

# From the League of Nations to the United Nations: The Continuing Preservation and Development of the Geneva Archives

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## Abbreviations

ARMS	Archives and Records Management Service United Nations, New York
DG	Director-General
DHA	Department of Humanitarian Affairs
ECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
IBD	International Bureau for Declarations of Death
IRO	International Refugee Organisation
League	League of Nations
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODG	Office of the Director-General United Nations Office at Geneva
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
RRA	Registry Records and Archives Unit, Library of the United Nations Office at Geneva
SG	Secretary-General
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNOG	United Nations Office at Geneva

## Introduction

In 2009 the League of Nations Archives were included in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. This designation not only reflects the exceptional value of this documentary heritage as the continuous archival documentation of an international

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organization established before 1945, but also recognizes the United Nations' responsibility for its integrity, preservation, and accessibility.

So how was it possible that the archives of a political international organization were kept safe throughout the growing pains of the 1920s, its steady demise in the 1930s, and its almost entire shut-down during the World War II? And how are the archives of the United Nations Office at Geneva managed in order to ensure that they will be available to researchers in the future?

In order to answer these questions this paper will discuss the historical development, policy, and management issues of the archives of the League of Nations (League) and its successor organization, the United Nations (UN), with a focus on the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG).

From the very beginning of the League in 1919, a registry system was put in place to maintain and circulate the official correspondence and records of the League's Secretariat. A description of the registry system and its relevant policies and guidelines provides an understanding of the set up of the archives. It also helps explain how administrative history determined the scope and contents of the archive collections.

## Legacy and Foundations

### *The Registry System of the League of Nations*

The League of Nations was conceived in 1919 during the aftermath of the tragedy and suffering caused by World War I. The victorious states established the organization, which was designed "to promote international cooperation and to achieve peace and security" based on open, just, and honorable relations between nations.<sup>1</sup> The Covenant of the League of Nations, which constitutes the first part of the Treaty of Versailles, established the mandates of the world's first intergovernmental organization dedicated to peace and was approved by the commission on the League of Nations on 28 April 1919.

On 10 January 1920 the League of Nations officially came into being with the entry into force of the peace treaty. The organization consisted of an assembly and a council, both assisted by a permanent Secretariat, which formed the technical organ of the League. Appointed and headed by the secretary-general, the Secretariat was set up in Geneva, first in the Palais Wilson and later in the Palais des Nations.

The permanent Secretariat represented the civil service branch of the League of Nations and was, in practice, the only direct producer of records. These owe their origin to actions taken by the assembly, the council, the various commissions, committees and specialized bodies, as well the work of the Secretariat. The latter

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<sup>1</sup> League of Nations (1919).

was intended to serve these various entities and was also responsible for administering certain matters. The working languages of the Secretariat were English and French.

The central registry of the League of Nations was established on 30 June 1919 in London where preparations to set up the organization were underway. The registry's prime function was to maintain the official correspondence and records of the Secretariat, and to regulate their circulation. All incoming communications of a fully official character passed through the registry; and all out-going letters were recorded in the registry and dispatched by it with few exceptions.

With the seat of the League in London and the first secretary-general a British citizen, the registry service was modeled after the systems in place at the British ministries. It was a part of Internal Administration and headed by a registrar-general. The first head of service, Mr. D. A. Leak, was a member of the permanent staff of the British Foreign Office and seconded for service under the League.

In 1921 the registrar-general reported on the work of his service.<sup>2</sup> The system he described remained in place throughout the League's existence and was later adopted by the newly created United Nations.

