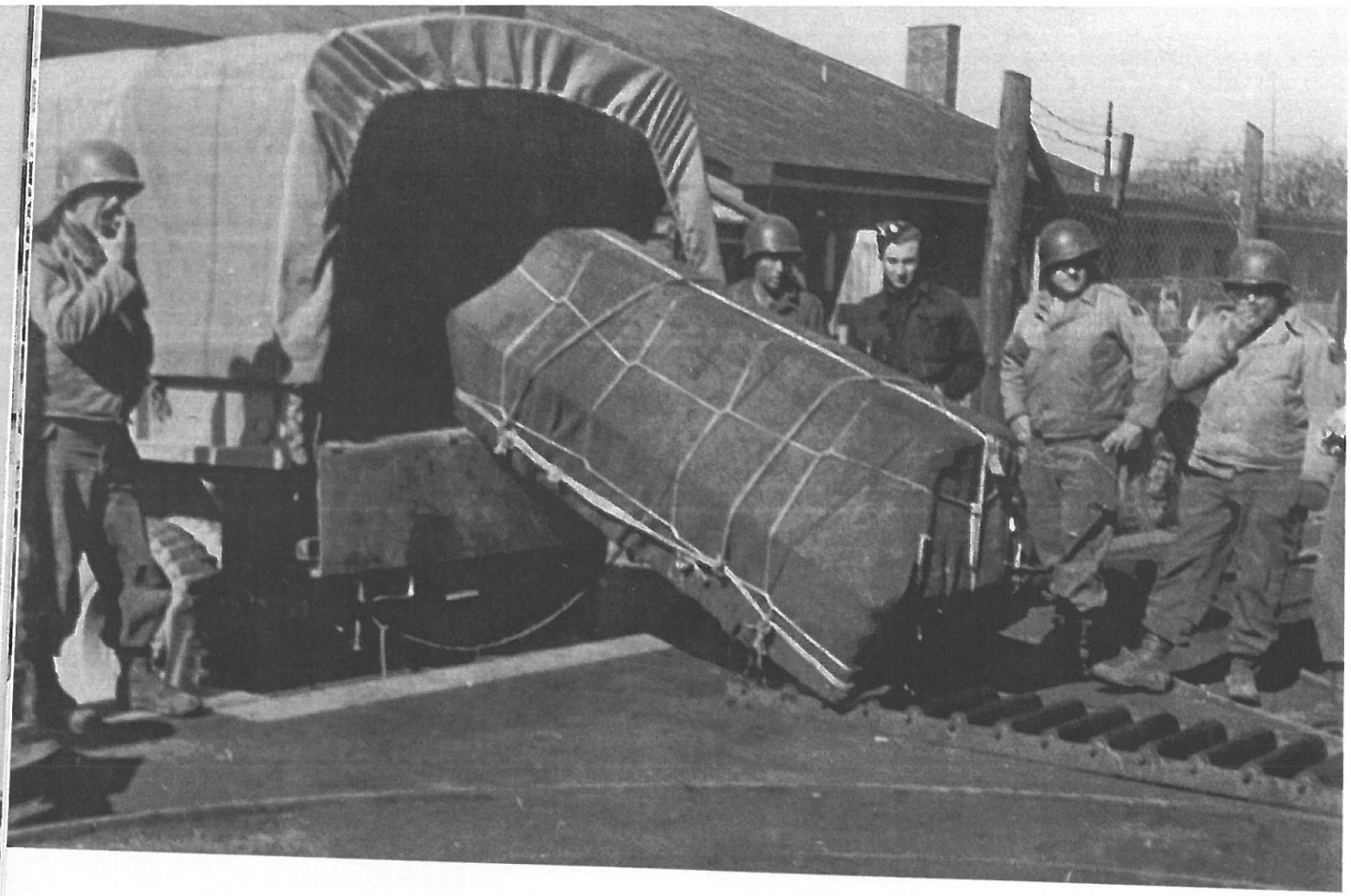


MONUMENTS MEN *and* NAZI TREASURES

U.S. Occupation Forces Faced a Myriad of Problems In Sorting Out Riches Hidden by the Third Reich

BY GREG BRADSHER

In late January 1945, Russian troops moved closer to the massive Tannenberg Memorial near Hohenstein, in what is now Olsztynek in northern Poland near the Baltic Sea. It commemorated the German soldiers killed there in World War I. And it was a battle in which the German commander, Paul von Hindenberg, who was later elected president, became a hero.

Colonel-General Hans Reinhardt, commander of Army Group Center, ordered the memorial to be blown up, but not before certain things were removed. Those things were the bodies of Field Marshal and Weimar President von Hindenburg and his wife. Lt. Gen. Oskar von Hindenburg supervised the evacuation of the flags of the Prussian regiments and the coffins of his parents, which were moved to Berlin.

Thus began what a 1950 *Life* magazine article called "one of the most curious and complicated enterprises the U.S. Army of Occupation ever undertook."

It was perhaps one of the most unlikely and interesting World War II German cultural property evacuation endeavors. The story involves four caskets; military flags; famous artwork; the Hohenzollern Museum treasure (from the Monbijou Palace in Berlin), including the crown jewels and the coronation paraphernalia of Frederick William I; and cultural treasures.

In March 1945, the German Army transported the caskets of the Hindenburgs, Frederick the Great, and Frederick William I, as well as the cultural items named above, to a one-time salt mine in the northern reaches of the Thuringian Forest, about 18 miles southwest of Nordhausen, that had been converted to a munitions plant and storage depot.

There, German Army officers supervised 2,000 Italian, French, and Russian forced laborers working in the plant. About 400,000 tons of ammunition and other military supplies were stored in the mine.

A group of large warehouses adjacent to the entrance into the shaft contained munitions, signal supplies, clothing, and other military stores. A large store of dynamite was located in relatively close proximity to the depository in the mine. Two rooms in the mine already stored records.

German officers sent all civilians out of the area in mid-March. Working with great secrecy and using only military personnel, they brought objects into the mine.

Opposite: The casket of Frederick the Great is removed from the Bernterode cave southwest of Nordhausen, Germany, in April 1945.

In a room measuring roughly 45 x 17 feet, they placed the caskets of Prussian kings Frederick William I (reign 1713–1740) and Frederick the Great (1740–1786), both of whom had been buried in the church of the Potsdam garrison, and of Field Marshal and Frau Gertrud von Hindenburg. Three of the caskets were made of wood; the fourth, containing the remains of Frederick the Great, was metal and larger than the others. Each casket bore a paper label fastened with cellophane tape.

In the same room the soldiers also placed treasures from the Hohenzollern Museum in Berlin. Each item had an identifying card attached. Most of the items had been made for or used at the coronation of King Frederick I and Queen Sophie in 1701. More than 200 German regimental flags, some painted and some embroidered, were hung above the coffins. They dated from the early Prussian wars and included many from the World War I era. A variety of other cultural items were placed in the room, and the entrances were sealed with brick and mortar on April 2.

