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Chapter 2

DANGEROUS RECORDS: CONTROLLING THE ARCHIVES OF THE INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE ORGANIZATION

Trudy Huskamp Peterson

In the beginning is the program, creating records as it operates. When operations end, the records remain.

The archives of international organizations formed during and immediately after the Second World War, as diverse as the World Bank and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), are crucial sources for understanding the Cold War period. The United Nations family of organizations has not developed a central archival facility, so researchers travel to the UN locations—New York and Geneva, Nairobi and Bangkok, et al.—to use the organization's records in the custody of the creating agency or its successor. All but one body of records, that is. The records of the International Refugee Organization (IRO) are not with the headquarters United Nations Archives in New York where the records of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA), IRO's predecessor, are housed, nor in Geneva with the League of Nations Archives where the records of the first high commissioner are maintained, nor with IRO's successor, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Instead, they are in France's *Archives Nationales*. Why? It is a Cold War story.

At the end of the Second World War Europe had more than 11 million displaced non-German people. Allied military authorities, UNRRA, governments in liberated countries, and voluntary agencies repatriated millions, some forcibly. By 1947, when the IRO assumed responsibility for refugee assistance, the continual flow of people meant that refugees and displaced persons still totaled between 10 and 12 million. IRO's mandate covered about 2 million of these people, including refugees in the Far East and the Middle East.¹ After four and a half years of IRO operations, by the end of 1951 the majority of these persons had been settled, although some 400,000 remained displaced.²

The IRO went into liquidation on March 1, 1952. The records of the IRO, an important source on the location of the current and former refugees and the agreements made with governments to assist them, needed to be deposited with an organization for preservation. The usual pattern would have the records of a

subordinate unit turned over to its hierarchical superior; for the International Refugee Organization that would have meant the records would go to the United Nations. But that presumed disposition provoked a controversy between UN officials and the representatives of the nation-states that created and funded the Organization, with the staff of the IRO in the middle. The struggle focused on who would have access to the records in the proximate years after IRO's closure, with the national representatives fearful of access by Soviet officials if the records were in UN custody. These early Cold War concerns were decisive, and over the repeated objections of UN officials, the IRO records were transferred to the national archives of France, where they remain. The interests of the United Nations and the IRO's successor UNHCR were ignored, a pattern demonstrating the primacy of the interests of nation-states over the interests of the international organizations they had created.

Historians are increasingly investigating the nature of the archival sources, the techniques of the archival enterprise, and, for government records, their management as examples of state power.³ This "archival turn" argues that the control of access to archives by imperial governments is a fundamental element in the structure of governance. Researchers use the IRO records in the custody of the French national archives, but have not questioned why they are there.⁴ Yet, allocating the records and transferring their control to France sharply reveals the structure of Cold War power, including over an international organization.

The essay traces the debate over the IRO records and its denouement through the archives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the United Nations, the International Refugee Organization held by the *Archives Nationales* de France, and the *Archives diplomatiques, ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères* France. Organized roughly chronologically, the story follows the developing controversy, from an assumed routine transfer of records to a vigorous international argument involving foreign ministers and the UN Secretary-General.

International Refugee Relief: The Early Period

The early twentieth century's waves of refugees brought a series of international refugee relief organizations into being after the First World War. The League of Nations appointed commissioners and envoys to deal with specific groups of refugees; the most famous was polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen, who in 1921 was appointed High Commissioner for Russian Refugees, but whose mandate expanded (1921–30) to include protection and care of refugee groups from Asia Minor.⁵ In July 1938, responding to the mass of refugees fleeing Germany and Austria, representatives from thirty nations met at Evian-les-Bains, France, and created the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR) to "improve the present conditions of exodus and to replace them with conditions of orderly emigration."⁶

In wartime 1943 the Allied powers, including the Soviet Union, established the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration to administer relief and help former prisoners of war and exiles return to their homes, while IGCR struggled

to work out a plan for the displaced persons who were unwilling to be repatriated. UNRRA operated an extensive network of field offices; however, the Soviet Union did not allow UNRRA to operate in areas under Soviet control. At the Allies' February 1945 Yalta Conference, the United States, the UK, and France signed bilateral agreements with the USSR that specified, in the US version, that "[a]ll Soviet citizens liberated by the forces operating under United States command and all United States citizens liberated by the forces operating under Soviet command" will be given special treatment "until they have been handed over to the Soviet or United States authorities."⁷ These agreements led to virulent arguments as the war drew to an end. Although in the immediate postwar period the majority of Eastern European and Soviet nationals did return, Soviet officials continued to denounce the Allies for not repatriating every former Soviet citizen. Writing later about the occupation of Germany, the official US Army publication said bluntly, "From beginning to end, probably the least edifying aspect for SHAEF [the occupying Allied military authorities] of having Soviet citizens of any variety in its custody was the endless shower of carping complaints from the Soviet authorities."⁸

The United Nations Organization, created in May 1945, immediately became entangled in the refugee repatriation issue, "one of the most contentious issues before the UN Security Council during the first few years of its existence," prompting a debate that "went to the heart of the fundamental ideological conflicts dividing East and West at the time."⁹ By that date the Allied nations had realized that having the responsibility for refugees and displaced persons divided between the military authorities of the UK, US, and France, the IGCR and the UNRRA was inefficient and forced repatriation by the militaries and UNRRA was increasingly controversial. A single civilian organization needed to be established that could deal with the whole panoply of refugee problems. The idea of creating such a refugee organization was raised at the UN's founding conference, and it remained a topic of discussion in the succeeding General Assembly sessions. Early in 1946 the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established a Special Committee on Refugees and Displaced Persons, which recommended the "establishment of a specialized agency of a non-permanent character to deal with the problem of refugees," a proposal that led to the creation of the International Refugee Organization. Who would be helped by the new agency was contentious, with the Eastern European countries, led by the USSR, Yugoslavia, and Poland, arguing that only persons who wanted to return to their countries should be assisted as those refusing repatriation were "Fascist collaborators, war criminal, quislings, or traitors," while representatives of other nations insisted it was necessary to assist all refugees and displaced persons. The Soviet and Yugoslav delegates also asserted that the countries of origin of the refugees should take part in the screening of individuals for refugee status and that they should verify the information obtained. As IRO historian Louise Holborn summarized, "Thus it became apparent that the western countries were determined to secure UN protection for political dissidents among the refugees, while the minority aim was to seek out the dissidents and turn them over to the countries of origin for punishment."¹⁰ Meanwhile, when the IGCR's Executive Committee decided in July

