

Facilitating Access to the League of Nations Archives

By YVES PÉROTIN

DURING THE YEARS 1966 to 1969, I was responsible for a project intended to define rules of access and prepare a guide to the archives of the League of Nations. My headquarters was the United Nations Office at Geneva.

The resources offered by the archives of the League and their usefulness for historical research have been described in another publication designed for political scientists and students of international relations.¹ This article, however, is addressed to archivists, for I believe they may be interested in the technical and professional conclusions that I have reached through my rather unique experience. I address myself particularly to my American colleagues because I know they are concerned with such problems as the effectiveness of archival work, liberalization of access, and others that conditioned my activities at Geneva.

When I began my work in 1966, I did not find the archives of the League in disorder. They had been put away, for the most part in

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He wishes to thank E. M. Mayes, who played an important part in completing the project, for her translation of the paper into English. M. Pérotin also appreciatively acknowledges the essential role of A. Rattray, who worked for 3 years as his assistant. Robert Claus, State Archivist of Connecticut and former Chief of the Communications, Archives and Records Service at United Nations Headquarters, has the author's gratitude for reviewing the English text.

¹ "L'ouverture des Archives de la Société des Nations," in Association des anciens élèves de l'Institut des Hautes études internationales de Genève, *Annales d'Études Internationales*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1970). There is a useful note on access regulations, "The League of Nations Archives at Geneva," in *Central European History*, vol. 3, no. 4:392-396 (Dec. 1970).

their original boxes, in one of the storerooms of the United Nations Library at Geneva, to which they had been entrusted since 1956. Certain major categories were easily distinguishable: official files of the central Registry, working papers of the sections of the Secretariat, Commission or branch office files, and others. Finding aids then available included: for the Registry files, indexes and registers compiled contemporaneously with the records; and, for the Section and Commission files, typed inventories prepared at a later date based on old accession lists. Research was therefore not an impossibility; in fact a small number of researchers had been authorized to use the archives, after their qualifications had been checked and the files they wished to consult examined.

Nevertheless, the situation was unsatisfactory for several reasons: no general policy existed for allowing or refusing access to the files; there was no convenient finding aid; and, there were no regular procedures for making records available. This state of affairs was difficult both for the officials, the Director General of the Geneva Office and the Librarian, who had to make decisions on requests to consult the records, and for the historians, who could not be certain what they might be permitted to see or even what documentation might be available.

The situation persuaded the administration of the United Nations to take action. This was made possible by a \$75,000 grant from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. In 1965 the decision was made to begin, in the following year, a 3-year project to facilitate access and use of League records by researchers; I was placed in charge on August 1, 1966. Theoretically, I was to "eliminate useless records, prepare needed guides and indexes," and "propose rules and procedures to facilitate access for study and research to the maximum extent possible."

From the earliest months I had the help of a most competent assistant, an excellent bilingual secretary, and a clerk. In addition, even before the project began, a panel of consultants composed of historians and former high officials of the League, under the chairmanship of Ambassador Th. Aghnidès, was appointed to consider questions relating to the archives and to formulate recommendations concerning rules of public access.

During its course, the project never had the impact and recognition that I felt it deserved. Moreover, placement of the archives under the aegis of the library did not permit me the desirable autonomy, particularly the authority to organize a real archives service and not a kind of manuscripts section. In addition, I must admit that I did not leave these archives without some misgivings about their fate.

I believe, however, that I carried out the essential tasks, and it is these I propose to discuss.

I devoted the first weeks following my appointment to a rapid survey of the records for which I was to be responsible and especially to a thoughtful consideration of what I could do with them. I came to the following conclusions:

1. The archives of the League of Nations were not in disorder: the questions of physical arrangement could therefore arise only incidentally.
2. The disposals would not be very significant in quantity (a maximum of perhaps 10 percent) and therefore would not result in appreciable gains in space; if records really had to be removed, however, long and painstaking work would be involved.
3. The existing finding aids were too analytic for the Registry files and too summary for the other records.
4. The problem of opening the archives to research and developing necessary controls and regulations promised to be very difficult to solve, especially because the familiar friction between the "liberals" (supporters of a quasi-total opening to facilitate research) and the "conservatives" (preoccupied with safeguarding the interests of the international organization, of Governments, and individuals) was already evident.

