

Digging through Documents:

The Promise, Pitfalls, and Practicalities of Archival Research for International Relations

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Introduction

Political science has a methods problem. Politics is an inherently social and fluid domain, and political science fixed on establishing cause and effect relationships – at various levels of aggregation and across a range of topics – in this murky space. In doing so, scholars have bifurcated into rival camps espousing, broadly, the virtues of dataset generation, surveys, and experimental data to which quantitative models of inference can be applied, and those promoting the merits of ethnographic, case study, and historical research using assorted qualitative approaches.¹ Needless to say, each approach also comes equipped with its own set of ‘best practices’ intended to guide work in the respective area. The schism itself makes limited sense as the two approaches can complement as much as rival one another. Nevertheless, the divide is real and increasingly central to both publishing and graduate education in the discipline.²

Within this discussion, archival research occupies a particular niche. Rarely taught as part of graduate school political science methods courses,³ archival research is often seen as primarily a pathway for acquiring evidence for an ultimately qualitative analysis. That, at least, is the overwhelming experience I have come away with from conversations about archival work – both mine and others’ – with colleagues, methodologists, and graduate students.⁴ Reinforcing the problem, archives are often seen as the domain of historians – a discipline committed to discussing

¹ See, e.g., Sidney Tarrow, “Bridging the Quantitative-Qualitative Divide in Political Science,” ed. Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *The American Political Science Review* 89, no. 2 (1995): 471–74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082444>; James Mahoney and Gary Goertz, “A Tale of Two Cultures: Contrasting Quantitative and Qualitative Research,” *Political Analysis* 14, no. 3 (2006): 227–49; Jack S. Levy, “Qualitative Methods and Cross-Method Dialogue in Political Science,” *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (February 1, 2007): 196–214, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414006296348>; David Collier, Jason Seawright, and Henry E. Brady, “Qualitative versus Quantitative: What Might This Distinction Mean?,” *Newsletter of the American Political Science Association* 1, no. 1 (2003).

² A good overview is Cassandra V. Emmons and Andrew M. Moravcsik, “Graduate Qualitative Methods Training in Political Science: A Disciplinary Crisis,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53, no. 2 (April 2020): 258–64, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096519001719>; see also John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “Leaving Theory behind: Why Simplistic Hypothesis Testing Is Bad for International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 427–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066113494320>.

³ An important exception is the graduate seminar taught by Steven Wilkinson at Yale.

⁴ A recent study of graduate methods training by Cassandra Emmons and Andrew Moravcsik reinforces the point, showing that only one graduate methods course on research design included a sequence on archival methods; Emmons and Moravcsik, “Graduate Qualitative Methods Training,” 5, table 2.

individual cases in detail rather than fostering generalizations as per political science;⁵ similarly, archival training sessions seeking to include political scientists skew toward emphasizing the careful use of archival data in reconstructing history against which to evaluate and/or develop theory. Political science's intramural fight over methods and best practices thereby ends up ensnaring archival research by treating it as simply another version of qualitative research (and subject to the same quantitative critiques).

This paper challenges these understandings of archival research. It does so by underscoring the potential for archival research to contribute to numerous aspects of political science research. In the process, I also attempt to debunk claims that there are a set of 'best practices' that can be more or less mechanically applied to archival work. In fact, owing to heterogeneity in archival data, there is no one-size-fits-all approach: just as research methods should seek to fit the method to the question, so too does archival work require flexibility and creativity among researchers.⁶ That said, there are general principles that, if not serving as a set of best practices or norms, should at least assist researchers in making sense of archival work. I return to these themes below.

The remainder of this chapter proceeds in five sections. Following this Introduction, I discuss what archives are, the variety of archives researchers may encounter, and key differences among types of archives from the perspective of gathering and accessing material. Having done so, I lay the foundation for a broader epistemology of archival research by discussing the X functions that the material contained in archives can play in political science research; in the process, I also try to highlight the ways in which archival work simultaneously connects with and transcends traditional methodological divisions. Having done so, I outline a set of principles and guidelines for researchers interested in archival research, before concluding.

How Archives Vary

⁵ Not for nothing is one of the leading books used for explicating archival research titled "The Craft of International History;" see Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). On history versus political science, see Robert Jervis, "International History and International Politics: Why Are They Studied Differently?" in *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), ed. Colin Elman and Miriam Elman, pp. 389-390; Scott Frisch and Sean Kelly, "Political Science and Archival Research" in *Doing Archival Research in Political Science* (New York: Cambria, 2012), ed. Scott A. Frisch, Douglas B. Harris, Sean Q. Kelly, and David C.W. Parker, p. 38.

⁶ Making a similar point is Marc Trachtenberg, "Stumbling Around in the Archives" in *Stories from the Field: A Guide to Navigating Fieldwork in Political Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), ed. Peter Krause and Ora Szekely, pp. 139-140.

At the most basic level, an archive is simply a depository of materials – often documents and/or audiovisual records such photographs – generated or utilized by actors – people, businesses, government agencies, and so on – of interest.⁷ In general, the most relevant materials for political scientists are archival documents that underline some aspect of what actors of interest were engaged with at a particular moment of time. Sometimes, sub-sections or portions of these documents are compiled in published document collections (e.g., the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series published by the U.S. Department of State, or the terrific State Department Policy Planning Staff papers from the late 1940s edited by Anna Nelson), and/or subscription-only databases.⁸ Scholars using such collections can be said to utilize archival materials, but not to have conducted archival research – that is, spent time obtaining documents for oneself by sifting through documents contained in an archive.⁹ Of course, the growing availability of materials posted online (and sometimes searchable) by different archives is gradually blurring the distinction between archival research and more narrowly utilizing archival materials.

Still, saying that an archive is a depository of documents and other such items does not tell us much. Furthermore, calling something an “archive” can obscure as much as it reveals for the simple reason that archives vary in their scope, complexity, and accessibility. Ideally, archives provide a snapshot of the past. They do not provide the truth about the past per se,¹⁰ but rather provide insight into the ideas, concerns, debates, and choices made by actors of interest via the textual, audio-visual, and other materials that informed the then-present, all of which can be accessed by any or all researchers. In practice, this is an impossible ideal. For one thing, because the work and activities of years passed outweigh the capacity of anyone to catalogue or document

⁷ Laia Balcells and Christopher M. Sullivan, “New Findings from Conflict Archives: An Introduction and Methodological Framework,” *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 2 (March 1, 2018): 138–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317750217>; Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Penguin, 1961), 14–20, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uva.x000024145>.

⁸ For the remit of the FRUS series, see <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/about-frus>; Anna Kasten Nelson, ed., *The State Department Policy Planning Staff Papers* (New York: Garland Pub, 1983) For a sampling of published and subscription archival collections, see the superlative website maintained by Marc Trachtenberg at <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/methbk/AppendixII.html>.

⁹ This is not necessarily a meaningful distinction, and we should be careful not to make a fetish of archival research itself. If researchers can answer their questions using published collections or databases, they should do so. Given, however, that published collections may contain an incomplete and/or biased selection of documents, as well as the possibility that additional evidence that may or may not bolster one’s argument(s) may exist at an archive, scholars should recognize the tradeoffs. For an extreme example of the sort of risk that can come from relying exclusively on published documents, see Holger Herwig, “Patriotic Self-Censorship in Germany after the Great War,” *International Security* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1987), pp. 5–44.

¹⁰ Thanks go to James Goldgeier – quoting Thomas Blanton of the National Security Archive – for this point.

these developments, even the most well-funded archive contains only an incomplete sampling of possible materials from the past. It is simply impossible to retain all materials that actors at Time 1 produced or utilized – some triage is inevitable, just as actors of interest may not have saved (intentionally or otherwise) all materials that informed their work or worldview.¹¹ Likewise, because “the past” is nigh-infinite and increasing, archives are bound temporally, with the content of their materials chained to some (potentially expansive) period of time. Thus, the United Kingdom’s National Archives – considered among the best government archives in the world – covers over a one thousand year period of British history from the Norman invasion onward but not much before 1066.

By the same token, archives vary in terms of their substantive scope – the domain over which they claim to provide insight – and their accessibility to researchers. These parameters are driven by statute, organizational imperative, personal discretion, or some combination thereof.¹² Some archives are expressly broad in scope and inclusive in access. British and U.S. federal archives, for instance, are supposed to retain all documents produced by central government agencies.¹³ Moreover, they are supposed to release material to the public on a timeline set by law, just as researchers can file requests for expedited release of materials (called Freedom of Information Act [FOIA] requests in the U.S., and Freedom of Information [FOI] requests in Britain).¹⁴

¹¹ See, for instance, the discussion of degradation in South African archives in Liz Stanley, “Archival Methodology Inside the Black Box” in *The Archive Project: Archival Research in the Social Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2016), ed. Niamh Moore, Andrea Salter, Liz Stanley, and Maria Tamboukou, pp. 37-38. Similarly, many German records that might shed light on the First World War were modified in the interwar period and/or destroyed during the Second World War; Herwig, “Patriotic Self-Censorship,” esp. p. 15.

¹² For insight on these realities, see the reviews of different archives published online by *Dissertation Reviews*, “Fresh from the Archives,” <http://dissertationreviews.org/fresh-from-the-archives>.

