

Archives of the United Nations

by ALF ERLANDSSON

The United Nations was founded and its charter drafted at the Conference on International Organization held at San Francisco in April-June 1945. A child of the Second World War, its name derives from the "United Nations" which fought the Axis Powers during World War II. The United Nations (UN) system consists of many different international organizations more or less independent of the central body. The other members of the "UN Family" are usually called Specialized Agencies, the most important being UNESCO, ILO, WHO, FAO each of which maintains its own archives at its headquarters location.¹ Besides the UN Family, there are other international organizations, of course, not at all related to the UN system, such as NATO, the Nordic Council, The Warsaw Pact, and so on.

EVOLUTION

Even at the San Francisco conference during the spring of 1945, a sort of archival or records keeping arrangement was set up. It might be therefore said that the UN Archives goes back to the very beginning of the organization, but the real start of the UN archives took place in 1946 after the decision was taken to settle the new World Organization in New York at Lake Success.² The founder of the UN Archives was Arvid Pardo of Malta who served as the acting archivist from 1 January 1946 until October 1946, when he was succeeded by an archivist recruited from the United States National Archives. Upon his transfer to another department, Pardo stated in a "farewell" memorandum of 4 October 1946 that he assumed "the ultimate functions of the Archives to be: To make the experience of the United Nations and of other international institutions and agencies, as that experience is embodied in their non-current records . . . available now and hereafter to guide and assist the United Nations, the governments and people of the world in planning and conducting their activities for peace and international cooperation." He hoped that the Archives in the future would be "a centre where all persons interested in the cause of peace could come to study the errors of the past in order to build a

1 UNESCO in Paris; ILO and WHO in Geneva; FAO in Rome.

2 There was, of course, an archives of the League of Nations from 1919, but it has remained in Geneva at the Palais de Nation as a separate holding. See *Guide to the Archives of the League of Nations, 1919-1946* (Geneva, 1978).

better future for the world.” Three years later, the archivist who succeeded Pardo wrote:

The establishment of an archives staff very early in its administrative life was an extremely forward-looking step by the United Nations. Most experienced administrators are well aware of the costliness of allowing such problems to accumulate over the years, and the establishment of a professional archives unit in the first year of the United Nations was taken by archivists and records administrators all over the world to mean that the United Nations did not intend to repeat the records management mistakes of other large agencies.³

It was fortunate for the young archival institution that people with such idealistic views and with a clear understanding of the importance of archival records for historical research was put in charge from the very first. And they seem to have been astonishingly successful. During 1947, a well drafted Secretary General’s Bulletin was issued codifying many of the salient points which Pardo had expressed in 1946. The archives was also provided with sufficient staff so it can be said that it had a very successful start. Organizationally, the Archives was made a unit of the Registry and Communications Division, and a professional archival programme was introduced during the following year.

In this initial stage of its history, the Archives was more a registry office or a documents library than an archival institution. The staff dealt more with the official publications (so called documents) than with records. The formal authorization of the Archives functions was given in the Secretary General’s Bulletin of March 1947 which contained a definition of “records” very similar to the one given in the National Archives Act of the United States, and it provided that no records of the UN could be destroyed without the approval of the Archives.⁴ The same Bulletin also stated that the UN Archives should “establish liaison with archivists of associated and other international agencies and with principal archives agencies of member states, for the purpose of collecting information on records of international agencies or related research materials, and on methods of archives administration, as well as for the purpose of obtaining documents and records essential to the archives of the United Nations”. This provision has stimulated an animated cooperation with colleagues in other archival institutions in general and with colleagues within international organizations in particular. It took, however, many years for this idea to bear fruit, but during the International Council on Archives’ World Congress in Washington, D.C. (October 1976), it was decided to create a section for the Archives of International Organizations within the Council. A few weeks earlier the first meeting between archivists of the international organizations had been held in Paris, under the auspices of UNESCO, where the publication of a guide to their archives and areas of possible future cooperation between these archives was discussed. The ideas that Alvin Pardo had advanced in 1946 about cooperation between international archives have finally been realized more than thirty years later.

