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Secretaries-General of International Organizations: Information Sources in Libraries and Archives

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the use of primary and secondary sources on international organizations (IOs) and their executive heads from the perspective of a university teacher and researcher. When asked to teach a course on IOs in the early 1990s, I focused on three research topics: decision-making within the organizations (or: what's going on within?), the history of IOs (how did they come into being and how did they evolve?) and the careers of the executive heads (which roles do individuals play?). My research has resulted in books such as Decision Making within International Organizations (2004, edited with Bertjan Verbeek) and Routledge History of International Organizations: From 1815 to the Present Day (2009), as well as the Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations or IO BIO Project (together with Kent Kille and Jaci Eisenberg, www.ru.nl/fm/iobio).

The paper addresses, in that order, my own awareness of the availability of official documents, my training of students to use primary sources on IOs, the writing of a comprehensive history of IOs as a tool for students, the promotion of using international information and data sets, and the search for information on the careers of executive heads of IOs, in particular Secretaries-General.

Keywords: intergovernmental organizations; history of international organizations; international information; biography; secretaries-general of international organizations

Introduction

To understand my IO BIO research project on Secretaries-General of intergovernmental organizations (IOs), I take you back in time by explaining my working with official documents as a political science student, teacher and researcher.

How Did I Become Interested in Using Official Documents?

Trained as a political scientist and social historian I have always been interested in the use of a variety of primary and secondary sources, including official documents. When I began to study political and social sciences at the University of Amsterdam in 1966, the media received much attention and in one course I was given the opportunity to read the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* during a semester, with weekly meetings to exchange information with students reading other foreign newspapers. Being a regular visitor of an external group of staff and students called Critical University, I became a member of the Working Group on Newspapers. As such I visited the Dutch newspapers buildings to check how much information each newspaper had printed on the Russell-Sartre Tribunal of 1966-67, which investigated the American military intervention in Vietnam. The newspapers did not tell their readers much about the Tribunal and in the statistics course my professor taught me how to express my findings in convenient tables and figures. This was all fascinating, but my real moment of learning was the discovery of *I.F. Stone's Weekly* (http://ifstone.org/weekly_searchable.php) and Stone's use of publicly available official documents on many topics. It may be obvious that these documents exist, but one needs a push to actually hold and analyse them. Even if I had been told about parliamentary proceedings in class (most probably), Stone's way of reading them critically made me aware that I could read a variety of parliamentary proceedings and attached documents in our library. Nowadays these are available digitally: what a luxury! I can check documents dating back to 1814 in seconds and also search for specific terms. At the time this was different. However, the urge to go after primary documents remains crucial in the process of learning. Sources and texts that remain unknown will not be used.

How to Train Students to Use Official IO Documents?

When asked to teach a third-year Bachelor course on IOs, I wanted students to make use of official documents. The course preparation made me a regular visitor of both the university library, where the United Nations documents were kept in the basement and arranged according to a system that one needed to understand, and the international law library, where one could find international treaties and the European Union (then Communities) documentation with its own systematic. Otherwise I travelled to the library of the Peace Palace in The Hague or contacted foreign libraries through the university library. This situation has drastically changed as well, but how could I make my students aware of using primary sources on IOs? After some small experiments I made each student in my course adopt a specific IO (there is quite a variety of them) plus an international treaty related to that IO (quite a few too). Supported by the necessary instructions they had to analyse the workings of both the institution and the treaty, based on primary information as far as possible (literature on IOs was to be studied in a later phase of the course). Students soon found out that this method was not as obvious or simple as believed or expected, either in the old times when they had to visit libraries (including the initiation rituals related to using a library) or later when they searched the Internet. A summary of a treaty is found easier than the specific edition of the entire treaty and does not reveal the procedures they had to look for, while reading a complete treaty is an art by itself, even with guiding instructions available.

Searching the website of a complex IO or specialized scientific institute also proved more difficult than students expected, given the many times that students and I visited a website together, with the result that more information was available than their earlier search had provided. I leave aside the question of whether this method made my students happy, but there were enough grades of A and B and when doing their internship at an IO or writing their thesis, they often expressed its helpfulness – but of course quite a few groaned and moaned. This method helped me to understand better the variety of IOs and IO documentation. I also learned a lot through the reports of my students who had had their internship at an IO (often I envied them for being there). Given the easy access from within, I always instructed those students who already knew their thesis topic to collect and copy relevant documents during their internship in order to improve the information quality of their theses.

