Preservation, Access, and the Multinationals

*by Trudy Huskamp Peterson**

Nation states have been the dominant political organizations of the twentieth century. Nation states have national archives. These archives have been dominant, too: developing archival theory and practice, supporting archival organizations, and defining what it means to be an archives and an archivist.

Let us now frame a few research questions that might be posed about the concluding years of this century, the century of the nation state:

- Did the move to invite additional nations to join NATO reflect the notions of identity of populations with each other, with nation state security concerns, or with a desire to lock ever greater portions of the European land mass into one military system?
- Did the recent tumult when Renault announced its plan to shut down its auto plant in Belgium and move manufacturing to Spain's cheaper labor market affect Ford's subsequent decision to continue producing in Germany, even though German firms themselves were fleeing to Central and Eastern Europe?
- Was there a congruence or incongruence between the crumbling status of the Dayton Peace accord in Bosnia and the efforts to rebuild the infrastructure of Bosnia in general and Sarajevo in particular?

To answer the first of these questions, the one on NATO expansion, a researcher will have to have recourse not only to the records of the nation states, but also to the records of international government organizations, NATO in particular, but also the European Union, the United Nations Security Council, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The second of the questions, that addressing labor movements, popular protest, and industrial activity, would require access to the records of the headquarters of the firms in question, the records of the local subsidiaries (in both the gaining and the losing country), and pan-European manufacturing and labor data from international governmental sources.

The third question, rebuilding Sarajevo in the face of political disintegration, requires access to the records of international philanthropic organizations and other non-governmental organizations, numbering in the dozens of dozens.

Are the questions important? Absolutely. Are records required to answer them? Of course. Are they being preserved? It is difficult to know. What is the likelihood that our future researcher could gain access to this data? In a word: poor.

Let me briefly examine three related questions. First, what are the forces that have made the records of the multinationals significant? Second, what are the factors that make preservation of records a particularly difficult problem with multinationals? And third, what are the current possibilities to gain access to these records?

Galloping Globalization.

Each of the three types of multinationals—international government organizations, international business, and international philanthropic and other nongovernmental organizations—is experiencing galloping globalization. Each affects the other two, directly or indirectly, but each acts autonomously.

The international governmental organizations have had an astonishing growth in the second half of the twentieth century. Unexpectedly, nation states willingly shrank their own powers, agreeing to multinational control structures. Why? Recently a team of researchers consisting of a Russian, a German, and a U.S. economist argued that "the most important national interests of these states [United States, Russia, Japan, and the nations of Europe] converge much more than they conflict. The real interests that the parties share greatly outweigh the interests that divide them."[1] In other words, ceding power has actually been in the national interest.

Be that as it may, the outcome has been the creation of permanent structures, from the European Commission to the World Bank, with a permanent corps of civil servants, unaccountable to any single state, who create records on the most important worldwide issues of our day. While the fears of the anti-UN activists in the United States, who see in the United Nations a conspiracy to establish a world government and extinguish the nation state, are clearly fantasy, it is true that the permanent bureaucratic structures

of the international governmental organizations create the same self-preservation mechanisms that surround any bureaucracy, but importantly absent are the counter-veiling pressures of a citizenry to whom the officials are accountable.

The second type of multinational structure is that of the businesses and commercial establishments. While these have been international for some functions for centuries (think of the Chinese painting porcelain for the European trade), the late twentieth century difference is in the assembly of goods through multiple nations producing components; in the move from international goods or financial markets into international service providers; and from the speed with which information and currency flows. This borderless market, however, still relies on corporate headquarters somewhere on the globe. These headquarters may be the traditional home of the company, where the corporate officers have their offices, or it could be a single officer in a location that gives the most advantageous tax position for the company.

