

The Archives Program of the United Nations¹

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United Nations Archives

IT IS now just about two years since the National Archives document *Proposal for a United Nations Archives* became the first professionally prepared, carefully constructed statement of what the United Nations archives program ought to be. During the past twelve months the development of such a program has been constant and, I believe, consistent both with the exigencies of the unit's position in a fast growing organization of tremendous responsibilities, and with the archival profession's desire to see, as part of the world's top-most political agency, an archives unit embodying the best of the older and the most fruitful of the newer theories and practices of archival economy. The United Nations Archives has, I think, come nearer to fulfilling its function as a service agency to the Secretariat than it has to realizing the larger hopes of the profession; this is a source not of regret, however, but of eager enthusiasm for the future. The first responsibility of any United Nations service unit must be to contribute as competently as possible to the effective functioning of other offices. When that is accomplished, attention can be devoted to the specialized activities of our own field.

The planners of the United Nations at Dumbarton Oaks and at San Francisco in 1945 did not make provision for the establishment of an archives—or at least did not mention it as an administrative unit. Possibly they were concerned with more important matters. The “international secretariat” set up by the host government at San Francisco did, however, contain an archives unit which operated as part of the documents service. Its task was the filing and custody of four record copies of all the mimeographed official documents of the Conference, together with the original drafts.

The conclusion of the Conference, on June 26, 1945, was marked by the formal signing of two documents, the Charter of the United Nations and the Statute of the International Court of Justice (com-

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bined in a single document, now in the custody of the United States Department of State) and the "Interim Arrangements" (now in the United Nations Archives) which provided for the establishment of a Preparatory Commission to meet in London in the fall of 1945. It was to be the task of the Preparatory Commission to draw up an agenda and arrange for the convening of the first session of the General Assembly. Their work would naturally require the constant use of the San Francisco Conference documents, so the Conference archivists carefully packed and shipped to London both the archival materials and the distribution stocks of documents.

The Preparatory Commission secretariat included an archives unit similar to the earlier one, but to its primary function, the custody of current documents and drafts, was added the care and servicing of the now non-current San Francisco materials, and the preparation of those records for binding.

With the formation of the United Nations Secretariat early in 1946, an archives unit became an established part of the documents office, and it planned and supervised the transfer of the records from Church House, London, to Hunter College, New York, and thence to the present United Nations headquarters at Lake Success, where they still remain. The unit was transferred for a few months to the jurisdiction of the Library and was later joined with the Central Registry and the communications units in what finally became the Communications and Records Service.

During the summer of 1946, plans were begun for the development of a comprehensive archives program, to include not only the custody of official copies of documents, but also the survey, appraisal, accessioning, description, and servicing of non-current materials of the United Nations and of predecessor agencies. Recruitment of a professional staff was begun, to supplement the predominantly clerical group already employed, and the new archivist set to work to draft and obtain the issuance of a comprehensive statement of duties, powers, and responsibilities. Plans for the internal organization were adopted, and four units were established, dealing respectively with archival service (i.e., custody and reference), indexing and other descriptive work, appraisal and liaison, and photographic and sound recording archives. An increase in personnel was granted at the end of the year, and considerably augmented office and records storage space was planned. The past year has been devoted largely to these administrative and organizational developments, to the day-to-day documents work, and to the slow development of a broader program.

Before going into a more detailed statement of program, however, I should like to point out a few of the administrative problems that

appear to me to be peculiar to international archives agencies, and that cannot fail to have an important bearing on the development of such agencies.

It has probably been evident that the United Nations Archives does not quite follow the usual pattern of an archival agency—that its duties and responsibilities often appear to be more closely akin to those of a registry office or a documents library. The resemblance is strengthened by the fact that about one-half of the present staff is engaged almost exclusively in the receipt, registration, filing, and servicing of mimeographed documents. I believe it is a characteristic of international agencies that an extraordinarily large part of their work is reflected in their various document series more than in their correspondence, reports, or memoranda files. All proposals, amendments, committee reports, and resolutions of the General Assembly and other bodies, for example, are issued in document form at several stages in their development, as are Secretariat reports and important communications from member governments. This is necessary, of course, in order that all members may be kept completely informed as to its work. The result, in any case, is that the document offices become an extremely important part of the administrative mechanism and that the official copies of the documents are, so far at least, the dominating force in the development of the archives. Accumulating now at the rate of about twelve hundred a week, these must be individually checked for completeness, registered, and filed appropriately in their classified series.

As was stated above, about half the Archives staff works primarily on these documents. The remainder of the personnel, however, including most of the professional members, is engaged for the most part in the more conventional archival pursuits of survey, appraisal, accessioning, arrangement, and description of non-current records.

