

**INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON ARCHIVES
SECTION ON ARCHIVES AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

**COMPREHENSIVE REPORT ON THE “IMPORTANCE OF CASUALTY RECORDING FOR
THE PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS”**

Comments submitted by the Section on Archives and Human Rights,
International Council on Archives, 24 February 2023

The International Council on Archives [ICA], an international association created in 1948 to promote the development of archives, with advisory status to UNESCO in the field of archives and documentary heritage, commends the preparation of a comprehensive report by the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the “Importance of casualty recording for the promotion and protection of Human Rights” [Resolution 50/11 of the Human Rights Council]

Supporting this initiative, the International Council on Archives, informed by the work of its Section on Archives and Human Rights [SAHR], is pleased to share experiences and recommendations that relate to archives in the context of casualty recording.

Records on casualties of violent conflict, be it quantitatively and qualitatively, have long been a central part in dealing with violent pasts. To furnish reliable and authentic casualty records influences the public discussion on the nature of the atrocity, shape the quest for justice in trials and reparation efforts and give the survivors an indispensable dimension in their search for truth. Archives hold these types of records post-conflict and guarantee their authenticity so they can be evidence and proof of the human toll, which in turn shapes the various transitional justice mechanisms after conflict and the efforts of human rights protection.

Memorialisation of atrocities is an essential part of post-conflict mechanisms. Respect for the victims and non-recurrence are central goals of these efforts. Access to records of a violent conflict, specifically the casualty records, is essential especially when the scale of atrocity is contested or denied.

Post-conflict Lessons

- In many conflict scenarios, independent from outside efforts of recording, the records of the acting bureaucracies became proof of the dimensions of casualties. Especially in contested scenarios the records, often in combination with historic sites, deliver continuous proof when political powers work to deny or diminish the atrocities. The records of the archive at the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial and museum site for example play a central role in the fight against holocaust denial, like many of the other Holocaust sites with their archives. While the numbers of murdered are unfathomably high, they also are an integral part of the dimension and the memory, as numbers signify the extent of contempt for human life.
- To further strengthen the undeniability of the holocaust and its horrific numbers, a great many state and national archives (EAG, EBNA) have aligned themselves for example with this goal through their collaboration with the International Holocaust

Remembrance Alliance who in turn welcomes the ever-increasing access to records as it strengthens memorialisation and fights Holocaust denial.

- At the Srebrenica genocide memorial site in Potočari Bosnia-Herzegovina an archive of records on those massacred and audio-visual records of the massacre was started in 2021 as a response to increased efforts of denial of the 1995 massacre. The archive as an institutional form is meant to introduce undeniable evidence at the historic site of the atrocity with a particular emphasis on the number of casualties.
- Longstanding memorialisation efforts strengthen human rights and guarantees of non-recurrence. The Tuol Sleng Museum and the DC-Cam archive use the victims' photographic shots of the security police as evidence of the 5.200 tortured and murdered prisoners at the site and the million more all over the country. The visual evidence of a single causality enhances the documented numbers recorded.
- The lack of casualty numbers can extend the pain and conflict over the period of violence. In Argentina, the CONADEP, the official commission after the end of dictatorship to examine the numbers of disappeared, put the casualty figure at 8.961, estimates of the true extend of the disappeared go to 30.000. The lack of records to determine the actual number of the disappeared creates to this day a painful debate.
- SAHR is mid-way through a project locating the archives of those national Truth Commissions which have completed their work. Twenty five such archives have already been identified and they will prove invaluable in locating casualties. In the context of this response, the South African History Archive in Johannesburg [SAHA] which holds the anti-apartheid movement's documents, and some of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission documents for South Africa and the Genocide Archive of Rwanda / Kigali should also be mentioned.
- Numbers are a crucial tool in the fight against denialism. Many archives, often together with historic sites, stand for the fight for truth, be it in Srebrenica or Kigali, Auschwitz or Buenos Aires.

Considerations during Conflict

- Given the roles (archival) records hold for the post-conflict mechanisms in the search for justice, truth and reparations, archives and registries need special protection in war zones.
- Parties to the conflict should be committed to and implicated in the protection of documentation and records of the conflict
- Institutional conflict observers and mediators should accept the protection of archives and records as an integral part of their brief

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Comprehensive Report should:

- Refer explicitly to useful archival practices such as chain of custody, context of record, description of collections and organisation for future use as essential tools for casualty recording.

- Encourage agencies to use archivists and archive repositories as practical resources (1) for the many efforts relating to casualty recording (2) as potential repositories of gathered data and (3) as help to guide the long-term collection of such data.
- Acknowledge that keeping casualty recordings safe and authentic is an essential part of good practice. Casualty recording is an effort with a long-term view as every conflict needs a factual base for the memory of generations to come. Time and again, the numbers of casualties in a conflict belie attempts at playing them down.
- Emphasise that access to such recordings, with care to respect privacy laws and victims' wishes, needs to be organized and is part of a long-term strategy of post-conflict memorialisation and protection of human rights.
- Remind agencies that the role of military personnel and first responders after conflict is critical in protecting records and encourage the formation of Army Cultural and Documentary Property Protection Units at national levels, encompassing records and archives.
- Welcome the drafting of national and international standards and of legal instruments on the protection of cultural and information assets as recommended by various national groups of the Blue Shield.
- Note the importance authenticated documentation of casualties has for the academic study of atrocities: the fields of international law, transitional justice, peace studies, memory studies and many more build their analyses on documentation and numbers in order to create a knowledge base for prevention, judicial strategies, reconciliation and memorialization. To name just a fraction of potential examples:

- *Pascale Bonnefoy Miralles. The Investigative Brigade: Hunting Human Rights Criminals in Post Pinochet Chile. 2022*

- *Michelle Caswell. Archiving the Unspeakable. Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia. 2014*

- *Erin Jessee. Promoting Reconciliation through Exhuming and Identifying Victims in the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. 2012*

- *Kieran Mitton. Rebels in a Rotten State: Understanding Atrocity in the Sierra Leone Civil War. 2015*

- *Lara J. Nettelfield, Sarah E. Wagner. Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide. 2013*

- *Kirsten Weld. Paper cadavers. The archives of dictatorship in Guatemala. 2014*

- *David-Ngendo Tshimba. Beyond the Mato Oput Tradition: embedded contestations in transitional justice for post-massacre Pajong, northern Uganda. 2015*