1946 that it supported including a resettlement program in the future IRO, the Soviet Union withdrew from the IGCR.¹¹

After nearly a year of debates, the UN General Assembly approved the Constitution of the IRO on December 15, 1946, by a vote of thirty in favor, five opposed, and eighteen abstentions. All the Eastern European delegations (Byelorussian SSR, Poland, Ukrainian SSR, the USSR, and Yugoslavia) voted against. The Constitution needed ratification by fifteen member states to go into force, which happened when Denmark ratified on August 20, 1948. During the interim eighteen months a Preparatory Commission of the International Refugee Organization worked to plan the operation of the IRO and facilitate the transfer of responsibilities from UNRRA and IGCR to it. But the conflict over refugees did not end: as Georges Boris, chief of the French delegation to the ECOSOC, wrote to French foreign minister Robert Schuman, "[A]t each session of the Council, about the problem of refugees," the USSR, Poland, and Belarus delegates "repeat the same interminable speech" condemning "the action of the IRO, claiming the repatriation of all the Soviet citizens from their host states."¹²

The first session of the new IRO's governing body, the General Council, was held on September 13, 1948. The General Council consisted of one representative from each of the member states, a nine-member executive committee, and an appointed director general. The IRO constitution specified that no refugees or displaced persons with valid objections "shall be compelled to return to their country of origin," which meant they had to be resettled.¹³ Eighteen countries became IRO member states;¹⁴ Soviet bloc countries did not join, arguing that the answer to the refugee problem was not a new organization but instead enforcing existing bilateral agreements for repatriation.¹⁵ The Soviet bloc saw IRO's emphasis on resettlement as "a means for Western countries to acquire a ready source of labor and of offering shelter to subversive groups that might threaten international peace."¹⁶ Tellingly, between July 1, 1947 and December 31, 1951 only about 52,000 refugees of the approximately 1.6 million settled during the period chose to return to their former homes in Eastern Europe—and only 1,836 went to the USSR.¹⁷

As IRO neared the end of three years, a period that the member governments in 1946 had anticipated would be sufficient to complete the resettlement or repatriation of refugees and that the IRO's General Council had adopted as policy, thousands still remained to be placed.¹⁸ The General Council told ECOSOC that there would be a continuing need to care for refugees whose placements had not been resolved and "there is every likelihood that in addition to these persons there will be new refugees for whom the very same problems will arise." The members urged the UN to continue unbroken international assistance,¹⁹ and at its next session the General Council members resolved, "The IRO which is a non-permanent organization, is facing a problem which in certain aspects appears unfortunately to be of a permanent character." The eighteen governments of the IRO were anxious to reduce the amount of their financing to the refugee operation and to instead spread it to the more than fifty nations that were UN members. The General Council ended the IRO, after several extensions, and the United Nations

created the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, originally for three years but extended until the present.²⁰

The new UNHCR's mandate was to focus on legal and administrative protection of refugees; it would not take over IRO's extensive network of field offices, from Argentina to Yugoslavia, which had to be closed. Refugees had provided information to the IRO field offices to qualify for immediate assistance and to obtain repatriation or resettlement, and the files contained highly personal information about health, skills, relatives, language, place of birth, etc., and assessments by the agency representative interviewing the refugee. A few field offices closed in 1948 and 1949; dozens closed in 1951. Some offices turned over their records to the host governments, a position endorsed by French officials who argued that these records either should be given to the host governments (except Germany) or, if the state did not want the files, they should be destroyed.²¹ The remaining field offices records were to be sent to IRO headquarters.

Another matter to be settled was the disposition of the International Tracing Service. Established in 1948 based on previous work by governments, the International Committee of the Red Cross and UNRRA, it was responsible for searching for missing persons, establishing fates, and preserving records to assist in the tracing process. It was nominally under the IRO but operated independently in Arolsen, Germany. Tracing work would be far from finished by the expected date of IRO closure, so after much international consultation, the Service was transferred to the Allied High Commission of Germany on April 1, 1951.²²

At the meeting of IRO's executive committee in October 1951, director general J. Donald Kingsley proposed transferring to UNHCR the IRO headquarters records and the remaining records of field operations. The committee agreed, requesting "the Director-General to take action appropriate to the Disposal of Records in accordance with the Director-General's recommendations."²³ The disposition seemed settled; in fact, so sure was UNHCR that it would take over the records that in April 1951 it had asked the International Labour Organization (ILO) for permission to hire Jacques Asscher, who had been the IRO chief documentation officer and had transferred recently to the ILO. In making the request, the UNHCR's executive director told the ILO that UNHCR was going to receive "the bulk of the documentation" from IRO by July 1. Asscher moved to UNHCR on June 1.²⁴

Winding Up the IRO: First Steps

Winding up the IRO was neither swift nor simple. In February 1952, the IRO's General Council created a Board of Liquidation consisting of representatives from France, the UK, and Venezuela. The council then appointed Oliver E. Cound (US) as liquidator, UK Brigadier F.H. Dallison as deputy liquidator, and French ambassador Henri Ponsot as councillor.²⁵ The Board of Liquidation was authorized

to “dispose of any assets, property and records at its own discretion, insofar as there were no applicable directions from the General Council.”²⁶

