowadays the customers of archives tend to be virtual, unprepared for methodological reality, expecting an

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[10] Kancelaria Archiwum Państwowego w Siedlcach, Projekt założeń do projektu ustawy 'Prawo o archiwach' Naczelnej Dyrekcji Archiwów Państwowych 10.04.2018 r. (znak sprawy: Z_ND-I-025.1.2017).
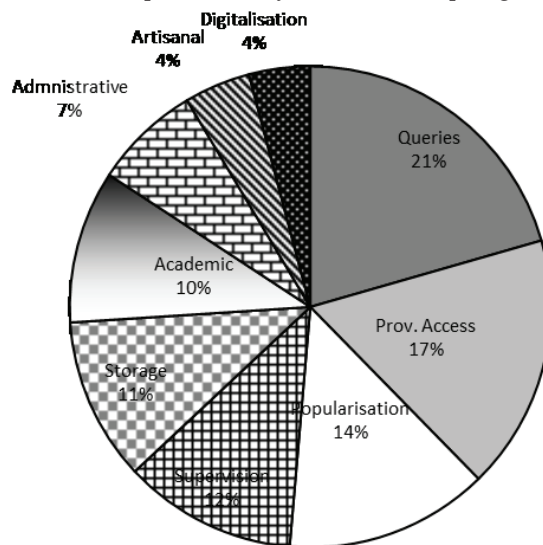
[11] H. Staszewska, *Strategia opracowania zasobu archiwalnego w archiwach – zarys problemu*, paper delivered during VII National Conference of Polish Archivists, Kielce, 21 IX 2017.

[12] *Sprawozdanie 2018*, p. 10.

instant answer, and to make matters worse, 'difficult to keep for longer?'[13]. Lastly, what kind of organization work could we expect from the archivist employed at the State Archives today?

Among the employees dealing with the compilation of resource, only 22% declared that it was their only task. For the others, it constitutes additional work performed in the archive. Usually, they concomitantly: run queries, provide access to the resource, popularize it, supervise archives, manage storage areas, perform academic activity, carry out administrative, technical and artisanal (sic!) tasks, as well as the digitalization. It is worth mentioning here that despite theoretically realistic organizational structures of State Archives, suggesting a narrow specialization of various units within it, a surprisingly numerous group of employees compiling records participates in other, at times radically divergent, archival efforts, such as: queries, providing access to fonds, digitalization, administrative tasks, storage space management, lastly technical, artisanal and administrative duties. It proves particularly striking, when dealing with the employees of the Regional Archives Centers (33%), and not satellite departments, where it tends to be the norm.

Diagram 2. Additional tasks performed by archivists compiling the resource.
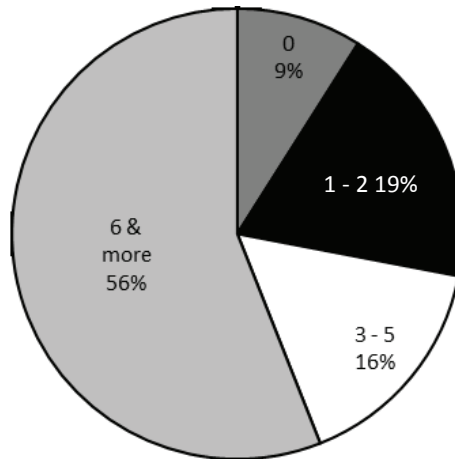

Source: D. Magier, *Wyniki ankiety.*

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[13] H. Staszewska, *Strategia opracowania.*

It is worth bearing in mind that most employees of State Archives do not, in the least, deal with compiling. Admittedly, among those performing such tasks, experienced archivists who have completed at least six fonds comprise 56%; however, the unnerving fact is that the subsequent group is made up of young archivists, who have only processed one or two fonds. Regrettably, it falls in line with a broader trend which sees archivists leave State Archives during the first two to three years of their work to look for a place of employment better in many aspects. It seems, nevertheless, that the persons who have worked for four or five years usually remain in the archive. Regarding the compilation of archival records, it raises concerns of a generation gap and the risk of breaking the Master-Apprentice model among the staff[14].