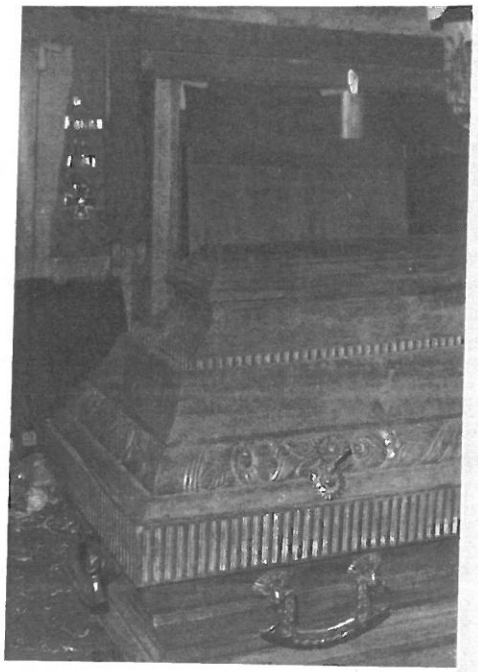
Officers with Art Expertise Arrive to Supervise Operations

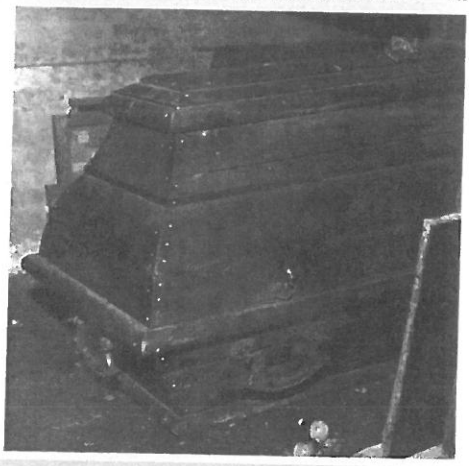
The items were not concealed for long. By the end of April, the mine treasure would be in American hands. Not long afterward, the caskets, paintings, and flags would be stored in Marburg, awaiting political decisions as to what to do with them.

Marburg is situated on a hillside along the Lahn River, 60 miles north of Frankfort. From a military standpoint in 1945, Marburg was important for its marshalling yards at the south end of town, which were used for the transshipment of German military personnel and supplies.

The U.S. Army Air Forces bombed the yards four times in March. The historic buildings in the central part of the town were undamaged from these bombings, but the new Staatsarchiv Building (occupied in 1938), suffered moderate damage.

Not long after the last aerial bombardment of Marburg, the American military forces entered the town and captured it by the end of March.





When American forces entered the Bernterode salt mine in April 1945. they found four caskets in a chamber. The coffin of Frederick Wilhelm I is not pictured. *Left, top:* Frederick the Great; *bottom:* Frederick's bronze coffin draped with a Nazi flag. *Center, top:* Field Marshal and President Paul von Hindenburg; *bottom:* von Hindenburg's coffin. *Above:* The casket of Frau von Hindenburg in the Bernterode cave.

Soon thereafter, in early April, Capt. Walker K. Hancock inspected the primary cultural institutions and locations. Hancock was an officer specialist with the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFA&A) Section, whose members were known as the "Monuments Men." As a renowned sculptor, Hancock had won the prestigious Prix de Rome before the war and designed the Army Air Medal in 1942. At the castle, he found three great halls packed with parcels from the Staatsarchiv and Marburg town archives. At the Staatsarchiv he found that the building and its archival holdings had sustained greater damage from the occupying troops than from the bombs.

While Hancock was dealing with the situation in and around Marburg, other U.S. troops came across the Bernterode salt mine. During their inspection of the mine, they observed a masonry wall built into the side of the main corridor about 550 yards from the elevator shaft.

Noticing that the mortar was still fresh, they made an opening and, after tunneling through masonry and rubble to a depth of more than five feet, uncovered a latticed door padlocked on the opposite side.

Breaking through, they entered a room divided into a series of compartments hung with brilliant flags and filled with paintings, boxes, and tapestries. The contents were grouped around four caskets, one of which had been decorated with a wreath and red silk ribbons bearing Nazi symbols and the name Adolf Hitler.

An inspection of the room the following day, April 28, brought to light a richly jeweled scepter and orb, two crowns, and two swords with finely wrought gold and silver scabbards. Hancock inspected the depository the next day and later wrote:

> Crawling though the opening into the hidden room, I was at once forcibly struck with the realization that this was no ordinary depository of works of art. The place had the aspect of a shrine. The symmetry of the plan, a central passageway with three compartments on either side connecting two large end bays; the dramatic display of the splendid flags, hung in deep rows over the caskets and stacked with decorative effect in the corners; the presence of the caskets themselves; all suggested the setting for a modern pagan ritual. The pictures in the entrance bay . . . seemed to have been brought in as an afterthought.

Two hundred and seventy-one artworks, many of them 18th-century court portraits and paintings apparently from the Sans Souci palace at Potsdam, lay scattered about. There were also several works of Lukas Cranach the Elder from a 1937 Berlin exhibition, and works by noted artists Boucher, Watteau, and Chardin.

On the right of the central passageway were three wooden coffins, with the identifications indicating they contained the Hindenburgs and Frederick William I. In the last compartment on the left was the great metal casket of Frederick the Great. Near that casket was a small metal box, from the Kriegschule in Potsdam, containing 24 photographs in color (with copies

in black-and-white) of portraits of German military commanders from Frederick William I to Hitler.

A large heap of tapestries and altar cloths lay damp and unwrapped by the door. There were 65 steel ammunition boxes and cases of books, some with the stamp of the Crown Prince's Library, and some china in boxes.

The Art Experts Find Treasures of a Nazi Future

Hancock telephoned another Monuments Man at 12th Army Group Headquarters, Navy Reserve Lt. George Stout, one of America's foremost experts in the field of art conservation. He told Stout that he was at a mine "with 400,000 tons of explosives in it. I can't tell you what else is down there, not over the phone, but it's important, George. Maybe even more important than Siegen [another mine that contained works of art and treasures]."

Because of the precarious conditions at the depository, the Army ordered its evacuation, with the coronation paraphernalia going to headquarters and everything else moved to a place of safety. Stout was ordered to go to Bernterode to give technical advice on the removal of the artworks and other historical holdings.

When Hancock and Stout went into the mine and reviewed the treasures on May 1, Stout observed that the Germans were hiding "the most precious artifacts of the German military state. This room wasn't intended for Hitler; it was intended for the next Reich, so they could build upon his glory." Laughing, Hancock replied, "And it didn't even stay hidden until the end of this one."

