

# **Implementation of appraisal regulations including the selection of sample archives. A case study on the Swedish country district police**

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## **Abstract**

Appraisal has often been combined with some form of sampling. The purpose of the present study was to shed light on the implementation and consequences of the method of selecting sample archives: while records from a few agencies of a certain type are almost totally preserved, in other archives all or nearly all records are discarded.

A case study was carried out on an appraisal decision, including the selection of sample archives, issued in 1969 by the Swedish National Archives. The decision concerned the country district police force (1918–1964), and was to be implemented by the autonomous regional archives. The study first explored proposals and opinions preceding the decision. The next step was a quantitative examination of the country police archives, followed by a discussion of how the implementation of the decision affected research potentials.

The results revealed that the regional archives followed the rules only to a certain extent, and with large variations. As a consequence, the amount of preserved records is much larger than the decision makers intended. Organisational inertia, and concepts related to this, may partly explain these divergences.

## **Keywords**

Archival appraisal, police archives, sample archives, sampling, Swedish National Archives

## **Introduction**

The notion of archival power, i.e. the power of the archivist to influence what future generations will be able to learn about our times, is currently widely recognised in the archival science literature. Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook laid the foundations for this outlook in their influential 2002 article.<sup>1</sup> It has since then been further developed by, among others, Eric Ketelaar and Randall C. Jimerson.<sup>2</sup> Archival power is executed by the

ways records are acquired, appraised, structured, described, and made accessible. Perhaps the most important of all these activities is appraisal; Richard Cox has even labelled it “the core archival activity.”<sup>3</sup> The discussion on appraisal has during the last decades been intense. The main interest concerns macro-appraisal and its many varieties.<sup>4</sup> Other concepts in focus are documentation strategy, institutional functional analysis, and the vertical and horizontal approach.<sup>5</sup> Swedish research about archival appraisal is more limited, and has predominantly treated the development of appraisal decisions at the national level.<sup>6</sup>

A group of appraisal methods, more debated some decades ago, is archival sampling. The basic idea is to select records, representative of the content of a large accumulation of records. The preserved material is meant to give an idea of the original records, and can occasionally be used as a basis for statistical analysis. Today, sampling is mainly discussed in connection with the appraisal of case files. Margaret Dixon describes a Canadian method for combining macro-appraisal with the selection of operational case files.<sup>7</sup> In the context of the German vertical and horizontal approach, Juergen Treffeisen discusses criteria for selecting case files in courts of law.<sup>8</sup> Different sampling methods are also briefly described in textbooks.<sup>9</sup>

During a period, ranging approximately from the 1950’s to the 1980’s, sampling procedures were however very widespread. At this time, research interests were shifting towards social and economic history, which required source material suitable for statistical processing. Consequently, archivists debated the best strategy of acquiring a statistically reliable sample.<sup>10</sup> For instance, Eleanor McKay advocated the use of random number tables, while Frank Boles preferred systematic sampling, e.g. every hundredth file.<sup>11</sup> There were also critical voices. Leonard Rapport checked the confirmed usage of case files that previously had been selected following purposive criteria (i.e. records containing information on certain important topics, events, or personalities), and found that almost no researchers had used them for the reasons they had been selected.<sup>12</sup>

An international survey in the 1970’s concluded that in many countries, sampling was regarded as “the prerequisite for the elimination of the bulk of the material.”<sup>13</sup> Felix Hull’s (1981) study of sampling in eight countries showed large variations in practice and opinion at the time. Hull summed up:

All methods in use appear to arouse a certain anxiety among the users, and while qualitative and quantitative methods have been adopted in various places and at various times, no one is wholly happy about the validity of the former, nor entirely satisfied with the complete authenticity of the latter.<sup>14</sup>

Concerns about the consequences of sampling have subsequently continued to rise. The present appraisal policy of the Swedish National Archives expresses a sceptic attitude: sampling should be “used with caution, and only after careful analysis of its consequences for researchers.”<sup>15</sup> In the United States, the National Archives and Records Administration now recommends that sampling be used “only after careful analysis of all other options.”<sup>16</sup> In a historical perspective, sampling thus stands out as a considerable expression of archival power in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. I believe that it is time for more empirical analyses of the implementation and consequences of various forms of archival sampling.