After the Archives had received a substantial amount of archival materials from defunct agencies such as the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation

³ R. Claus, 12 January 1949.

⁴ UN SGB/63, March 1947 para. 3.

Administration (UNRRA, 1945-1949) and the United Nations War Crime Commission (1943-1949), *inter alia*, it was felt that its occupation with semi-archival materials or “printed archives” should be terminated, resulting in 1951 of a transfer of the official publications (“UN Documents”) to the Library. Three years later, the Archives itself was transferred to the UN Library which belong to the Department of Conference Services. This experiment did not turn out well, and by March 1962 the Archives was transferred back to the Office of General Services. The importance of an effective transfer (or retirement) programme of non-current records to the archives was early recognized by the archivist and his colleagues. Yet an unfortunate bifurcation of the records operations into an archives management function and a records management function, and their temporary organizational relocation to different departments, seems to have seriously hampered the introduction of an effective mandatory and periodic transfer-system. The result has been that very often non-current files remained without effective control in the originating offices and were not transferred to the archives.

Following a period characterized by very trying space problems, the Archives was moved again, in August 1970, to temporary premises in a Queens warehouse in Long Island City, New York. In spite of an unfortunate location far from the Secretariat building, the move at least gave the archivist an opportunity to consolidate the operations of the archives and to bring its bits and pieces together. A systematic arrangement and description programme was introduced and put into action. In October 1978, the Archives moved to its present premises at Park Avenue South (NY) where forty thousand square feet of space has been placed at its disposition—enough for housing UN records for a good number of years to come.

HOLDINGS AND COMPONENT ARCHIVES

In 1971, an intensive programme of description and arrangement was initiated to bring about a systematic arrangement of the UN holdings. The main categories consist of individual archive groups and subgroups⁵ reflecting the organization of the Secretariat, which is structured as follows: the Offices of the Secretary-General, consisting of the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, the Office of the Under-Secretaries-General for Special Political Affairs, Office of the Under-Secretary-General for Political and General Assembly Affairs, the Office of Legal Affairs, the Office of the Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management, responsible for the Office of Financial Services, the Office of Personnel Services and the Office of General Services, and the Office for Inter-Agency Affairs, the Department of Political and Security Council Affairs, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Department of Political Affairs, Trusteeship and Decolonization, the Department of Conference Services, and the Office of Public Information.

The Secretariat archives are further divided into the Registry Archive Group (RAG) and the Departmental Archive Group (DAG). The *Registry Archive Group* is divided into sub-groups: Central Registry, 1946-1947; Branch Registries, 1948-1954; Central Registry, 1954- . The first Registry system of the

⁵ According to recommended terminology by the International Council on Archives, the original USA term “record group” has been replaced by “archive group”.

United Nations was patterned after that of the British Foreign Office and was set up after the establishment of the Preparatory Commission which met in London between 21 November 1945 and 31 January 1946.

Upon the approval by the Secretary-General a decentralized system was introduced and Branch Registries began to be installed from January 1948. A year after the UN had moved from Lake Success to its permanent Headquarters in New York City (as of 1951) plans were again drawn up for a Centralized Registry system and that system, introduced in 1954, is still in use.

Alongside the registry systems, the various departmental officials in the Secretariat continued to maintain records of their own. As to be expected, some officials did use the registry systems more than others so that the size of the records in these *Departmental Archive Groups* (DAG) vary greatly from department to department. For purposes of arranging and describing these archive groups emanating from the departments of the Secretariat, records have been organized along the lines of the departments within the Secretariat. With few exceptions, most of these departmental archives contain materials that date from the very beginning of a particular department or office.