Diagram 3. Number of fonds compiled by archivists performing the task.
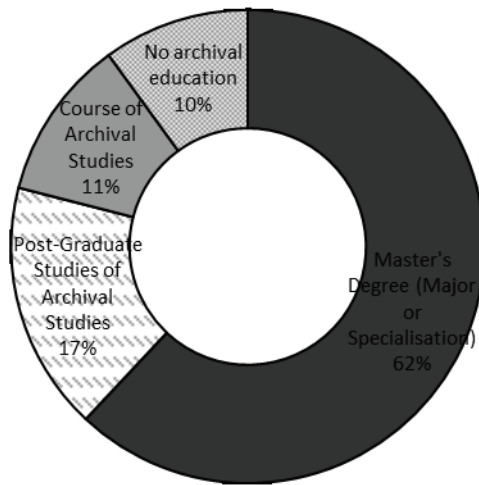

Source: D. Magier, *Wyniki ankiety.*

The education level of persons compiling the source may be considered satisfactory, as over 60% of them graduated with Master's degrees, with the specialisation in Archival Science, but the group also includes those who majored in Archival Studies[15], who completed post-graduate archival

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[14] On the other hand, it is quite possible that in many units of State Archives the model has been inactive for a long time, considering the fact that the assistants from more experienced colleagues is only sought by the least numerous group of archivists (29%), others prefer to study previously processed records of the kind (40%), or read literature on archive studies (31%).

[15] A large number of surveyed persons declare having graduated from Archival Science major, indicating their work experience as over 11 years, a fact that seems implausible, in light of the fact that the first independent course of Master studies 'Archival Science

and courses in the field. On the other hand, a complete lack of educational background was declared by as many as 10% of archives' employees performing the compilation of records, a number that should be seen as rather high, considering the type of performed duties.

Diagram 4. Education level among archivists compiling the resource.

Source: D. Magier, *Wyniki ankiety.*

Compiling, despite being in the recent years a less emphasized task, continues to be seen as a vital duty for State Archives, even by employees performing other tasks. It is considered to be one of several duties of equal importance by 64% of employees, whereas as the heart and soul of archivist's work by 33% of them, with only 3% regarding the activity as unimportant. The order of the respective answers is similar among the archivists performing compilation work, though the ratio between the first two answers is much more balanced; a testament to the respect they feel for their own work.

As the greatest difficulty when compiling the archivists see the initial studies on the creator of the fond, as well as the recognition of fond identity of the documents; however, they also point to such problematic stages of compilation as: providing the structure, writing the introduction to the fond, formation of archival units. Importantly, the same level of difficulty as the formation of a.u. was indicated for the procedure of evaluating the

and Management of Documentation' was established in Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, in the academic year of 2006/2007. In all likelihood, what they meant was a specialization in Archival Studies; therefore, I included such answers in that category.

Diagram 5. The significance of compiling work according to workers who perform the task.
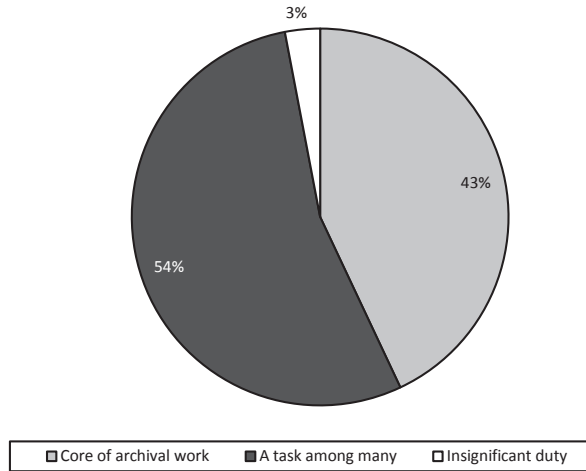
Source: D. Magier, *Wyniki ankiety.*

fond as processed[16]. On the other hand, there were also those who saw the difficulty of compilation in the rather mechanical activities, such as organizing folders and taking the inventory.

The methods of compiling archival fonds have been in the center of discussion among archivists performing the compilation tasks on archival records. The methodological guidelines emerging in the recent years usually provided guidelines and complaints in equal measure. The common practice of criticizing the simplified methods of compilation[17], introduced on 1 January 2003, indicated that the archive world took notice of the fact that these constituted a mere experiment aimed at reporting statistical – but not qualitative – results, whereas the conclusions drawn pointed to 'the lack of state-of-the art, uniform, up-to-date and coherent methodological regulations, based on international norms and standards'[18].

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[16] With much certainty, it can be declared that the respondents thought about the old regulations pertaining to assessment of fonds as processed, not the new one, introduced (shortly before survey was carried out) by force of: *Zarządzenie nr 8 NDAP z 30.01.2018 r. w sprawie inwentaryzacji materiałów archiwalnych oraz sporządzania i zatwierdzania elektronicznych inwentarzy archiwalnych dla zespołów (zbiorów) w archiwach państwowych*, https://www.archiwa. gov.pl/files/zarzadzenia_NDAP/zarz8_2018.pdf [accessed on: 26 I 2019].