I deplore the replacement of traditional library rooms per department or faculty, with writing desks in a reference library, in my case with bookshelves and books on IOs and European integration, with library rooms that have only writing desks, though now provided with power connections, printing facilities and wifi, but without books. I don't know whether this is typical for my university and country or a more general trend (it did not happen in Grenoble, France where I also taught), but the new situation does not allow students to consult a selection of specialized books by taking them in their hands and using the contents and index to find what they are looking for. Apart from tracing empirical information they may also notice the theoretical or specialized view the author has. Even if digitization allows searching many texts, seeing a few pages on screen does not equal the direct contact with the literature. The link between empirics and theory by holding books is not picked up that easily, as I found out, but obviously I am a dinosaur. Our central library still has some general handbooks directly available, but that requires going there.

A History of International Organizations as a Tool

One of the tools for my students was a history of IOs, which helped to contextualize the organizations and treaties they were studying. The dominant theoretical paradigm in my department was (neo)realism, which meant that IOs were discussed mainly as a topic of relative unimportance and one without change taking place. I expected that an overview over a longer time period, hence with a variety of conditions and also changes, would sharpen their awareness of the actual importance of IOs in particular circumstances and would stimulate them to assess IO activities from various perspectives, also including neo-institutionalism, constructivism or critical theory. However, a history of IOs was nonexistent, which encouraged me to write one. I began with a short version and then expanded it every year by précising parts of the text and adding new topics. I opted for a comprehensive history: from the very beginning to the present day, covering the main fields of international relations (security, economics, the humanitarian field), global, intercontinental and regional organizations and also international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The book, published by Routledge in 2009, progresses chronologically, but also provides a thematic and geographical coherence so that related developments are discussed together. A series of detailed tables, charts and information boxes explain the chronologies, structures and relationships of IOs. The book is based on literature and primary sources related to the many institutions I came across during the years. The book is a first attempt to give an overall account of this history.

When did this IO history start? I opted for the Congress of Vienna of 1814-15, not so much because governments then established the first IO (the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine), but rather because conditions differed from the times before and because the decisions of the governments set in motion a number of related innovations, inventions and learning processes, shaping the core of what we now call IOs (see also Reinalda 2010). Among these were the invention of follow-up conferences (see below), the regulation of diplomatic relations (which enabled the cooperation process), institutional experimentation (resulting in practical and acceptable ways of working and in learning how to make institutions function), the promotion of international public law, and the open character of multilateral conferences as promoted by a politically-oriented daily press (eager to report on the search for solutions of problems) and the presence of NGOs (advocating their opinions).

The mechanism of a conference plus a follow-up conference resulted in the custom that states, having reached agreement at a conference, would convene a follow-up conference to assess whether states had actually implemented the agreed-upon decisions and policies. If this was not so, as was mostly the case, the situation required new deliberations and decisions during this conference, including a decision about a further follow-up conference. Unlike before 1815, the new mechanism resulted in an ongoing cycle of conferences dealing with similar and related issues. Apart from this (still *ad hoc*) continuity, it produced path dependency with regard to the selected common solutions and efforts. From the 1860s on these developments were followed by a process of institutionalization, which replaced the *ad hoc* mechanisms with permanent arrangements based on rational-legal authority. These early IOs established regular (i.e. annual) general assemblies (rather than calling *ad hoc* conferences) and permanent secretariats with functionaries becoming responsible for running the organization's day-to-day functions: providing information to the member states and preparing the agenda and reports for the periodic conferences.

The institutional memory related to these roles enhanced the position of the secretariat and the awareness of the path dependency in what had been undertaken. Most secretariats started relatively small (a Secretary, assisted by administrative officers), but, when activities increased, the secretariats would grow and express specific wishes about the competence of staff members, as part of bureaucratization and professionalization processes that also enhanced the leadership requirements of its Secretary. Secretariats were at work throughout the year. The extensive discussion about the League of Nations' secretariat in Versailles in 1919 further enhanced the position of the secretariat and its Secretary-General. The idea of a secretariat based on national officials who would be loyal to and paid by the member states was rejected and, in line with the experiences of the nineteenth-century IOs, replaced by that of a truly 'international secretariat', whose members had to distance themselves as far as possible from national ties and to devote themselves to the organization's purposes (Dubin 1983). The Secretary-General thus became the organization's representative and its face.

Path dependency was promoted by the fact that multilateral conferences ended with written documents. States encapsulated everything that had been settled and agreed upon in one complete document (*Acte finale*), which contained a summary of the work done and had annexed to it the various documents signed by governments, initially by the foreign minister but later also by ministers of other departments (the first time in 1909). Practice soon revealed that treaties on the same topics concluded at a later date would make use of the older ones by building on what the older agreements already contained. States that were not parties to a multilateral treaty often showed their willingness to recognize the norms and procedures embodied in it, or to become parties to it. The traditional interstate treaty developed into the multilateral convention, 'hammered out in committee and conference of many states, voted upon as if it were a legislative bill, and adopted to serve as a joint legislative enactment' (Claude, Jr. 1966: 32). The treaties and conventions resulting from multilateral conferences thus enabled the further development of international law. These treaties are also of interest to political scientists, because the compromises between societal and political actors embodied in them reflect power relations and the development of ideas and principles discussed and agreed upon internationally. My students were trained in recognizing these power relations and ideas as elements of long-term processes.

