

## The Genesis and Structure of the International Council on Archives: An American View

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In his presidential address to the Society of American Archivists in October 1946, the second Archivist of the United States, Solon J. Buck, proposed establishment of an international organization of archivists dedicated to preservation and use of archives worldwide, suggested its character, and outlined steps for its creation.<sup>1</sup> Although this was not a new idea, Buck provided effective new leadership at a time of intense American interest in international concerns. The National Archives had been heavily involved in the protection of archives overseas during World War II, and plans were going forward for establishment of an archives for the new United Nations with strong American encouragement.<sup>2</sup> The recent establishment of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco) also seemed to offer the possibility of assistance in creation of an international archival organization. The time thus seemed propitious for a renewed effort. In fact, based largely on American efforts under Buck's leadership, the International Council on Archives (ICA) was established in close cooperation with Unesco less than two years later.

Today, the ICA provides information and services to archivists throughout the world. It now includes 116 member na-

tions and holds quadrennial congresses which are open to professional archivists worldwide. The ICA's International Archival Round Table Conference, which is held annually between ICA congresses, provides a forum for national delegations to meet and discuss archival issues of international concern. The ICA publishes an annual journal, entitled *Archivum*, and a semi-annual *Bulletin*. Eight regional branches have been established to promote communication and cooperative attention to shared problems among archivists within the Arab world, Africa, the Pacific region, Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.<sup>3</sup>

Despite its many activities, the ICA is relatively little known to American archivists. Many factors contribute to this, including distance from Europe where a majority of ICA meetings are held, language barriers, limited funding for international activities, and traditional American preference for activities closer to home. In addition, the organizational structure of the ICA itself has been an important factor. Despite periodic constitutional changes, the ICA continues to be organized on a pattern that was established at the time it was founded. The goals and experiences of the American ar-

<sup>1</sup>Solon J. Buck, "The Archivist's 'One World'," *American Archivist* 10 (January 1947): 9-24.

<sup>2</sup>See Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Toward an International Archives Council, 1945-50," *American Archivist* 39 (July 1976): 287-92 for more detailed information concerning creation of a United Nations archives and an archives program for Unesco.

<sup>3</sup>See *Directory of the International Council on Archives*, issued periodically, for full information on the regional branches and other bodies within ICA.

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chivists who led the effort to establish an international archival organization are thus of particular interest today.

In his 1946 address, Buck formulated the philosophical foundation for an international organization. He outlined the concept that all documentary materials are interrelated, forming within a nation its national archival heritage and for all the world "the archives of mankind, the official record of human experience in organized living."<sup>4</sup> Buck postulated that all archivists must share a concern for the "protection and effective utilization of man's total archival heritage" and that protection of that total record could be achieved only through cooperative international activity.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in view of the oneness of man's archival heritage, an international organization of archivists was essential.

Buck then proposed that archivists establish such an international organization under the auspices of Unesco to provide an appropriate forum for international communication and cooperation. He outlined his plans to write officials of archival associations, agencies, and institutions throughout the world "to propose the calling of a World Congress of Archivists to set up a permanent International Archives Council."<sup>6</sup> At its 1946 business meeting, the Society of American Archivists endorsed Buck's plans and authorized him as its president to take any steps needed to bring about the establishment of such an international organization so

that archivists of all countries of the world could "as quickly as possible reestablish their professional contacts, cooperate in the solution of urgent postwar problems of their profession, exchange experiences, ideas, methods and techniques, and work together more closely for the effective preservation, administration, and utilization of the archival heritage of mankind."<sup>7</sup>

Between May and August 1947, Buck sent letters from the National Archives to eighty prominent archivists worldwide.<sup>8</sup> These letters asserted his conviction that the time had come to establish a permanent international organization of archivists and asked for comments about whether an international organization was needed, what its form of governance should be, and how it should be financed.<sup>9</sup>

More than one-half of those who received Buck's letter responded, all unanimously in favor of establishing an international organization of archivists. Although responses concerning governance and representation were mixed, archivists worldwide had stated clearly that they would support and participate in an international organization.<sup>10</sup>

In December 1946, not long after Buck had made his speech to the Society of American Archivists, the first General Conference of Unesco met in Paris. With encouragement from archivists, the conference resolved to encourage the creation of an international organization of professional archivists. What form this

<sup>4</sup>Buck, "The Archivist's 'One World'," 12.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>7</sup>*American Archivist* 10 (July 1947): 228.

<sup>8</sup>Extra-Federal Archival Affairs Case 147-E14, "Establishment of an International Organization for Archivists" in National Archives Record Group 64 (Records of the National Archives) provides background information concerning many aspects of the establishment of the International Council on Archives, including the mailing list for Buck's letter. Oliver Wendell Holmes describes some of the problems encountered in developing the mailing list as well as some of his other experiences in "Toward an International Archives Program and Council, 1945-50," *American Archivist* 39 (July 1976): 287-99.