[17] *Decyzja nr 20 NDAP z 10.12.2002 r. w sprawie wprowadzenia wskazówek metodycznych dotyczących uproszczonego opracowania zasobu archiwalnego przechowywanego w archiwach państwowych*, https://www.archiwa.gov.pl/images/docs/akty_normatywne/dec_20_2002. pdf [accessed on: 26 I 2019].

[18] H. Staszewska, *Uproszczone metody opracowania w archiwach państwowych – eksperyment metodyczny czy statystyczny*, http://adacta.archiwa.net/file/2010torun/HS_upMetody.pdf [accessed on: 26 I 2019].

On the other hand, the implementation of those announcements by way of organizing the methodological regulations and adjusting them to the technological and social realities has not been unreservedly accepted by archivists. The change of several key methodological regulations at the outset of 2018 was poorly received by persons compiling archival records. The question remains whether it is the result of an opinion formed through actual application of those regulations in archival practice (highly unlikely, as the process of organizing the resource was at the time put on hold), or of people's general unwillingness to change. The latter seems to be the case, as indicated by a very large number of 'No opinion' answers to the question: 'How do you evaluate the direction of the changes recently introduced to methodological guidelines?'.

Diagram 6. Methodological changes introduced in 2018, as evaluated by archivists employed at the State Archives (%).
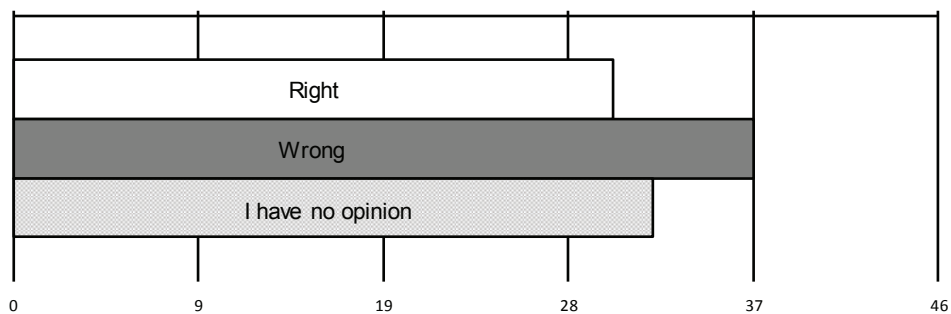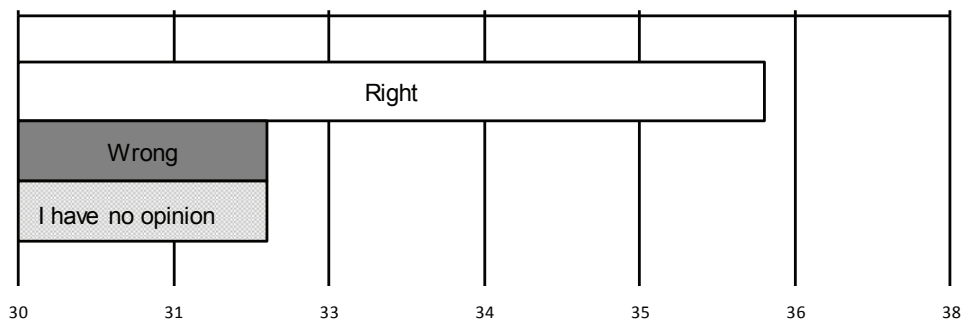

Source: D. Source: D. Magier, *Wyniki ankiety.*

Another major reform regarding the compilation duties – the operation of methodological commissions in the State Archives, was assessed as positive by a slight majority of archivists, though here, too, the large proportion (32%) of those without any opinion should draw our attention. It seems rather surprising in light of the fact that we are dealing here with people who perform compilations on a daily basis.

Despite such – seemingly rather conservative – attitudes of archivists to the methodology of their work, great majority of people performing compilation tasks does admit it is necessary to introduce procedural changes to compiling of the archival resource in the Polish State Archives. The areas which call for changes can be grouped in three main categories:
– social changes (information society, democratization of access to the resource, post-modern trends in the humanities) and technological progress,
– greater than before variety of archival sources,

Diagram 7. Changes in the operation of methodological commissions, as evaluated by the archivists employed at the State Archives (%).