Hancock borrowed Stout's Jeep and, without a military guard, returned to First U.S. Army headquarters at Weimar with the three boxes from the Hohenzollern Museum. After inspecting the contents, Hancock took the boxes to the Reichsbank at Frankfurt—this time with an armed escort. Another thorough inspection concluded that the objects had suffered no damage, and the boxes

This Prussian crown was part of a collection of coronation paraphernalia found at Bernterode. *Below:* Two finely wrought swords of Frederick the Great.

were repacked and deposited in the bank. The boxes contained, among other objects, the Prussian coronation paraphernalia.

Back at Bernterode, Stout was planning the evacuation of the remaining items in the mine. Under the arrangement with the military government and local civilians, power was kept up to operate the elevator in the mine shaft. Power at the mine, however, was intermittent and the lighting insufficient. Two shifts of soldiers working daily for three days packed paintings, flags, and other textiles into 180 packages and 40 bundles. The caskets were sewn and lashed in carpet wrapping to facilitate handling and to conceal their identity.

Fourteen French laborers, former plant workers, helped move the objects to the elevator shaft. German crews operated the elevators. The cage of the elevator was too small for a few of the objects—large paintings and the caskets—and the engineers had to make temporary alterations to accommodate them. The last to be hoisted was the casket of Frederick the Great, which weighed at least 1,200 pounds and filled the elevator, with not a half-inch to spare.

As Frederick the Great's casket neared the top of the shaft, a radio in the distance blared forth the "Star-Spangled Banner," and just as the coffin came into view, the radio band struck up "God Save the King." It was May 8, V-E Day; the war in Europe was over.

Captured Nazi Documents Examined at Marburg Castle

A convoy carried the objects from Bernterode to Marburg, some 100 miles to the southwest. The military government at Marburg took temporary custody of the bodies and the regimental flags in Schloss (Castle) Marburg, pending their final disposition. All other objects were delivered to the Jubiläumsbau, or Jubilee Building, which was the home of the Kunsthistorisches Museum.

Stout noted in his report that although the municipal archives in the mine did not need to be evacuated immediately, they would face preservation problems over the next several months. He also noted the presence of explosives in the area of the mine. Hancock suggested the Army consider removing the flags from Germany.

In addition to housing the four caskets and archives, Marburg Castle became home to a Political Document Center, operated by the American State Department and the British Foreign Office. Throughout May, a collection of German Foreign Office documents from other evacuation centers were moved to the castle. There an Anglo-American team examined and sorted the documents.

The Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF) directed the

Army Groups to store, safeguard, preserve, and inventory art treasures discovered in areas occupied by their forces. Hancock established the first central collecting point in Marburg in late May 1945.

He set up primary operations of the collecting point in the relatively vacant Staatsarchiv building and in the Jubiläumsbau. The Staatsarchiv building eventually housed paintings from the Suermondt Museum in Aachen, the Metz Cathedral treasure, and numerous other cultural properties from Cologne, Essen, and other western German cities.

To help Hancock deal with the art, 2nd Lt. Sheldon W. Keck (formerly an art conservator at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and a fellow Monuments Man) arrived to provide expert care and emergency treatment for works of art at Marburg.

While Hancock spent most of his time during the summer getting the collecting point up and running, he found time for the Bernterode treasure. Hancock had the 225 regimental flags transferred from the Jubiläumsbau to the castle, where they were stored in the room with the caskets.

The treasures stored in the Jubiläumsbau included masterpieces from the Berlin State museums. The paintings retrieved from the Bernterode mine included two paintings by Watteau that had belonged to Frederick the Great and other works by Boucher, Chardin, Cranach, Rubens, Van Dyck, Ruysdael, and Van Goyen.

On September 15, the Headquarters of the Military Government of Land Hessen-Nassau recommended that the regimental flags be transported to the United States, either as trophies of war or held in custody for future disposition. They further recommended that, "Because of their propaganda value as symbols of the military tradition, . . . they should not be permitted to remain in Germany. The caskets can be stored indefinitely in their present location [in Marburg Castle]."

There was similar concern about the royal regalia of Prussia in the Foreign Exchange Depository at Frankfurt. The U.S. Group Control Council's MFA&A Branch doubted the wisdom of returning the regalia to Potsdam, and they were transferred on September 17 to the Wiesbaden Central Collecting Point instead.

During the last week of the month, all the paintings recovered at Bernterode, with the exceptions of the ones that were to be exhibited in Marburg, were moved to the Staatsarchiv as the beginning of a program to consolidate the collecting point under one roof. In the latter part of October, there was some consideration of moving the battle flags stored in Marburg Castle to the collecting point, but it was decided that, since they were trophies of war, they would be kept separate from the art.

Some Artwork is Displayed; Fate of Flags Still Unclear

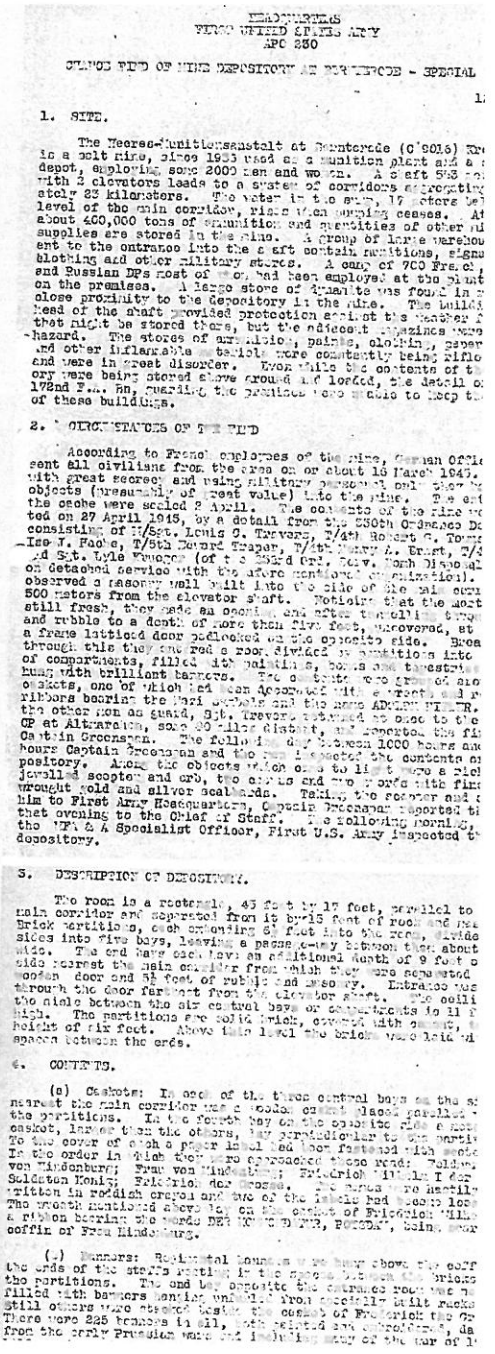
When Hancock returned to Marburg in November, after two weeks' leave, he saw his long-desired exhibit of German art take place. Through joint efforts of the staff of the Kunsthistorisches Institut, the rector of the university, and the Monuments Men, the Marburg Central Collecting Point mounted its first art exhibit, "Masterpieces of European Paintings." The exhibit featured 30 paintings of very high quality from among the artworks found at the Bernterode and Siegen mines. The exhibit opened in mid-November at the Jubiläumsbau.