## ***Legal and Administrative Foundations***

### **League of Nations Registry and Archives Policy**

As early as July 1919, the first instructions were issued in the *Procedure with regard to the registration, circulation, etc., of official documents*,<sup>3</sup> concerning correspondence and other papers of the organization. Staff members were asked to adhere "as far as possible" to the outlined procedure to ensure a uniform and consistent practice and thus gain efficiency and convenience in the treatment of official documents. The instructions were approved and circulated in the Secretariat by Secretary-General (SG) Eric Drummond. The following are the main rules that were laid out:

All new papers, duly signed and dated should in the first place be sent to the registry, where they would be classified, entered, and returned to the sender or passed to any person or section indicated by him. Copies of important documents should be sent to the registry. A coherent dossier or file is made up of documents on the same subject and the relevant minutes. The minutes on each individual registered document are placed in chronological sequence. Files rotate among staff

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<sup>2</sup> 29/11929/11929, Summary of Work performed in the Registry of the International Secretariat, 31 March 1921, League of Nations Archives, Geneva. The registry's main tasks concern all activities for the proper filing and circulation of correspondence, as well as replying to information requests, preparation of a daily synopsis, and the general custody of the archives.

<sup>3</sup> 29/520, A.7, 29 July 1919, League of Nations Archives, Geneva.

based on indications, which the minute writers make on the docket sheet (or jacket). The registry is charged with the copying, signature, and dispatch of outward draft letters that require the SG's approval. The instructions also state: "There need be no hesitation in sending the most confidential documents to the Registry."<sup>4</sup> No document can be removed from the docket sheets and no registered paper should be unnecessarily detained in individual custody. The registry is to be the single legitimate home for all the official archives.

Standing instructions<sup>5</sup> prepared by the registrar-general expand on the SG's instructions from 1919 and include a description of the registry with its three specialized branches for classification, archives, and indexing. It is noteworthy that the Archives Branch, responsible for storing the documents in its facilities, also ensured that the action indicated in the minutes was taken by the relevant executing section of the Secretariat.

The standing instructions also provide details on the rules and procedures for each branch and on the circulation of documents according to subject.

A revision in January 1926 reiterated the main functions and procedures of the registry and lists two new branches: The Transiting Branch, which registered the dates for the document's arrival and exit, and the Safe Branch, which "dealt with the very important documents which are kept in the fire-proof safes."<sup>6</sup>

The instructions of the registry service not only determined its functions and tasks at a given time, they also documented its work. They clearly demonstrate the changes that the service went through in order to adapt to an increased workload. Statistics provided with the registrar-general's report show a rapid increase of registered documents, from a monthly average of 1,062.83 documents in 1919 to 3,188 documents in March 1921. In July 1921, an average of 500 documents a day were processed by the Registry Service.

This enormous increase in volume, which was due to the expanding activities of the League and rising document production, continued steadily and only slowed with the beginning of World War II. It not only put stress on the registry's resources, but also required a constant adaptation of the document classification scheme to new activities and changes in the structure of the organization. Classification sections of the registry never completely coincided with actual organization charts and thus some of these sections later fell into disuse, or documents had to be reclassified. In order to facilitate the classification system the divisions were named, renumbered, and reorganized in 1928 and 1933. As a result, the files and their indexes are today separated into three chronological series from 1919 to 1927, 1928 to 1932, and from 1933 to 1946.

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<sup>4</sup> 29/520, A.7, 29 July 1919, League of Nations Archives, Geneva.

<sup>5</sup> 29/11885/11885, Registry. Standing Instructions, 31 March 1921, League of Nations Archives, Geneva.

<sup>6</sup> 29/11885/11885, Registry. Standing Instructions, revision January 1926, League of Nations Archives, Geneva.

The concerns of the time are captured in a report by the registrar-general in a memorandum<sup>7</sup> dated to 15 February 1923. Following a request by the Library Committee, Mr. Leak provides his opinion that all non-current documents older than 3 years should be transferred to the library for improved research results. Prior to transfer, documents of low importance and utility should be separated and destroyed. A definite decision on this question was, however, deferred by the committee<sup>8</sup> as it did not “feel sufficiently confident on the subject.”