Once again, however, these companies can set their work practices and employment standards without much accountability to anyone, other than to the owners. In the United States, the Clinton Administration has attempted to forge an agreement with a number of the major clothing manufacturers that will cover their operations world wide. The agreement is for a code of conduct, that would prohibit child labor, forced labor, and worker abuse; establishes health-and-safety standards; recognizes the right to join a union; limits working hours to 60 a week "except in extraordinary business circumstances"; and insists that workers be paid at least the legal minimum wage or the prevailing industry wage in every country in which agreements are made.[2] The problem, of course, is monitoring such an agreement. It is a major step, but it is voluntary, it is limited to the manufacturers in one country, and to one industry in that country. The industry is said to be setting up a policing mechanism, but efforts to introduce transparency—including the access to records—in international business operations are Sisyphean tasks.

Privatization—a world-wide trend—also plays a part in the issues surrounding the records of international business. As governments divest themselves of a particular function, the records of that function vanish from the public sphere into the private. From banking to manufacture of weapons, the public track stops at the corporate door. And when the privatized entity is purchased by a foreign corporation (such as the lightbulb maker Tungsram of Hungary purchased by General Electric of the United States), then the policy of retention and access move from that of a national government to that of the foreign parent.

The situation with the major philanthropic and other non-governmental international organizations is different from either the governmental or business model. These organizations, ranging from Greenpeace to the Rockefeller Foundation to IASSIST, are accountable to members or to boards of directors or, even, to heirs of the original donor. The records of the activity may be centralized or dispersed among national chapters; the sources of capital or the number of members may be publicized or a closely held secret; the actions of the board may be publicly reported or may be absolutely secret. What is clear is that these organizations float above or rest lightly within a single nation's structure.

Preserving the Information Base

All three types of international organizations depend heavily on electronic information transfers to accomplish their work. But all three, too, have piles of papers, photographs, videotapes, architectural drawings, and a panoply of other records types. Who decides what to preserve? And, if data can flow electronically, is there any need to move physically other record types—such as paper or video tape or cartographic items—to an archives?

The record of the United Nations and its components on preserving their records is spotty, at best. The central United Nations archives and records service in New York has no authority to control the records policies of the components. Further, with the 1000 person cuts in UN headquarters recently announced, any administrative positions are shaky, especially in something as little valued as the records preservation activity. On the other hand, some UN units have solid records and archives programs, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization or the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The temporary UN units—such as UNPROFOR—are less likely to have a sufficient records policy to ensure that essential documents are preserved.

Other international governmental bodies, from NATO to the European Union to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, are known to have serious records programs. It is not clear that temporary bodies, created for a limited purpose, often as a result of crisis, are adequately documented—just as national governments often have trouble adequately documenting the records of short-term committees, commissions, and boards. Who, for example, is the official secretariat for the documents of the campaign to end female genital mutilation, recently announced as a joint campaign of the World Heath Organization, the UN's Children's' Fund, and the UN Population Fund?

Turning to international business, it is difficult to gain any general picture of the state of preservation of records, given the secrecy that surrounds commercial enterprises. When Royal Dutch Shell, for example, was under attack for continuing to do business in Nigeria, were the records of the Nigerian unit physically transported to the Netherlands? Was the information reported from Nigeria to the headquarters deemed to be sufficient for corporate purposes and the disposition of the records in Nigeria left to chance? Or was it most expedient—if not downright prudent—to destroy the records in Nigeria as soon as possible?

One specific problem for an in-gathering of corporate records in Europe is the policy of the European Union to ensure that if a country wants to keep the records created in its territory, it can. In the case of the Renault controversy, for example, that would mean that Belgium could prohibit the Renault subsidiary from sending its records to the French headquarters, as could Spain. Whether or not this has actually happened, it is possible. In at least one example, France prevented the records of a monastic order from being sent to the headquarters of the order in Rome. Whether any government would think that corporate records are essential for documenting the history of the nation is not clear, but other countries than the European Union—notably Russia—give themselves the legal right to prevent the export of records of a business registered with the government. The best one can say is that at least in such a case the documents would be preserved, although scattered.