Keck, the former Brooklyn Museum of Art conservator, took charge of the Marburg Central Collecting Point in early November. The transfer of cultural objects from the Jubiläumsbau to the Staatsarchiv was completed in mid-December.

At the same time, the Department of State requested that the caskets not be turned over to the German authorities. State further asked authorities of the Office of Military Government, U.S. (OMGUS) to arrange for the safekeeping of the caskets for some time to come.

The regimental flags, still stored in Marburg Castle, were prepared to be shipped back to America as trophies of war and housed at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. On December 17, however, there was a change of heart regarding the disposition of the flags by the MFA&A sections in Seventh Army, and shipment to the United States was postponed until further notice.

Col. John H. Allen, the chief of the Restitution Branch, wrote to the OMGUS



HEADQUARTERS
THIRD UNITED STATES ARMY
APO 250

SUBJECT: Field of Mine Depository at Bernterode - Special

1.

1. SITE.

The Heeres-Munitionsanstalt at Bernterode (0'8016) Kr
is a salt mine, since 1933 used as a munition plant and a
depot, employing some 2000 men and women. A shaft 563
with 2 elevators leads to a system of corridors excavating
ately 23 kilometers. The water in the mine, 17 meters be
level of the main corridor, rises when pumping ceases. A
about 400,000 tons of ammunition and quantities of other m
supplies are stored in the mine. A group of large warehou
ent to the entrance into the shaft contain munitions, signa
blothing and other military stores. A camp of 700 Fre
and Russian DPs most of whom had been employed at the plant
on the premises. A large store of dynamite was found in
close proximity to the depository in the mine. The build
head of the shaft provided protection against the weather
that might be stored there, but the adjacent premises were
hazard. The stores of ammunition, paints, clothing, paper
and other inflammable materials were constantly being rifle
and were in great disorder. Even while the contents of t
ory were being stored above ground and loaded, the detail o
178nd F... Bn, guarding the premises were unable to keep t
of these buildings.

2. CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE FIND

According to French employees of the mine, German Offic
sent all civilians from the area on or about 16 March 1945,
with great secrecy and using military personnel and their
objects (presumably of great value) into the mine. The ent
the cache were sealed 2 April. The contents of the mine w
ted on 27 April 1945, by a detail from the 350th Ordnance Bo
consisting of 1/Lt. Louis G. Treverg, T/4th Robert G. Tom
Ike F. Faoble, T/5th Howard Draper, T/4th Henry A. Ernst, T/
nd Sgt. Lyle Wenger (of the 350rd Ord. Serv. Comb Disposal
on detached service with the above mentioned organization).
observed a masonry wall built into the side of the main corri
500 meters from the elevator shaft. Notable that the mort
still fresh, they made an opening and after tunnelling thro
and rubble to a depth of more than five feet, uncovered, at
a frame latticed door padlocked on the opposite side. Brea
through this they entered a room divided by partitions into
of compartments, filled with paintings, boxes and tapestrie
hung with brilliant banners. The objects which came to light were
caskets, one of which had been decorated with a crest, and
ribbons bearing the Pour le Mérite and the Iron Cross First Class.
the other men as guard, Sgt. Treverg returned at once to the
CP at Altwarmbuchen, some 30 miles distant, and reported the fi
Captain Greenagen. The following morning, between 1000 hours and
hours Captain Greenagen and the men inspected the contents o
pository. Among the objects which came to light were a gold
jewelled sceptre and orb, the crown and two swords with fin
wrought gold and silver scabbards. Taking the sceptre and
him to First Army Headquarters, Captain Greenagen reported t
that evening to the Chief of Staff. The following morning,
the MFA & A Specialist Officer, First U.S. Army inspected t
depository.

3. DESCRIPTION OF DEPOSITORY.

The room is a rectangle, 45 feet by 17 feet, parallel to
main corridor and separated from it by a wall of rock and
Brick partitions, each extending 6 feet into the room, divide
sides into five bays, leaving a passage-way between them about
wide. The end bays each have an additional depth of 9 feet o
side nearest the main corridor from which they were separated
wooden door and 8 feet of rubble and masonry. Entrance was
through the door farthest from the elevator shaft. The ceili
the niche between the six central bays or compartments is 11 f
high. The partitions are solid brick, covered with cement,
height of six feet. Above this level the brick were laid
spaces between the ends.

4. CONTENTS.

(a) Caskets: In each of the three central bays on the s
nearest the main corridor was a wooden cement placed parallel
the partitions. In the fourth bay on the opposite side a simi
casket, larger than the others, lay perpendicular to the partiti
To the cover of each a paper label had been fastened with scotc
In the order in which they were approached these read: Feldm
von Hindenburg; Field von Hindenburg; Friedrich Wilhelm I der
Soldaten König; Friedrich der Grosse. The names were inscribed
written in reddish crayon and one of the labels had been lost
The wreath mentioned above lay on the coffin of Friedrich Wilh
a ribbon bearing the words DEM GROSSEN KÖNIG, POTSDAM, being
coffin of Frau Hindenburg.

(b) Banners: Regimental banners were hung above the coff
the ends of the shafts resting in the space between the pairs
the partitions. The end bay opposite the entrance room was
filled with banners leaning unbridled from carefully built racks
still others were stacked beside the coffin of Frederick the G
There were 225 banners in all, both painted and embroidered, da
from the early Prussian wars and including many of the war of 1

Walker K. Hancock, an officer specialist with the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFA&A) Section inspected Bernterode on April 29. He reported on the discovery, that officers "entered a room divided by partitions into a series of compartments, filled with paintings, boxes and tapestries, and hung with brilliant banners."

Monuments Men (from left) George Stout, Sgt. Travese, Walker Hancock, and Steven Kovalyak during the excavation of Bernterode.

chief of staff that the flags appeared to be all of German origin and that the MFA&A officer at the Marburg Central Collecting Point was attempting to obtain from scholars a list of exact descriptions of each banner, in the hope that the flags would not have to be unpacked and then repacked before shipment. The chief of staff responded on December 20, asking Allen for a more detailed list and description of the flags. He stated that it was doubtful all of the flags would be sent to West Point. Some might be turned over to the French or other Allies, and some, possibly a large part, should be destroyed.