This early attempt at reducing the workload for the registry and at establishing an official archives service was therefore unsuccessful and no other subsequent attempts at reorganization have been documented. As Registrar Vallery-Radot's 1939 report demonstrates,<sup>9</sup> the same number of staff treated 52,185 documents in 1923 and more than 90,000 in 1937. The report does not mention any disposal activity carried out by the registry. We can therefore assume that neither the registry files nor the section files transferred to the registry were destroyed.

The League's records and archives were transferred to the UN in 1946 and remained in Geneva. Since 1958 the UNOG Library has been responsible for their management, and rules about access were issued by UN Secretary-General U Thant in 1969. Secretary-General's Bulletin 135<sup>10</sup> determines that consultation of the archives take place in situ from the beginning of the calendar year following the date on which the most recent item in the file concerned has attained 40 years. Exemptions can be made by the UNOG director-general (DG) who can grant exceptions in favor of researchers who are able to prove a legitimate interest in more recent material. A 60-year rule is in place for specific documents from national administrations for files that could injure the reputation, affect the privacy, or endanger the safety of individuals, and for personnel files. Researchers also need to respect national copyright and reproduction rules.

UNOG's DG was charged with the implementation of these rules and work started on the opening of the files. To make them accessible to the public, an inventory, the General Repertory, was finalized in the 1970s and a reading room was set up.

By the end of the 1990s, when most League archives became open to the public, the UNOG Library focused on expanding reference services in the reading room. By that time archivists had acquired extensive knowledge of the collections and research methods. Knowledge transfer among unit staff is actively supported in order to ensure that information is retained and can be tapped in the future.

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<sup>7</sup> 29/26428/20859, Ultimate disposal of the Registered Archives of the Secretariat: memorandum and proposals on this subject, 15 February 1923, League of Nations Archives, Geneva.

<sup>8</sup> C.204.M.120.1923, Commission of Experts on the Libraries of the Secretariat and the International Labour Office, 19 March 1923, League of Nations Archives, Geneva.

<sup>9</sup> S935/2, Archives (Registry), 1939, League of Nations Archives, Geneva.

<sup>10</sup> ST/SGB/135, Access to League of Nations Archives, 26 December 1969.

## Records Management Policy at the United Nations Office at Geneva

Even before the transfer of assets from the League to the United Nations, the drafters of the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the new organization recognized the importance of its documents and defined their special status in Article II, Section 4: “The archives of the United Nations, and in general all documents belonging to it or held by it, shall be inviolable wherever located.”<sup>11</sup>

To manage the documents and archives, the registry system remained in place and some League files on unsettled issues were transferred to the UN. By 1950 all of these files had been reincorporated into the League Archives in Geneva.

As was the case in the early years of the League, the new UN registry had not yet developed a well-defined filing system. There was, however, some control over correspondence, files, and documents while the organization moved from San Francisco to London to Lake Success in 1947 and into the new permanent headquarters in New York in 1950.

At the European Office of the United Nations in Geneva, the registry, together with the mailing system was initially part of the General Services, Documents, Distribution and Registry Division<sup>12</sup> and later of the Conference and General Services Division. The registry was composed of three units for classification, filing and indexing, and for transit and custody. In 1949 most mail was delivered unopened to the individual divisions. Only once mail had been handled and a reply received, were the documents forwarded to the registry. Only a few divisions retained the system of the League, whereby the registry opened and registered all but personal mail and then forwarded it to the relevant division. Also, the registry no longer verified if action had been taken as indicated in the file.

The file classification system was numerical and broken down into the main subjects dealt with per division. This source-based system was changed in 1973 to a decimal subject-oriented system, when UNOG decided to adapt to the headquarters classification scheme.

The UNOG registry service maintained registered records for their entire life-cycle. Inactive records that were maintained in the divisions and units could be transferred to the Records Retirement Service, which also provided access to these records. Consultation of records was usually based on administrative needs, and external research requests were rare. As was the case at the League, an official archives service responsible for identifying, managing, and preserving records of historical value was never set up.