<sup>9</sup>"Letter Sent to Archivists of Foreign Countries Concerning the Organization of an International Archives Council," *American Archivist* 10 (July 1947): 227-32.

<sup>10</sup>"Abstract of Answers to Questionnaire," Extra-Federal Archival Affairs Case 147-E14 (RG 64).

encouragement would take was not immediately clear, however. Not until Unesco's second General Conference, held in Mexico City in November 1947, were specific actions identified and funds appropriated to help establish an international archival organization. At that meeting, with strong encouragement from the American delegation, \$4,000 was budgeted for a small group of archivists from various nations to gather in Paris in the summer of 1948 to establish a council.<sup>11</sup> Thus Unesco provided the specific mechanism that assisted the archives profession in creating its own international organization.

From this point, steps in the establishment of the International Council on Archives proceeded smoothly through formal diplomatic channels. On 29 February 1948, Julian Huxley, Director General of Unesco, wrote to the United States Secretary of State outlining plans for the inaugural meeting and asking for American cooperation and the designation of an appropriate representative.<sup>12</sup> Unesco similarly obtained cooperation from other participating governments and set about planning for the meeting.

During the winter of 1947-1948, archivists in the United States also continued their efforts on behalf of the international organization. In his capacity as Unesco's Honorary Consultant in Archives, Herbert Brayer, State Archivist of Colorado, advised Unesco in its planning activities. At the same time, Brayer, Solon Buck

and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Buck's "program adviser" at the National Archives, also drafted a preliminary constitution for the organization.<sup>13</sup>

The inaugural meeting of the International Congress on Archives took place from 9-11 June 1948 at Unesco House in Paris, with archivists representing the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Mexico, Norway, and the United States participating. Solon Buck attended as the delegate of the United States representing both the National Archives and the Society of American Archivists.<sup>14</sup>

The most important business of this meeting was to adopt a constitution. The draft written by Buck, Holmes, and Brayer was used as the basis for discussion. With one exception, it was adopted without substantive change. The exception was an important one, however.

The Americans' draft had specified that all associations of archivists and archival institutions from all parts of the world could join the new organization and send voting representatives to international congresses. Individuals also could join, but would have no vote. Holmes, Buck, and Brayer thus had envisioned an international organization in which no direct role existed for national representatives or delegations. This was not to be the character of the new organization, however. Instead, the 1948 meeting adopted a constitution that provided for every member nation to be repre-

<sup>11</sup>Herbert O. Brayer to Oliver Wendell Holmes, 1 December 1947, Extra-Federal Archival Affairs Case 147-E14 (RG 64).

<sup>12</sup>Julian Huxley to the Secretary of State, 29 February 1948, Extra-Federal Archival Affairs Case 147-E14 (RG 64).

<sup>13</sup>Holmes also served as chairman of the Society of American Archivists' International Relations Committee from 1946-1951. The preliminary constitution can be found in Extra-Federal Archival Affairs Case 147-E14 (RG 64).

<sup>14</sup>Other participants at the meeting were Dr. D. P. M. Graswinckel, Director, General Archives of the Netherlands; Mr. Vaclav Husa, Czechoslovakia; Mr. Hilary Jenkinson, Director, Public Record Office, London, United Kingdom; Dr. E. Martin-Chabot, Conservateur, Archives de France, Paris; Dr. Emilio Re, Director, Archivio di Stato, Rome, Italy; Dr. Julio Jimenez Rueda, Director, Archivo General de la Nacion, Mexico; Dr. C. Samaran, Directeur des Archives de France, Paris; Dr. Asgaut Steinnes, Director, Riksarkivet, Oslo, Norway.

sented by a voting delegation of two or three accredited representatives divided among the nation's associations of professional archivists, its national archival administration, and other archival institutions within the nation. Thus national delegations would be the key to the new organization's structure. All archival institutions and associations of archivists could join, but could participate as voting members only to the extent that their representatives were within their nation's accredited delegation. As in the Brayer-Holmes proposal, individual archivists also could join, but would have no vote.<sup>15</sup>

The Americans were disappointed with this result. Immediately after the meeting Brayer wrote: "Our eastern colleagues—represented by Husa of Czechoslovakia—started in at the very opening of our meeting and all but torpedoed the program insofar as 'democracy' within the organization is concerned."<sup>16</sup> In a more conciliatory tone, he also observed that Husa could not have succeeded without support from others in the meeting. He might also have added that Unesco and other international organizations of the time were organized with national delegate structures. These contemporary examples must have had a strong influence on the ICA's organizers, who were meeting with Unesco's assistance and support.