At its March 1952 meeting, the council members had “considerable discussion on the subject of the ultimate custody” of the archives of the IRO Review Board for Eligibility Appeals, which heard the pleas of persons that the IRO had initially declared ineligible for resettlement. The council emphasized “the possible harm that might be done” to these persons “if their personal files were to fall into unauthorized hands.”²⁷ As the French delegate advised the Quai d’Orsay, “given the very particular and very confidential information contained in many of the individual files” created during the appeals process, the records should be destroyed except those of refugees deemed ineligible. The chairman of the appeals board argued that the ineligibles could benefit from a review by the new UNHCR which might apply “a more liberal criteria” than the IRO.²⁸ Ultimately, the Council decided that only the record of the appeal decision and its justification would be transferred to UNHCR and even those documents would be destroyed when no longer needed for UNHCR’s work.²⁹ The IRO’s accounting records were to be sent to the firm Peat, Marwick, Mitchel & Co. in London, to hold for five years and then be destroyed. Privately, the French delegate told his ministry that the remainder of the archives would be destroyed unless an institution would hold them free of charge, as the cost of storing them at the United Nations would be, he said, “too expensive.”³⁰ The Board announced that it hoped to complete the liquidation process by the end of July.³¹

When the Board was established, United Nations officials in New York and Geneva assumed that the IRO records would be kept in United Nations custody, as IRO’s executive committee had decided. They had good reasons to believe this. First, the IRO had been created by the United Nations and records are the property of the creating agency, a principle respected in international archival practice. Second, UNRRA records had been transferred to the UN Archives in New York and the records of the IGCR to the IRO, establishing a precedent for keeping the archives in UN hands.³² Third, the new UNHCR needed access to the records to carry out its protection responsibilities.

An unexpected complication came from the chief of the IRO’s history unit, L. Michael Hacking.³³ Following the practice of the UNRRA, the IRO had decided to publish an official history, in two volumes of reportage and one volume of documents. A history unit was established in 1950, and part of its work was to organize the archives it needed. On February 29, 1952 I. Paul Schiller, UN Geneva registry section chief, wrote to his superior expressing concern about the attitude of the historian:

the U.N. should try to guarantee, by some sort of mild intervention, with IRO liquidation authorities, that the destruction of historically valuable source material should be avoided at almost any cost. I say this because Mr. Hacking and others have indicated that, since a lot of the record material deals with politically sensitive matters, it might better be destroyed. They support this argument by saying that the historians will make the interpretation of such material in their definitive history.

Two weeks later Dallison, the British Deputy Liquidator, wrote to Schiller that although the financial records and personnel files should be ready for transfer shortly, he was “unable to say” how the historical records “will be disposed of as this decision will rest with the Board of Liquidation, it may be that the United Nations will not be requested to take them over.”³⁴ Dallison’s letter prompted the UN office in Geneva to write to UN New York for instructions. Should the UN press the issue of the historical records?³⁵

Now the young UNHCR entered the debate, its views in accord with the position of UN New York and UN Geneva. UNHCR’s Asscher told the UN Geneva library that both the IRO General Council and executive committee had discussed the disposal of the IRO records and talks had been held between the IRO, UNHCR, and governments during the past year. “As far as the transfer of IRO records to UNHCR is concerned, this has proved a difficult problem,” he explained, in part over the cost to preserve and provide services on the materials, “which has only been partially solved.” A “great number” of files had been destroyed in the IRO branch offices, he reported, while some IRO branch offices had transferred files to the host governments “upon their request.” A “small portion” of the operational files, law library material and some individual case files had been transferred to UNHCR headquarters, but the main body of the IRO headquarters records, “re-arranged so as to fit the needs of the IRO History Unit,” which contain “invaluable information, should in our opinion be preserved both for their interest as archives and for the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.”³⁶

David B. Vaughan, the UN Acting Assistant Secretary-General for administrative services, told UN Geneva on March 21, 1952 that “the Board of Liquidation of IRO and the United Nations have a mutual obligation to ensure preservation of at least selected parts of the IRO records; the method and conditions of such preservation being matters in my opinion in which the Board of Liquidation of IRO would take the initiative.” He suggested using the UNRRA model, in which UNRRA provided “its own funds for arrangement and screening of records to be transferred” and the UN could selectively dispose of any files that it found no longer “desirable to retain.”³⁷ UNHCR’s executive director pressed the case, writing to the UN Geneva office again on April 21 that the “archives of the International Refugee Organization, or at least some parts of them, would be of great value for the work of this Office” and that it was important to keep them in Geneva “where this Office could have easy access to them.”³⁸ UN Geneva forwarded the UN position to IRO deputy Dallison.³⁹ In June 1952 the deposit of the IRO records with the UN still seemed to be a possible if not likely outcome when IRO liquidator Count wrote to UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld: “In order to provide a basis for determination of final disposition of these records, the Liquidators would appreciate information as to what costs, if any, would be involved.”⁴⁰

Meanwhile, worries about the disposition of the records began floating through the international archival community. The International Council on Archives (ICA), the world’s principal professional archival organization, asked Sir Hilary Jenkinson, the head of the UK Public Record Office and a distinguished archivist, to see if he could influence either the deputy liquidator or the chief historian, both of whom were British citizens, to prevent the possible destruction of the IRO

archives. Jenkinson wrote to IRO deputy Dallison, saying ICA's information was "that it is proposed to destroy [the IRO records] wholesale so soon as a History of the organization has been completed," a report he called "alarming." Jenkinson pointed out that just because a history had been prepared the records should not be destroyed: "[T]he uses to which later Research Workers put Archives bear, in the vast majority of cases, little or no relation to that history." He explained that if the IRO had

been established by the British Government instead of U.N.O. its Archives, upon its liquidation, would probably have been taken over by the Foreign Office; and in any case the question which classes of them were to be destroyed would have been settled in a Schedule compiled by the Committee of Inspecting Officers, which is established under Rules made by the Master of the Rolls, and laid before Parliament.⁴¹

No reply from Dallison is in the files.

