

# The Proposal for a United Nations Archival Agency

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*United Nations*

NEARLY 23 years ago, in a presidential address before the Society of American Archivists, the distinguished Archivist of the United States, Solon J. Buck, presented an eloquent plea for "The Archivist's 'One World.'" Curiously the date was October 24, 1946, exactly 1 year after the coming into force of the United Nations Charter—an effort in a wider sphere to create one world. Since that date the United Nations has had some successes and some failures, many problems, and a great deal of hopeful and continuing progress toward its ultimate goal.

If today, in our own more limited international sphere, we archivists wish to dwell with pride on some of the things we have done and are doing, we also have reason to contemplate with sadness some areas where much remains to be accomplished and to dedicate ourselves to new and stronger efforts to deal with them. Without presuming to report generally upon the current state of the archivist's world, I should like to discuss some aspects of one of Dr. Buck's principal recommendations: that a United Nations archival agency be set up.

First, however, I should like to refer briefly to his second major recommendation: that an international organization of archivists be established. As we all know, it was largely through Dr. Buck's own enthusiastic efforts, with the energetic assistance of Oliver Holmes and other leading American and European archivists, that the International Council on Archives was established under Unesco sponsorship in 1948. Dr. Holmes told the story of this successful campaign to the Ottawa meeting of the Society in 1967. I hope we shall soon persuade him to publish it.

The council has now become firmly established, with a permanent secretariat, a journal, periodic congresses, and a very small budget indeed. It has, nevertheless, been able to undertake projects and make substantial progress along many lines, including most of those suggested by Dr. Buck; its existence has been a major factor in the impressive growth of the international community spirit among archivists today—a banal way to put it, perhaps. None of us can fail to be aware of the fact, however, that in our profession (as indeed in many others), the barriers of distance, language, nationality, and ideology have all but disappeared during the past 20 years.

The author, Deputy Chief, Communications, Archives and Records Service, United Nations, and a Fellow of the Society, read this paper on Oct. 10, 1969, at a session of the 33rd annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, held in Madison, Wis.

Most of us are familiar with the principal aspects of the council's program, and we shall hear today about one of the most exciting of its activities, the provision of technical assistance in archives work to the developing countries. I should like now only to suggest that, with regard to this point of Dr. Buck's program, there has been progress of a magnitude possibly greater than he had imagined, but there remain even further challenges to be met and needs to be fulfilled.

Dr. Buck's other preoccupation in his "One World" talk—and he thought of it as the most urgent of the archival problems that called for international cooperation—was the need for an agency to care for the archives of international government. The effort to promote the establishment of a United Nations archival agency had begun in Washington about the time the Charter was being drawn up, and by October 1945 Dr. Buck and a number of his senior colleagues, led and coordinated by Dr. Holmes, had completed a seven-page mimeographed document embodying their recommendations. The document, entitled "Proposal for the Establishment of a United Nations Archives," was not published but was brought to the attention of United Nations officials through diplomatic channels in February 1946. It was later summarized for the profession in the "One World" talk of October 1946, which was published the next year in the *American Archivist*.

The Proposal recommended the establishment "as a separate and distinct facility" in the United Nations Secretariat of a single archival agency, which would care for the records of the United Nations and its various affiliated bodies as well as for those of defunct international organizations (whether or not their duties had been assumed by the United Nations) and for other "records of international concern and importance," such as the seized records of the recently defeated nations. The proposal suggested that, along with other standard archival functions, the new agency might usefully participate in the appraisal of international records proposed for disposal; assist international agencies in developing records disposal systems and advise them in the management of current records; and, at the request of the United Nations or other international agencies, perform research on the background of current problems.

Though the proposal was sent to the United Nations Secretariat, it was never presented to the General Assembly, and it does not appear that the United States Delegation pursued the question further. It is still unclear, as it was to Dr. Buck in 1946, how much influence the document had on the thinking of those who were planning and effecting the organization of the various United Nations bodies. I can attest, however, that it was received and read by United Nations officials and that in subsequent months it became a very valuable source of inspiration and support for those directly engaged in starting a United Nations archival program.

The Proposal perhaps failed in its principal purpose, since there has not yet been established any United Nations archival agency as a distinct

facility with the suggested broad responsibilities. In a sense, however, there has been a certain measure of achievement in the aims of the proposal, since each of the major organizations of the United Nations family has its own records office and together they are carrying on many of the functions suggested by Dr. Buck.