The problems with the international NGOs are quite similar to those of the multinational businesses, with the exception that there is less likelihood that they would be destroyed to prevent the release of corporate secrets.

The truth is that, for many records of international non-governmental bodies, whether commercial or philanthropic or pressure groups, there is no logical archival home. If one expects the corporate headquarters to hold records of business world-wide, there would be mass archival storage on the Cayman Islands or in Liechtenstein. In countries where the national archives has a mandate to hold the records of industry or of any organization or establishment within the country, the national archives might be a possible place of deposit. In some countries, however, such as the United States, unless the records of the non-governmental body show the functioning of the government, the national archives does not have the authority to hold them.

Even if the problem of location could be solved, the problem of international transport is daunting. Electronic files can be transported with relative ease (and if they cannot, the matter of carrying diskettes is simple), but operating in many languages, with electronic data recorded in a wide range of fonts, currently represents a major technical problem. Paper and videotapes are another matter entirely. Shell advertises that it operates in 120 countries. McDonald's operates in so many that purchasing power parity can be based on the cost of a Big Mac—with reasonably sound economic predictability. It is simply not realistic to believe that these corporations will move any significant quantity of records around the world—it would not be economic, and for these businesses that has to be the bottom line. Turning to the non-commercial sector, there the funds are usually heavily committed to pursuing the mission of the organization and precious little is willingly spent on administration, for that is just the means to the goal. Unless the information itself has value in pursuing the objective of the non-commercial organization (such as documentation of human rights abuses), it is unlikely to command the resources required for preservation.

Accessing the Record

If the record of a multinational activity is preserved, what is the likelihood that the researcher can gain access to it, in any reasonable time? Again, the answer is discouraging.

The international governmental organizations may have a policy or a procedure, but it is often both arduous and not timely. (One outstanding exception is the Historical Archives of the European Union in Florence, Italy.) The records of the cases at the World Court are closed for 100 years. The International Monetary Fund recently balked at a request for access for official business by an employee of its sister institution the World Bank. Ironically, the closed policy and restrictive conditions of some of the international organizations spill over into the national practice; a recent attempt to adopt a Freedom of Information Act in Latvia, for instance, failed (according to a knowledgeable observer) because Latvia hopes to join NATO and the opponents of the act argued that an open access law would run counter to NATO practices!

Turning to international corporations, the record is opaque. Corporations like Coca Cola have an archives and an access policy; so does the Walt Disney Corporation, some multinational banks, and others. But the records policies of most are unknown.

NGOs also probably present a mixed access picture. Here there is almost no data about the actual access conditions. Let me, instead, give you an example of the archival challenges of the Open Society Archives as an archives of a major international NGO.

The Open Society Archives is the archives for the world-wide network of Soros Foundations. From their headquarters in New York, foundations operate in nearly forty countries world-wide—from Mongolia to South Africa to Estonia to Guatemala. In addition, there are major philanthropic activities in the United States. The Archives itself is located in Budapest, Hungary, which serves as the de facto European headquarters for the Open Society Institute (as the Soros foundation is officially known). In addition to the records of the foundations themselves, the Archives holds by contract the records of the Research Institute of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, in which we find almost every language of Europe and Central Asia; the records of the Index on Censorship, with world-wide languages; and so on.

Obviously, for us fonts and languages are major issues. But so, too, is what to preserve in what format. Because the foundation network is completely networked and dependent upon electronic communications, we are looking hard at the electronic data in the foundations, to see what can be transferred to the Archives electronically and thereby provide a basic portrait of the Foundation's

activities. We also are capturing the electronic traffic broadcast within the foundation network in an innovative electronic storage program; this should give basic outlines, too. We cannot reasonably ship paper or audio-visual records from all points of the globe, yet some records in non-electronic formats are indispensable for providing a picture of what the foundations are achieving. For example, the Romanian Foundation has for a number of years provided grants to companies to take public opinion polls, thereby providing an unbiased source for evaluating attitudes toward issues. The polls are taken by different organizations, and the result is published in a continuing series of hard copy publications. The data is invaluable for research, but to preserve it we have to preserve the hard copy report. Similarly, the videotape of the Roma microlending project by the Hungarian foundation exists only in video format. Books published by foundation grants, documentary films supported by them, and all manner of sound recordings are also part of the legacy.