### **Research problem**

The aim of the present study was to shed light on the implementation and consequences of a specific sampling method, i.e. retention of sample archives. This method was used where several local or regional agencies performed similar tasks. A few complete archives are presumed to present an accurate picture of the activities of all agencies of a particular kind.<sup>17</sup> Retention of sample archives was previously quite prevalent in Sweden, and was, according to a report from the Swedish National Archives, used for no less than 21 different kinds of government agencies.<sup>18</sup> One of them was the country district police force. In 1969, the National Archives issued an appraisal decision, including the selection of sample archives, concerning these archives. A later report (1998) self-critically pointed out this decision as a prime example of far-reaching appraisal decisions in the sixties.<sup>19</sup> Long before that report, several critical Swedish historians had emphasised that this kind of sampling prioritised research on administrative history, i.e. it presupposed that users were more interested in the record creators than in the people or the societal conditions mentioned in the records.<sup>20</sup> The process of making and implementing this decision was hence estimated as suitable for a case study.

According to the 1969 decision, the archives from a small number of police districts were to be preserved as sample archives, while the other archives should keep only very few records. This decision was to be implemented after the records had been delivered to the regional archives. A short glance in the National Archival Database<sup>21</sup> however revealed that record destruction at the different regional archives was not at all uniformly carried out. These variations warrant an explanation.

Research questions considered in the present study were:

- Which proposals and opinions were in the discussions preceding the 1969 appraisal decision forwarded by central and regional actors?
- How did the regional archives implement the decision?
- How may differences in the implementation be explained?
- Finally, which were the consequences of the decision to the possibility of using the preserved material for crime research?

The last question, concerning research possibilities, requires some comment. The archives of the country police districts were very large, and the agencies held several functions, as prosecutors, enforcement officers, and police superintendents. Some concentration was necessary, and since I presume that matters of crime and punishment will remain of interest to archive users in the foreseeable future, special attention was dedicated to what happened to the information on crime cases.

Regarding the usefulness of the records for research purposes after the 1969 appraisal decision, three hypotheses are offered: 1) Some statistical aggregations might be feasible. 2) The preserved material would probably be useful for research on administrative history. 3) Using the archives for other categories of crime research would probably prove to be a challenge. The present empirical study put these suppositions to the test.

The empirical investigation was carried out in two steps. The first included an examination of proposals and discussions preceding the appraisal decision. Sources for this part of the study were available in the National Archives' own office archive in the form of regulations, memos, and correspondence. The second step was a quantitative investigation of the regional archives' collections of country police records. The main

source of information was the National Archival Database, which contains details on the holdings of national and regional archival institutions. Data about the number of police archives, their volumes expressed in running metres, as well as the number and content of sample archives, were collected and compiled. In some cases, where the database lacked details, supplementing information was gathered through e-mail inquiries.

### **The Swedish country district police archives**

The Swedish judicial system was, up to the 1960's and 1970's, divided into separate organisations for the towns and the countryside. The town police was a matter for the municipalities, while the country police was governed by the state. After a reorganisation in 1918, the district police superintendent also served as a public prosecutor and an enforcement officer in his district. Beginning in 1965, a new state police incorporating both towns and countryside replaced the former organisation. At the same time, separate organisations for public prosecutors and enforcement officers were formed. The court system underwent a similar reform in 1971.

The archives of the country police districts thus cover the years from 1918 to 1964. The original large number of districts had at the end of that period, due to reorganisations and merging of small districts, been lowered to around 350. The National Archival Database contains records from a total of 617 districts. The records from these districts were at the end of the 1960's transferred to the regional archives.

### **Appraisal proposals and decisions**

This section gives an account of proposals and opinions that, in the discussions preceding the 1969 appraisal decision, were forwarded by central and regional actors.