¹³ Useful discussions are The National Archives, “History of the Public Records Acts,” accessed December 2020, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/legislation/public-records-act/history-of-pra/>; Congressional Research Service, “Federal Records: Types and Treatments,” *CRS In Focus*, February 267, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11119>; Brian Greer, “How to Ensure That Trump Preserves Official Documents,” *Lawfare*, November 6, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/how-ensure-trump-preserves-official-documents>.

¹⁴ Congressional Research Service, *The Freedom of Information Act: A Legal Overview*, R46238, August 24, 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46238>; Information Commissioner’s Office, “What Is the Freedom of Information Act?” 2020, <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-freedom-of-information/>; The National Archives, “20-year Rule,” 2020, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/our-role/transparency/20-year-rule/>. For an overview on using the US Freedom of Information Act in one’s research, see National Security Archive, *Effective FOIA Requesting for Everyone* (Washington: National Security Archive, 2008), https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/pages/foia_guide_full-min.pdf.

In contrast, private organizations, individuals, and even some governments can have an idiosyncratic approach to record retention and access.¹⁵ Researchers seeking to utilize such records often need to request specific permission to view and/or publish material from said records, just as the material on file generally makes no claim to being the whole record of one's doings. Until recently, for instance, researchers seeking to use the records of former White House chief of staff, secretary of the treasury, and secretary of state James Baker at Princeton University needed to write Mr. Baker's office for permission; even then, the materials encompassed what Mr. Baker retained on his own volition rather than a sustained effort at record keeping.¹⁶ Similarly, one scholar researching a major non-governmental organization reported that she gained access to its records by being hired to write a book for said organization – otherwise, access was idiosyncratic – and, once in the collection, was handed several dozen unorganized document boxes from a closet with decades' worth of materials with no apparent plan for record retention.¹⁷

Along parallel lines, government records in countries including France, China, and Russia can require multiple levels of approval and, in any case, access to certain documents can be restricted at archivist (as distinct from government) discretion, just as once-available documents can be re-classified and access denied.¹⁸ Gatekeeping by those in charge of archival records can add a further lay of complexity by obscuring whether a researcher is able to view all materials related to a research project, or even identify the set of potential materials. Thus, one scholar

¹⁵ For the conditional nature of even government records, see Ian Cobain and Richard Norton-Taylor, "Sins of Colonialists Lay Concealed for Decades in Secret Archive," *The Guardian*, April 18, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/apr/18/sins-colonialists-concealed-secret-archive>. Also illustrating the situation is Adam Michael Auerbach, "Informal Archives: Historical Narratives and the Preservation of Paper in India's Urban Slums," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 53, no. 3 (September 1, 2018): 343–64, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-018-9270-5>.

¹⁶ On changing access to the Baker Papers, see Princeton University Library, "James A. Baker III Papers Open to All Researchers," February 2, 2018, <https://library.princeton.edu/news/general/2018-02-02/james-baker-iii-papers-open-all-researchers>. Thanks go to Dr. Mary Sarotte for introducing me to the papers years ago; also consult Mary Sarotte, *1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Dr. Emily Whalen, personal communication with author.

¹⁸ Charles Kraus, *Researching the History of the People's Republic of China*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper 79, Woodrow Wilson Center, April 2016, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/researching-the-history-the-peoples-republic-china>; Rachel Donadio, "The Iron Archives," *New York Times*, April 22, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/22/books/review/Donadio.t.html>; American Historical Association, "AHA Issues Statement Concerning Access to French Archives," November 2020, [https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-concerning-access-to-french-archives-\(november-2020\)](https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-statement-concerning-access-to-french-archives-(november-2020)). Note too reclassification can be an additional problem even in relatively open archives. The United States government, for example, launched an effort in the late 1990s to reclassify many military and intelligence records that were once available to the public; Steven Aftergood, "Reclassification Program at National Archives Exposed," *Federation of American Scientists*, February, 21, 2006, https://fas.org/blogs/secrecy/2006/02/reclassification_program_at_na/. Thanks go to Dr. Sergey Radchenko and Nate Jones for assistance on these points.

working with Oxford University Press' archival office noted that OUP's archivists readily provided access to records but, because the researcher was given a set of materials generated in response to a query, there was no way to determine whether all relevant materials were delivered.¹⁹

As the preceding suggests, archives also vary in terms of their internal clarity. Some archives are exceedingly well-organized, reflecting a sustained effort to help researchers navigate holdings through the provision of clear finding aids, research guides, and information on where relevant materials are likely to be located. The George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, for instance, has spent the better part of a decade digitizing finding aids and information on available files to enable researchers to track down relevant materials. Other archives, however, lack a robust internal scheme such that researchers need to rely on their wiles to decipher the flow of paper and identify relevant information.²⁰ One researcher working in Kenyan government archives, for instance, noted that scholars have no way of knowing what its holdings entailed as there is no systematic list of records; one review of the Sri Lankan national archives similarly observed the limited and "erratic" utility of record inventories.²¹ Notably, the question of internal organization can overlap a closely-related matter: whether the archive keeps material in the same organizational scheme as the originators of the materials had it, or imposes its own framework. To cite one example, the Reagan Presidential Library has kept its files in the same organizational scheme as when the materials were produced. Owing, however, to chaotic internal decision-making processes and turf battles in the Reagan White House, the flow of paper can be difficult to follow and documents correspondingly difficult to track down.²² Much the same can be said of State Department records at the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), though for a different reason: because the State Department has gone through multiple reorganizations, source material has moved and finding aids produced at prior points are of limited utility today.²³

¹⁹ Dr. Caroline Ritter, personal communication with author.

²⁰ George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, "Finding Aids," 2020, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/finding-aids/>.

²¹ Dr. Caroline Ritter, personal communication with author; Nadeera Rupesinghe, "The National Archives of Sri Lanka," *Fresh from the Archives*, January 4, 2016, <http://dissertationreviews.org/archives/12569>.

²² Author's personal experience. Thanks go to Drs. James Wilson and Elizabeth Charles for help clarifying this point. Some of the difficulty with the Reagan files may come from the fact that many materials related to national security affairs of particular interest to IR scholar remain under the control of the National Security Council in Washington, D.C.

²³ Conversations with NARA Archivists, 2013-2015. See also National Archives and Records Administration, "Department of State Central Files (RG 59)," September 1, 2020, <https://www.archives.gov/research/foreign-policy/state-dept/rg-59-central-files.x>

Finally, archives vary in terms of the openness of their materials. Put simply, even archival materials made available to researchers may not be totally transparent. Indeed, portions of key materials may be redacted, identities of participants obscured, and even whole pages withheld from one's viewing.²⁴ These problems can loom large in government archives – which may place a premium on withholding sensitive and/or classified information – and with materials of more recent vintage (e.g., when authors or participants are still living). Even these are not hard and fast rules, however: strikingly, the U.S. government only finished declassifying materials from its participation in the First World War in the early 2010s!²⁵ In short, even archives that are easy to access and utilize may not provide much in the way of usable research material.

Combined, it should be obvious that there is no one type of “archive” one encounters when conducting research – archives vary along several dimensions at once, with even archives of a particular type (e.g., government, private, individual) differing from one another on key dimensions. Depending on the research question, researchers may therefore need to be prepared to access multiple different archives to offset weaknesses or problems encountered. In the process, researchers should be cognizant that the act of accessing and utilizing archival materials can require potentially-lengthy research into the norms of how archives operate, what materials other scholars and experts report to be accessible and open, and sensitivity to the possibility that records may be incomplete or unavailable due to restrictions, incomplete record taking or retention, gatekeeping, and disorganization.

The Four Functions of Archival Research

Given variation in the nature of archives and the potential difficulties involved, it is important for researchers undertaking archival research to have a clear sense of the purpose(s) of the work. Here, however, a second problem presents itself: particularly for international relations, a framework of the ways in which archival research can contribute to a project has not – to my knowledge – been explicated. Developing an epistemology of archival research is beyond the scope of a single chapter. Nevertheless, a bit of reflection suggests that archives can speak to

²⁴ On this problem and prospective solutions, see Trachtenberg, “Stumbling,” p. 138; Fred Kaplan, “When In Doubt, Redact,” *Slate*, April 18, 2019, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/04/mueller-report-redactions-pentagon-papers.htm>.

²⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, “Secret Writing: CIA’s Oldest Classified Documents,” April 28, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/blog/2016/cias-oldest-classified-docs.html>.

multiple aspects of the research process – the choice is really how one wants to incorporate the work.²⁶ Equally important, and as noted at the outset, the potential for archival contributions cuts across quantitative and qualitative methodological boundaries.

A note of caution at the outset. Although the below highlights the functions of archival research on its own, it should be obvious to readers that archival work does not exist in a vacuum. Instead, and as scholars such as Marc Trachtenberg and Cameron Thies observe, archival research can also complement or supplement the evidence gleaned from secondary sources, published primary source collections, and interviews.²⁷ In fact, and as discussed below, one of the more effective ways to execute archival research is to marry it with extensive research utilizing published sources in order to focus one’s efforts.²⁸ For the sake of illustration, however, this section focuses on archival research as a unique and discrete approach.

