CHAPTER 8

Archives

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International organizations (IOs) have left behind an abundance of documents and other archival material. Combined with state and personal collections, these offer a rich basis for IO studies. Researchers can use archives to answer questions of institutional history—the internal developments of IOs or IOs' role as international actors—and to examine broader processes of international history—seeing IOs as an arena for and mirror of global developments.

What?

Archives are institutional repositories of documents. Archives can be large, professional institutions, or smaller and more ad hoc. They can be operated by national or regional governments, IOs, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or other private associations, or hosted by libraries or museums. When we talk about "the archive" we most often refer to a physical location where documents are stored and where researchers can consult material in reading rooms. However, new technology now means that some documents can be accessed online, either through archives' own websites or in digital collections or databases. This chapter primarily discusses traditional, physical archives, where the majority of documents still reside, but similar considerations apply to research using digital archival collections. Archives are important because they contain "*eyewitness accounts*," or "primary sources," and *unpublished* information that cannot be found elsewhere.

Archival research is an old method. Scholars first developed tools and procedures for working with archival collections during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Arnold 2000: 45). Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) is commonly presented as the father of modern history because of his emphasis on using primary sources. Ranke argued that historians should produce "scientific" and "objective" history based on "evidence." However, archival research is not quite as straightforward as letting the documents speak for themselves. Sources, including archival documents, can only be understood through the researcher's interpretation. They are a "residue" left behind by past human activity (Bloch 1992 [1954]: 45) and represent "structures that survive into the present" (Gaddis 2002: 35). Therefore researchers cannot simply enter the archive to find a perfect picture of past events and processes. (For more on analysis of documents, see chapter 10—*Document Analysis: A Praxiographic Approach*.)

IO research can include sources from many different archives. IOs themselves often have rich archival collections that can shed light on the IO's internal institutional developments (e.g., Gram-Skjoldager and Ikonomou 2019) or provide a picture of broader societal developments (e.g., Ravndal 2020). Various national archives hold material sent home from state delegations to IOs. Finally, private individuals who worked for IOs, or NGOs and civil society groups, may have left collections in university libraries, national archives, or the archives of political parties, or similar. Tracking down such private collections can be challenging but rewarding.

A growing IO literature uses archival research. Two studies taking the League of Nations as their starting point represent excellent examples of how to conduct archival research on IOs: Patricia Clavin (2013) examined how the League expanded its work on economic and financial policy and how this laid the foundations for the post-World War II Bretton Woods system, while Susan Pedersen (2015) analyzed how the League's mandates system sought to protect the interests of imperialism while inadvertently opening up space for anticolonialist actors and arguments.

Why?

Archival IO research brings many benefits that stem from the very definition of what an archive is: a repository of unpublished "eyewitness accounts" produced by the day-to-day operations of the organization. This can include many types of documentation, such as incoming and outgoing telegrams and letters commenting on the events of the day, various memoranda with contemporary analysis of events or proposals for new policies, drafts and redrafts of speeches that can provide insight into the balancing between different priorities, or verbatim records of meetings and marginal notes and comments that can show internal disagreements or emphasize what different individuals considered important. Contrary to the polished and carefully crafted words of published press statements and reports, these documents offer a glimpse into the "behind-the-scenes" operations of the organization.

The benefits of consulting these materials are obvious. First, archival sources provide the possibility of constructing a narrative of events as seen by IO staff and offer a chance to grasp the spur of the moment, instinctive, and "true" reactions and thoughts of the actors working in these organizations. Second, working with material from different archives allow researchers to see an event from multiple vantage points. Indeed, historians turned to IO archives in the past two decades precisely to counteract the national bias of traditional diplomatic history (Amrith and Sluga 2008; Kott 2011). The most fruitful archival research projects will be those that combine material from IO archives, national archives, and private collections, because this allows for multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon. A third benefit is that archives contain unpublished information, allowing the researcher to bring new insights into the academic debate. Finally, archival material can be analyzed with different research methods that offer grounds for methodological innovation and interdisciplinary dialogue.

How?

As Marc Trachtenberg notes, although many believe archival research is "daunting," there is really "nothing mysterious about working in archives. No arcane set of skills is needed" (Trachtenberg 2006: 165–66). It is largely a research method based on common sense that most scholars learn through practice and by asking advice from experienced researchers. This section sums up the lessons I have learned from visits to multiple archives in the course of my research on IOs (e.g., Ravndal 2020; 2023).

For clarity, it can be useful to separate the research process into three stages: before, during, and after the visit to the (physical) archive. Similar questions arise when working with digital collections.

The first stage involves identifying archival collections of interest and how to access them. A common way to find relevant collections is through the citations in publications on the topic. Additionally, historians place great value on locating novel or hitherto underutilized sources. For IO research, the logical starting point is to check whether the organization's own archive is open to researchers. Most large IOs such as the UN, the International Labour Organization (ILO), or the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) have archives, usually located at their headquarters. I have often found that a visit to the UN archive in New York or the League of Nations archive at the UN Library in Geneva is useful even if these organizations are not the main object of study. Since their foundation, the UN and the League functioned as hubs for international cooperation, and we can therefore find traces of other IOs and broader international developments in their archival collections. Likewise, many researchers routinely consult the national archives of the United Kingdom and/or the United States because their extensive diplomatic network collected information about events all over the world, and their archives are relatively easy to access and navigate.