A museum expert was found, and he determined that the regimental and battalion flags were all of German origin, with the majority from the 19th and 20th centuries. On January 3, the collecting point sent OMGUS a list of the flags and recommended that, in view of the artistic and historic significance of the flags, they be held in custody until their return to the German Government was deemed advisable.

When it became known that the Political Documents Unit, and the accompanying guard, were leaving Marburg Castle, the four caskets, flags, and other articles were moved to the Marburg Central Collecting Point at the Staatsarchiv building on February 8 so that they could remain under U.S. military guard. The caskets were placed in a locked, fireproof room with barred windows on the ground floor.

The disposition of the German flags was still unsettled. German consultants had recommended that the flags be preserved, especially 14 dating from the 18th century, because of their historical interest and their artistic value. While awaiting a reply from West Point regarding the flags, the OMG for Greater Hesse reminded OMGUS that it had 225 military flags and requested OMGUS make a decision regarding their disposition. By early April no decision had yet been made. Pending a decision, the flags would remain at the Marburg Central Collecting Point.

Finally in May, the Central Collecting Point sent two shipments to the Wiesbaden Central Collecting Point, which included the flags, libraries, paintings, and furniture that had been recovered at Bernterode.

The Four Caskets Remain A Problem for the Americans

And what about the caskets?

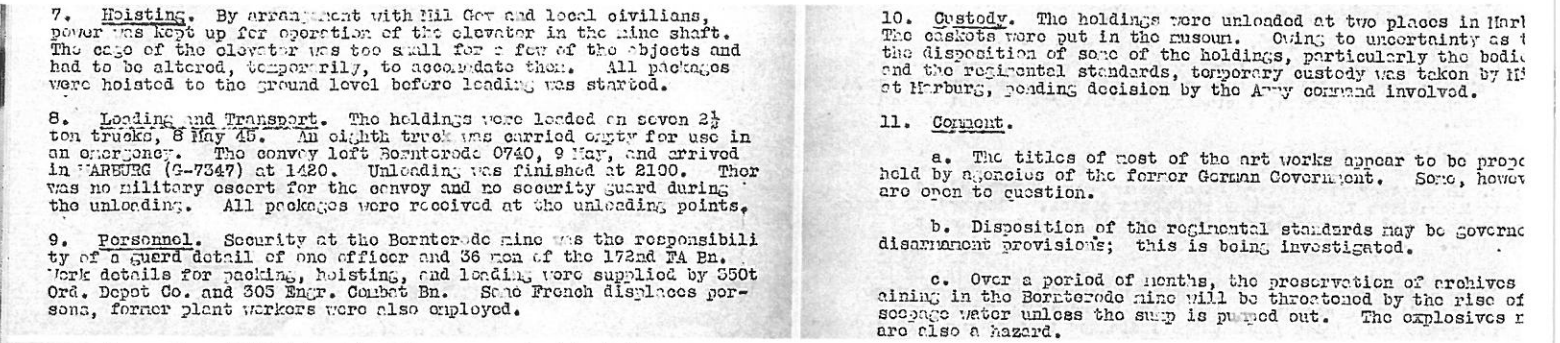
At the State Department, Division of Central European Affairs chief James W. Riddleberger and his colleagues talked about the best possible solution for the caskets. Riddleberger believed that if they waited too long, the reinterment might conceivably become the occasion for some kind of nationalistic demonstration. There was much to be said in favor of returning the bodies of the Hohenzollern rulers to Potsdam, but they should be fairly certain of what uses might be made of the occasion before proceeding. An alternative would be to ask the government of Greater Hesse to take over the responsibility for a dignified reburial.

As for the bodies of the Hindenburgs, Riddleberger advised Ambassador Murphy that the reinterment should be strictly for family, "thereby at least symbolically removing the aura of national possession which the Nazis attempted to fasten on the old Marshal." He added that he did not know if this idea would be feasible since he had been unable to glean information about Hindenburgs who still might be alive.

Col. John H. Allen, chief of the Restitution Branch, informed Murphy that the Marburg Central Collecting Point and all of its German-owned contents housed in the Staatsarchiv Building were to be turned over to the appropriate German authorities no later than June 1. He added that no MFA&A personnel would be stationed in Marburg after this transfer and that the caskets could not be considered strictly as "cultural objects." He asked Murphy to advise him what disposition was to be made of the caskets.

Murphy responded to Riddleberger in early April that the Berlin office had been seriously considering the problems of the four caskets. He agreed with Riddleberger's view that they should rid themselves of the responsibility before it became a political liability. Murphy said they had instituted a search to discover the nearest living relative of the Hindenburgs for a quiet, private reinterment.

As for the two Hohenzollerns, OMGUS favored the proposal to turn over these bodies, together with those of Hindenburgs if



7. Hoisting. By arrangement with Mil Gov and local civilians, power was kept up for operation of the elevator in the mine shaft. The cage of the elevator was too small for a few of the objects and had to be altered, temporarily, to accomodate them. All packages were hoisted to the ground level before loading was started.

8. Loading and Transport. The holdings were loaded on seven 2½ ton trucks, 8 May 45. An eighth truck was carried empty for use in an emergency. The convoy left Borntorode 0740, 9 May, and arrived in MARBURG (G-7347) at 1420. Unloading was finished at 2100. There was no military escort for the convoy and no security guard during the unloading. All packages were received at the unloading points.

9. Personnel. Security at the Borntorode mine was the responsibility of a guard detail of one officer and 36 men of the 172nd FA Bn. Work details for packing, hoisting, and loading were supplied by 350t Ord. Depot Co. and 305 Engr. Combat Bn. Some French displaces persons, former plant workers were also employed.

10. Custody. The holdings were unloaded at two places in Marb The caskets were put in the museum. Owing to uncertainty as t the disposition of some of the holdings, particularly the bodi and the regimental standards, temporary custody was taken by HI at Marburg, pending decision by the Army command involved.

11. Comment.

a. The titles of most of the art works appear to be prope held by agencies of the former German Government. Some, howev are open to question.

b. Disposition of the regimental standards may be governe disarmament provisions; this is being investigated.

c. Over a period of months, the preservation of archives aining in the Borntorode mine will be threatened by the rise of seepage water unless the sump is pumped out. The explosives r are also a hazard.

George Stout, MFA&A Specialist Officer, reported in May 1945 on the removal of the coffins and other artifacts from the mine and their delivery to the Marburg Collecting Point.

no relative could be found, to the Greater Hesse government for simple, dignified reburial, devoid of anything resembling a public demonstration. It would only be necessary, Murphy observed, to state how the bodies came into U.S. possession. The decision not to return the Hohenzollerns to Potsdam could easily be explained by the lack of any central German government able to take custody.