Creating a Dataset and/or Defining a Universe of Cases

First, archival research can help craft a dataset or define a universe of cases that can then be subjected to quantitative analysis or mobilized in support of qualitative research.²⁹ This approach can be especially important if existing datasets in one’s area of interest are absent, ill-defined, and/or substantively problematic (for example, due to limits on existing secondary sources).³⁰ Consider, for example, Lindsey O’Rourke’s recent study of U.S. covert action during the Cold War.³¹ Covert action is an inherently difficult topic to study, with abundant reports of

²⁶ For a similar typology to the one below, see Frisch and Kelly, “Political Science and Archival Research.”

²⁷ Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*, chap. 5; Cameron G. Thies, “A Pragmatic Guide to Qualitative Historical Analysis in the Study of International Relations,” *International Studies Perspectives* 3, no. 4 (2002): 351–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1528-3577.t01-1-00099>. For reasons for caution in combining sources of data, however, see Balcells and Sullivan, “New Findings from Conflict Archives,” 141.

²⁸ Along related lines, see Christopher Darnton, “Archives and Inference: Documentary Evidence in Case Study Research and the Debate over U.S. Entry into World War II,” *International Security* 42, no. 3 (2018): 84–126, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00306.

²⁹ Some work even treats archival records themselves for analysis, using big data-mining techniques on large batches of archival materials to look for patterns and test arguments. In this case, the dataset is composed of the archival record rather than drawn from archival materials. For illustration, see Azusa Katagiri and Eric Min, “The Credibility of Public and Private Signals: A Document-Based Approach,” *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 1 (February 2019): 156–72, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000643>.

³⁰ For important discussion of limitations on widely-used datasets, see Evan S. Lieberman, “Bridging the Qualitative-Quantitative Divide: Best Practices in the Development of Historically Oriented Replication Databases,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 13, no. 1 (2010): 37–59, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.12.041007.155222>.

³¹ Lindsey A. O’Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America’s Secret Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2018); Lindsey A. O’Rourke, “The Strategic Logic of Covert Regime Change: US-Backed Regime Change Campaigns during the Cold War,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 92–127, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1693620>.

covert operations in secondary sources, journalist accounts, and memoirs enjoying little supporting evidence, at the same time that the actual record of covert action is - by its very nature - supposed to remain hidden. Without documentary evidence, studying covert action thereby risks both over- and under-reporting the true set of covert activities. To address this problem, O'Rourke relied upon a rigorous multi-step research process that involved scrutinizing relevant government archival records to (1) ascertain the veracity of reported covert actions, and (2) identify operations that had previously gone unremarked. The result is the most comprehensive dataset of covert actions to date, allowing O'Rourke to evaluate the results using both quantitative and qualitative tools.

Oona Hathaway, Curtis Bradley, and Jack Goldsmith's work on agreements in U.S. foreign policy takes a similar track.³² Noting the growing tendency of U.S. presidents to forge international agreements via executive agreements for purposes nominally authorized by Congress, the authors ask whether the Executive Branch (1) reports on said agreements as required, and (2) make a persuasive case that agreements are "pursuant to congressional delegation"? As with O'Rourke, one needs a reliable universe of cases to answer the question – a universe that, because the record of executive agreements is itself being studied, first needs to be generated. To this end, Hathaway, Bradley, and Goldsmith submitted FOIA requests to the U.S. Department of States that resulted in the release of archival materials covering over 5,000 executive agreements since 1989. These archival released subsequently enabled them to build and evaluate a comprehensive dataset of executive agreements, ultimately finding the reporting process incomplete and the legal backing suspect.

Variable Measurement, Refinement, and Reproduction

Second, and closely related, archival research can assist researchers in identifying, describing, and measuring independent and/or dependent variables. Here, there are two ways archival work can make contributions. On one level, archival research can help us refine and check established independent or dependent variables by providing new evidence to evaluate prior assessments. In doing so, archival research allows for a kind of replication and independent check

³² Oona A. Hathaway, Curtis Bradley, and Jack Landman Goldsmith, "The Failed Transparency Regime for Executive Agreements: An Empirical and Normative Analysis," *Harvard Law Review* 134, no. 2 (May 2020): 629–725, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3589900>.

on data, just as gaps between prior findings and new results can – as elaborated below – encourage theory and argument development.³³

Say one is interested in examining the impact of reassurance in international politics.³⁴ One of the canonical cases of notionally “successful” reassurance comes from the end of the Cold War, where claims abound that the Soviet Union successfully reassured U.S. leaders – ultimately by withdrawing troops from Eastern Europe – that the USSR would no longer threaten Western interests, thereby enabling a peaceful denouement to the Cold War.³⁵ Research establishing this case, however, relied almost entirely on memoirs and journalist accounts of (1) the set of Soviet signals, and (2) corresponding shifts in U.S. attitudes. To rectify the possibility that this evidence may be biased, scholars have used archival holdings at the Reagan Presidential Library, personal papers of key participants, released CIA and State Department materials, and so on to re-evaluate what Soviet signals entailed in the moment. And here, new research challenges prior measurement of variables of interest. In fact, archival research indicates that Soviet reassurance signals were often accompanied by actions that could suggest an ongoing Soviet threat – indeed, even Soviet troop withdrawals were not necessarily trust-inducing since they could always be reversed. Likewise, U.S. leaders’ interpretation of Soviet signals reflected far less confidence in Soviet intentions and motives: as private statements and internal deliberations indicate, uncertainty and suspicion of the Soviet Union remained significant despite Soviet reassurance efforts.³⁶ In turn, finding that independent and dependent variables were mis-measured in an episode often treated as a near-critical case for reassurance theories raises deeper questions over the research program.

³³ I say “a kind of replication,” because other researchers may well have consulted some of the archival materials of interest yet still (1) overlooked evidence that you find important, or (2) not been privy to additional new evidence found in a different part of an archive. In this case, archival work would not allow for pure replication – it may simply be closer to checking ‘inter-coder reliability’ - but would still push the bounds of knowledge and lay the ground for future research to explore the discrepancy.

³⁴ Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167–214; Charles L. Glaser, “Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models,” *World Politics* 44, no. 4 (July 1992): 497–538; Andrew Kydd, “Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation,” *International Organization* 54, no. 2 (April 1, 2000): 325–57.

³⁵ Illustration such claims are Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Andrew Bennett, “Trust Bursting Out All Over: The Soviet Side of German Unification,” in *Cold War Endgame: Oral History, Analysis, Debates*, ed. William Wohlforth (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 175–204; G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), chap. 7.

³⁶ See especially Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 2014). Also important is Sebastian Rosato, *Intentions in Great Power Politics: Uncertainty and the Roots of Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021); Joshua Shiffrin, “A Signal Failure? The End of the Cold War, U.S.-Soviet Diplomacy, and Theories of Costly Signaling” (working paper).

The second prospective contribution to variable measurement is arguably even more important: archival research can help first establish the values assigned to independent or dependent variables. Particularly for new arguments, this sort of work is often a necessary step for testing a given theory by determining whether independent and dependent variables correlate – for example, via regressions for quantitative studies or congruence procedures for qualitative work – in the first place.³⁷ By the same token, archival digging that shows how variables map onto the historical record can increase our confidence that the theories carry real-world salience and capture the concepts intended – it can help ensure a tight fit between theory and application.³⁸

Consider, for instance, Elizabeth Saunders' work on presidential attitudes toward foreign intervention.³⁹ Saunders identifies two distinct types of leaders holding divergent beliefs on the optimal focus of intervening in other countries: internally-focused leaders – who believe threats come from the domestic nature of other actors, such that interventions must transform the target's domestic foundations – and externally-focused leaders – those who do not see a link between a target's domestic composition and its foreign policies. Although one could potentially measure such causal beliefs among presidents from memoirs and journalistic accounts, the risk of measurement error abounds since leaders may lie or misrepresent in the moment or after the fact.⁴⁰ Instead, Saunders argues that leadership beliefs can only be reliably measured before presidents take office. To do so, she mobilizes significant evidence based on the personal papers of Presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson before they took power, while measuring beliefs using a rubric to link statements and arguments in the documents. Having done so, the project is able to process trace the causal impact of such beliefs on U.S. intervention strategy.

³⁷ On regression, see Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton University Press, 1994); for congruence procedures, see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 181–204.

³⁸ This, in turn, can help us evaluate the quality of the underlying concepts and definitions; on the criteria for evaluating concepts, see John Gerring, "What Makes a Concept Good? A Criterial Framework for Understanding Concept Formation in the Social Sciences," *Polity* 31, no. 3 (1999): 357–93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3235246>; on the problems that drift from historical or empirical accuracy can impose, see James Farr, "Historical Concepts in Political Science: The Case of 'Revolution,'" *American Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 4 (1982): 688–708, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2110968>.

³⁹ Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy," *International Security* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 119–61.

⁴⁰ Along related lines, see Brendan Rittenhouse Green, "Two Concepts of Liberty: U.S. Cold War Grand Strategies and the Liberal Tradition," *International Security* 37, no. 2 (October 2012): 17.