Schiller, the UN Geneva registry chief, attempted to figure out how much it would cost to transfer and provide reference services on the records. He told his superior that taking the IRO records "would mean the start of a professional archives programme for other records as well," with "long-range values accruing to this administration." He pointed out that the "main purpose of transferring the records to U.N. custody" was "to preserve and make available through a knowledgeable and professionally-minded administration the IRO story." The UN legal department began work on a legal agreement to accomplish the transfer, and by October 1 Adriaan Pelt, the UN Geneva office chief, told IRO liquidator Cound that he was ready to negotiate a transfer agreement. The UN asked the IRO to pay \$6,300 as the cost of transferring the records and \$8,500 for the two-year salary of a person to service the records.⁴²

The Shift, from UN to French Custody

Then the disposition plans changed. On October 28, 1952 Cound wrote to Pelt that the Liquidation Board considered it "inadvisable" to store the IRO historical archives in Geneva. Instead, they were to be retained until the IRO member nations commented on the draft history, then, "having served their purpose, it may well be that they will be destroyed." Pelt asked for clarification. Cound answered firmly that the three Board members believed "that no necessity arises for the History archives to be available to all and sundry for research or other purposes—on the contrary they consider this to be undesirable." The Board was unwilling to agree to pay the salary cost, thought that "mere storage space" should be provided for a period of three years, and believed that access to the records should be confined to IRO member governments.⁴³

UNHCR was stunned. A UNHCR senior advisor wrote to Victor Montoya, Venezuela's Liquidation Board member, that the "High Commissioner considers

that access to these files is of the greatest importance to the work of his Office.” The UN is willing to store the records, he said, but “there appears to be some doubt as to whether the Board agrees that access to these files should be given to the Office of the High Commissioner.” He pointed out “that it is in the interests of the refugees in several countries that this Office should be able to consult these files” and he hoped the Liquidation Board “will agree to some arrangements for the storage of them which will make this consultation possible.”⁴⁴

Worried by the escalating argument, a UN Geneva staff member telexed UN Geneva chief Pelt, who was at UN New York, saying the IRO “says files not available to HCR” and suggested that the storage space for IRO records be made available free of charge and UNHCR to provide staff without cost. Pelt told the staffer to tell Coud to suspend “the exchange of views, whether written or verbal” until he returned to Geneva whereupon Pelt “would like to settle whole question with him by personal discussion.”⁴⁵

Word of the Board’s position spread throughout the UN system. Guillaume Georges-Picot, UN Assistant Secretary-General for the Departments of Economic Affairs and Social Affairs, wrote to Pelt on December 3, expressing his concern for the disposition of the records. He added new arguments for preserving the records: they are “an excellent source for sociological and related studies and research” in which the Department of Social Affairs was “greatly interested”; the IRO records include the records of the IGCR, not just those of IRO; the nongovernmental organizations in the social welfare field would find the records “of great value”; and the records have both “scientific and historical value.”⁴⁶

What had happened? In a confidential memo of January 30, 1953, Pelt told UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and others that he had learned that at a Liquidation Board meeting the “French and Venezuelan representatives, the former taking the initiative, expressed the view that the archives should not be entrusted to the custody of the UN” because of the cost. Pelt, however, thought that “the true reason was the fear that once the archives were in UN custody, access to them might be granted to representatives of governments from behind the Iron Curtain.” The French representative had suggested that the records be given to the French *Archives Nationales*; the future access to them was not decided “but there is little doubt that anyway the HCR would be excluded.” The UK representative, “while sharing the financial argument, made it clear that he could not share the views of his colleagues with regard to the other objection, and asked for time to enable him to refer the matter back to his Government.” Pelt proposed dropping or reducing the cost quoted⁴⁷ and agreeing to a restriction limiting access to the representatives of the member governments of IRO, UNHCR, and the Secretary-General and their authorized representatives. Finally, Pelt observed “that apart from practical reasons in favour of UN custody over IRO archives ... a matter of principle [is] involved.” He was worried that if a UN organization was permitted to “dispose freely of its archives outside” the UN, it would set a “dangerous precedent for the disposition of the records of other UN bodies.”⁴⁸

Pelt’s information was correct. In a message to its Geneva staff, the Quai d’Orsay’s Directorate of Administrative and Social Affairs argued that the historical archives

of the IRO "have no relation" to the mission of UNHCR which is exclusively about "legal and administrative protection of refugees"; that storing the records in the United Nations would allow the correspondence between governments and IRO to be accessed by other IRO member states "without the agreement of the sending or receiving governments," contrary both to usual practice and the intent of the General Council; and that the committee had agreed in November that members would look for organizations that would host the archives. The French national archives would "comply exactly" with the guidelines of the Liquidation Board, including "very probably a clause prohibiting the use of the archives for a minimum of three years and then the constitution of a committee which would be consulted for each request."

Meanwhile, the Secretary-General was "strongly of the opinion that as a matter of principle, as well as of practical advantage for the work of the United Nations" the IRO records "should come to final rest in the archives of the United Nations." He agreed to waive the storage and staffing costs.⁴⁹ Pelt wrote twice to Cound proposing an agreement along the lines the Secretary-General had approved.⁵⁰ Cound coolly replied that "your offer will be presented for consideration" at the next meeting of the Board which was scheduled for late April.⁵¹

Sensing that the Venezuelan representative on the Board was the swing vote between the French advocacy for sending the IRO records to the *Archives Nationales* and the probable British support for depositing them with the UN, Vaughan of UN New York sent an aide-memoire to the Venezuelan government "setting out the views of the Secretary-General in regard to the question of the final disposition of the IRO archives." Hammarskjöld believed, wrote Vaughan, that "as a matter of principle and from the practical point of view of the work of the United Nations, the United Nations should be the depository of the archives of the IRO, a specialized agency of the United Nations, part of whose work has already been taken over by other United Nations organs." The Secretary-General personally sent a demarche to the Liquidation Board, assuring it that the UN "intended to meet fully the conditions you consider essential as to the servicing of the archives, access to them and security arrangements" as well as "to meet the objections of a financial nature."⁵²