The War Department now had concurred with the State Department that there should be quiet reinterments of the bodies before they became political liabilities.

Meanwhile, 62-year-old Oskar von Hindenburg, residing in northern Germany at Medingen, wrote to the Burgermeister of Marburg on March 22, stating that he was trying to locate the coffins of his parents. He had received unconfirmed news that they were supposed to be in Marburg, and he asked if this was correct, adding that the matter was of great concern to him. A month later, the OMG for Greater Hesse sent the letter to the MFA&A Section, Restitution Branch, which forwarded the correspondence to the Office of the Political Adviser.

"Operation Bodysnatch" Nears an Ending

On May 3 Gen. Lucius Clay, deputy military governor, directed OMG Greater Hesse to turn over the bodies of the Hindenburgs to Oskar von Hindenburg. Hindenburg could reinter the bodies in either the U.S. or British Zone, but the ceremony must be strictly a private family affair with no publicity.

Clay directed that the bodies of the two Hohenzollerns be delivered to the government of Greater Hesse, acting as interim trustee in absence of any German government. Reinterment in Greater Hesse, he wrote, may be official without being open to the general public, and the OMG for Greater Hesse had to approve the plans.

On May 17, the OMG for Greater Hesse summoned the minister president of Greater Hesse, Dr. Karl Geiler, to its headquarters, where he was told to await instructions concerning the caskets and to be prepared to execute those instructions as soon as he received them. Before initiating action through the German civil government, OMG for Greater Hesse would consult with Wilhelm, the former Crown Prince of Prussia, the current head of the house of Hohenzollern. The two officers who would deal with the four caskets were 1st Lt. Theodore A. Heinrich, the MFA&A officer for Kassel, and Capt. Everett P. Lesley, Jr., then with the MFA&A detachment at Frankfurt. Both had academic credentials in art history.

Once Lesley became aware of Clay's instruction, he "immediately dubbed the project Operation Bodysnatch." Thereafter the codename "Operation Bodysnatch" was often used in official communications.

The first two issues relating to Operation Bodysnatch were to find places to rebury the caskets and to inform the Hohenzollern and Hindenburg families about the matter. As a first step, Lesley went to Burg Hohenzollern, Hechingen, Württemberg, in the French Zone of Occupation, where former Crown Prince Wilhelm, son of the late Kaiser, was acquainted with the substance of the OMGUS instructions. He concurred in any future steps that might be taken, so long as these were respectful and observed the requisite solemnity.

Next, the Americans looked for a place to bury the Hohenzollerns. They learned that the family owned only two pieces of property in Germany. The first, near Wiesbaden, was deemed unsuitable. The other was Burg Hohenzollern, a mountain-peak fairy-tale castle. But the castle was in the French Zone. When queried about its possibility for the reinterment, the French answer was unequivocal: they wanted no Hohenzollerns buried in the zone.

Then the three explored other possibilities in the U.S. Zone without success until their investigation disclosed the Elisabethkirche in Marburg. As the burial place of the Landgraves of Hesse, related by marriage to the Hohenzollerns, it appeared doubly appropriate.

The place chosen to bury the two Hohenzollerns was below the floor at the east side of the north transept, near a medieval

To learn more about

- The Allies' discovery of cultural treasures in a German mine after World War II, go to *www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1999/spring/.*
- Restitution of Nazi looted art, go to *www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2002/summer/.*
- The discovery of Nazi documents in a cave in Czechoslovakia, go to *www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/winter/.*

More than 200 German regimental flags, dating from both the early Prussian wars and the World War I era, were hung above the coffins.

shrine marking the supposed resting pace of St. Elizabeth, a Hohenzollern ancestor. The north transept, cut off from the choir, nave, and crossing by screens and metal gates, could thus be kept closed to public view without arousing curiosity or impairing the fabric of the building.

Burial Sites Are Found But There Are Problems

Minister President Geiler was informed of the arrangements for the interment of the Hohenzollerns in the Elisabethkirche and was directed to make arrangements for the transportation of the caskets and for providing simple and dignified markers for the graves.

The two Hohenzollern kings had a final resting place, but where would the Hindenburgs be laid to rest?

Oskar von Hindenburg was to receive the bodies of his parents for burial, but in June, British military government authorities made it clear that they would oppose any attempt to bury the bodies in the British Zone of Occupation. In order to avoid inter-zonal difficulties, and to simplify transportation concerns, OMG of Greater Hesse decided to inter the Hindenburg bodies in the Elisabethkirche as well.

Geiler sent von Hindenburg a discreet telegram inviting him to Wiesbaden to discuss a private business matter. On June 12, von Hindenburg was taken to Marburg to view the prospective site for his parents' graves.

As the north transept would not readily accommodate four new graves, and von Hindenburg stated that his father would have considered burial in the company of two kings of Prussia to be "ostentatious," it was decided that the Hindenburgs should be interred in the chamber ("Turmhalle") in the base of the north tower, at the eastern end of the church.

Von Hindenburg was pleased with the site, as well as to hear that the state of Hesse would bear most of the costs for reburying his parents. "My family," he said, "is now as poor as church mice."

During the afternoon, the four caskets were unwrapped in the Marburg Central Collecting Point, those of the von Hindenburgs being identified by Oskar von Hindenburg. All caskets were found to be in good condition, though "somewhat battered." The bodies were contained in sealed lead inner coffins, which were not opened.

Each of the four gravestones measured two meters by one meter and weighed two tons, sealing the graves and discouraging any fanatic who might want to steal the bodies.

Digging the four graves was not as simple a procedure as first thought. The north transept of the Elisabethkirche is built over the site of an earlier structure, the pilgrimage-shrine and tomb of St. Elizabeth of Hungary. Though the remains of St. Elizabeth were then kept in a shrine in the sacristy, excavations had to be carried out with care, in case other relics should be uncovered. The excavation uncovered masses of bones under the flooring, where none should have been. The spot had evidently been used for unrecorded burials of pre-Reformation monks attached to the church. The old bones were carefully moved over a few feet and reconsecrated.

Workers digging under the north tower hit bedrock 24 inches below the floor. This meant that the large Hindenburg caskets could not rest beneath the floor as planned. Blasting the bedrock was out of the question once someone pointed out that the same dynamiting might bring down the 236-foot 14th-century tower.