To conclude this first approach, I prepared and subsequently submitted, in October 1966, a precise plan of work. In the juridical field I undertook to examine in depth the problem of accessibility and to report on my findings within 6 months. I proposed rules governing public access that would be liberal but would respect general and private interests. I asked that the archives be kept completely closed for 1 year, but that at the same time a decision should be made to reopen them experimentally as soon as provisional rules had been adopted. On the technical side I proposed to: abandon the effort to make disposals (which at best would have gained only 500 to 1,000 cubic feet of space, and thus would not have justified spending the hours necessary from the limited time available); review, with the aid of my staff, all the files and registers (about 6,000 cubic feet); and prepare, also with the aid of my staff, a general inventory of the archives of the League of Nations and a guide to serve as an introduction to the inventory.

In order to save time, I put this work plan into operation on a provisional basis in September 1966. Shortly afterwards it was considered by the panel and 2 months later was approved by the Director General.

It can be seen that my general program, though departing slightly from the initial directive, remained faithful to the spirit of the project, as shown by the expressions used in the preliminary discussions such as "archivization," "render the archives workable," and so on.

In short, the aim was to arrange for the files of the League to progress from the stage of noncurrent records to that of archives, properly speaking, usable for historical research. I did not consider, however, that this progress should be achieved through a modification of their original order or a physical rearrangement of the records—it would have been contrary to *respect des fonds*; it was a matter, therefore, of an essentially intellectual operation, to be carried out on paper. Apart from verification of missing files, reintegration of League files deposited at United Nations Headquarters or with the World Health Organization, and some labeling and reclassification of materials still in disorder, all the work of executing the plan remained somewhat abstract in nature. The whole task can be summed up in the simple idea on which it was based: to render the archives accessible. This had to be interpreted in two ways: not only were people to be given the right to consult the archives, but they were to be supplied with the practical means of doing so. I should like to describe what was achieved pertaining to the right of access in both the theoretical and the practical areas, and then to relate the progress made in preparing new finding aids. Finally, I should like to indicate my opinions on the value to archival theory of the project to make the League archives accessible.

People who have tackled only from a distance the question of opening recent archives are generally ready to admit that it involves fairly tricky decisions, but they usually refuse to recognize that the basic elements of the problem are extremely complex. They may be inclined to say: "One has only to decide on the 'dangerous files' and segregate them. This is not always easy, but no questions of principle are involved." In approaching the question I was neither so naive nor so presumptuous, for I had already experienced comparable difficulties on other occasions, but I had not yet gaged all the subtleties involved in opening the League archives. In fact, during the 6 months I spent studying the problem of accessibility, I discovered that it must be approached on three different levels: first, on the juridical plane, to determine the essentially legal rights and obligations involved; second, to review—in terms of appropriateness to our needs—the advantages and disadvantages of the various possible decisions on opening or closing the archives; and third, to examine the practical solutions capable of satisfying the requirements recognized at the first two levels. I prepared a 75-page report, which was submitted to the Director General at Geneva and, by him, to the panel. Although I received some criticism, I have never regretted taking the time to make this almost exhaustive study. It settled many points, as my interpretation met with implied or expressed ap-

proval; and thereafter, it was necessary only to refer to the report when one or another discussion broke out during panel meetings.

In the juridical chapter of the report, I was able to establish that: the League of Nations had indeed been the owner of the archives at present kept by the United Nations as League records, and the United Nations had succeeded to this ownership; the said ownership carried the right to open the archives to the public, on condition that the privacy and safety of individuals were protected; and the Secretary General of the United Nations was properly responsible for exercising this right. To arrive at these conclusions, I had to explore fields not approached until now, except in regard to sovereign states or multilateral agreements.