The first regulation concerning appraisal of country police records was issued in 1934. It listed six series of records, considered to be of minor importance. These should consequently be discarded, by the records creators themselves, after a time limit of 15 years.<sup>22</sup> During the following two decades, around a dozen more regulations followed, stipulating disposal of certain types of records deemed less significant. So far, none of the records in question were related to crime cases. An appraisal decision in 1958 went further.<sup>23</sup> According to this regulation, files on cases having been passed on to court

(from 1935 and onwards) were to be discarded after ten years. The same rule applied for files on cases that had been settled with an order of summary punishment. Only files prior to 1935 and files on unsolved cases should be preserved.<sup>24</sup> A correspondence between the National Archives and one police district explains the reasoning behind the new rules. Records concerning cases passed on to court were kept in the court's archive, and cases settled with an order of summary punishment had been sufficiently recorded in the crime journal. Files on unsolved cases, on the other hand, contained information that could not be found anywhere else.<sup>25</sup>

In 1966, after the reorganisation of the police force, the National Archives issued a memo, forwarding a radical proposal with the purpose of saving space at the regional archives. An estimation of the total volume of country police records disclosed that, after implementation of the 1958 regulation, it would embrace no less than 10,000 running metres. The memo now suggested destruction of everything, but for three types of records:

- Lists of people with unpaid taxes, emanating from the duties of the country district superintendent in his role as an enforcement officer. In 1951, the National Archives had put forward that this voluminous series was useful for research in social and economic history. The author of the memo did not quite agree, but found it necessary to stand by this statement.
- Receipts for returned stolen goods. These would have to be preserved due to a legal formality.
- Crime journals. Entries in these books contained brief information on the nature of the reported crime, the name of the plaintiff, measures taken by the police, and (where appropriate) measures taken by the court. The journals constituted the only source of records for a complete set of crime statistics.

All other records were assessed as having limited research value, or as being replaceable with similar information available elsewhere. On the subject of crime case files on unsolved cases, the author of the memo had, after examining them more closely, noticed that the vast majority concerned trivial crimes, such as theft or damage. They were consequently not worth to preserve, with the possible exception of files on cases

that had attracted public attention. The memo concluded that the proposal would reduce the total volume of the country police archives to around 1,200 metres.<sup>26</sup>

These calculations of shelf space were a clear indication of the main purpose of the proposal. This was further confirmed by the wordings of the memo, which revealed a strong desire to destroy as much material as possible. For instance, some records' value as legal evidence was described as an "obstacle for destruction." When the research value of a series was assessed as limited, it was expressed as a "possibility for destruction." Previous research on Swedish appraisal decisions states that the National Archives during this period prioritised economy and space-saving to a high degree, a conclusion that appears quite correct.<sup>27</sup>

The author of the memo admitted to the difficulties of predicting what kind of source material future researchers might need. Therefore, the memo suggested that one sample archive was selected at each of the seven regional archives. The samples should be selected in such a fashion that they comprised a representative variation of e.g. rural and industrial districts. The sample archives would not be totally complete, since they were not exempt from application of the 1958 regulation. This measure was nevertheless presumed to provide researchers with an adequate foundation for understanding the activities of the country police.

The memo was referred to the regional archives for consideration.<sup>28</sup> Their response expressed support for the main intentions of the proposal, as well as worries for its consequences. A few archives wanted to slow down the whole process, arguing that a decision about large-scale destruction should not be made in a hurry. Apart from that, there was a general agreement on the need to discard a large share of the records. Nonetheless, everyone wanted to retain a larger number of series, particularly different kinds of journals and ledgers. No one advocated preservation of all crime case files. Some archives wanted to keep cases that had attracted public attention, but others pointed to the arbitrariness of such a procedure. Several of the regional archives however demanded a larger number of sample archives, the argument being that if a sample was to represent the whole country, it had to encompass a large variety of districts. Two of the regional archives, Gothenburg and Uppsala, had consulted researchers at the local

universities. They voiced concerns about the consequences of the proposal, and stressed the difficulties in drawing general conclusions from a small sample.<sup>29</sup>

The end result of the process was the appraisal decision 237, issued in 1969. Although it was a very far-reaching decision, the National Archives had clearly paid attention to some of the critical voices. The final decision contained a list of 13 different types of records that should be preserved, mainly journals and ledgers. All other records should be discarded after 30 years, if previous regulations did not prescribe a shorter time limit. The number of sample archives was increased to two or three at each regional archives. Finally, the decision provided a possibility for individual regional archives to preserve records, e.g. crime case files of “special scientific or other interest.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Implementation of the 1969 decision**

This section investigates how the regional archives implemented the appraisal decision 237. Data in the National Archival Database reveals the volumes of the district police archives, how many sample archives the different regional archives selected, and to what degree the sample archives differed from the ordinary country police archives. The results are compiled in Table 1.