Now the draft official IRO history produced by Michael Hacking's unit became a complicating factor. During the first months of 1953 representatives of IRO member states reviewed the draft history; the US and UK representatives rejected it as fatally inaccurate and misleading. At the Board of Liquidation meeting on April 25 the US representative cited false statements, misinterpretations of events, and unrealistic critiques such as comparing the cost of transportation in IRO ships with the cost of commercial transport, while the UK representative, commenting in writing on the second volume, cited issues of fact, omission, interpretation, and emphasis.⁵³ At its next meeting, the Board noted the "formal opposition by two Member Governments to publication of the History as prepared" and resolved that "the present draft of the history shall not be published."⁵⁴ The history unit staff members were dismissed, and at the beginning of June 1953 Cound, at the suggestion of the US State Department, hired Louise Holborn, a political science

professor at the US Connecticut College for Women, to prepare a “condensed History.” Rene Ristelhueber, a retired French diplomat, was hired to collaborate with Holborn and prepare a French translation of Holborn’s text; and French ambassador Henri Ponsot was appointed “Counselor to the historians” and was to handle “administrative and budgetary matters.” As Ristelhueber lived in Paris, the French representative proposed that the revision be done there.⁵⁵

Also at the Board’s April 25, 1953 meeting, Cound reported on the renewed UN proposals to deposit of the archives in the UN library in Geneva with guarantees of confidentiality. The archives, he warned, contain “information that can be used to the detriment of the IRO and its members.”⁵⁶ The UK representative said Geneva would be the best place to guard the archives and that the UN offer was “perfectly satisfactory,” to which Jean Serres, the French representative chairing the session, replied that the preparation of a revised history “implies” that the archives should be sent to Paris where the work will be undertaken and that the free storage there would be an “economic solution.” Insisting with Cound on “the essential character of security,” Serres reiterated the French position that the records should be used only by “people authorized by the government in question” and suggested a ten-year closure and a committee to vet requests for access. The UK representative said he had to refer the question of archives to his government; Serres said, rather presumptuously, that if the UK would agree to completing a revised history that will “imply its acceptance of sending the archives to Paris.”⁵⁷

All UN efforts to retain the archives failed. Apparently UN officials were not informed in advance that on June 10, 1953 IRO liquidator Cound signed an agreement with the director of the *Archives Nationales*, with an additional protocol signed on June 15.⁵⁸ Cound wrote to Secretary-General Hammarskjöld on June 30, reporting that at its recent meeting the Board of Liquidation “expressed the wish that the archives should be entrusted to a member government,” and the “archives have been dispatched” to the French *Archives Nationales* “without cost and under conditions dictated by the Board.” He told Hammarskjöld that he felt “sure you will agree that under the circumstances the decision of the Board is a wise one.”⁵⁹ The Secretary-General did not agree. He made a “formal representation” to the Liquidation Board, protesting that the transfer should not be a permanent arrangement and that the United Nations should have final custody of the archives. Hammarskjöld also sent a strong letter of protest to the French minister of foreign affairs and considered sending a “confidential representation” to the US State Department because Cound, the liquidator, was American.⁶⁰

By the time Hammarskjöld’s letter to the Liquidation Board arrived in Geneva, Cound had closed his office and departed. The letter was passed to the French Foreign Ministry, which held the acting chairmanship of the board; the UN received no reply. On August 1, for internal use, Serres summarized the French position: the archives of the IRO must be preserved as the committee “did not want to leave the impression that the IRO would destroy all the traces of its activity and prevent a real understanding of what it had done”; to “avoid polemics” the archives would be available only to IRO member governments and not to the public until after a “long delay.” Most importantly, the archives “certainly contain documents

to which access by the public is not desirable.” Refugees from Eastern Europe, because of the surveillance of their families behind the Iron Curtain, “very strongly fear any threat of indiscretion” because the security of the families is at stake. The Liquidation Board believed, Serres said, that the presence in the United Nations of “civil servants belonging to the nations from which the refugees left” means that such “hazardous secret” information must be protected from UN use.⁶¹

Half a year later, the UN Director for Coordination for Specialised Agencies and Economic and Social Matters wrote to UN Geneva’s Pelt saying Hammarskjöld had asked him to “take up the matter” of the custody of the IRO archives with the French delegation to the UN. Did Pelt have any light to shed on it? Would it be useful to sound out the Venezuelan minister in Geneva? Pelt advised against it because, despite “the pressure you have tried to exercise at Caracas,” minister Montoya had supported the French position and if approached would likely inform Serres, the French member of the board, “that U.N. is once more on the war-path.” The likely result would be, he thought, that Serres “would probably take his precautions so as to forestall the effect you might achieve through taking the matter up with the French Permanent Delegation in New York.”⁶²

A March 1954 internal Quai d’Orsay memo reviewing both the history of the IRO history project and the disposition of the archives provides insight into the opposition to UN custody of the documents. It argued “that these documents were owned by 16 [*sic*] member states of the IRO not the United Nations as a whole”; that the content of the records should not harm the refugees and therefore the preservation of the archives “should be surrounded by particular precautions.” In addition to denying UN ownership, the memorandum argued that the Liquidation Board had “no power” over the archives as the correspondence of governments should not be made public without the consent of the originator. The records had not been screened and documents expunged, the writer complained; it was “certainly not desirable” to permit access by the public and by non-IRO member states. “We know the tendentious comments of the Soviets and Satellite States which thoroughly attack the ‘slave traffic’” which the IRO was said to have facilitated; these states “are masters in manufacturing texts.” It concluded, “It therefore seems that, if the United Nations began to get their hands on the historical archives to put them without discernment or control at the disposal of all the member states of the United Nations,” then the member states of the IRO would have had to be consulted in advance and allowed to determine which of the records they would “desire to keep or destroy.”⁶³

The Denouement

The Board of Liquidation’s agreement with the *Archives Nationales* transferred to it all the historical records of the IRO, with the exception of the small body of records transferred to UNHCR and an even smaller quantity to the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, the predecessor to the UN’s International Organization for Migration. The records in France were entirely closed for ten

years, from July 1, 1953. During the closed period the records could be used by the IRO historians and by IRO member governments if an “ad hoc Committee, consisting of a Member of the French Foreign Office, a Representative of the *Archives Nationales* and a Diplomatic Representative of the Government requesting the documents” would agree to the access by the government “for its own use only.” If the document(s) requested concerned another IRO government, the ad hoc committee was required to include “a Diplomatic Representative of the Government concerned with the documents requested.”⁶⁴ No access was permitted for the UN, UNHCR, or nongovernmental refugee organizations. After June 30, 1963 the records could be made available to the public “in such manner and under such rules as the *Archives Nationales* may determine in agreement with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.”