After defining the legal frame, I undertook in the second chapter to identify and present the general arguments in favor of opening the archives, as well as those against opening them. The arguments are well known and will not be repeated here: the reports and debates of the International Archives Congresses of Washington and Madrid and those of the Round Table in Copenhagen have thrown them into relief so well that they are a part of the working philosophy of every archivist. The only claim my analysis can lay to originality arises from the special international character of the League of Nations.

At this point in my report I could have ended the discourse and formulated my proposals. It would perhaps have been sufficient to weigh the contradictory arguments for and against opening the archives within the framework of the juridical conclusions and to recommend a reasonable plan. I was aware, however, that any such recommendation would be useless and inapplicable if made without a previous study of the possible ways in which the archives could actually be opened.

This subject formed the third chapter, wherein I considered the various forms that the regulations might take: complete opening of all files, complete closing, and partial opening or closing. I also discussed possible distinctions within the systems: for example, a time limit (either fixed or movable); or a limitation in researchers' subjects; and, in regard to use of the records, the conditions under which records would be made available for searchers, for reproduction, and for publication.

I concluded the report with precise and detailed draft rules of access. I cannot quote the text here nor describe the ensuing discussions. Their omission may be surprising in an article primarily devoted to methodology, but it must be recognized that both my report and the panel discussions are private in character. In any case my intention here is not to expound my personal views (which are of

little importance) but to relate the problems encountered, the decisions taken, and the way the rules were applied.

I shall therefore describe how we arrived at conclusions that would be based not only on theoretical considerations but on a certain amount of experience. Pressed for time, yet anxious not to act too hastily, we adopted the following procedures to reconcile these contradictory demands. During the first year of the project—the year when the archives were frozen—the work plan was prepared and approved; my report on accessibility was written and discussed by the panel; and provisional rules of access were approved by the Secretary General. In the second year the program was tested, with researchers once more being admitted. The final year was devoted to studying what had been learned from the trial period and to developing and adopting the definitive rules of access. The rules, approved by the Secretary General of the United Nations, are:

1. The Archives of the League of Nations, with the exception of the categories of material defined in paragraph 3 below, shall be open for consultation *in situ* from the beginning of the calendar year following the date on which the most recent item in the file concerned has attained 40 years.

2. The Director General of the United Nations Office at Geneva may grant exemptions from the rule stated in paragraph 1 in favor of researchers proving a legitimate interest in material of more recent date. The Director General may, however, refuse applicants access to documents which are unmistakably still of a confidential or secret nature. The beneficiary may be required to undertake to submit the manuscript of his work to the Director General before publication.

3. The following items shall remain closed for a period of 60 years:

- (a) Files containing internal documents of national administrations unofficially communicated at the time to League of Nations officials or commissioners by Governments whose archives are not open to researchers for the dates in question;

- (b) Files containing documents that, if divulged, might injure the repute, affect the privacy, or endanger the safety of individuals;

- (c) Personal files of officials or agents of the League of Nations.

4. The copying, reproduction, and publication of documents to which access is given shall be subject to the following principles:

- (a) Researchers shall be warned that the United Nations is not in a position to release them from any obligations in respect to copyright held by persons whose works may be found in the archives;

- (b) The reproduction or publication of large bodies of files (whole archive groups or large series therein) shall not be permitted;

- (c) The United Nations services shall not be obliged to carry out the actual work of reproduction, even for payment.

5. The Director General of the United Nations Office at Geneva shall be responsible for the implementation of this decision, particularly in

regard to the determination of reserved files, the practical methods of providing access and the granting of the exemption for which provision is made in paragraph 2. He shall report annually to the Secretary General on the operation of these rules and shall report on each occasion when important exemptions are granted pursuant to paragraph 2.

