

# The Records of International Meetings

By E. WILDER SPAULDING

*Acting Chief, Division of Publications, Department of State*

**B**ETWEEN 1914 and 1920 one English diplomat alone attended 488 international meetings.<sup>1</sup> If World War I spawned international conferences, congresses, meetings, councils, committees, and commissions in great number, certainly World War II has been far more prolific. Every type of operation concerned with the winning of the war, from the blacklisting of firms collaborating with the enemy to the major military planning of chiefs of staff, and from the occupation of North Africa to the administration of Japan, has produced its inter-allied council or commission. The making of the peace is producing its international meetings in almost every field of human endeavor. Even before Pearl Harbor the State Department's printed list of American delegations to international conferences and American representation on international institutions listed 114 international bodies with which our Government was concerned.

Dr. Carl Lokke wrote in *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST* of October 1944 that, judging by the evidence at hand, lack of information on the international organizations of the period of World War I "is fairly universal." Books and articles on the international meetings and councils of that period are based on the most fragmentary sources. This indicates that the sources simply are not available to students of international organization and, similarly, they are by no means readily available to official administrators and diplomats.

One hundred years ago, or even a generation ago, our official relations with other peoples were chiefly bilateral and they were strictly diplomatic in the traditional sense of that term. The regular files of the Department of State were then sufficient to tell almost the entire story of our foreign relations. That is no longer the case. Our foreign relations are increasingly multilateral. And they are increasingly non-diplomatic in that they deal, even officially, with a host of such matters as international dairy meetings, international exchanges of professors and students, relief to foreign peoples in distress, international banks

<sup>1</sup> Sir Maurice Hankey, *Diplomacy by Conference*, Lond. 1946, p. 3.

and funds, labor and the standard of living, dependent peoples, and numerous other economic and cultural and social matters. Except in times of stress and crisis, these apparently non-diplomatic matters may be of far more concern to the mass of humanity than affairs that are traditionally diplomatic in character.

We are therefore coming to realize the importance of record keeping in all fields of international activity and not just in that of the formal politico-diplomatic relations of sovereign states. We are also coming to realize that our Government's multilateral relations with other states are at least as vital as its bilateral relations and we must therefore concern ourselves more and more with the problems of international and multilateral record keeping. That is one of the reasons why the Archivist of the United States, who is also President of the Society of American Archivists, is so properly concerned with the possibility of furthering cooperation among the archivists of many lands and why he has proposed that UNESCO take an early interest in international archival problems.

When Dr. Lokke wrote his article in *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST* on the interallied organizations of the first World War and their records, he was able to find a good deal of information on the central records of the Paris Peace Conference and the Supreme War Council and he was able to mention the records of a few other organizations like the Rhineland High Commission. But he obviously could not even trace the central files of most of the other Allied agencies of the time and he had to conclude that "our fund of information about the records of the interallied bodies of the last war is both inadequate and unsatisfactory." One could very properly revise his statement and say that our fund of information about international bodies of all periods is inadequate and unsatisfactory.

I plan, in this brief paper, only to touch upon some of the phases of international record keeping and suggest a very few of the problems which confront the archivist, the scholar, and the official who for administrative or policy reasons needs to know what has been done at international meetings.

I am not primarily concerned, of course, with the brief formal reports which customarily, but not consistently enough, follow international meetings. But it should be noted that even these are essential. Some meetings and conferences leave behind them only a mass of somewhat unrelated working papers. The governments which participate should insist that the secretariat prepare a final report that is far more than a final act, that the report be formally filed with the basic records, and that it be made available through publication to interested persons in every land. And participating governments should also produce and

publish their own delegation's report just as fully and as promptly as possible. This is often difficult. Returning delegations very naturally feel that their major task has been accomplished and they are much more anxious to get home and start implementing the decisions of the conference than they are to sit down at the humdrum task of writing out its accomplishments. Our American delegation report on the Chapultepec Conference, for instance, did not appear in print for over a year. Furthermore, these formal reports should be published in adequate numbers through well-known channels so that you and I can easily learn of their availability and obtain copies if we want to. It would obviously be helpful if all reports of this kind which come out of the Inter-American system could be made available, promptly and consistently, through the Pan American Union.

There is one other consideration which is important but about which the archivist can do but little. Records that are never kept will never serve posterity. The international meeting that is recorded only at the lower level is inadequately recorded. As far as I know Colonel House himself was the only American to carry away from the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 a record of the reasons for the top-level decisions on the Sudetenland boundary—a fact that was very troublesome for the Department of State many years afterward at the time of Munich when it was important to know what position our delegation had taken in 1919 on that important subject. Over twenty years later a President of the United States expressed the opinion that the Big Three at Paris should never have kept any minutes of their meetings on the ground that men will not speak frankly if their remarks are recorded. I understand that that great American followed his own convictions to the extent of keeping no minutes of his conferences at the White House. Other participants will, however, inevitably keep notes on such meetings and we can only hope that our own high officials will do the same. Certainly the records of conversations with foreign Ambassadors which Secretary Hull dictated so conscientiously formed a very important part of the history of the days before Pearl Harbor.