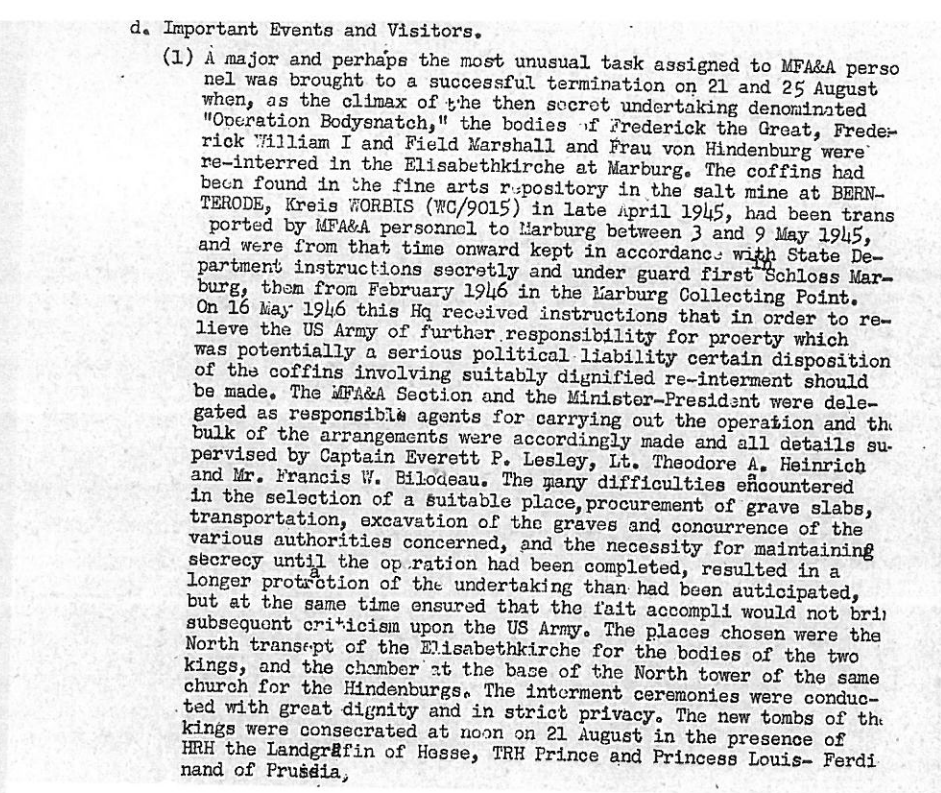
Consequently, a local architect was instructed to raise the church floor in the tower by several steps so that the large caskets could be accommodated. Carrying out such extensive alterations within the church while keeping their purpose secret, and keeping the structure open for normal services at the same time, called for a "maximum of dissimulation" by the various officials.

Marburg Operations Closing; Cultural Items Go to Wiesbaden

While Operation Bodysnatch progressed, the Marburg collecting point was closing down. The remaining cultural items in the Staatsarchiv were moved to Wiesbaden in early August. The Wiesbaden Central Collecting Point now had custody of all the Bernterode treasure and responsibility for its disposition. An unexpected glitch in the form of a new state secretary arose after the June 30 elections. Dr. Hugo Swart, the only official in the Civil Government fully possessing all information about the Bernterode treasure, was succeeded by Dr. Hermann Brill, who objected to Operation Bodysnatch itself.

When Dr. Brill was first fully briefed on his responsibilities, he voiced strenuous objections to the entire plan. Without consulting the Military Government, he decided to send the Hindenburg remains to Hanover.

The Military Government stopped this, and days of angry argument ensued. Brill's opposition was due chiefly to his conviction that Germany's misfortunes were as easily attributable to Hindenburg as to Hitler. He did not particularly object to the two kings; although he made it plain that he thought burial in a church was too good for any of



d. Important Events and Visitors.

(1) A major and perhaps the most unusual task assigned to MFA&A personnel was brought to a successful termination on 21 and 25 August when, as the climax of the then secret undertaking denominated "Operation Bodysnatch," the bodies of Frederick the Great, Frederick William I and Field Marshall and Frau von Hindenburg were re-interred in the Elisabethkirche at Marburg. The coffins had been found in the fine arts repository in the salt mine at BERNTERODE, Kreis WORBIS (WC/9015) in late April 1945, had been transported by MFA&A personnel to Marburg between 3 and 9 May 1945, and were from that time onward kept in accordance with State Department instructions secretly and under guard first Schloss Marburg, then from February 1946 in the Marburg Collecting Point. On 16 May 1946 this Hq received instructions that in order to relieve the US Army of further responsibility for property which was potentially a serious political liability certain disposition of the coffins involving suitably dignified re-interment should be made. The MFA&A Section and the Minister-President were delegated as responsible agents for carrying out the operation and the bulk of the arrangements were accordingly made and all details supervised by Captain Everett P. Lesley, Lt. Theodore A. Heinrich and Mr. Francis W. Bilodeau. The many difficulties encountered in the selection of a suitable place, procurement of grave slabs, transportation, excavation of the graves and concurrence of the various authorities concerned, and the necessity for maintaining secrecy until the operation had been completed, resulted in a longer protection of the undertaking than had been anticipated, but at the same time ensured that the fait accompli would not bring subsequent criticism upon the US Army. The places chosen were the North transept of the Elisabethkirche for the bodies of the two kings, and the chamber at the base of the North tower of the same church for the Hindenburgs. The interment ceremonies were conducted with great dignity and in strict privacy. The new tombs of the kings were consecrated at noon on 21 August in the presence of HRH the Landgrafin of Hesse, TRH Prince and Princess Louis- Ferdinand of Prussia,

The Office of Military Government reported in August 1946 on the completion of "Operation Bodysnatch" with the reinterment of the four coffins from Bernterode in the Elizabethkirche at Marburg.

the four. He also raised the objection to the interment of the Hindenburgs in so venerable an edifice.

To forestall more debate on the matter, on the morning of August 8 the Military Government ordered Brill to immediately carry out the plans as agreed upon by his predecessor.

General Clay grew impatient over the delays.

"The execution of this project was too slow and detrimental to Military Government inasmuch as press correspondents already had the complete story and were pushing this headquarters for a release," he reported.

The next day, August 9, the OMGUS Chief of Staff ordered that the preparations be finished and services held as soon as possible. A representative of the United Press was to be present at the services and was to have exclusive news rights to the story.

Getting the four burial slabs to Marburg, as everything else associated with Operation Bodysnatch, was not easily accomplished. Because of the strict 80-kilometer limit on motor transport, the slabs had to be freighted by rail from Miltenberg to Marburg over a fairly circuitous route. On August 12 the Marburg Building Department was informed to be ready for the arrival of the four slabs in the next few days. When they did not appear, a frantic check of German railroad stations was launched, and finally the flatcar with them was found. The slabs were quickly routed to Marburg, where they arrived on August 14. Two days later, they were moved by trucks to the Elizabethkirche.