The nearest approach to a general United Nations archival agency is the archives of the United Nations Secretariat, which was established under professional leadership in October 1946, 2 weeks before Dr. Buck's talk and less than a year from the time the United Nations began. As a service unit in the Secretariat, the United Nations Archives has always had as its basic responsibility the custody and servicing of the records of the United Nations itself. It has surveyed noncurrent records of the agency (both at headquarters and in the field), appraised them and prepared and cleared disposal lists and schedules, provided interim storage for retired records of limited value, accessioned and stored archival materials, prepared guides and inventories and provided reference and research service. There is a limited microfilm program for space saving and security purposes.

Like most archives agencies, the United Nations Archives is hampered somewhat by limitations of staff, space, and equipment. With greater resources it could increase its contribution to general scholarship and enhance its service to the United Nations by accelerating the production and distribution of guides to some of the collections so as to facilitate their research use. This is perhaps a program for the future, however, since few of the records are more than 25 years old, and most must still be restricted to official use.

I may perhaps digress a moment to suggest that, as we would all agree, the concept of archives work has itself undergone a significant change in the past 23 years. With the increased attention now directed to records management, the archivist nearly everywhere now finds himself concerned very largely with matters of current records administration as well as with the care and feeding of historical archives. This has been generally true among the United Nations organizations, where those in charge of records bear various titles and are located in different parts of the organizational structure, but where there uniformly exists a close coordination of the functions of mail operations, correspondence control, maintenance of current files, retirement and disposal of noncurrent records and administration of archives, and where one finds in almost every agency a single administrative responsibility for all these activities.

In the United Nations Secretariat, the archival staff is directly responsible for all activities connected with noncurrent and archival records, as well as for the custody and servicing of microfilm of current documents and sound recordings of meetings. Associated units of the Secretariat, under the same overall direction as the archives, carry on work pertaining to mail operations and current files. Records management work, in the broad sense, is done by the professional and senior staff of all these

units as required, and together they have been able to contribute—at least modestly—to some of the broader programs envisaged by Dr. Buck. The Archives, for example, has offered its facilities for the preservation of the records of a number of international organizations that have gone out of existence; it has taken custody of two groups of major importance: the archives of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, 1943–49, and the archives of the United Nations War Crimes Commission, 1943–49. The records staff of the United Nations has also been able to provide assistance in archives and records management to many other international agencies as well as to the delegation offices of several member states and to certain Governments in developing countries. This has been done in various ways: through briefing and training of staff, by the loan of senior officials to set up records systems and procedures, by developing classification schemes for current correspondence and working out disposal schedules and procedures for noncurrent files, by distributing information on its own practices to interested agencies, and by correspondence on these and related subjects. The records staff has also cooperated, as technical advisers, with the Office of Technical Cooperation of the Secretariat in administering expert projects for assistance in archives and records management and in planning a projected seminar in records management for government staff of developing countries. The United Nations Archives, therefore, while by no means a central agency for the United Nations system, has been able to contribute significantly to the development and improvement of archival and records management practices outside its own immediate area.

During the period since 1945 the other agencies of the United Nations family have, of course, developed their own records offices—at differing rates and following various patterns. Typically they have started with the essential filing office or registry for current correspondence that has gradually assumed responsibility for storing noncurrent records not a part of the central files, then for scheduling and disposing of useless materials and finally, perhaps, for administering organized repositories for noncurrent records and archival materials. In a few cases, like the United Nations and Unesco, a so-called archives unit has been set up early in the life of the agency principally to deal with the problem of filing, indexing, and servicing the multitudinous mimeographed and printed documents of the agency. In all the United Nations organs these constitute perhaps the most important part of their records. Such archives units have also been given custody of the records of immediate predecessor agencies, but these units have functioned for some time as document reference collections, on the library model, rather than as full-fledged archival agencies. One or two of the United Nations agencies, like the United Nations itself and the International Monetary Fund, did appoint a professional archivist early in the life of the agency. Most did not begin to concern themselves with matters of archival and noncurrent

records administration until at least the later part of the 1950's, when the volume of accumulated files began to exert pressure and, with the passage of time, the need for better access to their own earlier records forced the agencies to take action. Some, like the International Labor Organization, which is this year celebrating its 50th anniversary, have only recently begun to devote systematic attention to the management of noncurrent records.