Facilitating the Use of International Information and Databases

The obvious guide about documents, publications and electronic information of IOs is Peter Hajnal's (1997) edited book *International Information*. Hajnal's quality with regard to international documentation is also demonstrated by the subtitle 'Evolution, Interrelationships, Documentation' of his recent book on the G20. Because country clubs such as the G20 lack a secretariat to gather and disseminate the document output, his systematic survey and analysis of the problem of archival research related to these clubs is appropriate (Hajnal 2014: 171, 191). His *International Information* works better for Master students, who specialize in a specific field, than for Bachelor students still exploring the IO field. The same goes for the *Yearbook of International Organizations*, which is helpful for details about specific organizations and quantitative research, but its sheer size and richness of details require some experience before one manages to not get lost and fully profit from it. Two relevant book series are the *Historical Dictionaries of International Organizations Series*, edited by Jon Woronoff and published by The Scarecrow Press since 1993, and the *Global Institutions Series*, edited by Thomas Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson and published by Routledge since 2005. Availability depends on whether libraries have bought books from these series.

Two edited handbooks allowed me to have authors write state-of-the-art articles that should help using IO-relevant sources and databases more intensely. My *Ashgate Research Companion to Non-State Actors* (2011) covers three types of non-state actor: NGOs, IOs and transnational corporations, while my *Routledge Handbook of International Organization* (2013) focuses on international organization (singular) as a process and IOs as institutions. Both address relevant sources. In the *Ashgate Companion* Elizabeth Bloodgood discusses the *Yearbook of International Organizations*, Thomas Davies the ways to research the field of transnational history and Francis Baert the role of ideas in the UN Intellectual History Project (UNIPH), which resulted in 15 books and underlines the importance of oral histories. James Church and Michael McCaffrey discuss available information and documentation of IOs in the *Routledge Handbook*, Erik Gartzke and Christina Schneider address data sets and quantitative research such as the basic data set of the Correlates of War project and data sets specific to individual IOs. Erik Voeten discusses the data and analyses of voting in the UN General Assembly, while Elizabeth Bloodgood and Hans Peter Schmitz provide an overview of data sets on international NGOs. Given the importance of international public opinion data, which have rarely been summarized, Marta Lagos and Yun-han Chu provide a review of international comparative surveys and regional barometers. Davide Rodogno et al. discuss transnational history by paying attention to two helpful academic tools for the study of the history of IOs, *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (Iriye and Saunier 2009) and the League of Nations Online Search Engine (LONSEA), a digital tool that is meant to encourage the investigation of global history from below (www.lonsea.de). Reactions show that teachers appreciate these chapters on international information ('wish I had had these before').

Writing Short Biographies of Secretaries-General: The IO BIO Project

A comprehensive history of IOs does not leave much room for discussing the role of individuals, although some individuals, among them executive heads of IOs, have played leadership roles. The *Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations* or IO BIO Project helps to learn more about the careers of Secretaries-General (Kille 2013, Reinalda and Verbeek 2014). In April 2014 IO BIO had a set of 30 biographies in place on its website and is continually adding more, all written by experts. The genre of the biographical dictionary, with short biographies of individuals whose performance contributed to the public sphere, dates back primarily to the nineteenth century, although older examples exist. While the appeal of great persons has remained a crucial component of biography as an art, scholarly explanation has become more important, with modern biography producing more or less coherent lives. These represent complex personalities as part of, and contributing to, their time.

James Walter (2014) calls biography one of the earliest modes of leadership study, which offers insights that must be taken seriously, in particular if biography is oriented to questions germane to political inquiry such as leader efficacy, achievement and dysfunction. Secretaries-General, or other executive heads with different titles, are the chief executives and representatives of international bureaucracies that vary in size and structure. The biographical literature on them is limited, giving an incomplete picture of the variety of people who have held these positions and the interactions between them. IO BIO is designed to provide short, but informative biographies of individual Secretaries-General as well as descriptions and analyses of their social and professional connections in order to address this shortcoming. The entries (between 800 and 3,600 words; the length is determined by level of importance, with three category levels) present an accurate and coherent description of the entire life and career of each Secretary-General. IO BIO is also interested in the more private parts of the executive heads: what is the role of partners and how do they combine the public office with the private life? This information may be more difficult to find, also depending on the cultural background of the executive head. The descriptions are based on a combination of primary and secondary sources, including private information. Rather than providing a catalogue of mere biographical and career details (as so-called Who's Who publications do), all entries about the individuals are descriptions written according to scientific standards, with entries providing biographical data (the first section), a balanced account of life and work (the main section) and references (Archives, Publications and Literature). The entries highlight the Secretaries-General' contributions to their profession, their IO and international relations as a whole.