Source: D. Magier, *Wyniki ankiety.*

– change in the understanding of basic concepts and the emergence of new ones.

Among the recommendations for methodological changes, archivists list both proposals to move away from the classical model of compilation, and those for returning to it to a greater extent[19].

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[19] Examples: 'Archiwum całkowicie odeszło od opracowania. Wykonujemy bezsensowną ewidencję czy retrokonwersję, z której mało kto będzie mógł skorzystać' ['The archive has entirely refrained from compilation tasks. We perform pointless inventory work and retroconversion, that hardly anyone will benefit from']; 'Lawinowe narastanie zadań powodujące przeciążenie AP-ów i zepchnięcie opracowania na dalszy plan lub wymuszające rezygnację z tego zadania' ['The skyrocketing increase in the number of tasks results in overload of the State Archives and in setting the compilation aside or abandoning it entirely']; 'Wygospodarowanie czasu i etatów na to, by opracowanie odbywało się 'na bieżąco'. Ilość zespołów oczekujących na opracowanie w archiwach państwowych jest zatrważająca' ['Allocating time and staff to perform compiling occurred 'on an ongoing basis'. The number of fonds awaiting compilation in the State Archives is frightening']; 'Należy położyć nacisk na dokładne indeksowanie materiałów, dostosowując hasła indeksu do wymogów środowiska informatycznego' ['Precise indexation of records has to be emphasized, with the index entries being adjusted to the requirements of the digital environment']; 'Aktywny udział użytkowników zasobu w procesie opracowania (crowdsourcing) – ewidencja jest płynna, gdyż użytkownicy nadsyłają poprawki i uzupełnienia' ['Active participation of users of the source in the process of compiling (crowdsourcing) – the inventory is fluid, as users send in corrections and missing data']; 'Uproszczenie opracowania, opracowanie naukowe zostawmy naukowcom' ['Simplification of compilation; we should leave academic compilations to scholars']; 'Elektroniczna ewidencja może zastąpić konieczność systematyzacji zgodnie ze schematem organizacyjnym' ['Electronic inventory could replace the need of systematization according to the organizational scheme']; 'Przejmowanie akt uporządkowanych z archiwów zakładowych, możliwość przeszukiwania elektronicznych baz danych, najważniejsza jest dobra ewidencja zasobu, opracowanie jest czasem sztuką dla sztuki' ['Taking over ordered documentation from company archives, the ability to search electronic databases, the most important feature is the good inventory information of the source, compilation thus becomes art for art's sake'].

Without a doubt, on completion of the special campaign, that retroconversion indubitably is, the time of compiling archival fonds will return (unless, of course, one such campaign is replaced by another – such approach seems to be the scourge of Polish State Archives). Obviously, one cannot imagine leaving behind 'the separating of archival fonds (archival sources), their organization, and providing them with archival descriptions (archival aids), as well as ordering the entire fond according to its structure'[20]. However, will that mean the return to the traditional compiling, based on the heritage of the archival theory and practice in Poland, as some would like to have it, or another, more revolutionary formula, as recommended by others? Regardless of the chosen direction, it is important to be aware that even the most trailblazing solutions originating in the minds of the avant-garde of archival science will be implemented by archivists who have their own burden of experiences, their own approach to archiving, and their own skills honed over a century of Polish archival practice. It is something worth bearing in mind when putting forth new concepts and priorities for the operation of State Archives in order not to lose sight of the general objective behind their very existence.

(translated by LINGUA LAB)

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[20] K. Kwiatkowska, *Metodyka opracowania zasobu archiwalnego ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem akt spraw*, Toruń 2014, p. 25.

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STRESZCZENIE

Polskie archiwa państwowe pod wpływem rewolucji cyfrowej i zwrotu posthumanistycznego stoją na przed trudnym wyborem kierunku działań w zakresie opracowania materiałów archiwalnych. Okresowe odejście od opracowania, spowodowanego procesem przenoszenia ewidencji archiwalnej do wersji cyfrowej (retrokonwersja) sprzyja próbie zastanowienia się, jakie to opracowanie po zakończeniu tej akcji ma być. Pierwsze propozycje metodycznych zmian ujrzały już światło dzienne. Co o kierunku tych zmian myślą archiwiści? Artykuł powstał na podstawie analizy ankiety przeprowadzonej wśród pracowników archiwów państwowych i omawia ich stosunek do opracowania akt.

Słowa kluczowe: archiwa, archiwistyka, archiwiści, materiały archiwalne, opracowanie

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