Once interesting archival collections have been identified, accessing them usually involves travelling to the location of the archive and spending at least two to three days there. Such visits must be carefully planned. Archives' websites give information about opening hours, access applications, and whether it is necessary to book a seat in their reading room. Additionally, it is a good idea to consult finding aids, and seek advice from the archivists and/or scholars who have visited before, to identify (some of) the specific documents you would like to view. Many archives allow for ordering documents in advance to facilitate more time-efficient visits.

To locate relevant information in the archives, it is necessary to understand how documents have been created and organized. Archives often have online catalogues that allow keyword searches, but their file descriptions are of varied quality. Relying on an online search risks missing out on relevant files if the archivist who catalogued them failed to include "your" keyword. Instead try to understand how the organization produced and catalogued its documents. Organizations may use a central registry system, thematic codes, a chronological system, or a system centered on different departments or individuals. I have found relevant information, for example, by going though folders of all incoming and outgoing telegrams for an office during a given time period. None of these telegrams would have come up in a keyword search.

The second stage of archival research is the actual visit to the archive, for which my main advice is: bring a camera and take good notes. Most archives today let visitors make digital copies of documents with a camera or phone. But not all, so do read the instructions on the website carefully beforehand. Because international travel is expensive, researchers may only be able to spend a few days at the archive, but by photographing documents even a short visit could yield thousands of copies that can later be analyzed at a slower pace. Keep in mind that each day in the archive will likely correspond to a week or more sorting through and analyzing the copied documents.

It is very important to take good, informative, and organized notes during archival visits, so that the researcher later knows which file a document belongs to and how to locate information in the photos. A note or photo without its document reference is useless as it cannot be included in the analysis. Software like RefWorks, OneNote, or NVivo can be useful. My own system is quite low-tech. I create a word document titled with the reference to a folder or box or other small archival unit (e.g., “FO 371 59719”) and sort these into computer folders that replicate the structure of the archive. In each word document I take (brief) notes about what I found interesting about this unit and which parts I have photographed. When taking photos, I start each sequence by photographing the archive box, the front of the folder, and/or the call slip—some visually striking element that allows me to quickly identify the start of a new unit in my photo stream, and which will later provide information about the document reference for the following photos.

Finally, the third stage of archival research involves sorting through and analyzing the documents and integrating the information in your writing. Archival collections have different copyright policies. To publish (excerpts from) a document, or even just include a quote from it, it may be necessary to get permission from the copyright holders. Consult the copyright information on the archive website or ask an archivist.

There are different ways to cite information from archives in publications. Sometimes the archive gives a suggestion, or a journal may prefer one style over another. The most important consideration is that it should be possible for others to locate the exact document. Therefore each reference must include three elements: 1) something to identify the individual document (e.g., “Letter from Smith to Johnson, 12 October 1956” or “Minutes of meeting, 3 January 1948”), 2) the archive reference for the relevant folder or box (e.g., “S-0194-0001-02”), and 3) the name and location of the archive.

What Challenges?

Working with archives presents both practical and methodological challenges. Visits to archives can be both expensive and time consuming. Some scholars may face additional challenges with visa applications, not to mention the obstacles to international travel demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that traditional archival research may not be viable for everyone or at all times.

Some archives are taking steps to remedy these problems by digitizing their collections. The UN Library in Geneva, for example, now offers online access to the entire League of Nations archival collection.[1] The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is also making parts of the ITU's documentation available online. Several other archives have digitized parts of their collections, and these are mostly free to download through their online search catalogues. For a useful overview of relevant online archives for IO research, see the website of the United Nations History Project.[2]

Methodological challenges also arise due to how archival collections have been produced, preserved, and organized. Not all sources survive into the present, and importantly, "sources of the past do not survive in neat patterns of their own accord" (Arnold 2000: 60). Therefore archival collections will only ever give a partial picture of the past, and it will be a picture that is "biased" in significant ways.

Bias in a collection can arise from different sources. Sometimes what makes it into an archival collection can be accidental. Fires and floods have been and remain a hazard for archival collections. But documents are at risk of more than natural disasters, wars, and revolutions. As researchers we rely on the work of archivists in organizing, managing, and preserving the collection. Archives have been produced for a purpose, and this purpose is *not* primarily to serve academic researchers. Past archivists have made choices about what to keep and what to destroy, and these processes can leave systematic biases in the collection. The researcher should therefore pay attention not only to what they find in the archives but also to what is not there. "Operation Legacy" represents a large-scale example whereby the British government during decolonization destroyed or withheld numerous documents from its colonial administration (Sato 2017). On a smaller scale, the archival collection of Trygve Lie, the first UN secretary-general, contains folders and documents that he organized when writing his memoirs in the 1950s. Can we be sure he did not seek to present himself in a good light by leaving out certain files? To deal with biased sources the researcher must first identify how the source is biased, and second seek to compensate by comparing, or triangulating, information from different sources.

Whether intentional or accidental, the gaps and silences in archival collections are significant, and the researcher must be aware of them. Criti-

1. https://archives.ungeneva.org/lontad (accessed February 9, 2023).
2. https://www.histecon.magd.cam.ac.uk/unhist/index.html (accessed June 7, 2022).

cal, feminist, and postcolonial scholars are particularly attentive to these silences and have developed methodologies for dealing with them (see box x—*Postcolonial Insights* and chapter 28—*Feminist Approaches*). Lisa Lowe (2015: 5) discusses the need to "read *across* the separate repositories organized by office, task, and function, and by period and area" when working with the archives of the colonial state. In IO research, scholars can include archival collections in the Global South as an additional perspective to avoid replicating the worldview found in the American and British collections many of us continue to work with. Recently published work shows the value of including archival visits to countries such as Ghana, India, and Trinidad (O'Malley 2018; Getachew 2019).

To Go Further

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