Another illustration comes from the perennial question of whether and how lobbyist money influences the activities of private organizations such as think tanks. This matter is of growing relevance amid worries that foreign lobbying is distorting policy debates in the United States, partly by warping the output of seemingly neutral and objective research organizations.⁴¹ It is also an issue that is difficult to study: although lobbyists are legally required to reveal donations to elected officials, no such disclosure requirement exists for giving to private organizations, making measurement of key variables problematic. To establish whether and how lobby funds affect think tanks and related organizations, one solution could involve archival research. One might, for example, pull the records of lobbying groups such as the strongly anti-Soviet Committee on the Present Danger located at the Hoover Institution to see if one can establish which organizations received money and in what amounts,⁴² if a good secondary record of those organizations' activities exist, researchers could then work to establish patterns of correlation.⁴³ Alternatively, access to the records of organizations such as the Brookings Institution or Heritage Foundation could help track whether and to what extent research activities changed or outputs were altered following receipt of foreign funds.

Testing Causal Mechanisms

Separate from measuring independent and dependent variables – third – archives can be fruitful in tracing and evaluating causal mechanisms and/or intervening variables postulated by different theories.⁴⁴ This function stems from the nature of archives themselves. Because archives are depositories of materials capturing what actors of interest were engaged with or by at a given moment, researchers interested in the causal mechanisms linking independent and dependent

⁴¹ Eric Lipon, Brooke Williams, and Nicholas Confessore, “Foreign Powers Buy Influence at Think Tanks,” *New York Times*, September 6, 2014; Alex Fang, “US Urges Think Tanks to Disclose Foreign Funding,” *Nikkei Asia*, October 14, 2020.

⁴² Online Archive of California, “Register of the Committee on the Present Danger Records,” 2018, https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt6w1038fh/entire_text/.

⁴³ In this vein, see Chad Levinson, “Partners in Persuasion: Extra-Governmental Collaboration in the Vietnam War” (working paper).

⁴⁴ For exceptional details on this function, see Deborah Welch Larson, “Source and Methods in Cold War History: The Need for a New Theory-Based Archival Approach” in *Bridges and Boundaries*, ed. Elman and Elman, pp. 328-343; Deborah Welch Larson, “Archival Research in Foreign Policy” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, ed. William R. Thompson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-389>. Also invaluable is Trachtenberg, *Craft of International History*, chaps. 4-5.

variables can use these materials to fill in the processes by which input yielded output.⁴⁵ To do so, scholars need to identify which actors' materials were central to the causal processes or intervening variables of interest. By then investigating how the policies, debates, ideas, and so on revealed by these materials varied (or not) over time and space, researchers can measure intervening variables, and/or develop a composite judgment of the extent to which actors behaved in line with postulated mechanisms.⁴⁶ These results, in turn, can help researchers to establish whether theories operate in the manner and via the pathways expected.⁴⁷ Furthermore, because this approach can reveal intra-case variation within a single case, archival research in this manner can expand the set of observations upon which to test a theory's claims.⁴⁸

Illustrative of the potential here is Caitlin Talmadge's work on battlefield effectiveness among autocratic militaries.⁴⁹ Talmadge's argument is nuanced, but ultimately holds that autocratic military performance hinges on civil-military relations. Simply summarized, autocratic regimes that prioritize military routines optimized for war – most likely when facing high external threat and/or low domestic threats – tend to perform better on the battlefield as officers are promoted based on merit rather than political connections, military training is optimized for battlefield conditions, command arrangements are adapted to wartime decision-making, and intelligence is disseminated to relevant military authorities. In contrast, autocracies that prioritize regime survival and “coup proof” their militaries tend to suffer on the battlefield as decision-making, promotion channels, information sharing, and command arrangements are optimized for non-warfighting tasks. Meanwhile, as states adopt varying mixtures of organizational practices over time, so too should battlefield effectiveness change.

Clearly, this argument hinges heavily on showing that shifts in autocratic organizational practices affected training, command and control regimes, intelligence sharing, and officer

⁴⁵ On causal processes, see Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, eds., *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 106–8; for analytic issues in using mechanisms, see John Gerring, “The Mechanismic Worldview: Thinking inside the Box,” *British Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 1 (2008): 161–79.

⁴⁶ Notably, such research can either stand on its own or accompany other tests (e.g., congruence procedures) of an argument.

⁴⁷ Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 52–55, 64–67.

⁴⁸ On increasing the set of observations against which to test arguments via process observations, see Henry E. Brady, David Collier, and Jason Seawright, “Toward a Pluralistic Vision of Methodology,” *Political Analysis* 14, no. 3 (ed 2006): 353–68, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpj021>.

⁴⁹ Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Cornell University Press, 2015).

selection in the expected manners and, in turn, shaped battlefield performance.⁵⁰ To do so, Talmadge relies on American and Iraqi government archives to showcase variation in battlefield performance by North and South Vietnamese military units, and Iraqi and Iranian forces, during the Vietnam and Iran-Iraq Wars (respectively).⁵¹ By relating this variation back to changes in regime support for different military practices – compiled using both archives and secondary sources – Talmadge is then able to show not only that predicted independent variables correlated with predicted dependent variables, but that the causal processes moved in the direction and operated in the manner expected. As an added benefit, the fine-grained nature of the data on Iraqi, Iranian, and Vietnamese performance allows the study to evaluate and discount alternate explanations rooted in, inter-alia, regime type, state resources, military doctrine, and ideology: although plausible, each confronts limits accounting for the processes delineated in the work.

Equally illuminating is Brendan Green’s re-evaluation of the nuclear revolution.⁵² As developed by Robert Jervis, Charles Glaser, and others, the nuclear revolution holds that once states acquire secure second-strike nuclear arsenals, efforts to “break out” of this situation are ineffectual and irrational.⁵³ As a result, intense international security pressures driven by state fears for their survival ought to largely disappear from the world stage; to the extent competition endures, it is likely due to idiosyncratic factors such as organizational interests and sub-optimal policymaker beliefs. Green challenges these claims, arguing that inherent uncertainty over others’ motivations in international politics, the difficulty of establishing a status quo to be maintained by nuclear-armed states, the march of technology, and the potential to use arms races to reinforce one’s relative advantages makes continued competition both rational and strategic even after the advent of secure nuclear forces. Evaluating the argument thereby turns heavily on whether civilian policymakers embraced nuclear competitions for the reasons Green predicts. And to assess *that*

⁵⁰ Along similar lines, see Jason Lyall, *Divided Armies: Inequality and Battlefield Performance in Modern War*, Illustrated edition (Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁵¹ For related research showcasing the military problems associated with coup-proofing based heavily on Iraqi archival materials, see Kevin Woods, James Lacey, and Williamson Murray, “Saddam’s Delusions: The View from the Inside,” *Foreign Affairs* 85 (2006): 2; Kevin M. Woods, *The Mother of All Battles: Saddam Hussein’s Strategic Plan for the Persian Gulf War*, Illustrated edition (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 2008); Kevin M. Woods, David D. Palkki, and Mark E. Stout, *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant’s Regime, 1978–2001* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁵² Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution That Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁵³ Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Charles Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

issue, Green conducted extensive archival research – involving official as well as personal papers – in a host of presidential libraries and the Library of Congress to assess private speech evidence, budgetary and acquisition priorities, internal political debates, and so on that would shed light on the matter. Ultimately, the results provide significant evidence that Green’s claims aptly capture the logic behind the U.S. side of the Cold War arms race.

A wave of research in the ethnic violence and civil war literatures further highlights archival research’s potential to assist scholars in evaluating causal mechanisms. Even a brief list underlines the trend. Thus, Rachel Sweet uses unique access to rebel group archives in the Democratic Republic of Congo to illustrate the process by which rebels use state agencies to engage in seemingly legitimate international trade.⁵⁴ Evgeny Finkel relies on Russian, English, and Hebrew-language archives – including audio-visual materials – to assess the patterns of collaboration, coping, resistance, and evasion during genocide by examining the logic of such activities by European Jews during the Holocaust. Taking a related approach, Rachel Schwartz and Scott Straus test competing arguments surrounding violence against civilians in civil war by using local Guatemalan archives to reconstruct the patterns of counterinsurgency that led to civilian casualties;⁵⁵ Laia Balcells addresses similar questions partly by using Spanish archives covering the Spanish Civil War.⁵⁶ Abbey Steele, meanwhile, combines archival records with interviews and secondary sources to illustrate the political drivers behind the selective targeting of certain civilian populations during wartime elections in Colombia.⁵⁷ Note, too, that many of these studies combine both quantitative and qualitative data gleaned from archives to test mechanisms and evaluate intervening variables – underlining again that archival evidence can be engaged with either quantitative and qualitative tools.

Unexplained Variation, Theory Construction, and Additional Research

Finally, archival research can uncover unexpected or unexplained variation in a topic of interest, setting the stage for further research and theory construction. Again, this function comes

⁵⁴ Rachel Sweet, “Concealing Conflict Markets: How Rebels and Firms Use State Institutions to Launder Wartime Trade,” *International Organization* (forthcoming).

⁵⁵ Rachel A. Schwartz and Scott Straus, “What Drives Violence against Civilians in Civil War? Evidence from Guatemala’s Conflict Archives,” *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 2 (March 1, 2018): 222–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317749272>.