In 1982 the registry service was transferred to the Division of Administration.<sup>13</sup> In the same decade, the UNOG Central Registry system gradually ceased to

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<sup>11</sup> Convention on the privileges and immunities of the United Nations, 13 February 1946.

<sup>12</sup> Internal document 49–14765, Co-ordination of and Co-operation between Registry Services of the United Nations and Specialized Agencies, [1949?], UNOG Archives, Geneva.

<sup>13</sup> ST/SGB/186, Reorganization of the administrative services in the United Nations Office at Geneva, 22 February 1982.

function. Many departments stopped sending correspondence to the registry. Some record series are therefore incomplete today and some are no longer in use.

The record series concerning the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) stopped in the early 1980s, when the Commission created its own registry service. After abolishing the registry in the 1990s, the Commission continued transferring inactive records to the UNOG archives for storage, disposal, and consultation.

By the end of the 1990s, only fragments of the registry services for UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and the Office of the UNOG Director-General (ODG) remained. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is still maintaining a well-functioning registry system and transfers non-registered and inactive registered records to UNOG archives.

In June 2000 a reform of UNOG's registry system was initiated, and responsibility for all archives and records-related functions was transferred to the library.<sup>14</sup> The UNOG Registry, Records and Archives Unit (RRA) was designated to coordinate records management for all UNOG departments and to manage the historical League and UNOG archives. Modern records management principles were introduced and only a registry service for important documents from the Office of the Director-General remained.

Policies and guidelines including **responsibilities and functions** for records and archives at the UN were already issued in 1947. The SGB/63<sup>15</sup> determined the function of the archives and stated that other units had to keep the archivist informed of records, transfer them to the archives, and collaborate with the archivist on records surveys. The Archives Section became the custodian of all non-current and some current records of the UN. The section was responsible for making these records available, advising and informing other UN archivists on records matters, and liaising with archivists from other institutions.

All of the following policy documents confirm and expand the basic responsibilities of the UN Archives Service, the staff members, and the other units.

**Disposal and retention** policies crucially determined the state of the archives. No records were to be destroyed without the consent of the Archives Section. Revision 1 of SGB/63<sup>16</sup> issued in 1948 clarified the destruction procedure, determining that the Chief of Communications and Records Division could authorize the activity. The responsibility for disposition of records was transferred from the Secretariat Units to the Archives Section.

Policy statements and instructions of 1977,<sup>17</sup> 1984,<sup>18</sup> and 2007<sup>19</sup> confirmed this principle and specified: "With the agreement of the Secretariat unit concerned, the

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<sup>14</sup> IC/Geneva/4612, Reorganization of the archives service in the United Nations Office at Geneva, 13 September 2000.

<sup>15</sup> SGB/63, Functions of UN Archives, 28 March 1947.

<sup>16</sup> SGB/63/Rev.1, Functions of United Nations Archives, 14 July 1948.

<sup>17</sup> ST/AI/252, The United Nations Archives, 28 October 1977.

<sup>18</sup> ST/AI/326, The United Nations Archives, 28 December 1984.

<sup>19</sup> ST/SGB/2007/5, Record-keeping and the management of UN Archives, 2 February 2007.

Archives Section shall dispose of non-current records that have no further administrative, legal, historical or other informational value” thereby introducing modern records management principles.

Even today, the UN Archives Services’ retention schedules are still established according to these principles. After checking administrative instructions and guidelines and consulting with legal and audit services, the archivist proposes the retention schedule to the department. Based on mutual agreement, the schedule is then approved by the archivist and implemented with the help of the Archives Service.

Practice at UNOG differed from these guidelines until the year 2000, as disposition was done on a case-by-case basis according to general principles. For example, all files concerning policy and procedure were kept indefinitely and the head of the registry authorized disposal action.

To better understand the rules on consultation of archives, it is important to highlight the development of the policies on **access and confidential information**.