The Departmental Archive Group arrangement consists of the following sub-groups: DAG-1 Office of the Secretary-General; DAG-2 Office for Inter-Agency Affairs and Co-ordination; DAG-3 Office of Legal Affairs; DAG-4 Department of Political and Security Council Affairs; DAG-5 Department of Political Affairs, Trusteeship and Decolonization; DAG-6 Department of Economic and Social Affairs; DAG-7 Department of Administration and Management; DAG-8 Office of Financial Services (Office of the Controller); DAG-9 Office of Personnel Services; DAG-10 Office of General Services; DAG-11 Department of Conference Services; DAG-12 Office of Public Information; DAG-13 Missions and Commissions; DAG-14 ; DAG-15 Department of Conference and General Services; DAG-16 Department of Administrative and Financial Services; DAG-17 Department of Economic Affairs; and DAG-18 Department of Social Affairs.

Archives of defunct organizations and of still existing UN institutions that have their own secretariats, but do not have the status of Specialized Agencies, are known as PAG (Predecessor Archive Groups) and ROAG (Related Organs Archives Groups). Their group arrangements is: PAG-1 International Penal and Penitentiary Commission, 1893-1951; PAG-2 United Nations Information Organization, 1941-1946; PAG-3 United Nations War Crimes Commission, 1943-1949; PAG-4 United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, 1943-1949 (UNRRA); PAG-5 United Nations Conference on International Organization, 1945; and PAG-6 United Nations Preparatory Commission and Temporary London Office, 1945-1946. The Related Organs Archives Groups are: ROAG-1 International Refugee Organization, 1946-1952; ROAG-2 United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency, 1950-1960; ROAG-3 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); ROAG-4 United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East; ROAG-5 United Nations Development Programme; and ROAG-6 United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund.

6 DAG-15 to 18 are defunct groups, forerunners of DAG-10 to 11.

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL (DAG-1)

Up to the end of 1972, the Office of the Secretary-General had essentially the following archival sections:

Group 1—The Executive Office. This has been the backbone of the Office, and is organized to assist the Secretary-General. Its organization has been very flexible and its scope of functions and responsibilities equally wide. There are three sub-groups: *Sub-Group (1.1)—Executive Assistant, 1946-1961; Sub-Group (1.2)—Chef de Cabinet, 1961-1973* [This sub-group contains all the file-series originating from the Chef de Cabinet]; *Sub-Group (1.3)—Other Officials and Working Groups and Committees, 1946-1973.* *Group 2—Special Political Affairs.* This element deals with matters not entrusted to the departments. The group describes series of files from officials given political or special assignments dating from the earliest days. *Group 3—General Assembly Affairs.* This section handles day to day matters pertaining to the work of the General Assembly and the conduct of its business. *Group 4—The Protocol and Liaison Office.* It maintains relations on behalf of the Secretary-General with delegations and permanent missions of the member states. *Group 5—Papers of the Secretaries-General.* This group houses other personal papers.

MISSIONS AND COMMISSIONS (DAG-13)

This Archive Group is a conglomeration of many small groups originating from UN missions and commissions, and consists of more than 30 different groups originating from all over the world. Among the most voluminous are ONUC (United Nations Operations in the Congo) and UNEF (United Nations Emergency Force).

The United Nations became involved in the Congo from July 1960, and the whole “operations” soon became a peace-keeping effort and civilian assistance programme unprecedented in the history of international organizations. By the end of August 1960, a registry had been organized and guidelines on the maintenance of records issued. ONUG’s archives originate from the following:

- Offices of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, later known as the Officer-in-Charge, and the Chief of Civilian Operations;
- Office of the Chief Administrative Officer;
- Branch offices of ONUC, dealing with administrative and technical assistance matters in the field;
- The Force Commander’s Office and the various branches of military operational matters in the field as well as Headquarters.

