



Archival appraisal of series 352-5 Health Authority (Gesundheitsbehörde) death certificates

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The medical certificates of death appraised and retrospectively weeded by the Hamburg State Archives in the second quarter of 2018 covered the period from 1876 to 1953 and measured 45 linear metres.

As a rule the death certificates would have been issued by a doctor under the supervision of the authority responsible for the medical system. There were approx. 1,004,050 individual sheets in a format approximating to A6. To research specific persons, knowledge of the register office registering the death as well as the register number of the death registration would thus have been absolutely essential. The death certificates in the accession were not complete.

Due to the poor condition of the items, it was not possible to guarantee their permanent preservation.

As early as the 1960s the death certificates were not considered to be fundamentally worthy of being archived; it seems they were initially to be stored as an “alternative”, the civil registers of death having not yet reached the Hamburg State Archives. Retrospective weeding of the years 1837–1875 followed in 1990. The extension of archive legislation to cover registers of births, deaths and marriages, included by the Federal Ministry of the Interior at the suggestion of the state archive administrations in the draft of its new personal status legislation, and the resultant transfer since 2009 of civil registers to the State Archives (Series 332-5 Register Offices / Bestand 332-5 Standesämter) meant that death information (date and place of death) as well as further information about a person (incl. details of marital status and the name of the person registering the death) could now be ascertained directly from the death registers.

Against this backdrop, the files were analysed again to appraise the source value of the death certificates in light of current considerations.

The majority of the information contained in the death certificates can also be found in the register office death registers and the accompanying consolidated files (Sammelakten) (Series 332-5):



Death certificates	Personal status documents (primarily registers of deaths and consolidated files/ “Sammelakten”)
given and family names	given and family names
date of birth	date of birth (until about 1920 only the age is given in the registers of deaths)
sex	sex
status/occupation	status/occupation
house number and street	house number, street or district
place of death	place of death
day and hour of death	day and hour of death
disease/cause of death	cause of death only given in death registers after July 1938; death notices from hospitals or other official bodies stating cause of death in some instances included in the consolidated files from 1920 to 1957 held by Hamburg State Archives)
in some cases length of medical treatment	-
name of person registering death	name of person registering death (not always the doctor) in death notices from hospitals or other official bodies in some instances included in the consolidated files
-	place of birth
-	parents in some instances (name, status/occupation and place of residence)
-	in some instances religion
-	in some instances marriage
-	spouse



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The dates of birth missing from the death registers until about 1920 can, however, be calculated from the recorded age. In addition, this date can also be determined inter alia from the population registers in Series 332-8 Registration (Bestand 332-8 Meldewesen).

If a medical certificate was available, from July 1938 until 1957 the cause of death was recorded in the death registers. The death notices from hospitals or other official bodies are, at least in some instances, included in the consolidated files / "Sammelakten" accompanying the death registers that are available in the State Archives, including for the period 1920 to 1957.

Possible research into causes of death may additionally be covered by other series (e.g. Series 352-4 Senate Cholera Commission / Cholerakommission des Senats or Series 352-3 Medical Board / Medizinalkollegium). Included in these series are statistical surveys, lists of sick people and reports on individual cases. Records of deaths, including those resulting from the effects of war during World War 2 (bomb victims) and suicides, were recorded from about September 1937 and are held in Series 331-5 Police Department – Unnatural Deaths / Polizeibehörde – Unnatürliche Sterbefälle (approx. 71,300 archive records / 42 linear metres). Further core sources on persecution in the Nazi period are Series 315-14 Chief Finance President / Oberfinanzpräsident and 213-12 Public Prosecutor at the District Court – National Socialist Crimes of Violence (NSG) / Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht – Nationalsozialistische Gewaltverbrechen (NSG).

The documentation of all individual cases can be a possible objective for transfer during archival appraisal (such as in Series 351-11 Office for Reparations / Amt für Wiedergutmachung). Here this was not pursued due to the meagre supplementary information value of the material compared to other sources. For example, the persecution and murder of individuals and groups of individuals during the Nazi period (e.g. through euthanasia) is consistently and more comprehensively documented by other sources. In recent years, in order to make further sources available to research, indexing of the previously unavailable medical records from Langenhorn public hospital / Ochsenzoll general hospital (Series 352-8/7, approx. 160 linear metres) was begun. In a project begun in May 2018 and due to be completed by mid-2019, the genetic hygiene records of the public health offices (Erbgesundheitsakten der Gesundheitsämter) (measuring approx. 51 linear metres) and those of the Hamburg lower regional court (Erbgesundheitsakten des Amtsgerichts) (measuring approx. 6 linear metres) are being completely indexed and boxed – and thus also made completely available to researchers for the first time.

A further objective for transfer can be the documentation of changes in processing methods within a government department over time. In the case of the certification of deaths, however, no changes were evident.

Due to the aforementioned lack of any added value represented by the death certificates in comparison with other permanently transferred sources (such as death registers and case files), and taking into account the poor condition of the individual sheets, the Hamburg State Archives decided against further storage of the death certificates.