

AHA Statement Concerning Access to French Archives

Approved by AHA Council November 23, 2020

The American Historical Association (AHA), in solidarity with the French Association of Archivists (AAF), is deeply concerned about the effects of a recent change in policy, established by the Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale, regarding the declassification of documents from 1940 to 1970 that have been stamped “secret.” AHA wrote on this matter to President Macron, Minister Riester, and Minister Parly in February of this year (2020) and has not yet received a response. Article 63 of the Instruction générale interministérielle no. 1300 (IGI 1300) has been reinterpreted, in contradistinction to past practice, to change the terms of access to those sources. That decision affects documents held at Service historique de la défense at Château de Vincennes and possibly other repositories in France, including various branches of the Archives Nationales.

As historians, we know that access to this important group of documents has already proven vital to the work of scholars and students of 20th-century French history and of international history all over the world. Reading and interpreting these sources will be critical to the production of new historical scholarship in the future. We are thus alarmed to learn from our colleagues in France and elsewhere around the globe that the change in rules is currently rendering some well-known sources, and many others yet to be analyzed, practically inaccessible, even to professional researchers. There is also no reason to believe that this change is only temporary, since a new effective procedure for declassification has not yet been put into place. The net effect of this policy change is to undermine the work of historians and researchers that is essential to informing a broad public about developments in the recent past of France, Europe, and the world, and, indeed, to the flourishing of democracy.

We take seriously the national security concerns that influence declassification. However, the fact that these documents have been open for research in the past and cited without incident suggests that this concern should not be prioritized at the expense of the openness and accessibility of government records on which historians, and indeed a broad public, all over the world depend. Moreover, article L. 213-2 of the Code du patrimoine states that, after 50 years, almost all archival documents pertaining to the French state enter the public domain and should be made available without any conditions.

The AHA is the largest organization of professional historians in the world, with approximately 11,500 members spanning the globe. On behalf of this international network of scholars, we respectfully urge a reconsideration of the défense policy and a return to the previous policy so that these sources can once again be accessible to historians around the world.