

Copyright Claims Document German-American Ties

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As the Records Management Section got ready to move from the Madison Building basement to the fourth floor last summer, **Charles Roberts**, the section head, considered how to deal with a group of copyright applications that had been traveling with the section for as long as he could remember. "The Office set aside the claims because of their potential historical value," Roberts said. "Eventually, it may microfilm them."

Roberts's section, part of the Information and Records (I&R) Division, has responsibility for preserving copyright records.

Roberts consulted **George Thuronyi**, the assistant I&R division chief, about what to do. Thuronyi decided to ask the Office's intern from the Junior Fellows Program to research the content of the applications.

Contained in crumbling brown envelopes, the applications are German copyright claims from as long as a hundred years ago. An organization called the Amerika-Institut submitted them on behalf of German publishers and authors.

The German government founded the Amerika-Institut in 1910 to improve cultural relations between the United States and Germany. Among its activities, it aided U.S. scholars studying in Germany and built a library of American books at its Berlin headquarters.

The Bulletin of the U.S. Geographical Society hailed the institution's founding. "This institution is a most useful and welcome medium for the interchange of ideas between Germany and the United States," stated a Geographical Society editor in a 1914 issue of the *Bulletin*.

"Incidental to its main purpose," the editor continued, "the Institut assists German authors to obtain U.S. copyrights."

The envelopes remaining in Roberts's section hold notes from Office staff about problems in publishers' claims and letters to the Amerika-Institut attempting to resolve them.

Over time, the Amerika-Institut's reputation in the United States declined. Hugo Münsterberg,

The Amerika-Institut filed a registration for this 1916 periodical on behalf of a German publisher. At right is a Copyright Office tracking card.

the institute's first director, advocated in the United States for German policies during World War I, causing the Amerika-Institut to be seen as part of the German government's propaganda efforts.

Münsterberg died in 1916 and was replaced by Karl Oskar Bertling, under whose leadership the institute continued to be seen as a propaganda tool.

A World War II-era House of Representatives report states that Bertling helped arrange U.S. connections for a Nazi Party news service seeking to advance the party's cause in America. Bertling's name is also on a list of Nazi Party members maintained by U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt.

During World War II, at least some works the Amerika-Institut helped to register became subject to seizure by the U.S. government when it assumed control of the copyrights of alien combatant nationals.

After the war, the Allies closed the Amerika-Institut. ©