⁵⁶ Laia Balcells, *Rivalry and Revenge* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁵⁷ Abbey Steele, “Electing Displacement: Political Cleansing in Apartadó, Colombia,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 3 (2011): 423–45.

from the nature of archival collections.⁵⁸ By virtue of containing a mass of data, researchers well-versed in IR theory are poised to encounter empirical discrepancies between what the evidence in front of them suggests – even descriptively – about some relationship of interest, and what prevailing arguments suggest about this relationship. Of course, because theory is a simplified version of reality, just as the people, organizations, and so on captured by archives can say any number of seemingly random things, *some* drift between theory and evidence is natural. Nevertheless, the more one sees ideas, arguments, and lines of reasoning at odds with theoretical priors consistently appearing in the record, the more likely one is to have a finding that merits further research. By then applying standard social science methods – asking “what is this phenomenon an example of, what might explain the relationship(s) of interest, what other cases are out there that I can study,” and so on – researchers can be on their way to a wholly new theoretical argument.⁵⁹ Nor does this approach only work with IR theory. After all, because historical debates can be mapped onto and inform IR theory and policy discussions, knowing the relevant historiographic debates surrounding an event, actor, et cetera upon which an archive can shed insight allows researchers to judge whether that archival materials support one sort of argument over others and/or suggest an entirely different interpretation. These findings can then be related back to theory and/policy discussions and so drive research agendas forward.⁶⁰

Daryl Press’ study of credibility in international politics illustrates the possibilities here.⁶¹ As Press recounts, he began research for the project expecting – in line with prior research on credibility – to find that policymakers paid careful attention to states’ record for upholding or breaking their international commitments. In working his way through the UK National Archives’ records of British assessment of German credibility in the crises leading up to World War Two, however, Press noticed just the opposite: when faced with German challenges, British strategists regularly ignored Germany’s past record of standing firm or backing down. This discrepancy, and subsequent manifestation of the phenomenon in other cases (themselves developed using both archival and secondary sources), provided the impetus to develop what Press terms “current

⁵⁸ My thinking here has been enormously informed by Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*.

⁵⁹ In addition to the sources mentioned below, also useful here is Jennifer Erickson, “Social Reputation, Public Opinion, and US Nuclear Non-Use in the Cold War” (working paper).

⁶⁰ A recent historical application of this sort is Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World* (Harvard University Press, 2020).

⁶¹ Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), vii-viii.

calculus theory” – an argument as to why past actions matter relatively little and current capabilities and interests far more when states calculate credibility within a crisis.

At the risk of self-indulgence, my own work has been informed by similar gaps between theory and evidence – gap that could only be identified through archival research. Two different projects suggest the matter. First, when I began researching how great powers experiencing a relative rise in their power manage relatively declining states for my dissertation and eventual book, I initially expected to find that declining state efforts to reassure rising states of their benign intentions and limited capacity to threaten through military reductions would reduce rising state incentives to prey upon declining states.⁶² This prediction was consistent with a widespread argument in international relations theory holding that security-seeking actors can find ways of cooperating with one another; equally important, it also comports with what was then the conventional history of American policy toward the declining Soviet Union in the most recent case of shifting power (the end of the Cold War) on record – a process of Soviet reassurance that ultimately catalyzed a cooperative American strategy as the USSR declined.⁶³

Once I began exploring the archival records of the H.W. Bush administrations, however, it rapidly became clear that both the standard history and my own theoretical priors were at odds. In fact, the documents were replete with American strategists seeking to capitalize on Soviet decline by adopting steps that would bolster U.S. advantages even if (and sometimes because) such steps would harm the Soviet Union. These findings thus provided the motivation to toss out my prior thinking and, instead, attempt to develop a new explanation emphasizing the strategic and competitive mechanisms that would explain why a relatively rising state would kick a declining power as it fell down. When I then dug into new archival holdings (and additional cases) to assess

⁶² Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Dilemmas of Decline, Risks of Rise: The Systemic and Military Sources of Rising State Strategy towards Declining Great Powers” (Ph.D. Dissertation, MIT Political Science Department, 2013); Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁶³ On cooperation, see Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma”; Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*; Van Evera, *Causes of War*; on debates over the end of the Cold War, see James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev’s Adaptability, Reagan’s Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Beth A. Fischer, “US Foreign Policy under Reagan and Bush,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 267–88.; Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, 1st ed (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007).

this revised theory, it seemed to me that I was onto something new and exciting – an argument that helped bridge the gap between offensive and defensive realist theories.⁶⁴

Second, in the course of collecting evidence to evaluate my (new) theory of rising state strategy toward declining states based in part on U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, I ended up uncovering a large body of documentation on U.S. plans for NATO as and immediately after the Cold War ended. Although I put these materials aside and did not think much of them for a few years, I ended up revisiting the evidence when, in the mid-2010s, a controversy broke out as to whether the United States had ever promised Soviet leaders that NATO would not expand into Eastern Europe during the debates surrounding German reunification in 1990. Former U.S. leaders and several scholars argued strongly against this proposition, highlighting in particular the lack of any written agreement against enlargement.⁶⁵

This debate spurred me to revisit the aforementioned materials – and again, a totally different story appeared.⁶⁶ Not only did U.S. leaders use language and offer terms to Soviet leaders indicating that NATO would not enlarge after German reunification, but this effort was widespread and persistent among the highest levels of the U.S. government. Privately, however, additional archival materials indicated that U.S. leaders also began considering the opportunities to expand NATO into Eastern Europe while and soon after negotiations with the Soviet Union occurred – a surprising situation given that prior work on NATO expansion portrayed the process as having begun in earnest only during the Clinton administration in the mid-1990s! And where prior work on enlargement highlighted the role of Clinton’s particular beliefs in driving the expansion process, the new evidence indicated that policymakers in the Bush administration were actually more concerned with the possibility that the *West Europeans* would fill the Eastern European security vacuum and somehow undermine NATO’s post-Cold War influence.⁶⁷ Again, the gap between expected and actual content of the archives provided the foundation for these findings – results

⁶⁴ Note the importance of examining additional evidence/cases even after noting a discrepancy between theory and empirics: otherwise, one risks developing a narrow argument that may not be generalizable (e.g., if the finding an outlier) and fail to identify key variables, antecedent conditions, and mechanisms undergirding the claims.

⁶⁵ for summaries of the debate, see Mark Kramer, “The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia,” *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2009): 39–61; Mary Elise Sarotte, “A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (October 2014): 90–97.

⁶⁶ Resulting in Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion,” *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 7–44.

⁶⁷ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Eastbound and down: The United States, NATO Enlargement, and Suppressing the Soviet and Western European Alternatives, 1990–1992,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 6–7 (November 9, 2020): 816–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1737931>.

that not only change our interpretations of the transition from the Cold War to post-Cold War eras, but carry implications for understanding international competition, the role of international institutions, and the drivers of U.S. foreign policy.

Pathologies and Prospects of Archival Research

In sum, archival research can contribute to any or all components of an IR project. How, though, is one to execute the research? As scholars increasingly utilize archival research, others have reasonably flagged potential pathologies in archival work that can limit the inferences drawn from the work; along the way, a parallel series studies highlight several putative best practices to improve the quality of archival research. Surprisingly, however, little work has been done to synthesize the results, nor the limitations in practices designed to mitigate these dilemmas fully explicated. Before discussing the practicalities of archival research, it is worth pausing and discussing these issues.

Biases in Archival Research

Without quite categorizing or highlighting the differences among them, analysts suggest three particular pathologies that can negatively affect the quality of one's archival research. The first concerns the potential selection effect that can result from the inherently selective nature of archives themselves. Remember, an archive is an incomplete record of some sub-section of the past – it does not record everything, and may purposefully be designed as such.⁶⁸ By the same token, the materials available to researchers may represent a sub-section of items in the archive, just as individual archival records are themselves productions of actors with their own objectives, biases, and perspectives – they do not represent an objective truth.⁶⁹ It is therefore possible that even extensive work with archival records can lead to biased results, for the simple reason that

⁶⁸ A point that historians thoroughly appreciate; see Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, Illustrated edition (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press Books, 2006); Eric Ketelaar, "Archives as Spaces of Memory," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 29, no. 1 (April 2008): 9–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00379810802499678>.

⁶⁹ George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 100–101; Stephen Pelz, "Toward a New Diplomatic History: Two and a Half Cheers for International Relations Methods" in *Bridges and Boundaries*, ed. Elman and Elman, 100; Essay by James Goldgeier and Elizabeth Saunders, "Forum 25 on the Importance of White House Presidential Tapes in Scholarship," November 2, 2020, [https://issforum.org/forums/25-tapes#Essay by James Goldgeier American University and Elizabeth N Saunders Georgetown University10](https://issforum.org/forums/25-tapes#Essay%20by%20James%20Goldgeier%20American%20University%20and%20Elizabeth%20N%20Saunders%20Georgetown%20University10). See also Alexander Lee, "The Library of Babel Problem: Hypothesis Testing with Archival Sources," working paper, University of Rochester, November 2017, 5-6, http://www.rochester.edu/college/faculty/alexander_lee/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/archives3.pdf.

one's findings are based on an incomplete and/or skewed foundation. We can think of this as a kind of "background bias": the potential error that creeps in due to the constituent elements of archives themselves. A second and related matter concerns selection effects that enter due to researcher choices. Simply put, many archives are more extensive than researchers can engage even over long periods of time reinforces the problem.⁷⁰ Instead, analyst must decide which materials they review and analyze – again, introducing a potential source of error by affecting the foundation upon which a study is constructed. This kind of "triage bias" – the prioritizing of certain materials over others – can be thought of as the researcher-induced version of background bias.