The arbitration of the claims of one nation against another has a long and honorable history and arbitration records are not less important because they are generally bilateral in this era of multilateral negotiation. In fact it is because arbitrations take a unique form that the keeping of their records presents some interesting problems. Each of the national agents representing their governments before the tribunal or commission will of course keep his own files which will revert to his government after the award has been made. But final custody of the records of the commission or tribunal, umpire or arbitrator, is not always so simple or logical.

The records of the arbitral tribunals are often deposited in places where they are difficult of access by one or both parties to the arbitration. In the famous Alabama Claims Arbitration, for instance, the records of the Geneva Tribunal were apparently turned over to the council of state at Geneva. As I understand it the central files of the very important Tacna-Arica Arbitration were kept in only one copy and those files have remained, not in either of the countries immediately concerned, but in the United States because the President of the United States served as arbitrator. In the case of the Mixed Claims Commission, United States and Germany, of Black Tom explosion fame, there is likewise only one original commission record and that is reposing in Washington because the commission sat in that city. No agreement was ever made with the German Government as to its ultimate disposal. And since it is the joint property of two governments, one of which is now non-existent, the single government now having physical custody can only respect its integrity and keep it safely—which presents some troublesome problems when private interests occasionally try to recover papers which they presented to the commission as evidence. The moral is clear: any international body, and especially a temporary one, should decide, before it begins work, exactly what disposition is to be made of its records.

There is another solution to this particular problem. In the matter of the pending United States-Netherlands Arbitration under the Convention of March 18, 1938 no arbitrator will be selected unless the parties fail to agree among themselves. Each national agent, however, files his pleadings with the other agent. Thus each agency will possess a basic file and there will be no central file to divide at the end of the arbitration. Similarly in the Trail Smelter Arbitration, United States and Canada, joint secretaries were appointed and each maintained a complete set of original records. The same procedure, with minor variations, was followed in the case of the Panamanian Claims Arbitration and the General Claims Commission, United States and Mexico.

It has been suggested that the records of arbitral commissions set up under the provisions of inter-American conventions may very properly be filed with the Pan American Union. Since the complete elimination of central record groups for such commissions will occasionally have some drawbacks, this solution may be a happy one. Governments will probably insist, however, that records relating to the claims of nationals be kept from the gaze of pettifoggers and those governments may therefore be reluctant at times to turn them over to any international archives.

Here in the Western Hemisphere the Pan American Union has

become a record center of great importance. Theoretically it serves as the secretariat of the whole inter-American system.

Under the projected Organic Pact of the Inter-American System as recently submitted by the Governing Board of the Pan American Union to the governments of the American Republics the Union's position as the permanent secretariat of the whole system would be greatly strengthened. But in the meanwhile international record keeping in the Americas is bewildering in its inconsistencies and its limitations.

The Pan American Union has the records of all of the major International Conferences of American States, from 1889 on, irrespective of the country in which they were held. It very naturally maintains the records of inter-American organizations, like the Inter-American Economic and Financial Advisory Committee and the Inter-American Commission of Women, which have their headquarters at the Union. It has custody of the central files of a number of inter-American meetings even though they did not take place at the Pan American Union. For instance, the records of the Inter-American Maritime Conference of 1940 and of the First Inter-American Travel Congress which met in San Francisco in 1939 are kept in the PAU's Travel Division with subsequent papers of the same kind. And the Union has some special groups of papers like the records of the Guatemalan-Honduran Arbitral Tribunal which met in Washington under the chairmanship of Charles Evans Hughes.

On the other hand there is a mass of inter-American archival material which the Pan American Union does not have in its vaults. And some of it is of major importance. Mexico, for instance, retains the central files of the Inter-American Conference on Problems of Peace and War which met at Chapultepec in 1945. Mexico was the host government, and lacking other arrangements for the disposition of the records of international meetings it is customary for the governments which act as hosts to those meetings to retain the records. Yet, if there is advantage in centralizing records of the regular periodic conferences of American States in the Pan American Union, the records of such important gatherings as the Chapultepec Conference and the Buenos Aires Conference of 1936 should probably go there also. Of almost equal importance are the files of the meetings of American Foreign Ministers yet, as I understand it, those files remain in Rio, Panama, and Habana where they met.

Similarly the records of the nine meetings of the Pan American Scientific Congress, from 1908 to 1943, are scattered about in almost as many national capitals. The Pan American Highway Organizations has its offices in Buenos Aires yet the records of its meetings are kept

by the various governments which have played host to those meetings. The Pan American Institute of History and Geography has headquarters in Mexico City yet, as far as I know, the records of its recent meetings at Caracas are still at the latter city. On the other hand the records of the Inter-American Juridical Committee at Rio and the Inter-American Telecommunications Office at Habana are maintained at those cities.