Instruction ST/AI/117 of 1 August 1956<sup>20</sup> was issued to regularize the procedure for the declassification of documents. The Executive Office of the Secretary-General could approve declassification of restricted documents in consultation with the Office of Legal Affairs, the Department of Conference Services, and the substantive department concerned.

Administrative instructions issued in 1984<sup>21</sup> reiterate that restricted records may be declassified at any time by the SG or by his/her authorized representatives. It adds, however, that should no declassification be deemed possible at that point, the records would be automatically declassified after 20 years or be subjected to a review with further declassification reviews at 5-year intervals.

These rather vague guidelines were finally detailed and expanded with ST/SGB/2007/6 of 12 February 2007 on information sensitivity, classification, and handling.

The overall approach to classifying information is based on the understanding that the work of the UN should be open and transparent and that classifications should be used judiciously and only in cases where disclosure of the information could be detrimental to the proper functioning of the UN or to the welfare and safety of its staff or third parties, or violate the organization’s legal obligations.

The bulletin lists document types and subjects whose information content is considered sensitive. Different security classification levels and their identification and marking are defined.

Generally speaking, declassification procedures are separated by classification level, whereby confidential documents are automatically declassified after 20 years, and strictly confidential documents require reviews by the SG or his/her representatives. Further details are provided for information received from an outside source.

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<sup>20</sup> ST/AI/117, Procedure for the declassification of documents, 1 August 1956.

<sup>21</sup> ST/AI/326, The United Nations Archives, 28 December 1984.



Access rights to archives for the public have been described in policy documents since 1947.<sup>22</sup> In 1977 Secretary General's Bulletin 158 stated that UN Archives shall promote scholarly research concerning the UN and, to that end, will make available to the public the archival material and non-current records of the organization.<sup>23</sup> As detailed in the administrative instructions of the same year, the public shall have access to archives and non-current records that were originally public at the time of their creation and to those which are more than 20 years old and not subject to restrictions imposed by the SG.<sup>24</sup> In 1984<sup>25</sup> it was added that those less than 20 years old may be accessed if they are free from restrictions and if the originating office consents.

These policies demonstrate the slow but steady evolution of access rights to UN records and archives for the public. Clear guidelines and procedures concerning security classification and declassification and a rigorous application of the organization's transparency rules for newly created documents will make UN archives more widely accessible in the future.

## Archival History and the Geneva Collections<sup>26</sup>

### *League of Nations Archives*

Today, the League of Nations Archives proper are made up of the Secretariat Fonds, the records of the Refugees Mixed Archival Group (Nansen Fonds), and the External Fonds. These fonds were constituted by different services and are divided accordingly into registry, section or commission files.

Unlike the registered documents of the *Registry Files*, the documents that constitute today's *Section files* had bypassed the official procedure of the central registry and were built up and maintained by the various divisions in the Secretariat. They represent a body of documents whose substance and classification differ for each producing section, as they were produced when some sections (e.g. the Economic and Financial Section) were authorized to function autonomously, or because they kept parallel working files for internal use. Among these section files are, for instance, the "private papers" of heads or even of ordinary members of a section (memoranda, confidential papers, duplicates of correspondence handled by the registry), basic documents of which only a synopsis was registered (material for reports, replies to questionnaires, drafts of mimeographed documents), or

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<sup>22</sup> SGB/63, Functions of United Nations Archives, 28 March 1947.

<sup>23</sup> ST/SGB/158, The United Nations Archives, 28 July 1977.

<sup>24</sup> ST/AI/252, The United Nations Archives, 28 October 1977.

<sup>25</sup> ST/AI/326, The United Nations Archives, 28 December 1984.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Library Geneva (1999).

chronological series of unclassified correspondence. These papers often complement the registry files.