Granting the right of limited access to searchers was made possible by close scrutiny of the files. This was not the least of our preoccupations in completing the project. In reviewing the files, as in preparing the finding aids (discussed later), we had to foresee all possible solutions to the access problem because, as has been seen, the final rules were only approved at the end of the 3-year project. Without going into the complications that resulted from this obvious illogicality, I shall merely say that things were even less simple than the following would indicate.

To apply the movable time limit (40 years) for opening League records to the maximum advantage of the searchers, we had to determine the closing date of each file. It would clearly have been easier to consider only large series and to class an entire series as closed whenever it contained a few recent papers, but that would have smothered research. Even more complex was the treatment, necessitated by aspects of the rules, of files closed for 60 years (compromising for individuals), files containing unofficial communications from Governments (closed as long as the Governments' own archives), and the few files less than 40 years old that may not be consulted even by readers having a special authorization under rule 2.

As a practical matter, the situation compelled me to review, personally (except toward the end of the project when I was helped by my able colleague and friend, Sven Welander), all Registry files considered secret or confidential by the League, and all files outside the Registry. The extended examination permitted an appraisal of each file from the historical, political, and ethical points of view.

For the first two categories (files concerning private persons and unofficial communications of chancelleries), I was given full responsibility for determining how much should be open. This formidable responsibility did not make things any easier. Concerned as I always was both to leave the maximum number of files open and to apply the compulsory limitations, I often had to reflect at length on doubtful cases and frequently had to read each document (written sometimes in German, Spanish, or other languages). The multiform character of the League records prevented me, for the most part, from dealing with blocks by appraising samples. Also, to avoid subjectivity in my judgments or fluctuation in my decisions, I had to set myself detailed norms on the basis of directives received.

For the third category (files normally open after 40 years but reserved, before that date, even for searchers having special authorizations), I did not have the same responsibility. The Director General was to decide about opening such reserved files. Nevertheless, as the Archives Service was obliged to make recommendations about these files, I had to study them all so that in the future each case would not automatically require a fresh examination.

It is good to grant researchers the legal possibility of access to the archives (and this is the object of the rules given earlier). But to open the archives on a legal basis without giving searchers the practical means of using them with any hope of finding what was relevant to their studies would have been a sort of moral fraud. The preparation of finding aids, therefore, had to be the other major aim of the project.

The limited time I had for all these tasks compelled me to make rapid decisions. By the end of my first month on the project—and even before the work plan was developed—I had to determine the nature, scope, style, and format of the finding aids, and calculate the time required for their preparation. The drafting of the first pages of the general inventory was begun in September 1966, in anticipation of approval of the plan. All was not settled, however, with this first cast of the dice, for the subsequent opening of the archives at the end of a year and the application of regulations that were purely provisional (and thus susceptible of change later) made things even more complicated. Simultaneously, we had to serve researchers within the framework of a temporary system and to work with a view toward regulations that in their permanent form might be quite different. This was interesting, although difficult almost to the point of doing acrobatics. It was necessary to take many gambles and to win them. At the same time we had to adopt all sorts of procedures concerning production and binding, so that certain elements in the provisional finding aids could also be used in the final versions. This explains how the two finding aids—the guide and the general inventory—were each produced in three different editions in 3 years. I shall discuss only the latest edition of each.

The guide is a working tool of the classical type, with about a hundred pages. It has an introduction in which the general character of the archives of the League of Nations is analyzed and the history of the records is related. In the next section of the guide the archive groups are enumerated; the characteristics of each are given; and the systems of marking and numbering are described. The last chapter, devoted to use of the archives, sets forth the conditions of access, the history and method of use of the other finding aids, and the proper citation form for the records. Notes on peripheral ques-

tions, examples of research approaches, and a glossary, form the appendixes to the guide. The latest edition of this guide is available only in *ronéo* form. I believed that it should not be printed for several reasons. The information it contains has not been completely checked nor is the meaning assigned several terms in the guide absolutely certain. Its presentation, though carefully reviewed, does not meet the exacting standards required of printed publications. Finally, the text is drafted in French—and a French weighted with anglicisms. In brief, although this edition constitutes a complete finding aid, I nonetheless regard it as still provisional.