The actual burial of the four caskets "was noteworthy for the reason that for once nothing whatsoever went wrong." On August 19, with the edifice locked to outsiders, a five-man crew of German workers lowered the coffins into the open graves. The graves were sealed with a sheet of steel, and a layer of cement was then added. The sandstone slabs were laboriously pushed over the opening. A stonecutter was immediately brought in and engraved the stones with the desired inscriptions. These consisted simply of the names and dates of the personages buried: Frederick William I (1686–1740); Frederick II (1712–1786); Paul v. Hindenburg (1847–1934); and Gertrude v. Hindenburg (1860–1921).

Arrangements were made the same day for the attendance of members of the Hohenzollern family, and a car was dispatched to Medingen in the British Zon to pick up the Hindenburgs. The car, how ever, returned without them.

A Royal Family Assembles For the Graveside Service

During the morning of August 21, mem bers of the Hohenzollern family assembled in the Liaison and Security Office a Marburg. Also present were Robert Hage of the United Press; Francis Bilodeau; Lt. Heinrich; and Capt. Lesley. The 64-year-old former crown prince, Wilhelm, declined the invitation to attend, saying, "I have reached an age when funerals only depress me."

All entrances to the church had been blocked off by German civilian police to guarantee privacy. The graves and surrounding area were banked with fresh pine boughs and potted trees, and flowers brought by the Hohenzollerns.

As the von Hindenburg family had not arrived by 3 p.m., it was decided to postpone their family services. Military transportation was then sent to them in Medingen, and they arrived at 9 p.m. on August 24. The next day, a service practically identical with the earlier one took place. Present were seven members of the Hindenburg family, including Oskar von Hindenburg. Also present were various American and German officials.

The OMG Greater Hesse Deputy Director in Charge of Operations, Lt. Col. Francis E. Sheehan, with Operation Bodysnatch completed, wrote a report for General Clay. He stated that both families expressed to the Military Government their deepest gratitude for its magnanimity and delicacy of feeling and for the choice of Elisabethkirche as the site of the interment, and their satisfaction with the manner in which all arrangements were carried out. He also mentioned that Oskar von Hindenburg would shortly be sending a letter to the general.

Sheehan observed that, in the opinion of OMG Greater Hesse, the conduct of the entire operation was

a great credit to the Office of Military

Government as a whole, as well as to German civilian authorities in Marburg, who were charged with an exceedingly delicate and potentially compromising task. Any delays encountered could not well have been overridden without giving the impression that Military Government was too anxious to dispose of an awkward situation, an impression which in turn might have been used to advantage by seditious elements. It is believed that any questions arising in the future concerning the propriety of the undertaking can be more than sufficiently answered by referring to the expressed appreciation of the two families, the ecclesiastical authorities and the German people as represented in the city of Marburg.

On August 28, Oskar von Hindenburg wrote General Clay a letter thanking him for the successful reinterment of his parents. He wrote: "This deepest gratitude extends also to the time that American troops had brought the coffins of my parents to safety in Marburg and had them turned over to me, and to the fact that a reinterment was made possible by the kind help and initiative of the U.S. Military Government."

With the shutdown of the Marburg Central Collecting Point, the OMG Greater Hesse informed OMGUS that

> Under the successive direction of Capt. Walker Hancock, Lt. Sheldon Keck and Mr. Francis W. Bilodeau, this installation with its splendid facilities and expert staff had not only completed its directed mission, but had maintained fruitful relations with the celebrated Kunsthistorisches Institut of Marburg University and performed a distinguished community service in its vigorous contributions to the revival of cultural life. Its closing was officially regretted by Marburg authorities and together with private expressions of gratitude for the work done indicated the esteem it had earned. It has long been felt that insufficient recognition was given this installation.

A Postscript: Another Move

Of course, a story like this needs a postscript. And indeed there is one.

In early September 1952, the caskets of Frederick the Great and his father, Frederick William I, were taken from the Elisabethkirche to the ancient Hohenzollern Castle near Hechingen, where it was intended they remain, according to the words of one family member, "until Germany is united again and they can return to Potsdam."

Of course something would go wrong. Frederick the Great's coffin collapsed and a new one had to be built. On September 14 the bodies were laid to rest in the castle's chapel in the presence of about 200 members of Germany's royalty, headed by Prince Louis Ferdinand, head of the House of Brandenburg-Prussia, and Prince Oskar of Prussia.

But the story does not end here.

With Germany reunited in 1991, the coffins of Frederick the Great and Frederick William I were moved a final time to Potsdam. Frederick William I received a simple reinterment in a church; Frederick the Great's coffin lay in a courtyard of his Sans Souci palace, where he had asked in his will to be buried next to his favorite dog. A German military honor guard stood at attention during the rest of the day as 60,000, including Chancellor Helmut Kohl, walked by to pay their respects.

At midnight the coffin, draped in Prussia's black and white colors, was brought to the gravesite and lowered into the grave that Frederick had picked out over 200 years before.

Thus ends Operation Bodysnatch. Or does it?

The remains of the Hindenburgs are still at Marburg, not in Hanover as the former Field Marshal and President had wished.

Note on Sources

Two documents most useful for telling the first part of the story were the reports prepared by George L. Stout and Walker Hancock, both of which are contained in the File: ETO—Monthly Reports for May and June [AMG-159], Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFA&A) Field Reports, 1943–1946, Records of the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, Record Group (RG) 239, National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Also useful for the early part of the story are the MFA&A Field Reports, 1943–1946, RG 239, and File: SHAEF/G-5/751, Public Monuments—Fine Art, Numeric File August 1943–July 1945, Secretariat, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, Record Group 331.

Information regarding much the story can be found in various series of records of the Records of the Wiesbaden Central Collecting Point, Records of the Marburg Central Collecting Point, and the records relating to Central Collecting Points, all of which can be found in Records of the Office of Military Government (U.S.) OMGUS, Records of United States Occupation Headquarters, World War II, Record Group 260.

The diplomatic aspects of the story can be followed in the Classified General Correspondence, 1945–1949, Office of the U.S. Political Adviser for Germany, Berlin, Germany, Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Record Group 84 and File: 862.1233, Decimal Files, 1945–1949, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59. Also useful is Will Lang, "The Case of the Distinguished Corpses," *Life* (vol. 28, no. 10), March 6, 1950, and Walter Hancock, "Experiences of a Monuments Officer in Germany," *College Art Journal* 5 (May 1946).

Author

Greg Bradsher's previous contributions to *Prologue* have included articles on the discovery of Nazi gold in the Merkers Mine (Spring 1999); the story of Fritz Kolbe, 1900–1943 (Spring 2002); Japan's secret "Z Plan" in 1944 (Fall 2005); Founding Father Elbridge Gerry (Spring 2006); the third Archivist of the United States, Wayne Grover (Winter 2009); Operation Blissful, a World War II diversionary attack on an island in the Pacific (Fall 2010); the Nuremberg Laws (Winter 2010); and the Homestead Act of 1862 (Winter 2012). Dr. Bradsher is a senior archivist at the National Archives.