Table 1. Country district police archives at Swedish archival institutions (2012)

Regional archives*	Number of districts	Metres in all	Metres in average	Number of sample archives	Metres/sample archive	Metres/ordinary archive
Gothenburg	102	1052.5	10.3	2	22	10.1
Härnösand	131	1951.6	14.9	9	25.5	14.1
Lund	99	457.1	4.6	4	28.1	3.6
Stockholm	30	572	19.1	1	17.4	19.1
Uppsala	107	1238.1	11.6	3	19.6	11.3
Vadstena	89	1092.9	12.3	0	–	12.3
Visby	8	120.4	15	0	–	15
Värmland	26	330	12.7	0	–	12.7
Östersund	25	183.1	7.3	4	23.25	4.3
Total	617	6997.7	11.3	23	24.1	10.8

Source: National Archival Database

\* Since the appraisal decision was implemented, the number of regional archives has increased from seven to nine.

The National Archives memo had estimated that the volume of records after implementation of the disposal decision would amount to around 1,200 metres, and that each archive in average would be reduced to 3–4 metres. The outcome differed vastly from that figure, the total record volume being nearly 7,000 metres, and the average volume of each archive in reality being around eleven metres.

The total amount of records before implementing appraisal decision 237 was estimated to 10,000 metres. Thus, the decision had at least been implemented to a certain degree. Furthermore, several institutions selected a number of sample archives, and in most cases these are, as expected, significantly larger than an ordinary archive. The differences between the archival institutions are nevertheless considerable. At the regional archives in Lund and Östersund, the outcome is almost exactly as expected. All other institutions are very far from fulfilling the expectations, with an average record volume of 10–20 metres. Three of the institutions did not select any sample archive, while one of them, Härnösand, selected a larger number than prescribed.

Unfortunately, the amount of detailed data about the holdings at the different institutions varies a great deal in the database. Notwithstanding, it was possible to see that for a large number of police districts, record destruction has taken place only in accordance with the regulations of 1958. There are also some police districts where the archive appears almost untouched.

Some patterns in the differing implementation of decision 237 were evident. A closer look at the regional archives in Gothenburg revealed that they in the mid-1970's destroyed records in accordance with the decision for a majority (66 of 102) of the country police districts. The time limit of 30 years forced them, however, to keep records from approximately 1945 onwards. After the 1970's, no more disposal has been carried out, and consequently, many records proposed for disposal still remain on the shelves. In contrast, no crime case files, or any other records with a 30-year limit, remain in Lund; it appears that the final round of destruction, planned after 1995, was followed through.

## **Discussion**

The analysis of the implementation of appraisal decision 237 elucidated significant regional differences. How may these differences be explained?

There are a number of plausible explanations for most regional archives not fully implementing the disposal decision. First, the study of the decision-making process showed that the central actor, the National Archives, was more eager than the regional actors to discard large amount of records in order to save space. Some archivists at the regional level may have disliked the whole idea of destroying so many potentially valuable records. Lund was however less critical of the proposal than the other regions, which may explain why the destruction was followed through at that institution.

Second, limited resources are a factor of constant concern at archival institutions. If you have insufficient time and staff for carrying out all your duties, you may hesitate to begin with the controversial ones.

A third explanation relate to the time factor. Due to the 30 year limit, the disposal could not be completed before 1995, and by that time, attitudes to large-scale disposal, as well as to sampling, had changed. The National Archives had adopted an appraisal policy, displaying a sceptical view on sampling. Most regional archives partially

implemented decision 237 during the 1970's, but postponed further measures until 1995, at which time they had forgotten all about it; or alternatively, they deliberately avoided doing anything, because they by then had come to the conclusion that the decision was a bad idea.