A third class of documents, the *Commission Files*, is defined as files *not* produced by the Secretariat in Geneva, such as the League's External Fonds. These are archive groups constituted by more or less autonomous bodies established by the League of Nations, such as the administrative commissions or units directly responsible to the Secretariat like the branch offices, in order to fulfill administration or arbitrary obligations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles.

### **The Secretariat Fonds (1919–1946, 1,440 Linear Meters)**

The permanent Secretariat was the executive organ of the League of Nations in charge of:

- assisting the assembly and the council, as well as their committees, commissions, and conferences in the preparation of their work and the implementation of their decisions, as well as in the participation of surveys on technical subjects;
- carrying out administrative and financial work;
- the registration and publication of the treaties ratified between Member States;
- material and technical work, such as translation of speeches, writing, and reproduction of minutes and reports;
- documentation (statistical collection, information documents, etc.);
- dissemination of information to staff and the outside world.

These tasks were executed in the different departments, divisions, and services of the Secretariat. From 1939 to 1940, the classification system of the registry grouped the different sections and services of the League of Nations Secretariat into three large departments. Department I included the former Political Section, Minorities Section, Mandates Section, Disarmament Section, and Intellectual Cooperation and International Bureaux Section. Department II was composed of the Economic and Financial Section as well as of the Transit Section, and Department III included the former Health, Social Questions and Opium Traffic Sections, Intellectual Cooperation, and International Bureaux Sections.

The Secretariat archive fonds comprises all material produced or received at the headquarters of the League of Nations. As explained in section “[The Registry System of the League of Nations](#)”, most correspondence and files from the various sections of the Secretariat were handled, established, and kept by a central registry. Many sections additionally created parallel archives, the so-called Section Files, which were managed independently by administrative staff. Loss of files therefore occurred due to unauthorized and uncontrolled destruction, which was effected by section staff whenever it seemed necessary or useful.

Further losses to the fonds were incurred by physical relocations. The archives moved from London to Geneva in 1920 and to the newly built Palais des Nations in 1936. Furthermore, several parts of the fonds were transferred, mostly temporarily, as a result of World War II and the establishment of the United Nations. Another

consequence of the wartime situation was the intentional destruction of certain files (e.g. of most section files of the Political Section after 1933) and of the papers of the first secretary-general Sir Eric Drummond (approximately eight archives boxes) in 1940. The papers of SG Joseph Avenol were transferred to the Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, located at Quai d'Orsay in Paris, by the executors of his will.

The material that was moved to the USA during or after the war has been almost totally recovered. The registry files of the Health Section of the League of Nations, which were handed over to WHO in 1954, have also been returned.

In spite of the losses, an estimated 90 % of the Secretariat archives fonds has remained in its original state.

### **Refugees Mixed Archival Group or Nansen Fonds (1919–1947, 85 Linear Meters)**

In 1920 Fridtjof Nansen—a Norwegian scientist, Arctic explorer and politician—was appointed League of Nations High Commissioner for Prisoners of War. Within 2 years, Nansen arranged for approximately 450,000 former soldiers to be returned to their homes. In 1921 he was appointed High Commissioner for Russian Refugees and played an instrumental role in organizing emergency relief to famine victims in Russia. Starting in 1922 he also dealt with the problem of refugees from Asia Minor, caused by mass migration. One of his greatest achievements is the introduction of a system of legal protection for refugees, which produced the “Nansen passport.”

After his death in 1930, the League created an autonomous Nansen Office for Refugees, which continued the humanitarian relief work until 1938. From 1939 to 1946 the High Commissariat for Refugees under the Protection of the League of Nations took over the work of the office.

Due to several organizational changes, the corresponding files were registered and maintained by different services, moved to the ILO, and returned to the League. Section files were maintained alongside the registry files, and sometimes parallel registers were kept. The archives of the missions, offices, or correspondents of the High Commissioner for Refugees and later Nansen Office in various countries reflect their own administrative history.

