

Second Meeting on United Nations Archives and International History

Trinity College, Cambridge, 31 October 2003

Policy Issues: The UN and Information

In his presentation, Thant Myint-U discussed the deepening sense of crisis at the UN regarding matters of peace and security. Widely divergent perceptions of the root causes of this crisis have made it difficult to discuss, in fundamental terms, the future of international co-operation. Thant Myint-U pointed to the absence of an historical perspective from recent debates within the Organization, including a failure to think about previous periods of crisis in the organization's history, and similar debates about the organization's future. This was related, Dr Thant suggested, to a wider failure to formulate long-term strategic plans for the UN's role. The UN often lacks an informational base on the countries in which it is called to work. Efforts are underway to come up with a framework for the use of external information/analysis, in such a way as to make it easily available at times of crisis. This includes a code of 'best practice' regarding archives, which has suggested a programme of rapid declassification. However, Sam Daws pointed out that there are still complex issues to be resolved regarding the declassification of documents, including the need for consent to declassify documents originating from member governments.

Uses of Archives

Jens Boel spoke of the potential value of archival holdings to current debates, and the ways in which they might be communicated. He pointed out that the UNESCO archives regularly contribute a column to the organization's monthly *Courier*. For example, there was a recent feature on UNESCO's early work on education in Afghanistan in the 1950s, which was strikingly close to present concerns. Mr Boel went on to discuss the importance of archives to the corporate identity and institutional memory of UNESCO, mentioning, in this regard, the 'history club' run by retired UNESCO staff members, which publishes pamphlets on a range of historical issues. Finally, referring to a recent meeting he had attended in South Africa, Mr Boel raised the question of the importance of archival sources—of both the UN, and of non-governmental organizations—in

exposing human rights violations. This is an area where UN archives might be of great interest to the public at large, and even to victims' groups pursuing legal or other actions.

Projects/Collaborations

The discussion then moved onto current and potential collaborations in the field:

1. www.internationalhistory.org

Sunil Amrith made some remarks on the origins and development of the Centre for History and Economics' website on International and United Nations History. The website, which came out of the first meeting on UN archives (in December 2002), started in May 2003. From July to October 2003, the website had been viewed over 500 times. Sunil Amrith then discussed the two main initiatives connected with the website: the first is a project to commission studies cataloguing UN-related sources in national and private archives around the world; the second is to develop a research register which would build a network of scholars around the world using UN archives for a range of historical projects.

A number of suggestions were offered as ways to build up the website. Bernhard Fulda suggested approaching eminent professors of international history in various countries in order to raise awareness about the website, and to encourage contributions to the research register. Holger Nehring pointed to other organizations that might be interested in the project, giving the example of Peace History societies in Germany. Matthew Hilton and Holger Nehring both suggested posting a notice on H-Net discussion groups.

2. Proposed Committees

Taking up a suggestion made at the first meeting, various people commented on the constitution of a consultative committee on UN archives. Emma Rothschild suggested that two quite different committees might be needed: the first would be a committee of archive 'users' made up of academic historians, along the lines of the Consultative Committee of the UK's National Archives. The second, coming from within the UN,

would in the first instance produce a report providing an overview of the UN's use of archival and other information, and would include present UN officials, UN archivists, international experts (for example, the heads of national archives), as well as historians.

3. Other current initiatives

Richard Jolly told the group that China, Kenya, and Cambodia have all recently produced documents on the United Nations' role in development policy and planning in their countries, suggesting that this was a trend that should be encouraged. Emma Rothschild mentioned an initiative by the Brazilian government and the Library of Congress to digitise and make available the papers of senior Brazilians involved with the UN; it was suggested that this might be treated as a 'pilot project' which, if successful, could be extended to other countries.

4. Plans/Future Meetings

The meeting on International Archives to be held in Vienna in August 2004 might be a good forum to present this project to a wider audience. The Vienna meeting might be preceded by a further meeting in Cambridge early in the summer of 2004, which would be more formal than the two meetings held hitherto, and would include commissioned papers. In the meantime, the Project on International and United Nations History plans to commission a number of national archival studies on UN-related sources to appear on the website.

The meeting was hosted and organized by the Common Security Forum at the Centre for History and Economics, and attended by: Sunil Amrith (Cambridge); Jens Boel (UNESCO); Sofia Busch (Social Science Research Council); Sam Daws (UN/Cambridge); Bernhard Fulda (Cambridge); Tim Harper (Cambridge); Matthew Hilton (Birmingham); Sir Richard Jolly (UNIHP); Holger Nehring (Oxford); Thant Myint-U (UN); Emma Rothschild (Cambridge/Harvard) and Richard Toye (Cambridge).