In contrast to bias regarding the foundations of the materials one consults, a third issue concerns the potential for confirmation bias when utilizing archival materials.⁷¹ The concern here is that scholars digging through archival holdings will latch on to evidence that confirms a preferred or particular interpretation, concept, measurement, and so on while discounting contradictory evidence.⁷² This sort of bias can emerge in two distinct manners. On the one hand, researchers may end up focusing on a particular subset of materials that speak to and reinforce a preferred phenomenon while downplaying the presence of other materials – which may well be prevalent in available archival holdings – that challenge this finding; in effect, scholars suggest a particular piece of data, argument, idea, etc. is more (if not uniquely) present in the archival record than is truly the case.⁷³ Alternatively, scholars may erroneously interpret the documents by failing to fully contextualize materials and projecting their own understandings into the evidence (or screening out different interpretations).⁷⁴ Regardless, the net result can affect the results of one's work by too quickly affirming one line of interpretation while rejecting another. In this, confirmation bias poses an especially thorny problem for scholars interested in testing mechanisms and refine theory, where confirmation bias may overinflate or under-support certain arguments.

⁷⁰ Thies, "A Pragmatic Guide to Qualitative Historical Analysis in the Study of International Relations," 357; Darnton, "Archives and Inference," 95–96. Lee, "Babel Problem," 3–4.

⁷¹ George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 99; Darnton, "Archives and Inference," 112; an extended discussion is in Deborah Welch Larson, "Problems of Content Analysis in Foreign-Policy Research: Notes from the Study of the Origins of Cold War Belief Systems," *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (1988): 241–55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600629>; Lee, "Babel Problem," 2–3.

⁷² For a related discussion of confirmation bias when employing secondary sources, see Ian S. Lustick, "History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias," *The American Political Science Review* 90, no. 3 (1996): 605–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082612>; Thies, "A Pragmatic Guide to Qualitative Historical Analysis in the Study of International Relations," 359.

⁷³ Darnton, "Archives and Inference," 95.

⁷⁴ Larson, "Archival Research," 4–5.

Possible Solutions and Their Limitations

Background, triage, and confirmation biases are serious risks. To mitigate their impact, researchers have turned to two broad solutions. One approach essentially calls for researchers to specify a clear rationale for the archival materials consulted while aiming for a comprehensive review of the materials contained therein. This sort of specification can be based on either the logic of sampling (a standard technique in quantitative methods) in which the archive itself is treated as a population to be divided up, or based on theoretical (or conceptual) expectations that direct attention toward certain materials over others. By then indicating in one's research which materials were consulted and the preponderance of evidence therein, scholars – so the argument goes – reduce the impact of triage bias and certain forms of confirmation bias while working within the confines of background bias.⁷⁵

The second approach is less focused on the set of materials consulted and instead more concerned with drawing accurate inferences from archival holdings. Here, emphasis is placed on fully engaging the context in which archival materials were crafted and communicated.⁷⁶ By then underlining in one's research why certain inferences were drawn from materials – a claim that some marry to calls for “faithfully [representing] the context” from which materials were created and so (by implication) reporting what the preponderance of archival evidence indicates⁷⁷ – one can presumably offer accurate and replicable insights gleaned from archives. This approach places a premium on mobilizing existing primary and secondary sources while critically engaging archival materials, including those cited and not cited in the final research project, to make sense of one's sources; indeed, some researchers even work with other scholars to check their interpretation of documents to ensure “inter-coder reliability.”⁷⁸ In effect, this approach aims to correct for confirmation bias by seeking to remain faithful to the collected archival record – though, as should be obvious, it also contains partial solutions for background and triage biases by pushing researchers to engage with published and archival materials that help contextualize one's findings.

Both solutions admirably attempt to correct for the above biases. That said, it is important to acknowledge the solutions' own limitations. For one thing, there is clearly some tension in their

⁷⁵ Lee, “The Library of Babel Problem:” Darnton, “Archives and Inference,” 111-116.

⁷⁶ George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, 103–4; Larson, “Problems of Content Analysis in Foreign-Policy Research,” 249–51; Larson, “Sources and Methods,” 343-345.

⁷⁷ Darnton, “Archives and Inference,” 112; for “preponderance,” see *Ibid.*, 91, 95.

⁷⁸ For a superlative illustration, see Larson, “Problems of Content Analysis in Foreign-Policy Research.”

recommendations. Specifying a clear and consistent rationale for consulted materials may end up frustrating one's ability to contextualize findings by hindering engagement with sources not consistent with one's inferential plan but which – based on archival work itself – help clarify the documents. Conversely, rigorous attempts at contextualization can require researcher flexibility and focus on materials that do not lend themselves to a specific archival inferential agenda beyond an expert sense that the quest for internal validity regarding the case or evidence at hand directed one toward certain archival holdings over others.

These tensions also highlight broader problems with the two methods. Put simply, tying one's archival research to a specific inferential rationale – even if carefully designed – risks inhibiting one's ability to adapt and track down relevant data once one encounters the evidence in archival holdings.⁷⁹ Especially if archives are poorly maintained or only partially opened, acquiring relevant evidence may end up becoming something of a scavenger hunt, requiring a researcher to function as much as a detective as observer. Ironically, the pursuit of a detailed and specific research strategy can end up hindering scholars from accessing and utilizing relevant research – re-introducing the very sort of triage bias the method sought to overcome! Contextualization, meanwhile, introduces problems in the other direction. On one level, emphasizing strict fidelity to archival materials as presented risks blinding the researcher to what is not contained in archival holdings or only hinted at in the evidence – no small matter given the often-incomplete nature of archives.⁸⁰ Similarly, contextualization that relies on a preponderance of evidence standard for drawing inference can end up mistaking mass for salience: because important pieces of evidence may be the exception rather than the rule in archival holdings, context can only take researchers so far.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Along similar lines, see Marc Trachtenberg, “Transparency in Practice: Using Written Sources,” *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research* 13, no. 1 (March 31, 2015): 15-16., <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.893089> Note that Trachtenberg places a premium on prior research using existing (secondary) sources as a way of developing expertise.

⁸⁰ Though not drawn from archival research, illustrating the importance of what is not strictly reported is materials is the counter-intuitive and important interpretation of US entry into World War Two - emphasizing the Roosevelt administration's efforts to goad Japan into an attack - advanced by Trachtenberg and Schuessler; see Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*; John M. Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015). More generally on the absence of evidence issue, see Trachtenberg, “Transparency in Practice,” 16.

⁸¹ To take a recent example of the risks, scholars interested in US policy during the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War would naturally be interested in the high-level meetings and debates inside the George HW Bush administration. Applying at preponderance of evidence standard, archival holdings at the Bush Presidential Library would seem to present a story of a clear and consistent US move to challenge Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. As Jeffrey Engel observes, however, archival materials released only over the past half-decade show that – at least initially - the Bush administration strongly considered living with Iraq's actions and engaging Baghdad rather than organizing against

If current solutions are wanting, then what is one to do – how can archival research be made rigorous and defensible? The answer is to anchor archival research in the logic of social science inquiry and addressing well-crafted research questions with clear hypotheses in ways that enable other scholars to replicate the results while recognizing that no project is likely to be the final word on a subject.⁸² The goal, in other words, is conceptually grounded findings that advance a broader, theoretically- and conceptually-robust research agenda. Framing the matter in this way subsequently highlights some practical workarounds for the above biases.

First and foremost, archival work needs to flow from the purpose for which the research is conducted. Here, the emphasis should be on clearly and rigorously defining the evidence one wishes to acquire from archival work in light of the research task at hand. When measuring variables, for instance, this approach means *ex ante* defining one's concepts, indicating the operational criteria one will use to measure the concepts in a complex and murky reality, and thinking ahead of time about rules for weighing the strength of different pieces of evidence; this enables a researcher to go into the archives with a set of objectives and standards for collecting and evaluating evidence.⁸³ When evaluating arguments, in contrast, it is incumbent on researchers to generate a set of predictions regarding the sorts of processes and/or outcomes would be consistent (and inconsistent) with the different claims tested.⁸⁴ Again, this helps alert researchers to the sorts of archival findings that are likely to be important to one's research, and provides a way to account for the voluminous (and not always consistent) evidence one is likely to find. From there, the researcher's task is to work diligently to explore archives as fully as possible by at once looking for evidence in unexpected or obscure sources, and revisiting standard collections with an eye for new meanings or evidence in order to link these findings to one's concepts.

Iraq's move. Though this approach soon fell by the wayside, it minimally shows that US decision-making was far from monolithic – in fact, US policy varied in important ways. A preponderance of evidence standard would seemingly downplay these revelations as the exception rather than the rule even if the findings affect our understandings of the course and conduct of U.S. policy. See Jeffrey Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017).

⁸² Taking a similar tack is Thies, "A Pragmatic Guide to Qualitative Historical Analysis in the Study of International Relations."