A little more than a year after the records were shipped to Paris, the UNHCR’s US office obtained the records of the Washington office of the IRO and its Preparatory Commission. Instead of transferring them to the *Archives Nationales*, UNHCR sent them to the United Nations Archives in New York, with the restriction that access was limited to persons authorized in writing by the UNHCR Representative in the United States. Decades later, in 2001 the records of IRO’s branch in Greece, including about 3,000 individual case files, were found in the UNHCR branch office in Athens and transferred to the UNHCR archives.⁶⁵ These transfers have left the IRO records divided between Paris, Geneva, and New York.

Conclusion

Why did the members of the Board of Liquidation feel so strongly that the Soviets had to be kept out of the files? And why did the board want to exclude the UN, to the point of even denying access to the staff of its UNHCR successor?

Clear motivation is not often found in records. What the international correspondence about the IRO archives shows is repeated references to “security.” The chaos of the postwar period had crystallized a Western belief in the principle of non-refoulement—that there should be no forced repatriation to an area where the refugee would suffer persecution.⁶⁶ The fate of persons repatriated unhappily and the cases of returnees killed or sent to labor camps were known to representatives of all the IRO member states. Liquidation Board members appeared worried that Soviet agents would use the information in the files to locate persons who had fled from Eastern Europe and refused to return home, harass them or their families, blackmail them or worse. Ever since the end of the war, refugees had been “disappearing from streets,” presumably kidnapped by Soviet agents. French minister Serres would have been aware of the incident in November 1947 when three French-born children had been kidnapped and held in the Soviet Union’s camp near Paris; French police had freed the captives.⁶⁷ Unlike the US and UK zones of occupation, in the French zone the Soviet representatives remained until the very end of IRO’s life, making the French acutely aware of the Soviet demands for repatriation.⁶⁸

Understanding the fear of blackmail and forced repatriation, the desire to keep the records out of the hands of the United Nations staff is clearer. Although the Soviet Union did not participate in the IRO, it was a member of the UN and its nationals were UN staff members. Throughout the Cold War, the West harbored a suspicion that UN employees from the Soviet Union were Soviets first and international civil servants second. If the records of the IRO were available to the UN staff members, they would be available to its personnel from Eastern bloc countries. Furthermore, in 1952 it was as yet untested whether the ambassadors and ministers accredited to the United Nations could demand access to records of UN operations, both current and completed. Placing the IRO records with the UN would have opened the possibility that they could be scoured both by UN staff members from Eastern bloc countries and by those diplomatic delegations.

Two other factors seem to have been at play in the disposition decision. First, in their insistence on revising the draft history, the United States and UK were seriously concerned that the organization not be misunderstood. Soviet officials publicly charged that the IRO was preventing Soviet citizens from repatriating; IRO member states wanted to provide no opportunity for the Soviets to cherry-pick the records and find ones that could be misinterpreted to validate their argument. The draft history showed the representatives of the IRO member nations what might be misconstrued through a subjective reading of the records. As Serres of France observed, "The unfortunate affair of the history has emphasized the precautions that should be taken against improper use of the documents."⁶⁹ This was especially important, the United States said, because in the autumn of 1953 the UN General Assembly would be discussing the future of refugee work and it would be "unfortunate to have this discussion take place on the basis of interpretations of IRO's work which fail to reflect the common judgment of the Member Governments of the IRO. Only confusion would result."⁷⁰

Second, France repeatedly argued that the documents sent to the IRO from a government remained the property of that government, which therefore was the only body that could decide whether the item could be seen by any others—in other words, sovereignty of the government over its documents. Although public belief in international organizations was at one of its highest points during the immediate postwar years, as demonstrated by the continued founding of those organizations after the war, the insistence on national control of the records trumped the authority given to an international organization to manage its records. The United Nations might have been created by the nations assembled, but it could not be trusted by the nations to protect their sovereign interests.

Put simply, distrust between the great powers East and West characterized the early Cold War, and the fate of the IRO archives was determined by it. The story of the IRO archives is a reminder that preservation of and access to archives reflects the times in which they were created, maintained, transferred to an archive, or destroyed. The fact that so many serious people were willing to destroy the IRO records and to prohibit access to them, ignoring the usual principles of succession of archives, should give us all pause. Members of the historical profession left no written record of having tried to influence the disposition of the IRO archives and

the attempts by archivists were ineffective. IRO records were dispersed; some were destroyed.

Did the placement of the records matter in the long run? UNHCR went about assisting refugees without access to the records, and there is no indication that the work was made appreciably harder. The records were opened at the *Archives Nationales* at the designated time, and researchers use them there. No other UN bodies created during the Cold War deposited their records outside the custody of the United Nations, so the IRO records disposition was not as precedent-setting as some UN officials feared. The deposit of the IRO records with the government of France is a lasting archival anomaly of the Cold War.