The United Nations Emergency Force was established in the aftermath of the Middle East conflict of 1956. Because of the conflict of 1967, the records of UNEF were sent from Gaza to Jerusalem and eventually to New York. The mandate of UNEF I was clearly that of a force to police the peace and thus, the military aspects of UNEF I were predominant. Some records originating from civilian functions were maintained under a central registry similar to that of the UN Secretariat Registry, while other files were kept by the Chief Administrative Officer and his principal assistants or were maintained in some units

such as finance, procurement and liaison offices. The military kept its own records with each of the component functions such as Operations, Military Personnel, and Logistics using a simple numerical system.

Other UN Missions and Commissions whose records are extant are: 1. UN Commissioner in Libya and Council in Libya, 1949-1951; 2. UN Commission for Eritrea, 1949-1950; 3. UN Advisory Council in Somaliland (UNACS), 1950-1960; 4. UN Commission on the Racial Situation in the Union of South Africa (UNCORS), 1953-1955; 5. UN Visiting Mission to Trust Territories in East Africa; 6. UN Plebiscite Commissioner of the Trust Territory of Togoland under British Administration (UNPCT), 1955-1956; 7. UN Commission of Investigation into the Death of Mr. Dag Hammarskjold, Secretary-General, and Members of His Party, 1961-1962; 8. Good Offices Committee and United Nations Commission for Indonesia, 1947-1951; 9. UN Temporary Executive Authority in West Irian (UNTEA), 1962-1963; 10. UN Representative in West Irian (UNRWI); 11. UN Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK), 1947-1948; 12. UN Commission for Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea (UNCURK), 1947-1974; 13. UN Memorial Cemetery in Korea (UNMCK), 1959-1974; 14. UN Plebiscite Administrator for Jammu and Kashmir, 1948-1950; 15. UN Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP), 1948-1950 and UN Representative for India and Pakistan (UNRIP), 1950; 16. UN India Pakistan Observation Mission (UNIPOM), 1965-1966; 17. UN East Pakistan Relief Operation, UN Relief Operation Dacca and UN Relief Operation Bangladesh; 18. UN Malaysian Mission (UNMAM), 1963; 19. UN Fact-Finding Mission to South Vietnam, October-November 1963; 20. Security Council Mission to Cambodia and Vietnam; 21. Mission of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General to Cambodia and Thailand, 1966-1968 (De Ribbing Mission); 22. UN Special Committee on Palestine, 1947; 23. UN Palestine Commission (UNPC), 1947-1948; 24. UN Truce Commission for Palestine; 25. UN Mediator for Palestine, 1948-1949; 26. UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), 1948-1968; 27. UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine, 1948-1951; 28. UN Suez Canal Clearance Operations (UNSCO), 1956-1957; 29. UN Observation Group in Lebanon (UNOGIL), 1958-1959; 30. Spinelli Mission (United Nations Presence in Jordan), 1958-1967; 31. UN Yemen Observation Mission (UNYOM), 1963-1964; 32. UN Mid-East Missions (UNMEM); 33. UN Commission for Investigation of Greek Frontier Incidents, 1946-1947; 34. UN Special Committee on the Balkans (UNSCOB), 1948-1952; 35. Reporting Mission of the Representative of the Secretary-General in the Dominican Republic—REPDOM.

INTERNATIONAL PENAL AND PENITENTIARY COMMISSION (PAG-1)

An International Penitentiary Commission was established at the International Penitentiary Congress held in London in 1872. Besides the organization of the Penal Congresses every five years, with the exception of the World Wars, the two major "institutions" of the Commission were the "Bulletin" published by the Secretary-General since 1880, and the Permanent Bureau established in Berne in 1926. Originally instituted to ensure the continuity of the Penal Congresses, the Commission gradually developed into an organization of wider influence and importance. The purpose of the Commission was

“to collect documents and information regarding the prevention and repression of crime, and of prison administration, in order to advise governments of the general measures to be taken to prevent violation of the penal law and to provide for the repression of crime and at the same time to reform criminals.”