After the official closure of the Nansen Office at the end of 1938, its archives stayed in Geneva and rejoined those of the Secretariat of the League. In 1947 they were supplemented by the archives of the Liquidator of the Nansen Office in Paris. The archives of the High Commissioner for German Refugees in London (1933–1936) were transferred to Geneva in 1936. The main part of the archives of the High Commissariat for Refugees under the Protection of the League of Nations (1938–1946) and of the League Inter-Governmental Committee for Refugees (1939–1947) was allocated to the International Refugee Organization (IRO) and consequently transferred to the National Archives in Paris.

### **League of Nations External Fonds (1919–1946; 650 Linear Meters)**

This archival group includes series of files constituted outside the Secretariat—archives produced by administrative units directly responsible to the Secretariat or by more or less autonomous bodies (e.g. the administrative commissions) connected with the League, its specialized organizations, and their committees, among others.

Among these documents are files from administrative commissions and courts of law, (e.g. the Saar Plebiscite Supreme Court, the Upper Silesia Arbitral Tribunal, the Administrative Commissions for the Financial Reconstruction of Austria or Hungary, the Saar Basin Governing Commission, the Mixed Greco-Bulgarian Emigration Commission, etc.). This material also consists of archives produced by administrative units directly reporting to the Secretariat, such as the branch offices at Berlin or London or offices detached for the duration of the war (e.g. Princeton or Washington Office).

Each sub-fonds has its own history and its own special characteristics depending on the institution that created it and on its geographic location. Some are incomplete or missing for various reasons. Smaller archives groups, for example the records of a mission, have sometimes been incorporated into the Secretariat fonds—like the papers of the Mosul Commission—or into larger sub-fonds of external origin. It was also common practice to divide up these archives among various governments in view of the territorial relevance of some of the material. Some groups were allocated to local or national depositories. As an example, UNESCO in Paris keeps the archives of the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation; and the French National Archives retain some files of the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees set up in London in 1939.

Finally, some archives have been lost (e.g. the papers of the High Commissioner in Danzig), or systematically destroyed (e.g. the records of the Tokyo Office, destroyed in 1940).

### ***United Nations Office at Geneva Archives***

With the creation of the United Nations in 1945 and the dissolution and the liquidation of the League of Nations in 1946, the League of Nations Headquarters in Geneva, the Palais des Nations, became the seat of the United Nations Office at Geneva. UNOG archives concern records created by UN offices operating within the United Nations Office in Geneva.

The following file series were used for the registration of documents during the so-called first period of the UNOG Registry from 1946 to 1973: General (e.g. conferences, relations with governments, missions, and other institutions), General Administration (e.g. Establishment of UNOG, UN Postal Administration), Finance, Property and Equipment Administration, Legal issues (e.g. treaties,

privileges, and immunities), Publications and Library, World Health Organization, Information Service, Economic Commission for Europe (statistics, files on the economic reconstruction of Europe, coal, electric power, customs etc.) and Human Rights (the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Human Rights covenants).

The second period of the UNOG Registry, which started in 1974, records 13 file series. In addition to the subjects of the first period, there are series on Technical Assistance, Disarmament, Systems for Information Coordination, and Apartheid. With the decentralization of the Registry Service in 1980, fewer and fewer documents were registered; this continued until 2000 when a records management program replaced the registry system and only the series of the Office of the Director-General was maintained. An estimate as to the extent of the documents lost between 1980 and 2000 has not yet been made and archives transfers are still coming into the UNOG Registry, Records and Archives Unit from divisions and services.

Authorized destruction of registry files was carried out on a case-by-case basis up to 1999. In this way, the files of the first registry period, index category GXVI, Technical Assistance, were disposed of, as records personnel considered them of limited administrative value.