Today, in keeping with the pattern established in 1948, all archivists, archival institutions, and associations of archivists

anywhere in the world may join the ICA; however, only national delegations, as identified under the constitution, are permitted to vote. Each country has a minimum of two votes, normally cast by representatives of the national archival administration and of its national professional association of archivists. Federal nations, such as the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany, also may exercise a third vote, cast on behalf of all member state archives. In practice, the director of a nation's national archives administration serves as the leader of his nation's delegation.<sup>17</sup>

The organization of the International Archival Round Table Conference particularly illustrates the importance of the national delegations within the ICA structure today. Attendance at the round table conference is in general limited to the two or three members of a national delegation. In practice, many nations are represented only by the head of their national archives or the equivalent. Although observers are usually present, their participation is limited and by special invitation.

The ICA's organization has in many ways served the Council well. It has led to a system in which the interests of all nations can be heard and considered. It also offers valuable access to information and technology for very small nations and for those whose archival systems are in the early stages of development. Yet the ICA's organization and structure have

<sup>15</sup>"Constitution as Adopted at the Inaugural Meeting of the Provisional Council, convened by Unesco, 9 to 11 June 1948," Extra-Federal Archival Affairs Case 147-E14 (RG 64).

<sup>16</sup>Brayer to Holmes, 21 June 1948, Extra-Federal Archival Affairs Case 147-E14 (RG 64).

<sup>17</sup>As a governmental official and influential figure in his own archival community, this individual would inevitably play an important role in international archival activities. The role of the national archivist within the ICA is particularly reenforced, however, by the ICA dues structure. Dues for professional associations of archivists, institutional members, and individuals are established at modest levels. In contrast, dues for national archival administrations are based on a formula that uses gross national product and gross national product per capita to arrive at a variable assessment. Although national archives in small and developing nations pay relatively modest fees, the national archival administrations of industrialized nations pay substantial sums. The National Archives of the United States pays the largest annual dues to the ICA: \$23,100 per year during the period 1984–1988.

been more difficult to understand for the archival profession in the United States. Unlike many nations with centralized archival systems and extensive government participation in management of documentary resources, the United States has a large and diverse archival community in which the National Archives and the federal government play a relatively smaller role. American archivists do not naturally look exclusively to the National Archives for direction in their activities, nor do they consider the Archivist of the United States as their only natural representative or spokesman. Thus the structure of the ICA with its emphasis on the leadership of the national archival administration is not always understood by the diverse and decentralized archival profession in the United States.

The organizational structure of the ICA has another drawback from the American point of view: it increases the likelihood that the organization will be a forum for international politics unrelated to archival concerns. This potential was realized even during the ICA's organizational meeting in 1948 when Husa of Czechoslovakia proposed that only member nations of Unesco should be permitted to participate in the ICA. Americans present at the meeting stressed instead that the ICA should be concerned only with archival issues and that unrelated concerns whether national, political or other should not distract from the organization's principal goals. Husa's proposal was not made part of the original ICA Constitution.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the possibility for politicization has remained inherent in the organization, and its attention to archival issues often has been distracted by seemingly irrelevant interventions by national delegations.

Despite its limitations, however, the ICA does offer opportunities for involvement by associations of archivists, institutions, and individual archivists.<sup>19</sup> The Section of Professional Archival Associations, for example, exists to promote cooperative efforts among associations of archivists worldwide. *Janus*, the section's journal, provides a valuable organ for communication among archivists and archival associations about concerns relevant to practicing archivists. The section also promotes exchanges of archival personnel, publications, and audiovisual materials, and seeks other activities that may help establish more personal and lasting channels of communication among archivists and archival associations throughout the world.

The International Council on Archives also has established a number of standing committees and working groups to perform concentrated work in various archival areas. The concerns and scope of some of these, including the Business Archives Committee, the Committee on Automation, and the Committee on Professional Training and Education, are almost identical to those of comparable committees and round tables of the Society of American Archivists and other archival organizations in the United States. Important opportunities exist for communication and cooperation between these international and national bodies. American archivists have been appointed to serve on some ICA committees and these individuals also can serve as a link between the international organization and archivists with similar concerns within the United States.

In 1946, Solon J. Buck expressed his belief that archivists must "do all they can to promote the preservation of [all

<sup>18</sup>Holmes to Brayer, 1 July 1948, and Holmes to Dr. Lester K. Born, 1 July 1948, Extra-Federal Archival Affairs Case 147-E4 (RG 64).

<sup>19</sup>See International Council on Archives, *Constitution and Procedural Guidelines* (Secretariat of the ICA, 60 rue des Francs-Bourgeois, 75003 Paris) for a complete description of the ICA's organization.

records of man's efforts in living together] and their effective utilization in the maintenance of peace and the advancement of civilization."<sup>20</sup> The International

Council on Archives continues to provide a link among archivists worldwide seeking to attain these goals.

<sup>20</sup>Buck, "The Archivist's 'One World'," 24.

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