Following the last Congress of the International Penal and Penitentiary Commission, held at The Hague in September 1950, the Bureau of the Commission was liquidated. On 1 December 1950, the General Assembly approved a resolution by which the International Penal and Penitentiary Commission (IPPC) was integrated with the United Nations. Henceforth the work of the IPPC was incorporated in the activities of the Department of Social Affairs of the Secretariat of the United Nations.

Records: Accounting records, 1893-1939; correspondence of the Secretary-General, 1910-1926; and Registry files of the Permanent Bureau, 1925-1951.

UN WAR CRIMES COMMISSION (PAG-3)

The United Nations War Crimes Commission was established on 20 October 1943, and continued its work until the end of March 1948. The Commission's primary task, was to collect, investigate and record evidence of war crimes, and to report to the governments concerned those instances where the material available appeared to disclose a *prima facie* case. Formal charges against alleged or suspected war criminals were submitted to the Commission by the National Offices, along with supporting data and a description of evidence available. The Commission was responsible for determining whether there appeared to be sufficient evidence to warrant the listing of the persons charged as war criminals in order that they might be detained and prosecuted by the member governments.

Records: Summary minutes of meetings; documents; records of the Research Office charge files and related material; periodical lists of war criminals, suspects and material witnesses and related material; lists of war criminals submitted by outside authorities; correspondence of the War Crimes Commission; documents and transcripts of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East; reports of national military tribunals.

UN RELIEF AND REHABILITATION ADMINISTRATION (PAG-4)

The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was established on 9 November 1943 when forty-four nations (later increased to forty-eight) signed an Agreement, the purpose of which was to “Plan, coordinate, administer or arrange for the administration of measures for the relief of victims of war in any area under the control of any of the United Nations through the provision of food, fuel, clothing, shelter and other basic necessities, medical and other essential services.” UNRRA operations came to an end in the latter half of 1948.

Records: Headquarters Office (Washington, D.C.)—The Executive Offices, Bureau of Administration, Bureau of Supply, Bureau of Areas, Office of County Mission Affairs, Bureau of Services, Controllers Office, The Euro-

pean Regional Office; Regional Missions —Records from UNRRA Missions in Europe, Far East, and other parts of the world (in all thirty-three different missions).

UN KOREAN RECONSTRUCTION AGENCY (ROAG-2)

The UNKRA was established by the General Assembly on 1 December 1950 by Resolution 410(v) as its subsidiary body to undertake relief and rehabilitation programmes in Korea. At some indeterminate date, an artificial series of records called “historical files” was created, consisting of selected files and papers extracted from the registry and non-registry series or of copies/duplicates of such records.

Records: these were transferred to the United Nations Archives in September 1960. They are as follows: Registry Files, Project Files, General Administration Files, Personnel Files, Financial Files, Historical Files.

UN CHILDREN’S FUND (ROAG-3)

The United Nations Children’s Fund was originally created by the General Assembly in 1946 as an emergency agency to provide assistance for children of war-devastated countries after the Second World War. Its responsibilities are now to help governments to plan their child welfare programmes and to furnish supplies and equipment which the assisted governments are unable to provide.

UN DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (ROAG-5)

The United Nations Development Programme came into existence in January 1966 with the merger of the Expanded Programme of Technical Assistance and the United Nations Special Fund. The records created by the Technical Assistance Board and the UN Special Fund had come under the usual Archives procedures for the keeping of non-current records since both units were part of the UN Secretariat. With the advent of the UNDP, only certain categories of records originating from the UNDP Headquarters continued to follow the Archives procedures.