Over the last 10 years, however, there has been a rather dramatic increase in the amount and intensity of attention devoted to archives and records management. Many of the agencies have obtained the services of outside experts to survey their systems and make recommendations for new programs. Professional archivists from the United States, the United Kingdom, and France have participated, either as officials or as advisers or consultants, in setting up or directing records offices in the International Monetary Fund, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Labor Organization, the World Health Organization, and the International Telecommunication Union; and United Nations records staff members, of various nationalities, have assisted in setting up programs in the Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Health Organization, the International Civil Aviation Organization, the International Atomic Energy Agency, as well as the United Nations Development Program, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the United Nations Childrens Fund, and others.

The structure and the systems used in these offices vary considerably, as might be expected. In most cases current correspondence is administered according to modern adaptations of the familiar United Kingdom registry system, while noncurrent records practices may be patterned after those of the United Nations (derived from United States models) or based on United Kingdom or French methods. In any case, nearly all the United Nations agencies now possess organized scheduling and disposal systems, supervised and controlled central storage for noncurrent and archival records, and at least the beginnings of procedures for the preparation of guides and the regular provision of archival reference service. Microfilming is used as a tool of records management in several agencies; and one, the International Telecommunication Union, has developed an interesting application of computer techniques to handle some of its major records problems.

In addition to their own noncurrent records and archives the United Nations agencies have acquired and are preserving the records of most of their more significant recent predecessor agencies. I have already mentioned the archives of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency and the United Nations War Crimes Commission, which are in the United Nations Archives, along with the papers of the United Nations Preparatory Commission and the San Francisco Conference. The Food and Agriculture Organization archives has the files of the Hot Springs Conference as well as those of several predecessor agencies, such

as the International Institute of Agriculture, whereas Unesco has the papers of the former International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, at one time a part of the League of Nations but clearly the antecedent of Unesco.

This list cannot be exhaustive, but I must not omit mention of the archives of the League of Nations, the single most important international organization of a political nature in the pre-United Nations period. These archives, bequeathed to the United Nations in 1946, are not in the United Nations Archives but are in custody of the Library of the United Nations Office at Geneva, where they are administered by a small staff headed by professional archivists. With the aid of a generous grant from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, we are this month completing a 3-year project for review and description of the records. The project has made it possible to open a large part of them to research under clearly defined rules of access. Search room facilities are available, and excellent overall guides have been prepared, some of which I hope can be published.

In summary, I think it may fairly be said that the United Nations system, after some years of painfully slow progress and, regrettably, a number of mistakes and false starts, has now established the structures and policies required for adequate control and preservation of its records. The records offices, as a group, now provide reasonable assurance that the archives of the United Nations and its associated agencies will be kept and maintained.

This is a far cry, certainly, from the central agency envisioned by Dr. Buck to deal with the archives of international government. The idea of a single archival agency for the whole United Nations system, with the capacity to provide services even outside the United Nations organs, remains an intriguing one. Certain advantages are obvious, of course: economies of space and equipment, higher caliber of staff, better research and reference facilities, standardization of rules for access and of the preparation and publication of guides, and increased attention to new types of techniques and equipment such as the use of computerized retrieval. Many responsible persons, both official and unofficial, both archivists and nonarchivists, still feel that the idea of a central agency should not be discarded. Yet at this stage it seems most unlikely that any positive steps will be taken. Apart from the obvious budgetary considerations, it must be recognized that the United Nations agencies differ very widely in their membership, their functions, their structures, and their administrative practices, and that they operate, for the most part, quite independently of each other. Although machinery for coordination exists and there are many examples of cooperative undertakings, there seems little likelihood that the individual agencies will soon consent to release their noncurrent and archival materials to the custody of a central agency. This is true, I suspect, partly because, with very few exceptions,



the archival materials are still less than 25 years old and thus are limited to official use and remain quite active for this purpose.

It is also true that centralization of international archives in one place would be subject to the same criticisms often advanced against central repositories at other levels of government. Researchers understandably do not like to be required to travel to capital cities to see local records and they often prefer to conduct their research on archives at the site of continuing related activities, where they may be able to consult associated current records as well as officials familiar with the activities concerned. Those interested in aspects of the history of Unesco, for example, would no doubt complain bitterly if Unesco's archives were moved from Paris to New York or Geneva. For the reasons I have suggested, I believe we are unlikely to see a central agency for international archives.