Like the guide, the general inventory has not yet been produced in definitive form; only a few copies of it exist for the use of the Archives Service and searchers. Although in compiling the guide no special problems of drafting and presentation were encountered, it was necessary in the inventory to choose between different conceptions and possible plans. It might very well be thought, for example, that for the purposes of the project the compiler could choose from among the various groups and subgroups making up the League archives only those parts judged the most important, leaving the rest to be inventoried later. From the selected parts he could then prepare quite precise and exact inventories. I determined, however—and was supported on the point—that this was not the best solution because the choice of parts to be inventoried would have been somewhat arbitrary. Furthermore, it would have been contrary to the interests of researchers to leave unknown whole groups of files, even though they might be of only minor interest. But from the moment I decided to include all League records in the inventory, I had to resign myself to imperfections. There are many of these in the three volumes (1,100 pages, large quarto) that form the inventory. In the first place, there are errors of fact, despite numerous verifications; then there is a kind of bilingualism, which is hardly elegant; and finally, the files are often described by an official title rather than an analytical one. The imperfections are obviously regrettable, yet, without accepting these risks, we could not—in addition to other project activities—have inventoried some 180,000 files in 3 years.

The work of inventorying was done by a team from start to finish. My assistant—a former registrar of the League—had the staggering task of analyzing each file individually: noting the dates, deciding on the titles, and so on; my secretary had to transcribe and check the lists and enter them in accordance with the different forms required by the successive versions; the clerk had to transport and replace boxes under difficult conditions; and I, in addition to planning and directing the work, had to draft some 50 introductions for the different chapters.

The organization of the lists of files follows the major categories I devised for the archives: the Secretariat group; the "mixed" group (made up of various agencies for aiding refugees that used the same files); the several "exterior" groups (such as the administrative commissions, the mixed jurisdictions, the high commissioners, and the regular exterior offices or those formed in time of war); the collections group; and the "private archive" group. Within the vast group of Secretariat files, the lists are organized hierarchically in accordance with their actual origin: thus everything corresponding to a given section of the Secretariat—the Political Section, for example—is grouped together in the inventory, whether the files are Registry or Section files, so that the reader can easily run through all that has been produced by one administrative unit.

These two finding aids—the guide and the general inventory—were compiled, as I have said, during the course of the project. The guides prepared by the Registry of the League were not discarded; on the contrary we have attempted to describe these indexes, registers, and other contemporaneous finding aids and to define their use in connection with the others.

In closing, I should like to ascend briefly to the level of general archivology to discuss a few specific topics.

The first is the method of description we employed for the archives of the League of Nations. Its three distinguishing characteristics were: totality of coverage, the necessity of taking calculated risks, and experimentation.

With regard to totality of coverage, I think all archivists will agree with me on its importance, at least in principle. It is also a direct application of the rule set out by Schellenberg: "A descriptive program should be designed to provide information on all records in a repository."² We must not blind ourselves, however, to the fact that this principle runs counter to deeply rooted tendencies of many of us, whatever our doctrines may be. The proof of this is that rarely do guides or inventories of a global nature appear before a certain number of partial inventories have been published.

It requires a particularly great effort to overcome these tendencies if one is pressed for time—as I was—or if one is influenced simply by a desire to assist research as quickly as possible. In these circumstances the archivist will realize that he must deliberately risk errors of form and substance; but this is hard to do when he has been trained to the very strictest standards of accuracy (the *chartiste* method).

² *The Management of Archives*, p. 111 (New York and London, 1965). The sentence appeared earlier in *Técnicas descriptivas de Archivos*, p. 9 (Universidad nacional de Córdoba, Argentina, 1961).