The UN Archives is the depository for some archives not originating with the UN Secretariat, while certain other institutions hold some archives or parts of archives which derive from or are linked to the United Nations. For example, important parts of the San Francisco Conference records, including the original copy of the UN Charter, are held by the State Department, Washington, D.C. Also, a collection of Secretary-General Trygve Lie’s “private papers” is deposited with the Norwegian Foreign Office in Oslo, and Dag Hammarskjöld’s “private papers” are kept by the Swedish Royal Library in Stockholm.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH RECORDS CREATORS AND USERS

The first responsibility of the UN Archives is to serve the UN administration and to supply external researchers with sources. Reference service for the administration, appraisal and disposal, description and arrangement constitute

the main workload. In view of the complexity and sensitivity of the UN and its operations, it is not surprising that there is a growing need for a clearly defined policy for the Archives. As suggested earlier, the internal legislation of the United Nations is expressed in Bulletins and Instructions issued by the Secretary-General, and the legal basis for the Archives was first expressed in Bulletins of 1947 and 1948. These Bulletins have grown obsolete through the years and now need updating as they reflect only the earliest conditions of the Archives. One of the most important tasks during the last few years has been the preparation of rules and regulations for the Archives. These were finally issued in 1977.⁷ The most important features are: a mandatory transfer to the Archives of all non-current records; the inviolability of UN records (no disposal without the archivist's approval); promotion of scholarly research and the opening of archival material for the public when records are twenty years old; and the reiteration of the rule that no disposal can take place without the approval of the Archivist.

The most sensitive point in the relations between an archives and its parent organization is how to regulate the paper flow; that is, how to manage all records from their creation by the development and implementation of clear rules governing transfer to a depository of records no longer needed by the originating offices. The introduction of unambiguous regulations and mandatory transfers from originating offices was therefore of prime importance for the future functioning of the Archives. The rule developed prescribes that records which are more than three years old and not necessarily needed by the originating office shall be transferred to the Archives. Before this, transfers to the Archives were based on voluntary agreements.

The archivist has from the start been equipped with the authority to approve all disposals of UN records, but this rule was now been strengthened by reiteration and clarity:

The archival material and records of the United Nations shall be inviolable and may not be destroyed or removed from any United Nations premises without specific written authorization from the Archivist or, in his absence, authorization from his supervisors.

The United Nations Archives is little known to the public, and even most scholars dealing with the history of the United Nations have so far overlooked the very existence of the archival sources by limiting their studies to the official publications available in United Nations Information Centres and Depository Libraries throughout the world. After more than thirty years of service, the Archives now houses material critical to the study of the organization in particular, and of international cooperation in general. It is therefore essential that these holdings be made known to the world of scholars and researchers. Part of the public relations activity is participation in a project to publish a *Guide to Archives of International Organizations*. The objective for this project, undertaken by a working party on archives of international organizations sponsored by the International Council on Archives and UNESCO in Paris, is the provision to scholars "engaged in historical or other research in the field of international organization" with appropriate information while at the same

⁷ ST/SGB/158, 28 July 1977; ST/AI/252, 28 October, 1977.

time equipping these “organizations themselves with fuller knowledge and awareness of their own history”. The UN Archives fully supports this project.

The principle of public access to the United Nations Archives was also enunciated for the first time by the Secretary-General in his 1977 edict:

The United Nations Archives shall promote scholarly research concerning the United Nations and, to that end, will make available to the public the archival material and non-current records of the Organization, in accordance with prescribed regulations.⁸

This represents in itself a substantial breakthrough as never before had it been clearly articulated that the Archives should promote scholarly research. The main rule for public access is a twenty year time limit, after which all records not subject to special restrictions by the Secretary-General are open to the general public. Records that were originally public at their time of creation do, of course, remain open to the public. External access rules define the rights for scholars and others who wish to examine the holdings of the Archives; internal access rules regulate the use of the Archives for administrative purposes by the staff of the Secretariat.

There are different degrees of external access. From the beginning, the United Nations Archives has permitted some researchers to consult its records, but only by way of exceptions to a rule that gave no general external access. Full external access to an archives has been characterized as the “opening” of an archives to the public, and implies that at least some archive groups are made available unconditionally to researchers. It might be useful here to give a meaning to the word *documents*. *Elsevier's* provides an adequate definition: “Les DOCUMENTS D'ARCHIVES sont des pièces destinées par leur nature à être conservées à titre de preuve ou d'information par l'administration ou la personne qui les a reçues ou établies.”⁹ The English translation would, of course, encompass archival material such as records, files, and so on, but in the UN terminology, the word *documents* does not mean archival material. Rather, it identifies the printed or mimeographed output of the Secretariat which represents the official face of the organization and which is the instrument the United Nations uses to communicate with the public.