Fourth, I propose that the reluctance of the regional archives may partly be explained by the structure of the archival organisation. Today, the regional archives are integrated as constituents of the National Archives, but at that time they were autonomous agencies, developing their own profiles. In some respects they were however subordinated to the National Archives. The tension within the organisation repeatedly caused conflicts, where the regional archives asserted their autonomy against the central authority.<sup>31</sup>

Some concepts in the literature on organisational culture aid the understanding of this issue. A much-debated concept is *resistance to change*, the idea that employees have a tendency to oppose changes they for various reasons perceive as damaging or threatening.<sup>32</sup> Although implementation of an appraisal decision cannot exactly be labelled as a change, it may well have invoked a similar reaction, if perceived as an unwanted order from above. From the management's point of view, there are various options for handling resistance to change. One of these is *participation and involvement* in planning and implementation, occurring in reality in this case. *Negotiation and agreement*, with the final decision permitting more preservation than originally intended, was another option utilized. The literature also mentions that the management sometimes may resort to *coercion*, but that was not an option available to the National Archives in its relations to the regional archives.

A related concept that also may increase our understanding of this matter is *organisational inertia*, which means that within an organisation, there are deep structures that only allow small changes. These structures are very stable, as they are rooted in the organisation's history.<sup>33</sup> Another closely related concept in organisational theory is *imprinting*. In ethology and psychology it means that experiences during a short critical period have a lasting influence on an individual's behaviour. In organisational theory it means that conditions at the time of founding (of the organisation) leave a persisting influence on future development.<sup>34</sup> The regional archives had, since their founding in the

beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, enjoyed an independent and strong position in their respective regions, which may partly explain their lack of will to follow orders from the National Archives.

The final research question concerned the consequences of the decision to the possibility of using the preserved material for crime research. In relation to this question, three hypotheses were forwarded: that some statistical aggregations might be possible; that the preserved records might be useful for research on administrative history; that it would be difficult to use the archives for other categories of crime research. Were these hypotheses verified or falsified?

First, and most importantly, all crime journals are preserved. They contain basic information on all reported crimes in the district, enabling statistical studies of crime rates. In all districts, there are several other preserved series of journals as well, providing information on the daily work at the police station. Hence, a fairly accurate administrative history of the country police might be possible to accomplish. The first two hypotheses thus proved correct. The third hypothesis, that it will be difficult to use the archives for other kinds of crime research, proved only partly accurate. Since more records are kept than was intended, the research possibilities are greater than the decision makers anticipated.

It is difficult, however, to predict the usefulness of an archive from a particular district to a researcher in need of more detailed information about the reported crimes. First of all, whether decision 237 was implemented or not in a district, and to what extent, is a matter of random. Furthermore, the contents of the crime case files show large variations. Some files contain a thick pack of records (including interviews with suspects and witnesses), some only a few short notes; others consist of only a file cover with the same basic information on the front as is noted in the journal.

The reason for discarding files on cases passed on to court, stated in 1958, was that the same information could be found in the court archive. However, an appraisal decision issued in 1963 changed that. This decision stated that files on cases dated after 1947, and being stored in the lower courts' archives, should be discarded. There was however a long list of exceptions, e.g. cases ending with a prison sentence, cases concerning juvenile delinquents, and appeal cases.<sup>35</sup> As a consequence, it is difficult to determine in

advance how much information on a case that exists in a court's archive. In short, the possibilities of scrutinizing specific cases are arbitrary, to say the least.

## **Conclusion**

Although the literature on archival appraisal is vast, little empirical research concerns the actual implementation of rules and regulations. Historical studies of the implementation of sampling, and its consequences, are particularly at want. The present study of the Swedish country police archives specifically concerned an appraisal decision involving the retention of sample archives. The results showed that the regional actors only partially implemented a regulation issued by a central authority. As a consequence, a lot more records than intended were preserved, which affected the possibilities of using the material for research. Evidently, rules and reality do not always go hand in hand, and studies on resolutions made by central authorities only reveal part of the story.

More empirical research is required, and archival theory alone is inadequate for exploring developments in this field, but needs to be supplemented with organisational theory. Analytical concepts incorporated in organisational theory may help elucidate differences within as well as between archival institutions. Issuing a regulation that stipulates the destruction of a large quantity of records is a strong expression of archival power – but only to the extent that those who are supposed to implement it do as they are told. Resistance, or inertia, is also a kind of power that influences which records will be preserved for the future.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Schwartz and Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power."