Qualities of individual leadership, in particular the capacity to lead, matter, even if not all executives of IOs are noted leaders. Leadership refers to both the large bureaucracies they are heading (internal leadership as a quality by itself) and the representation of their IOs in the environment of states and other international actors (external leadership). The combination of internal and external leadership qualities can greatly affect the leadership provided by a Secretary-General to their respective IO. The entries published so far show that life descriptions add to our understanding of what Secretaries-General have tried and managed to do and deepen our understanding of what IOs do. They confirm that Secretaries-General have assets and means that allow leadership if they use the bureaucracy for the organization's aims and objectives. To be successful they must combine strong internal and strong external leadership. We can also discern between generations and groups of Secretaries-General, such as *frontierpersons*, the ones who start as the first Secretary-General of an IO, who (similar to the idea of American settlers who had only just come to live on the edge of what they regarded unclaimed territory) map the unclaimed issue area of an IO and are tasked with building up its administrative machinery, based on a constitution drawn up by the founding states, and *reformers* or those heads who have to reform the organization, due to circumstances and/or demands by important member states (Kille and Reinalda 2013).

Looking for Information on Secretaries-General Worldwide

The main difficulties when looking for information on Secretaries-General are the poor availability of information on individuals and the IOs' lack of transparency. Although some autobiographies and biographies exist, as well as smaller articles published on the occasion of special events, IOs in general do not reveal much about careers or individuals. Searching an IO's website or its printed material may reveal a short text, but most often we find little more than a picture (though often not) plus the dates or years of the office and maybe important prizes they were awarded. The main thing missing, but crucial to IO BIO, is the Secretary-General's performance during the time in office: what did s/he do, or attempt to do, and how (un)successful has s/he been? One may argue that Wikipedia (whatever its value) and other Internet sources compensate for the poor record of IOs. Since we looked for obvious Internet results on all Secretaries-General in our database (roughly 900 persons from 130 IOs), we concluded that the Internet does not compensate at all in this respect, although in some cases Internet sources are more extensive than those published by IOs, particularly in the case of famous politicians, however, many 'minor' Secretaries-General have extremely incomplete descriptions on the Internet or are absent. IOs not being transparent about what happens internally can be explained by reasons related to diplomacy, the understanding that policies are associated with the organization rather than individuals and a preference to keep controversies internally rather than have them out in public. Many retired practitioners still show an inclination to 'protect' their organization by not revealing internal disputes or events. Transparency, however, also is a norm supported by IOs and a requirement for public support and a project like IO BIO needs information about what goes on within IOs.

Major requirements for writing a short (or extensive) biography of Secretaries-General are expertise with regard to the IO, its internal processes and relevant actors, and the willingness to be open and honest about what a Secretary-General has attempted and achieved, or not, which is a requirement for both scientists and practitioners. Biographers furthermore need documents related to the person, archival sources (including descriptions that refer to persons), oral history projects (more and more traceable through the Internet) and databases such as LONSEA or the UN Career Records Project in Oxford. Unfortunately, not all IOs have (good) archives, or are restrictive in giving access. With regard to libraries it helps if their collection of biographical dictionaries and Who's who's is directly available as a category (IO BIO has an overview of international reference works on its website), but there are differences per library, both with regard to what they have and how they store them. Large Western libraries may be well equipped, though less with regard to the developing world, while libraries in the developing world have small collections. IO BIO experience shows that in the transformation to digital times librarians and archivists of IOs are disappearing (one may also ask: where have all the libraries gone?) and that it is rather difficult to approach government and intergovernmental institutions, because these tend to not reveal mail addresses any more and replace their information e-mail addresses with sets of FAQs. Digitalization of archives looks promising, but is both costly and time-consuming. However, the allowance to use cameras and scan documents from archives and libraries is a step forward as it is more precise and faster. When writing my dissertation long ago there were various sternly written restrictions with regard to (photo) copying documents (a maximum number) or the length of quotations (a maximum number of words to be copied in pencil). Restrictions like this still exist. Cultural traditions may also create impediments in the sense of not providing personal details (regarded as private) or not accepting the biographical approach as a reason to allow access to an archive. Tracing information then depends on who one meets or coincidence.

Conclusion

This paper highlights my working with primary and secondary sources on IOs from the perspective of a political scientist university teacher and researcher, who tries to draw his students' attention to official IO documents in his IO course, supported by a history of IOs, analyses of international treaties as reflections of power relations and the development of ideas and principles (hence different from what law does), and texts that facilitate the use of international information and databases. The last part of my research programme focuses on the pieces of a puzzle a researcher needs to collect and put together when writing short life and career descriptions of Secretaries-General of IOs as part of the IO BIO Project, which is a long-term research undertaking, also looking for contributors.

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