At the same time there remains a possibility of fruitful exploration of the suggestion that has been made for one or more combined regional depositories for United Nations agency records. They might also make their services available to other international organizations. Geneva, for example, is the headquarters of many international agencies, including several in the United Nations system, and it might be that we shall some day see the establishment of a central records depository there for the noncurrent and archival records of a number of those agencies.

Meantime I should hope that the cordial cooperation and exchange of information that now exists among the various United Nations records offices will continue and expand. An effort years ago to establish periodic meetings of agency records officials had to be abandoned after one session because of lack of funds for the purpose, but opportunities for reciprocal visits often arise and are embraced enthusiastically with mutual benefit. There have been a number of transfers of staff from one agency to another and these should certainly be encouraged. Loans of records from one agency to another have also served useful purposes; one example was the temporary transfer from the United Nations to the World Health Organization of the health and medical records of the League of Nations and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, some of which were microfilmed before their return a few years later. In the case of two large semi-autonomous agencies—the United Nations Development Program and the United Nations Children's Fund—through the two agencies maintain their own current filing offices, the United Nations Archives regularly provides storage and servicing facilities for their noncurrent and archival records and assistance in scheduling and disposal. Instances of such kinds of cooperation will be multiplied in the future, I am sure, and will contribute importantly to the development of a higher level of archival services for all the agencies.

It was suggested earlier that archivists concerned with international cooperation have reason both for satisfaction in their accomplishments and for discontent with their failures. With reference to Dr. Buck's

program for a United Nations archival agency, it is difficult to strike a balance. We must abandon, I think, the proposal for a single agency. We must recognize that we can no longer hope for a central institution to serve both as a repository for the records of international government and as the accepted source, at the international level, of professional advice and assistance in archival matters. Yet much has been achieved toward meeting both needs. Unesco's archival program and that of the International Council on Archives together form the kind of center for archival information and activity that Dr. Buck envisaged and that the profession must have. With the international journal *Archivum*, the permanent secretariat of the council and the archives program staff of Unesco, the research and publications on archival problems, the periodic congresses and round tables, the microfilming teams and the other technical assistance projects for training and expert advice, they provide in practice for many of the needs Dr. Buck described. Their potential for broader contributions is limited, it seems to me, only by the requirement for greater support and interest on the part of archivists and Governments.

We do not have a central repository for records of international government, but we have provided, through the United Nations archives offices, for adequate care of the records of the United Nations agencies and their predecessors. While the records seized from the Axis Powers after World War II were not placed under the control of the United Nations, as Dr. Buck recommended, they were handled, I believe, responsibly with conscientious efforts to serve the legitimate needs of all, not only the victors.

As for the records of the other international organizations that are functioning today—some 4,200 according to the 1969 *Yearbook of International Organizations*—it would manifestly be unrealistic to contemplate any single agency assuming responsibility for them. Quite obviously it would be undesirable even if it were possible. Many such agencies—especially the larger ones like the International Red Cross and the European Economic Community—can be expected to make excellent provision for preserving their own valuable records. Others, if they go out of existence, may deposit their archives in existing governmental or international archival agencies, as occurred, for example, with many of the post-World War I agencies, whose archives are preserved in the Public Record Office in London and the Archives Nationales in Paris; UNRRA and the War Crimes Commission, whose records are in the United Nations Archives; the International Refugee Organization, deposited in the Archives Nationales; and the International Military Tribunal at Nuremburg, held by the International Court. Other institutions, such as the International Tracing Service and the Church of Jesus Christ of Later-day Saints, may be expected to provide for the preservation of the records of various specialized kinds of international activity. Thus many sources of assistance and many ways of preserving the record



of their activities are open to the international organizations. It is perhaps for archivists in general to assist in this area, not only by offering their professional advice and facilities, when they can, but also by serving, as they customarily do, as watchdogs, collectors and scavengers, encouragers and needlers, to ensure that these agencies will make proper provision for their archives.

All of us engaged in archival work in the United States—indeed all over the world—have learned that we may confidently turn to Ernst Posner for words of wisdom and encouragement on any problems in our field. In the postscript to the collection of his essays on *Archives and the Public Interest*, he writes of “the rather dramatic change toward international awareness among archivists.” It is this international awareness which we must continue to foster and encourage and on which we must depend very largely if we are to approach a really satisfactory system for the control and preservation of international archives. While Dr. Buck’s Archivist’s “One World” is not yet a reality, Dr. Posner concluded: “We are well on our way toward it . . . and those who have made a contribution to it, no matter how small, may feel that they have served a worthy cause.”

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