<sup>2</sup> Ketelaar, "Recordkeeping and Societal Power"; Jimerson, *Archives Power*.

<sup>3</sup> Cox, "Appraisal and the Future of Archives in the Digital Era", 219.

<sup>4</sup> Cook, "Mind over Matter"; Cook, "Macroappraisal in Theory and Practice"; Baeven, "Macro-Appraisal: From Theory to Practice"; Jonker, "Macroappraisal in the Netherlands"; Cunningham and Oswald, "Some Functions are More Equal than Others"; Roberts, "Macroappraisal Kiwi Style."

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<sup>5</sup> Samuels, “Who Controls the Past”; Samuels, *Varsity Letters*; Treffeisen, ”The Development in Germany of Archival Processing.” For overviews of the appraisal discussion, see Couture, “Archival Appraisal: A Status Report”, and Trace, “On or Off the Record?”

<sup>6</sup> Fredriksson, “Vad skall vi bevara?”; Nyberg, ”Tvånget att försaka.”

<sup>7</sup> Dixon, “Beyond Sampling.”

<sup>8</sup> Treffeisen, ”The Development in Germany of Archival Processing”, 356–360.

<sup>9</sup> Cook, *The Management of Information from Archives*, 90–91.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the discussion, see Kepley, “Sampling in Archives: A Review.”

<sup>11</sup> McKay, “Random Sampling Techniques”; Boles, “Sampling in Archives.”

<sup>12</sup> Rapport, “In the Valley of Decision.”

<sup>13</sup> Kromnow, “The Appraisal of Contemporary Records”, 50.

<sup>14</sup> Hull, *The Use of Sampling Techniques*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Swedish National Archives, *Appraisal Policy*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, *Strategic Directions: Appraisal Policy*.

<sup>17</sup> Hull, *The Use of Sampling Techniques*, 11; Kromnow, “The Appraisal of Contemporary Records”, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Swedish National Archives, *Bevarande- och gallringpolicy. Rapport 2*, 19–22.

<sup>19</sup> Swedish National Archives, *Bevarande och gallring av brottmålshandlingar*, 26.

<sup>20</sup> Adamson, ”Några principiella synpunkter”; Nygren, Larsson and Åkerman, *Samhällsdokumentation inför framtiden*; Winberg and Åkerman, *Forskningens framtida datatillgång*.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.nad.riksarkivet.se/>

<sup>22</sup> Circular from the government to the National Archives and the county administrative boards, 7 December 1934. National Archives’ office archive, Bureau II, vol. EI:19.

<sup>23</sup> Technically, the government issued these decisions, following proposals by the National Archives. In 1962, the National Archives received the formal right to autonomously issue appraisal decisions.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from the Ministry of the Interior to the National Archives, 30 December 1958. National Archives’ office archive, vol. B2A:2.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from the police superintendent in Bjurholm to the National Archives, 11 February 1959, and reply from the National Archives, 13 February 1959. National Archives’ office archive, Bureau II, vol. EIva:106.

<sup>26</sup> Memo concerning appraisal in country district police archives, 15 July 1966. National Archives’ office archive, vol. F3AE:10.

<sup>27</sup> Fredriksson, ”Vad skall vi bevara?”, 32; Nyberg, ”Tvånget att försaka”, 51.

<sup>28</sup> It was also referred to the new police, public prosecutors, and enforcement officers, all of whom raised few objections.

<sup>29</sup> Referral answers from regional archives to the National Archives, November 1966–January 1967. National Archives’ office archive, vol. F3AE:10.

<sup>30</sup> National Archives, appraisal decision nr 237, 19 November 1969.

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<sup>31</sup> Norberg, *Mellan tiden och evigheten*, 318–322.

<sup>32</sup> Rowley and Hartley, *Organizing knowledge*, 353. For a critical review, see Dent & Goldberg, “Challenging ‘Resistance to Change’.”

<sup>33</sup> Finch, *Facilities Change Management*, 2–3.

<sup>34</sup> Marquis & Tilcsik, “Imprinting: Toward A Multilevel Theory.”

<sup>35</sup> National Archives, appraisal decision nr 75, 9 November 1963.

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