This division of function was the cause of no little confusion in the early administrative development of the Archives. Its place in the organization scheme of the Secretariat, for example, was difficult to determine; acceptable logic, in each case, dictated its connection with first the Documents Division, then the Library, and finally the Central Registry. This of course was a matter of minor importance, but it was perhaps symptomatic of initial uncertainty about the major purpose of the Archives. Was it to be essentially a custodial unit for the official document files, or should it be primarily a reference service office? If the latter, could it serve the public and scholars as well as the Secretariat and the delegations, and should it be prepared to conduct research projects in addition to filling routine reference requests? How far should it take cognizance of current records management questions,

and should it be concerned with the records of associated and other international agencies as well as with those of the United Nations? Certain of these questions have not yet been answered; in a few cases policy has been determined but practice has not yet been able to catch up.

The emphasis upon document files as distinguished from more conventional archival collections has its effect not only on the volume and kind of custodial work—receiving, registering, and filing—but also on the reference load of the office. The official documents, like Congressional bills for example, are more apt to have individual interest and importance than the average archival items, and the result has been that the reference rate has been quite high. Despite the fact that copies of most documents are freely distributed in the Secretariat, the Archives services some fifty requests a month on less than three hundred cubic feet of records.

The question of records storage equipment is also affected by the necessity for carrying on constant filing operations. Many types of conventional archives equipment are obviously not satisfactory for current filing purposes, yet the cost of the ordinary filing cabinets now in use is already causing some concern.

The most obvious administrative problem in an international archives is that posed by the use of two or more languages. The United Nations employs both French and English as working languages; correspondence, memoranda, documents, and oral communications may be in either or both of these tongues. Spanish, Russian, and Chinese are also recognized as "official" languages, and a considerable portion of the documents originate or are translated into them. It is obvious, therefore, that any professional archivist on the staff must possess at least a reading knowledge of both English and French, and that the staff must include a number of persons fluent in both languages as well as some who are competent in Russian and Spanish. So far, the number of documents in Chinese has been small and has been handled with special assistance from the Languages Division. Though one may reasonably expect a professional archivist in any country to know an extra language, it is not easy, even in New York, to find competent clerks, typists, and secretaries who can handle French as well as English.

The recruitment of personnel is, in general, one of the more trying problems that has to be faced. The United Nations, like other international agencies, must seek the widest possible national representation in its staff; this is desirable not only to satisfy the legitimate desires of the citizens of all member states for participation, but also to secure for the administrative processes the benefits of the varying national backgrounds and points of view. Everyone must recognize the wisdom, as well as the necessity, of this policy, as a general basis for United Na-

tions employment. Although its staff numbers only fifteen, the United Nations Archives now contains nationals of five countries, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Yugoslavia, and Switzerland. Because at present the section is administered largely in accordance with principles and practices derived from related institutions in the United States, it is perhaps natural that the largest single group are American citizens and that it has been relatively easy to find competent American candidates for positions. I feel strongly, however, that ultimately a truly international archives agency should contain representatives of the other great schools of archival economy and that therefore the staff should be augmented by members from the Scandinavian countries, from France, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the Netherlands, and the Latin American states. With this in mind, the assistance of the personnel department has been enlisted to stimulate the interest of competent employees of non-American archival institutions in employment in the United Nations, and it is my belief that as the staff expands, both the agency and the American members will benefit greatly from the varying experience and techniques that will be represented.

I should like to turn now to a description of the present program of the Archives, with some reference to our plans for the future. The work now embraces all of the functions regarded as essential in the National Archives "Proposal" of two years ago, as well as some of those described there simply as "possible additional functions." Briefly they may be listed as disposal, accessioning, maintenance and rehabilitation, arrangement and description, reference, research, advice in current records management, and technical advice.

Disposal work, like most other functions, has its formal authorization in a Bulletin of the Secretary-General issued in March 1947. This "organic act," carefully drafted, and examined by all departments of the Secretariat before issuance, contains a definition of records similar to that now in the National Archives Act and provides that no records of the United Nations may be destroyed without the consent of the Archives Section. Since the United Nations is still a youthful organization, relatively few records have yet been destroyed, and it has so far been possible to handle the appraisal of records for disposal without any great formality.

Accessioning of records is based on the Archives' authority to have custody of all non-current and certain specified current records of the United Nations and of all records transferred to the United Nations by associated or predecessor agencies. The records now in custody amount to about seven hundred cubic feet, of which somewhat less than half consist of the document files already discussed. Other current records

are the drafts of documents, and the verbatim minutes of meetings. Special provision has been made for the transfer of contracts and agreements after the auditing of related accounts, and of treaties after registration by the Legal Department. Non-current records include small groups of files from various Secretariat offices, as well as the records of the San Francisco Conference and the Preparatory Commission.