Up to October 1977, all UN records were subject to restrictions, and none were open to research or consultation by scholars.¹⁰ The legal rules were interpreted accordingly:

All records in the custody of the United Nations are subject to the general restriction that they may be consulted only with the permission of the Secretary-General. For permission to consult the records of any department, application should be made to the Executive Officer of the department concerned. The above restriction does not apply to members of the Secretariat staff who may be required to consult the records in the course of their official business, except in case of specific series of records indicated under “Special restrictions”.

This meant that two types of restrictions had been used—general or special. Records under “special restrictions” could also be referred to as “classified”

⁸ SGB/158, 28 July 1977 para. 5.

⁹ *Elsevier's Lexicon of Archive Terminology* (London, 1964) p. 3.

¹⁰ With the exception of UNRRA records which are open to 1974.

or “confidential” records. These regulations were introduced for purely administrative reasons. The introduction of the twenty-year rule means that records of general restriction, approximately eighty percent of the holdings, are now fully open to the public after the required passage of time. Researchers interested in records subject to special restrictions may apply to the Executive Office of the Secretary-General for author access-approval.

By moving to new and more useful premises, through introducing mandatory transfer, and in opening up holdings to scholarly research, the UN Archives has lately taken a great step from being more of a records centre to being a full-fledged archival institution. Still, the main workload remains service for the parent organization. Most archives groups are “alive” and growing, with few originating from closed offices; appraisal and disposal continue to be predominant activities.¹¹ Planning has now begun for improved “records management” on the office level, for the application of modern technology (computerisation) to archival services, for serving related elements and agencies located overseas, for an oral history programme, and for a publication programme.

Shortly before his tragic death in 1961, Dag Hammarskjöld expressed his thoughts about the records of the United Nations to a friend, who recalls: “On several occasions, during my service with the United Nations and afterwards he talked about the desirability and importance of having a record of what he used to call the inside story, i.e. the background of events and actions involving the United Nations as seen from his vantage point.”¹² Hammarskjöld could clearly see a need for keeping and safeguarding this important information so that it finally could be open for scholarly use. The goal of the United Nations Archives is to safeguard this “inside story” so that the study of it will enable mankind to better understand the human experience.

11 The disposal rate of the United Nations paper-flow is approximately seventy-five percent; about twenty-five percent of the original mass is retained as a permanent record and the rest destroyed. Retention Schedules are devised by the archives in cooperation with the originating offices, and are to be up-dated periodically to accommodate types of records which did not exist when a schedule was prepared. Typically, the major disposal problem is posed by registry files. This is, of course, not a difficulty attached only to UN registry files, for it is something of a universal archival problem. When important and unimportant correspondence are mixed together in dossiers, it is often difficult and expensive to undertake disposal. Since registry files are governed by codification manuals, a problem arises when the manuals have to be revised to reflect the changes and expansions in the organization of the UN Secretariat. This is a well known problem to those who have been involved in disposal of registry files. Initially workable retention schedules for registry files tend to become obsolete very rapidly. The Archives is now testing various possible avenues to effective disposal. One method under consideration is an “integrated” disposal system whereby disposable and non-disposable dossiers are separated right from the beginning of the filing process, at the moment of codifying.

12 From a letter by Per Lind, 23 October 1961, kindly put at my disposal by the late Andrew Cordier.

Résumé

L’auteur décrit l’origine et le développement des archives des Nations-Unies, en explique l’organisation, la signification, le contenu de même que les normes permises par le secrétaire général quant à l’accès public à ces fonds.