Notes

- 1 Louise W. Holborn, *The International Refugee Organization: A Specialized Agency of the United Nations: Its History and Work 1946–1952* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 20, 171 (hereafter Holborn, *IRO*).
- 2 Mark Cutts, ed., *The State of the World's Refugees: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17.
- 3 See, for prominent examples, Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995); and articles in the special issue of *Archival Science*: “‘To go beyond’: Towards a Decolonial Archival Praxis,” June 2019, <https://link.springer.com/journal/10502/volumes-and-issues/19-2> (accessed February 26, 2024).
- 4 The literature on refugees during the Cold War is too voluminous to cite comprehensively, but see *Itinerario* (2022) 46, Special issue 2, “Forced Migration and Refugee Resettlement in the Long 1940s: An Introduction to Its Connected and Global History”; Megan Bradley, Laura Madokoro, Merve Erdilment, and Christopher Chanco, “Whither the Refugees? International Organisations and ‘Solutions’ to Displacement, 1921–1960,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 41 (2022): 159–95; and Gerard Daniel Cohen, *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 5 Holborn, *IRO*, 5–6.
- 6 “Chairman of the American Delegation ([Myron C.] Taylor) to the Secretary of State,” July 14, 1938, *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1938, General, Vol. 1*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1938v01/d736> (accessed November 27, 2023).
- 7 “Agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union Concerning Liberated Prisoners of War and Civilians,” February 11, 1945, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, Conferences at Malta and Yalta*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv01/d526> (accessed November 26, 2023).
- 8 Earl F. Ziemke, *The US Army in the Occupation of Germany 1944–1946* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1990), 287–88.
- 9 Cutts, *The State of the World's Refugees*, 16.
- 10 Holborn, *IRO*, 38.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 23.

- 12 Memorandum, Georges Boris to Robert Schuman, "No. 150 Rapport de l'Organisation Internationale pour les Réfugiés," March 4, 1949, Nations Unies et Organisation Internationales, S.50.3.2 Organisation des Nations Unies, 2 Organisation internationale des réfugiés 1948–1952," box 296, Archives diplomatiques, ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères France (hereafter S.50.3.2, AD France).
- 13 Constitution of the International Refugee Organization, *United Nations—Treaty Series*. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b37810.html> (accessed November 27, 2023).
- 14 The countries were the United States, Canada, Guatemala, France, the Dominican Republic, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, China, Belgium, Iceland, Australia, Venezuela, Luxembourg, Denmark, Italy, and Switzerland.
- 15 Louise Holborn, "The Problem of Refugees," *Current History* 38, no. 226 (June 1960): 342–46, https://www.jstor.org/stable/45310458?read-now=1&seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents (accessed July 30, 2023).
- 16 Cutts, *The State of the World's Refugees*, 17.
- 17 Holborn, *IRO*, 363.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 19 Memorandum from the General Council of the IRO to ECOSOC, General Council Third Session June 28–July 8, 1949, reprinted in Holborn, *IRO*, 727–29.
- 20 Resolutions, General Council Fourth Session October 11–20, 1949, reprinted in Holborn, *IRO*, 731.
- 21 Holborn, *IRO*, 493–514.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 329–38.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 754. UNHCR had planned to acquire approximately 15,000 ITS dossiers but had not isolated them by the time of transfer and ultimately did not get the files.
- 24 John Alexander to W. Caldwell, April 11, 1951, Jacques Asscher personnel file, Records of the High Commissioner for Refugees.
- 25 IRO Press Release No. 245, February 15, 1952, "Oliver E. Cound," Series 3 Individual Personnel Records, Fonds 3 Records of the International Refugee Organization, UNHCR Archives. Cound was a retired career army officer from El Paso, Texas, who had joined IRO in 1948 as director in Italy. "Statement of Service of Oliver E. Cound," February 23, 1943, and memorandum, "Legion of Merit," February 23, 1943, both at US Army Heritage and Education Center, <https://www.armyheritage.org/programs/research/> (accessed November 27, 2023). "Compte-rendu de la 11^{ème} session du comité exécutif et de la IX^{ème} session du conseil général de l'O.I.R.," February 1952, S.50.3.2 AD France.
- 26 "International Refugee Organization." *International Organization*.
- 27 "Compte-rendu de la 11^{ème} session du comité exécutif et de la IX^{ème} session du conseil général de l'O.I.R.," February 1952, S.50.3.2 AD France.
- 28 Item no. 153, Stéphane Hessel from French delegation in Geneva, February 21, 1952, S.50.3.2 AD France.
- 29 "Compte-rendu de la 11^{ème} session du comité exécutif et de la IX^{ème} session du conseil général de l'O.I.R.," February 1952.
- 30 Item no.153, Stéphane Hessel.
- 31 I. Paul Schiller to F.R. Hapgood, "Preliminary Report on Transfer of IRO Records," February 29, 1952, GI 12/1/9, Fonds 4 Records of the United Nations office in Geneva, UNHCR Archives (hereafter GI 12/1/9 UNHCR 04).
- 32 "Transfer to the United Nations of the Residual Assets and Activities of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration: Report by the Secretary-General,"