Besides these registry files, archives record groups were established corresponding to deposits of a permanent or semi-active nature. Some examples include the archives of the International Bureau for Declarations of Death (IBD) 1952–1973; the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for World Refugee Year 1955–1960; the transfer of property from the League of Nations to the United Nations; United Nations Headquarters in New York, including papers by the former UN Undersecretary General and Nobel prize winner Ralph Bunche; Human Rights (Projects by country, victims of torture, program for indigenous populations, etc.), Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), UNCTAD and ECE Liaison Office in Germany (1947–1952).

These record groups also consist of the section files maintained by UNOG administrative and other services. Destruction of archives without permanent or historical value takes place in agreement with the originating offices based on disposal agreements and since 2000 also on retention schedules.

Several relocations of divisions or services affected the UNOG archives. When the Division of Narcotic Drugs was moved from New York to Geneva around 1955, its files were transferred to UNOG Archives. These files and those of several other bodies dealing with narcotic drugs were again transferred to Vienna in 1979. Records of the Trusteeship Council, the UN organ for supervising the administration of Trust Territories placed under the International Trusteeship System, which has been suspended since 1994, moved to the UN main seat in New York, and those of the United Nations Environment Program to the United Nations Office at Nairobi. The files of the Division of Human Rights were transferred with the organization from New York to Geneva in 1974 and are still in the custody of UNOG Archives. No known archives losses were incurred through these planned relocations.

## Conclusion

The recognized historic role of the League of Nations as the first experiment of an intergovernmental organization dedicated to multilateralism and to peace work is reflected not only in its political activities but also in its administrative structure and rules. As these are the foundations for records and archives management systems, today's collections mirror the successes and difficulties of the League and its successor, the United Nations.

Policies for records management were established from the very beginning, introducing a records registry system following the practice of British ministries. Administrative instructions for staff members and records services followed. League and UN administration sought to regulate records management by defining responsibilities and processes. However, the steadily increasing number of organizational activities and the growing complexity of global issues, coupled with technological changes led to a failure of the registry system. Early on, League and UNOG services developed alternative filing systems within their offices. Additional challenges to the integrity and completeness of the archives were relocations in times of crisis and disaster.

In spite of that, 90 % of the League's Secretariat files remained in their original state and Nansen Office files are considered fairly complete. External fonds suffered more damage, specifically during World War II, but some important file series were recuperated. Concerning UNOG archives, relatively few losses occurred in the registry files. For other records groups, review and description projects are necessary to facilitate or in some cases enable access.

Today the UN records and archives services recognize the threats to their collections. Disaster planning and emergency preparedness, as well as preservation methods and strategies are an integral part of policies. UN Secretariat rules on retention and filing have evolved and are applied in the different duty stations including UNOG. Informing and training staff is a key element of records management programs.

In 2009 the League of Nations Archives were inscribed on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. This registration underlined the importance of these archives as global heritage and the responsibilities of UNOG as its owner. In concrete terms, it helped to raise awareness and gain support for the need to improve storage conditions at the Palais des Nations<sup>27</sup> as well as widen public access through targeted description, digitization, and online discovery tools.

Digitization not only enables remote access to document content, but also helps preserve the original by replacing it for consultation purposes. The papers of the last secretary-general of the League of Nations, Sean Lester, the papers of the Austrian pacifist, Bertha von Suttner, and the collection of UNOG human rights photos have been digitized and are available through the archives online catalogue.<sup>28</sup> Currently

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<sup>27</sup> 2009 UNOG Annual Report, 2010: 33–38.

<sup>28</sup> <http://biblio-archive.unog.ch/suchinfo.aspx>

a project for the digitization and online publishing of the official documents of the assembly, the council, and the Secretariat is underway and is scheduled to be finalized by the end of 2013.

Taking electronic access one step further, the library's new projects include the design of information discovery tools, such as a comprehensive resource guide to the League of Nations Archives developed in 2011 and made available online.<sup>29</sup>

And last but not least, the UNOG library showcases selected archives in its League of Nations Museum. Open to visitors from all over the world, the multimedia exhibitions provide a visual account of the history of the League of Nations and educate on the progress of UN issues.

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