For us, the mission of the Open Society Archives is to document the foundations and also to preserve information on the period of communism and post-communism in Europe and to document the movements for human rights world-wide. But with the exception of a few other foundations, we are probably a unique philanthropic organization that is willing to consider the historical importance of its records.

What is to be Done?

The issue of preservation and access in archives of intergovernmental organizations has been repeatedly discussed during the last decade. In 1990 at the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Madrid, Charles Kecskemeti, the Secretary General of the International Council on Archives, argued for an archival policy in major intergovernmental systems. This was followed by a paper to the 1995 International Conference of the Round Table on Archives by Liisa Fagerlund, in which she called for "harmonized standards and procedures" and for exploring the possibility of depositing the archives in co-operating archival repositories (such as national archives) "in sites with major concentrations of United Nations system organizations."[3]

In many democratic states, a rock of the social order is the principle that citizens have the right to know what the government is doing and has done—the basis of Freedom of Information legislation. The international monitor group, Freedom House, now estimates that 60% of the governments in the world have a democratic form._ If this is true, then it follows that organizations made up of democratic states should, themselves, have democratic management—in the instant case, a principle of preserving important archives and providing access to them in an open and consistent way. Pressure by member states is critical to ensuring that a discussion of preservation and access goes forward. The goal is democratization of the data.

Unlike the obvious pressure path of citizen to national government to international organization, when we turn to international business we have no such levers. We can assume that business will do whatever it believes good business practice to be, without regard for future research and for history unless it suits the corporate purpose. But we really know very little about the actual situation in the Fortune 500 companies, not to mention such emerging giants as Gazprom or LUKoil. Here I believe the next steps are (1) to survey the actual preservation and access practices in the Fortune 500 companies, giving special attention to the status of the records of offshore subsidiaries; (2) to launch a concerted effort to encourage the companies to use international standards to describe the historic records they do hold and, to the extent possible under corporate guidance, to share that information electronically. Only with some survey results in hand will the research community be able to assess the preservation and access needs.

The records of international philanthropy are somewhere in between the two. If human rights activism uses the politics of guilt, it should be possible to use that same argument with key philanthropies to have them preserve and make available their records. After all, these organizations are or hope to be change agents, and it is important to them to have a means to measure their effectiveness. Records do that.

By suggesting these few activities, I am conscious of the admonition of the Book of Daniel: "Many run to and fro and knowledge shall be increased."[4] I also remember Mao Zedong's wrong-headed idea, as reported in the famous Little Red Book, that "investigation may be likened to the long months of pregnancy, and solving a problem to the day of birth. To investigate a problem is, indeed, to solve it."[5] Survey for the purpose of surveying, preservation for preservation's sake or access for access' sake is not the goal. The goal is, rather, that we take the steps now to ensure that the twenty-first century embarks on the preservation of its history, a history—I am convinced—that will have as a critical component the actions of the multinationals.

[1] Graham Allison, Karl Kaiser, and Sergei Karaganov, "Towards a New Democratic Commonwealth," December 12, 1996 draft, pp. 1-2 (copy in possession of the author).

[2] Dress Code," The Economist, April 19, 1997, pp. 54-55.

[3] Liisa Fagerlund, "Status of records of the United Nations system" (copy in possession of the author).

[4] Daniel 12:4.

[5] As quoted in Paul Theroux, Riding the Iron Rooster: By Train through China, New York: Ivy Books, 1989, p.72.

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