

IWG completes a successful mission

The National Archives has officially brought to a close the work of a special panel of professionals who declassified and made accessible to the public some of the last remaining classified U.S. records of World War II.

The Nazi War Crimes and Japanese Imperial Government Interagency Working Group, known as the IWG, issued its final report recently and closed up shop.

It marked the end of seven years of difficult work by a number of NARA staff, as well as staff from other agencies. They opened more than 8.5 million pages of previously sealed documents pertaining to Nazi and Japanese war crimes and war criminals during and after World War II.

The IWG was authorized by legislation passed by Congress in 1998 and amended in 2000 calling for the declassification and opening of many of these U.S. Government records.

This effort to add details to the history of the war would not have been possible without continued support from Congress, the cooperation of various Federal agencies, and the dogged determination of the public members appointed by President Clinton—businessman Thomas H. Baer, attorney Richard Ben-Veniste, and attorney (and former U.S. House member) Elizabeth Holtzman.

The work was carried out by representatives of more than a dozen government agencies, a group of historians expert in the era, and professional archivists at the National Archives and other agencies.

I want to thank, in particular, members and retired members of the NARA staff for their work over these years. **Michael Kurtz** and Steve Garfinkel (now retired) both chaired the group, and David Van Tassel (now retired) served as staff director for most of the project.

Other NARA staff included **Greg Bradsher, Paul Brown, William Cunliffe, Steven Hamilton, Ira Kirshenbaum, Miriam Kleiman, Chris Naylor, and Eric Van Slander**. Former NARA staff included Gene Fielden, Sean Morris, Richard Myers, Whitney Noland, Michael Petersen, Jack Saunders, and Robert Skirov.

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As a result of the IWG's work, historians and others researching World War II will now find richer, more enlightening, and, in some cases, more chilling details about Nazi and

Japanese war crimes and criminals, the misuse of many of these individuals by American officials in the postwar period, and how many of them escaped punishment for their deeds.

The declassified files include, among others, those from the Office of Strategic Services and its successor agency, the Central Intelligence Agency; the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and the Army Counter-intelligence Service. Also included were name files on Adolf Hitler and top operatives in the Nazi regime.

The records also document how early indications of the persecution of Jews by the Nazis were ignored by U.S. and British officials and, in the postwar years, how U.S. officials used former Nazi agents to help gather information on our ally-turned-enemy, the Soviet Union.

In addition to revealing the contents of the records, their release demonstrated that no harm was done by declassifying records of half-century-old intelligence operations. The release of these records in no way threatened the nation's security. Rather, it has enhanced public confidence in government transparency, which is vital to a democracy.

Moreover, the release of these documents supports and underscores the importance of our work at the National Archives. In providing access to government records, the work performed at NARA enables citizens to hold government officials accountable and to guarantee their rights under the Constitution.

In its final report, the IWG made several recommendations to Congress for any future declassification efforts that lawmakers may authorize, including adequate funding for targeted declassification efforts. Also, the IWG said there should be "absolute deadlines" for these efforts, along with adequate oversight, and that such projects

should involve public members as well as representatives of the affected agencies.

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World War II was the pivotal event of the 20th century, forever changing America and the world, setting the stage for the Cold War that followed, and creating the boundaries of geopolitics for the generations that have followed. The work of the IWG has added immeasurably to the documentation of that war.

You can read the final report of the IWG, as well as learn about the content of the records it has declassified, at www.archives.gov/iwg.

The National Archives has also been engaged in a number of other international programs designed to improve archival and recordkeeping standards internationally while increasing our knowledge of major episodes in modern history.

Since becoming Archivist of the United States, I have encouraged the closest cooperation with NARA's counterparts in Canada (with whom we are engaged in various joint programs) and with the national archivists of the world's other great democracies. I will write about some of these programs in subsequent columns.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Allen Weinstein".

ALLEN WEINSTEIN
Archivist of the United States

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