- A/665, October 4, 1948, <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/transfer-united-nations-residual-assets-and-activities-united-nations-relief-and> (accessed November 27, 2023); Holborn, *IRO*, 58–9.
- 33 Separately, R.L. Coigny, former director of the IRO health division, was hired in 1952 to write a “narrative on the medical aspects of the I.R.O. operations.” The complicated publication story is found in “History Medical & History Unit,” AJ43/1176, Records of the International Refugee Organization, *Archives nationales de France* (hereafter IRO AN).
 - 34 I. Paul Schiller to F.R. Hapgood, “Preliminary Report on Transfer of IRO Records,” February 29, 1952; F.H. Dallison to A.D. Meurig Evans, March 10, 1952, GI 12/1/9 UNHCR 04.
 - 35 W. Moderow to D.B. Vaughan, March 12, 1952, *ibid*.
 - 36 J. Asscher to Mr. Field, “Disposal of Records of the International Refugee Organization,” n.d. but mid-March 1952, *ibid*.
 - 37 D.B. Vaughan to W. Moderow, “Records of the International Refugee Organization,” March 21, 1952; *ibid*.
 - 38 J.A. Alexander to A.D. Meurig Evans, “Records of the International Refugee Organization,” April 21, 1952, *ibid*.
 - 39 A.D. Meurig Evans to F.H. Dallison, April 28, 1952, *ibid*.
 - 40 Oliver E. Cound to the Secretary-General, June 24, 1952, *ibid*.
 - 41 Hilary Jenkinson to Brigadier Dallison, July 14, 1952; Edward Carter to Sir Hilary Jenkinson, July 22, 1952, “Correspondence,” ROAG-1 International Refugee Organization—Dead Files (Accession and Disposal Inventory and Other Finding Aids), Records of the Archives, United Nations Archives.
 - 42 I. Paul Schiller to F.R. Hapgood, “Transfer of IRO Records,” August 12, 1952, GI 12/1/9 UNHCR 04.
W. Moderow to S. Lall, August 27, 1952, “Records of the International Refugee Organization,” S. Lall to A. Pelt, “Question of Agreement between the International Refugee Organization and the United Nations relating to the Transfer of IRO Archives,” A. Pelt to The Secretary-General, “Arrangements for Transfer of Records of the International Refugee Organization,” October 1, 1952, A. Pelt to Oliver E. Cound, October 2, 1952, all GI 12/1/9 UNHCR 04. IRO had the money. According to Holborn, at the end of liquidation there was \$80,000 unspent in the personnel account, and the disposal of assets brought in over \$5 million. Holborn, *IRO*, 566–67.
 - 43 Letter, Oliver E. Cound to A. Pelt, October 28, 1952, A. Pelt to O.E. Cound, October 30, 1952; Oliver E. Cound to A. Pelt, November 12, 1952, GI 12/1/9 UNHCR 04.
 - 44 M. Pages to Victor Montoya, November 20, 1952, *ibid*.
 - 45 Lethbridge to Pelt, November 18, 1952, Pelt to Lethbridge, 21/11/1952, *ibid*.
 - 46 Guillaume Georges-Picot to A. Pelt, “Archives of the International Refugee Organization,” December 3, 1952, *ibid*.
 - 47 Pelt’s deputy objected to providing free service and space. Pelt answered, “As long as we were considering the problem on purely administrative grounds I fully share the arguments. However, we are now faced with an entirely new situation, viz. possible transfer of the IRO archives to the national archives of one particular government for the purpose of keeping them out of the hands of an U.N. agency. Thus the matter has become a political issue which requires to be handled in a very different way as compared to the one followed so far.” A.D. Meurig Evans to Pelt, “I.R.O. Archives,” February 9, 1953, with Pelt annotation, GI 12/1/9 UNHCR 04.
 - 48 Confidential memo, A. Pelt to The Secretary-General, “I.R.O. Archives,” January 30, 1953, GI 12/1/9 UNHCR 04.

- 49 David B. Vaughan to A. Pelt, "I.R.O. Archives," February 11, 1953, GI 12/1/9 UNHCR 04.
- 50 A. Pelt to O.E. Cound, March 17, 1953, with attached draft Aide-Memoire, *ibid.*
- 51 Oliver E. Cound to A. Pelt, March 19, 1953, *ibid.*
- 52 Martin Hill to Adrien Pelt, March 31, 1953, enclosing Guillaume Georges-Picot to Santiago Perez-Perez and aide-memoire, both of March 30, 1953; Dag Hammarskjöld to O.E. Cound, April 23, 1953, *ibid.*
- 53 For US and UK objections to the drafts, see George L. Warren to Victor Montoya, January 26, 1953, and J.C. Wardrop to Colonel O. Cound, May 20, 1953, AJ43/1176, IRO AN; minutes, Board of Liquidation, April 28, 1953, S.50.3.2 AD.
- 54 Resolution 12 of Terminating the Work of the History Unit, Seventh session, May 4, 1953, S.50.3.2 AD France. For a critical assessment of the US and UK opposition as "a fight about power, prestige, and the production of knowledge" in the context of the Cold War, see Sebastian Huhn, "Rethinking the Postwar International Migration Regime from the Global South: Venezuela in a Global History of White Immigration," *Itinerario* 46 (2022): 214–32, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/itinerario/article/rethinking-the-postwar-international-migration-regime-from-the-global-south-venezuela-in-a-global-history-of-white-immigration/A4B10F8571E2443AC868A7FA38135A64> (accessed February 21, 2024).
- 55 M. Serres to Oliver E. Cound, June 13, 1953, AJ43/1176, IRO AN.
- 56 "AS-Comitte de liquidation de l'OIR," May 8, 1953, S.50.3.2 AD France.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 Agreement, Disposition of Archives, *The Archives Nationales of France*, and Protocol Additional, June 10, 12, and 15, 1953, GI 12/1/9 UNHCR 04. On June 10 Cound wrote to Serres that "as space is not limited all the files [will] be transferred." Cound to Serres, June 10, 1953, IRO AN.
- 59 Oliver E. Cound to Dag Hammarskjöld, June 30, 1953, GI 12/1/9 UNHCR 04.
- 60 Dag Hammarskjöld to Vincent Broustra, July 20, 1953; Dag Hammarskjöld to Oliver E. Cound, September 25, 1953; A. Pelt to The Secretary-General, July 9, 1953, all in GI 12/1/9 UNHCR 04.
- 61 Note pour Monsieur Broustra, a.a.—Archives de l'O.I.R., August 1, 1953, S.50.3.2 AD France. Serres also noted that UNHCR had been "incapable" of sorting out the dossiers of the displace at the International Tracing Service.
- 62 Martin Hill to Adriaan Pelt, February 2, 1954, and response, A. Pelt to Martin Hill, February 9, 1954, *ibid.*
- 63 "Note A.S.—Archives historiques de l'O.I.R.," March 22, 1954, S.50.3.2 AD France.
- 64 Agreement, Disposition of Archives, *The Archives Nationales of France*, and Protocol Additional, June 10, 12, and 15, 1953, GI 12/1/9 UNHCR 04.
- 65 UNHCR Archives, Description Fonds 3, Records of the International Refugee Organization, <http://adlib-ras.unhcr.org/ais5/Details/archive/110000132> (accessed July 30, 2023).
- 66 W.R. Smyser, *Refugees: Extended Exile* (New York: Praeger and The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1987), 7.
- 67 Mark Wyman, *DPs: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945–1951* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 75–6.
- 68 Holborn, *IRO*, 344.
- 69 "AS-Comitte de liquidation de l'OIR," May 8, 1953. S.59.3.2 AD France.
- 70 George L. Warren to Colonel Oliver E. Cound, January 30, 1953, S.59.3.2 AD France.