It is too apparent, then, that the records of these numerous inter-American meetings and organizations are scattered about the Western Hemisphere in such a way as to make the majority of them all but inaccessible to officials and students alike. And, more serious, it is almost impossible to learn of their whereabouts without inquiring of the Pan American Union. There are virtually no comprehensive guides to these archives. The few checklists, footnotes and guides which I have found are generally unsatisfactory in that, if they mention the record groups at all, they usually fail to describe the records with any degree of accuracy or even to distinguish between the records of the meeting or organization itself and those of the national delegations which attended it. There is much bibliographical work to be done in this field. It is to be hoped that more and more of the gaps will be filled by the Pan American Union.

Record practices in the field of international conferences and organizations are fairly well defined. They are, however, often so informal and without plan that they add to the confusion of the total picture. Almost no foreign offices, other than our own Department of State, have divisions expressly and solely charged with international conference affairs which can work for consistency in the organization and disposal of conference records. The foreign offices of some small governments may be very poorly equipped to give safe permanent custody to records and they may have no modern devices for duplicating and servicing them. Certain types of organizations, especially among the scientific unions, illustrate the informal side of record keeping by simply turning over their records between meetings to their ranking officers. And the records of many conferences and meetings remain with the host governments by default or because there is no other logical central depository for them or because the conference itself has neglected to provide for their permanent custody. The State Department, for instance, which still has the records of the Bretton Woods Conference which proposed the International Bank and Fund, and will find it difficult to dispose of them equitably because two organizations grew out of Bretton Woods and there is only one set of records.

When the Bank and Fund were later the subject of the Savannah



Conference of March 1946, two sets of records were kept so that the Bank and Fund could each receive one.

A host government may very properly retain the records of an international meeting if that meeting has no relationship to a permanent organization with a well established and well housed headquarters. Or the host government may retain records only until a permanent organization, proposed by the conference which met in that particular country, is established. For instance, an international whaling conference was only recently held in the State Department. The Department will keep the records of the conference until a permanent whaling commission is set up as proposed by the conference. After the Hot Springs Conference, which gave birth to the Food and Agriculture Organization, the State Department kept the Hot Springs records until the interim commission was well set up with an adequate staff when they were transferred together with much of the processed documentation which the conference secretariat had accumulated. In such cases of the transfer of records to the resultant organization the State Department may retain some of the accounts and fiscal papers and it may also keep the credentials of the delegates if they were addressed to the Secretary of State, giving photostats or certified copies to the new organization. The State Department is particularly eager to rid itself of records of conferences and meetings when they have not been made public and when the paternal conferences have not had the foresight to outline any procedure for their declassification. Certainly international conferences should not only decide as to the disposal of their records but they should also decide who may use them and under what conditions. The records of the Big Three at the Paris Conference of 1919 remained secret for 27 years because no provision was made for their release.

In discussing record keeping in the inter-American system I mentioned the scattering of the files of related conferences and congresses which meet in various countries. That situation is of course broader than the hemisphere. For example, our National Archives has the records of the Third World Power Conference which met in Washington in 1936 but I have no idea where the archives of the other World Power Conferences are to be found. The Council of Foreign Ministers has met recently in London, Paris and New York. It has a formal secretariat with a secretary general provided by the host government of the moment and a deputy secretary general who has served in that capacity or as secretary general at all of the meetings. The Council of Foreign Ministers is undoubtedly building a record group of first rate importance. Where will it eventually be deposited? Certainly it should not be divided among the host governments and no one host government is entitled to the whole.

And the Council of Foreign Ministers is only one of hundreds of all-important international councils, meetings, conferences and commissions which have grown out of World War II and its aftermath. Whether we think of the Far Eastern Commission or the Yalta Conference or the Allied Control Council for Germany or the Paris Peace Conference of 1946, we are impressed with the magnitude of the records problem. Those meetings were, and are, of tremendous importance. Their decisions must be known to those who must carry them out. Some of their records will have to be kept confidential for years, but, even so, they should be available to the diplomats and other officials who are concerned with the new world settlement. And they must be zealously guarded for posterity.

Certainly the call of the President of the Society of American Archivists for far more collaboration among the archivists of the world should be heeded. His suggestion that we think of all the archives of all the nations and all international agencies as constituting "the archives of mankind" is a happy one. And certainly we must look to the United Nations itself to become a keeper of records on a very large scale. Just as the Pan American Union should be entrusted with more and more responsibility for international record keeping in the Americas, so the United Nations should play the part of the world's record keeper. The records of its own birth, from the San Francisco Conference and from the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations at London, are in its newly established archive. The great UN machine is already creating a vast body of records for the organization's vaults. It is to be hoped, however, that the participants in many international meetings in all quarters of the world, even though those meetings have no organic relationship whatsoever with UN, will be able and willing to use UN as the depository for their most precious papers. And it is to be hoped that the archivist of UN will be generously and effectively equipped with all that is necessary for servicing those records to the people of all nations.