The question of the records of the League of Nations has been the subject of much discussion. The immediate transfer of all these records from Geneva to the temporary headquarters at Lake Success was found to be impractical, and because the United Nations maintains a large and experienced staff in the League of Nations building at Geneva, it was decided that, for the time being, the bulk of the records would remain there. Lists of all the central files were obtained, however, and were circulated to the interested departments at Lake Success so that they might request the transfer of records necessary for the conduct of their operations. As a result, large segments of the registry files have been accessioned by the United Nations Archives, where they are available for consultation. The office files of several League of Nations units, including the Princeton Mission of the Economic Section, have also been transferred. The existence in Geneva of large quantities of League records over which the Archives has no control and about which it has little detailed knowledge is, needless to say, a source of some embarrassment both to the Archives and to headquarters officials who wish to use the files, and it seems desirable that arrangements be made as soon as possible for the accessioning of all records not currently needed in Geneva.

Another valuable collection already in the custody of the Archives consists of sound recordings of the proceedings of United Nations meetings. As faithful reproductions of what was actually said in a meeting, they serve as useful supplements to the verbatim minutes and as substitutes for them when no written minutes were made.

We have already heard something of the plans for the transfer of the valuable collection of UNRRA records to the United Nations Archives. It is not necessary for me to emphasize either the importance of the records or the wisdom of the principle that their transfer exemplifies, *i.e.*, that the records of a great agency should be carefully maintained intact and placed where they can have permanent expert supervision and where they can be made available for use by all who need them.

Maintenance and rehabilitation work in the United Nations Archives has so far been concerned mainly with the provision of the best possible storage conditions in temporary facilities and with planning for permanent facilities at the new New York headquarters. Those plans have not yet reached the stage where I can describe the detailed proposals

for archives space, and it seems probable that it will be many months before the new buildings are ready. In the meantime, the physical facilities of the Archives at Lake Success consist of a little over four thousand feet of floor space, comprising seven offices, an archives reference room, a fire-proof vault for sound recordings, a small listening booth, and two record-storage rooms. The latter are equipped simply with steel filing cabinets, but consideration is being given to the construction in one of them of steel shelving for some type of metal or cardboard container.

Because of staff limitations, the amount of arrangement and descriptive work done is not as great as could be desired. A considerable number of small checklists, indexes, and shelflists of various types has been prepared, however, and an index to the documents of the Preparatory Commission will be published soon. It is hoped that this will be the first in a series of Archives Reference Guides and that it will be followed shortly with a checklist of the San Francisco Conference records.

The policies guiding the reference work of the Archives are similar to those of most government archival agencies. Whenever possible, access to the records is granted to any qualified person with a legitimate purpose. Letters and phone calls requesting information are answered, copies of documents are provided, and within the Secretariat, loans of materials are made. Naturally, however, most requests for assistance have come from the Secretariat and from the members of national delegations to the United Nations. Those requests have been distributed over all the record groups in custody and have, of course, varied from simple loans of specified documents to the conduct of fairly difficult research projects. The recent acquisition of search room facilities is expected to increase both the quantity and the quality of service given.

In the Secretary-General's Bulletin mentioned above, the Archivist was given authority to survey the records of all offices of headquarters and to advise, upon request, on methods of current records management. A beginning has been made upon a general survey, which is expected to result in the preparation of a series of retirement schedules covering all records of the agency. Excellent cooperation has been received from administrative and operating personnel.

Besides the advice on current records management matters given informally in connection with survey work and the drafting of disposal schedules, the Archives has been able to contribute assistance in the highly technical field of photographic and sound recording archives. Members of the staff have aided in the development of indexing systems for valuable motion picture and still photograph collections and have taken over the responsibility for handling the non-current motion pictures received from the United Nations Information Office in London

and from UNRRA. The photographic collections of the United Nations give promise of developing into a highly significant body of research materials relating both to the work of the United Nations and to world economic and social conditions generally.

Our photographic experts are also responsible for the technical supervision of the microfilming work that is done for the Archives for security or distribution purposes, and they are able to advise other offices on the technical aspects of microfilming done for the purposes of space economy.

I have left until last the discussion of one important function of the United Nations Archivist, "to establish liaison with archivists of associated and other international agencies and with the principal archives agencies of member states," The responsibilities contemplated under this paragraph in our statement of authority were not described in detail, mainly because it was at the time manifestly impossible to embark upon a broad program of cooperation in the specialized field of archival economy. Informal (but, I hope, mutually profitable) relationships have already been established with the archivists of a number of national and international agencies, however, and these will be continued and expanded.

Like many others here today I have felt strongly the need for some instrument to assist in uniting professional archivists for their mutual benefit, and I look forward to our discussions of this subject in subsequent meetings of the present session. The future program of the United Nations Archives will, of course, include full cooperation in any program that promises to assist the development of world archival resources and the improvement of the techniques of archives administration.

The last time I had occasion to talk before a professional group, I simply said what I wanted to say and stopped, rather abruptly I am told. My wife was horrified at the omission of the customary peroration and has insisted that I tie this talk up finally before abandoning it. Therefore I shall say in conclusion what I trust has been obvious as I went along: that the United Nations Archives, though still young and undeveloped, seems, to me at least, to give promise of growing vigorously with the whole United Nations idea and of becoming, in time, a rich and valuable center for research and a significant member of a cooperating group of archival institutions the world over.