Faced with the dilemma of either taking excessive risks or postponing the production of descriptive aids, the archivist can and must, I believe, escape the difficulty by keeping the finding aids in a provisional state for a time; they cannot be printed and must be given only limited distribution. This is what I did for the guide and the general inventory of the League archives. But it must be recognized that in finding such a loophole, the archivist is threatened with a new danger—allowing the provisional to become permanent. The danger is lessened, I think, by proceeding resolutely and energetically and considering the provisional aids as experimental in nature. By testing them through use by the readers, one can improve the aids and bring them relatively quickly to the level where they are fit to be printed.

One's own work is so interesting, one believes so naively that it is of exemplary value, that I was tempted to continue discussing the techniques used to describe the League archives, especially those for reconstructing true archive groups "on paper." On reflection, however, I doubt whether there is material for further discussion in this article, so I should prefer to return to the rules governing access to the archives. I have said that it is not for me either to justify or to condemn the arrangements, but only to draw archivists' attention to the difficulties that must follow the adoption of rules that are at the same time liberal and prudent.

In fact, if the archivist is to open recent archives to researchers—either by means of a movable time limit or by special authorization—while fulfilling his obligations to organizations or individuals, he is certain to encounter complications. Must the archivist therefore refrain from opening archives entrusted to his care? Certainly not, but he must understand that practical considerations are just as important as theoretical questions. It is not enough to say "After a certain number of years, the archives are open, except for this, that, and the other type of files"; it is still necessary to estimate as precisely as possible the work involved in such an arrangement. My experience with the League of Nations archives has shown me where such a policy leads: a very long way, if one takes the matter seriously. Otherwise there are two possible solutions—one as bad as the other: to close whole archive groups through caution and for lack of time to study them (at the same time affecting great verbal liberalism) or to open them lightheartedly, no matter what, which would lead to well-deserved criticism.

It might be suggested that the League of Nations archives constitute a special case and that, as government archives are more standardized, the archivist may apply simpler criteria, which would not require review of each file. Leaving political questions aside, let us consider, for example, matters relating to the reputations of private

persons. I find, after some experience, that apart from personnel files of officials or documents of a legal character (which can be treated in the mass), there are a substantial number of compromising papers among general administrative files. To find these, files must be scrutinized one by one. The international character of the League archives is not significant here, as records of a compromising nature can be found in the archives of national administrations. It may also be suggested, I know, that these cases are relatively rare and that they are unimportant because the ill-intentioned people who might search the archives for defamatory material could never locate such files. Unfortunately, the objection is only partly valid; very often there are index references, indeed even straightforward file titles, leading direct to the papers in question.

Again, with relation to the rules governing access to the League archives, the reader will recall one provision forbidding reproduction of whole archive groups. Everyone knows that the legality of filming whole series is a most controversial subject. American archivists, among others, strongly support the practice and say it is not disadvantageous to research. At the risk of again appearing to avoid an issue, I shall neither uphold nor criticize such microfilming. I might only point out that microfilming entire collections constitutes an alienation that a sovereign Government—but not an international organization—may accept.

Much more could be said about the archives of the League of Nations. I shall let matters rest here, however, having desired to report only the essential features of a professional experience that was particularly interesting to me.

Just Desserts

FLORIDA

KEY WEST, JACKSONVILLE DISTRICT.

[Suboffice of the United States engineer office.]

The Key West engineer office was established in 1844.

Before the collection of all the records in the room now used a great many of the books and papers were eaten by boring worms, ants, rats, and mice. A portion of them have been more or less water soaked by water driven in by the wind during the last two violent hurricanes.

—from *Archives of Government Offices Outside of the City of Washington: Message From the President of the United States*, p. 113 (62d Cong., 3d sess., H. Doc. 1443); Mar. 1, 1913. (Submitted by Robert R. Bolton.)