⁸³ On the distinction between concept (especially variable) development and operationalization, see David Collier and John Gerring, eds., *Concepts & Method in Social Science: The Tradition of Giovanni Sartori*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁸⁴ My thinking here has been informed by Van Evera's work on hypothesis generation; see Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*.

Embracing this principle offers several advantages. On the one hand, it provides a way of controlling for confirmation biases: after all, if scholars rigorously categorize the evidence they find according to the needs of one's research requirements, the risk of favoring a particular outcome, measurement, and so on goes down. At the same time, by frontloading the social science objective of archival work, scholars accommodate the potential for background and triage biases by creating a foundation for other scholars to challenge, refine, or extend one's results – it increases transparency, and opens the door to future work (potentially using new archival materials) that can advance the state of research. Moreover, because this principle underscores the importance of concepts and evidence, it frees the researcher to use their judgment when engaging archival holdings in pursuit of relevant data - liberating the researcher from suggestions that only consulting a complete swatch of archive constitutes comprehensive work.⁸⁵ In short, rather than mechanistically focusing upon the archives one intends to investigate, the researcher instead looks to rigorously understand and specify the role of archival research in light of the project's objectives, calibrating research expectations from there. Social science rigor and necessity should drive one's research efforts – to do otherwise, let alone to propose a one-size-fits-all approach to archival data collection, is to put the cart before the horse.

Second, scholars engaged in archival research *do* need some degree of contextualization. Here, though, the point is to help researchers understand the origins of archival materials, identify relevant pieces of evidence, and understand the scholarly debates concerning the historical record at hand. As Trachtenberg highlights, this means systematically engaging existing primary and secondary sources on the topic at hand before venturing into the archives.⁸⁶ This approach simultaneously assists researchers in getting a handle on what evidence is likely to be found in a given set of archival materials, the factors that may affect the substance of those materials (including particular biases of their authors/compilers⁸⁷) and so skew the findings, and the

⁸⁵ Darnton is the most explicit on this point, arguing that “Scholars are responsible for ensuring that cited material faithfully represents the context from which it was selected, which implies the need to review and report surrounding material within a particular scope.” It is certainly true that scholars should not modify (let alone falsify) evidence, just as evidence cannot always be taken at face value. Still, suggesting that robust research requires “the need to review and report surrounding material within a particular scope” is a near-absurd standard; after all, research based on a book from a library can (and often does) stand on its own even if a scholar neglects to examine the volumes that come before and after it on the library shelves. Ultimately, good archival research is that which is built on a defensible sample of archive-based evidence – the identification and evaluation of which requires scholarly judgment and insight more than any mechanistic methodological application.

⁸⁶ Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History*. See also Larson, “Archival Research,” 6-7.

⁸⁷ A good discussion of particular biases in individual documents is Larson, “Sources and Methods,” 343-345.

potentially large rival interpretations of archival evidence. By then adapting one's research strategy to account for these dynamics – for instance, by consulting multiple files (or even archives) to see if common data is present (or, alternatively, if data varies) and acknowledging points of disagreement in the record – researchers can (1) put prospective disputes over document interpretation into broader scholarly conversation, (2) alert readers to one's analytic choices, and ultimately (3) reduce the potential for background and triage biases to go unnoticed or unremarked. Note that such contextualization can be particularly powerful if married to robust conceptualization and consideration of the strength of different evidence; scholars interested in the drivers of Soviet policy during the Cold War, for instance, would then have a framework for weighing the relative insight afforded by research in Soviet foreign ministry records versus those of the Soviet Communist Party by appreciating the particular kinds of materials in these records and their social scientific utility.

Finally, scholars should embrace transparency when using archival materials in their studies. Here, however, the emphasis is not – as some methodologists have it – spending precious time and energy justifying one's interpretation of documents or selection of material ad nauseum.⁸⁸ After all, that's the whole point of replication, a task few other data-collection approaches emulate (one does not see datasets with individual datapoints justified and adjudicated amid conflicting evidence), a step generally hard-baked into good research anyway, and – in any case – something generally subject to the research task before the scholar; far from clarifying archive-based research, it risks slowing down and needlessly confusing the research process.⁸⁹ Instead, the point of transparency is to enable other researchers to grapple with and evaluate one's claims and coding. To do so, not only should researchers carefully delineate where in an archive one's data originated so that other researchers can track and verify sources if they so op down. Instead, they ought to further quote as extensively from relevant materials in the body or notes of a project as space limitations allow⁹⁰ and – more dramatically – be prepared to provide archival materials to other

⁸⁸ Andrew Moravcsik, "Transparency: The Revolution in Qualitative Research," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no. 1 (January 2014): 48–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096513001789>; Colin Elman, Diana Kapiszewski, and Lorena Vinueza, "Qualitative Data Archiving: Rewards and Challenges," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 43, no. 1 (2010): 23–27.

⁸⁹ Jack Snyder, "Active Citation: In Search of Smoking Guns or Meaningful Context?," *Security Studies* 23, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 708–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2014.970409>; Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Transparency without Tears: A Pragmatic Approach to Transparent Security Studies Research," *Security Studies* 23, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 692–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2014.970405>; Trachtenberg, "Transparency in Practice," 15–16.

⁹⁰ When generating datasets from archival material, the supporting material could follow these same principles.

researchers upon request following publication of one's results (copyright permitting).⁹¹ On this last point, scholars who have labored long and hard to acquire materials may understandably be reluctant to share the fruits of their labor. Still, insofar as social science depends on robust and defensible findings, embracing a norm of document transparency is crucial to the research enterprise. As importantly, it provides a check on biased inferences by (1) reminding the researcher that evidence may be re-evaluated by others at any time (incentivizing especially careful adjudication of archival materials), and (2) accelerating the process by which disagreements over evidence come to light in ways that can push a research agenda forward.

In the final analysis, the solution to background, triage, and confirmation biases is not to embrace one-size-fits-all set of methodological practices divorced from the nature of one's research, but rather a practical approach attuned to the research task in play. Robust social science concepts, contextualized research approaches and calibrated findings, and transparency can mitigate – though not eliminate – the problems inherent in archival work. Still, archival research is like any other tool: imperfect. So long as social science is an iterative and additive process, this need not cause perpetual hand-wringing and anxiety surrounding the limits of archival work but rather push scholars towards advancing the state of debate through the calibrated use of archives.

The Archive Itself: Preparation, Detective Work, and Paper Cuts

To summarize the preceding, the foundational intellectual task behind archival work and the main check against bias in one's research is thoroughly mining existing theoretical, empirical, and/or historical scholarship to carefully scope one's research objective. Baldly stated, researchers need a clear understanding of the reason(s) one is going into the archive, the debates one is engaged in and concepts one is employing, and what one hopes to get out of archival work. Assuming this is done, the actual act of archival research is itself fairly mundane – it's no great mystery how one engages in archival research. To dispel any concerns, however, let me spend some space summarizing the “craft knowledge” of archival work.⁹² In doing so, note that I am drawing on personal experiences, those of friends and colleagues, and the invaluable training seminars run by

⁹¹ Alternatively, they may opt to post materials to a website.

⁹² For a related discussion and similar list of tasks, see Lindsey O'Rourke, “Details in the Doodles: Documenting Covert Action” in *Stories from the Field*, ed. Krause and Szekely, 142-150.

the Summer Institute on Conducting Archival Research (SICAR) and the archival methods module offered by the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (IQMR).

Extending the emphasis on robust preparatory theoretical work and conceptual development, the first and most important functional task of archival research is simple: researchers need a sense of the archive before one's visit. By "sense of the archive," I mean getting a handle both on what a researcher needs to do to gain entry to an archive and its holdings, as well as what materials are open to researchers. In practice, this means consulting other researchers who have worked in said archive on their experience, reaching out to the archive by calling or emailing archives well in advance of one's visit to consult with archivists, perusing available websites, and reading in detail secondary and/or published primary sources.

Doing so provides several benefits. For one thing, it gives you a sense of what sorts of items may and may not be available, and what you may need to do to access those collections.⁹³ The latter is no small issue: again, some archivists are de facto guardians of collections such that researchers may need to present one's work in a particular manner or jump through red tape, just as different archives have different rules for how many materials a researcher can access in a given period, how far in advance one needs to request materials to be viewed, and the like. Knowing these formal and informal rules can save you time, heartbreak, and energy. If done correctly, such research and outreach can also accelerate your research efforts by gaining archivists' trust and support such that they can help direct you to unexpectedly data rich files or folders; archivists are often experts in their domain and, as with medicine, it always pays to trust expert advice.

Above all, careful vetting of an archive in advance alerts the researcher to the evidence that is already available beyond the archive's physical walls (sometimes even posted to the archive's website!) such that one does not need to spend precious research time collecting that which can be gleamed from the comfort of home. Here, dig into the notes or supporting documentation in existing sources while consulting (and asking for, if needed) finding aids and to craft a list of research priorities before you even step foot into the archive; when investigating an organization or government, it may also be helpful to try to reconstruct the flow of paper – memoirs and journalist accounts can be very helpful here – within said actor to identify particular individuals, sub-units, or offices whose files may be especially data rich. For sure, one's research priority list may change once you are in the archive and can see how the originators/processors of the archival

⁹³ Thanks go to Dr. Emily Sellars for assistance on this point.

material organized their collections, but it will provide an invaluable place to start and significantly speed up the research process. Few things in the archival research process are more frustrating, and a bigger waste of time and money, than arriving in an archive excited to see files only to be brought up short when an archivist then asks what records you want to see...and realizing you don't have a list!

The net focus, in other words, is again investing ahead of time in crafting a tailored archival research strategy: a sense of how one will invest one's finite time and resources into looking for evidence in support of one's research objectives given what one knows about the archive(s) in question. This strategy will not be a solution, as facts on the ground in the archive will require adaptation. Nevertheless, and as one scholar put it, ninety percent of archival research is done ahead of time via careful preparation in getting to know and planning for the domain in which you will be operating.⁹⁴ This is entirely correct. Get started early, read broadly, reach out, and anticipate.

Closely related – second – expect the unexpected. Scholars may begin archival research looking to consult the files of XYZ but then be forced to change plans for a host of reasons. The content of viewed materials, for example, may indicate that ABC was more salient to one's topic than XYZ; or XYZ materials may be heavily closed or redacted but their underling or superior's files – which may contain relevant related content – are more open; or that the files of XYZ are missing for some reason or another; or that an archivist is out for the day and thus no one can deliver you the files; or an archive closes early because of a small microwave fire.⁹⁵ In any case, scholars may have to adapt their research plans on the fly: new materials may need to be consulted, one's research priorities triaged to account for reduced time, or another research trip planned. Yet, although there's no way to predict quite what will go sideways, there are practical solutions. One piece of advice is to simply plan on research taking fifty percent longer than you think reasonable and scaling one's plans accordingly (either reducing the amount of material you hope to consult on a given trip...or planning for longer trips). Another – no to sound like a broken record – is to know the relevant primary and secondary literature touching on one's topic so that you can (1) adapt to and find workarounds for research roadblocks and/or (2) contextualize sources one did

⁹⁴ Dr. Galen Jackson, personal communication with author.

⁹⁵ The last one happened to me when visiting the Clinton Archives in Little Rock, Arkansas in January 2020.

not expect utilizing. In short, a good archival research strategy is not so brittle that the inevitable perturbations throw one's plans into arrears – build in flexibility!

Third, decide ahead of time whether you will attempt to process the materials one consults in the archive itself or wait until the trip is over and, along similar lines, how you will keep records of and save the materials consulted. On the first issue, many scholars find that quickly 'vacuuming up' archival collections containing potentially relevant evidence for systematic cataloguing and review after a trip concludes (or in the evenings of a trip) is more effective than reading each document in detail as one goes along. For one thing, unless a researcher has the funding and time to spend weeks or months in an archive, detailed reading in sequence is a likely path for ending one's research trip having failed to fulfill one's research strategy. Conversely, a dedicated cheap digital camera – or just the camera on a smartphone – makes it possible to make thousands of individual digital photographs (copyright permitting) of archival materials at virtually no cost. Even a short archival trip of a few days can thus allow a researcher to acquire a mass of material and make substantial progress on a project. As such, it can be useful to spend time in the archives in collection mode, before transitioning to "processing and analysis mode" when outside.

Be advised: this is not an invitation to collect documents without glancing at the material. In practice, it is also vital to keep an eye on the files being photographed to skim for what looks to be propitious evidence, signs (e.g., an unexpected name or office appearing regularly) that there may be new files one should consult, and more generally acquire a sense of what is being collected. By the same token, will often come across individual documents that jump out at them as they skim and merit careful attention in the moment because they seem to suggest new data, weigh into a theory debate, and so on; these are the sorts of materials that are worth pausing to reflect over (before resuming collection, that is). And of course, there can be situations where digital photographs are not allowed and the researcher can only take notes. Here, researchers may need to do more reading as they go along – skimming only where possible – while taking careful notes on the materials engaged. Still, the general principle of collecting archival materials as quickly and expeditiously as possible applies – even when reading, researchers taking notes find it helpful to produce short takeaways of less-relevant materials, while only taking notes on relevant portions of relevant items less they get bogged down in the weeds.

Collecting material, however, raises the issue of how to keep track of and record the materials consulted. Here, modern technology again comes to the rescue. As one collects images

with a digital camera or simply takes notes on collections, simply create a running list or spreadsheet of folders, boxes, and collections consulted. To this one can add annotations and notes to remind yourself of where especially valuable-looking materials look to be located (or, conversely, where materials seem limited). Meanwhile, you should also plan to upload your collected images to an appropriately named folder on a laptop or cloud storage service – or both – at periodic intervals to ensure your raw archival findings are kept safe. Note, too, that archives often present helpful ways of creating fallback systems to keep track of materials consulted with, for instance, boxes or folders labeled with descriptive information; snapping pictures of those each time you open a new box or folder and uploading the results alongside pictures of materials gives you a running visual record of what you’ve viewed.

Having embraced some or all of these steps, you are then able to process and systematically review the documentary record at leisure while keeping track of record locations. In this, one helpful trick is to pursue a three-part processing routine of (1) using widely available software to convert document images that tend to come in JPEG format into individual PDFs, (2) assemble whole documents out of individual PDFs while including a PDF of any labeling material associated with that box or folder, (3) reading and saving the resulting combined file with a descriptive name that will help you find and organize the result. On the last point, recognize that each researcher will have their own preferred way of labeling documents for easy reference. Personally, I find saving files with the year, month, and day of the document at the start, followed by short keyword descriptions and location information, effective in helping sort and track my materials.⁹⁶ Some also use optical character recognition (OCR) software to further process the compiled archival documents – let your research task and own sense of priorities determine whether it is worth investing in such potentially-expensive software and time-consuming task.

Fourth, recognize that an archival trip itself is as much of a logistical task as it is an intellectual or research task. Much like invading armies need to carry their own transportation and supplies with them, so too do researchers need to think about their own housing, food (remember, many archives don’t let you bring in outside food or drink), transportation, and associated needs.

⁹⁶ Thus, a memorandum from November 3, 1991 between National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft and President George HW Bush on the merits NATO enlargement and found in a particular folder and box in the Scowcroft collection at the Bush Presidential Library might be saved as “1991.11.3 Scowcroft Bush NATO expansion arguments [folder] [box] Scowcroft Collection GBPL.” In this way, I can both search my files by keyword and organize the files chronologically while keeping identifying information intact.

Some archives are in major cities that have the advantage of easy transport, food options, and motels; others – even domestically – are in out-of-the-way spots where food and housing options are more limited and you may need to rent a car to get around. Tight budgets complicate issues further: unless one has family or friends nearby, you can expect to spend upwards of \$1000-\$2000 for even a short domestic research trip, and potentially more during certain times of the year.⁹⁷ Plan on spending a few days organizing the logistics of your trip and navigating the financial tradeoffs involved (again, personal preferences matter a lot here). Thankfully, many archives also offer research grants – often advertised on websites – to defray the costs involved. Since, however, grant applications are often due on an internally-determined funding cycle that may not align with a researcher's priorities, careful planning is again needed.

Finally, researchers should anticipate very long lead times in acquiring relevant materials and be prepared for multiple archival research trips. With government archives, declassification can take years – even decades – just as access to private archival collections can require lengthy correspondence and negotiations with copyright holders. All of this takes time, and puts a premium on starting one's work as quickly as possible (particularly for those pursuing a dissertation) and preparing to conduct follow-up research in archives if and when these new materials come to light. Compounding the issue, the evolution of one's research objectives and/or insights – say, a new collection to consult or archive to visit – gleaned from previously collected materials can necessitate follow-on work. Complicating matters further, research by other scholars and decisions by archives or record holders themselves to release previously-restricted material independent of any of one's own requests can mandate its own subsequent research trip. Again, depending on available funding, the state of one's project, and other obligations (e.g., teaching), it can take time to actually execute the research. Beginning work early and recognizing that one archival jaunt may not suffice will not prevent these issues from emerging, but they will at least help researchers anticipate and allow for such situations.

⁹⁷ A \$300 plane ticket, \$80 per night motel room (a decent rate), and \$20 per day on food (a limited amount while traveling) comes to \$800 for a five day trip even before on-the-ground transportation is factored in. Add in a popular or distant destination at certain times of the year – e.g., London in the spring – and the cost can increase.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to lay out the basic functions of archival research for international relations scholarship, discuss the ways in which the archival medium can affect archival research, review common problems to archival research and potential solutions, and highlight some practical insights in the conduct of archival research. Of necessity, I have excluded important aspects of archival research, including extended discussion of how one integrates archival findings with existing primary and secondary sources and the potential for interviews and oral histories to supplement archival digging.⁹⁸ Still, I hope to have convinced readers archival research is a valuable approach unto itself. Learning the craft and adapting to the particularities of archival research requires time, energy, and creativity. Yet because archival research is ultimately amenable to a variety of analytic techniques and with limitations that can be accommodated without too much hassle, it represents an attractive path for scholars interested in producing conceptually-rigorous and empirically-grounded research. Among the dust of documents is the possibility for major advances in international relations theory and evidence.

⁹⁸ On interviews, see Layna Mosley, ed., *Interview Research in Political Science*, Illustrated edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).