

2023

Review- Archives and Human Rights

Alexandra Pucciarelli

Rutgers University - New Brunswick/Piscataway, alexandra.nicole.pucciarelli@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas>



Part of the African History Commons, Archival Science Commons, Asian History Commons, Cultural History Commons, European History Commons, Holocaust and Genocide Studies Commons, Legal Commons, Oral History Commons, Political History Commons, Public History Commons, Social History Commons, and the Social Justice Commons

Recommended Citation

Pucciarelli, Alexandra (2023) "Review- Archives and Human Rights," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 10, Article 6.

Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol10/iss1/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies by an authorized editor of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact elischolar@yale.edu.

Jens Boel, Perrine Canavaggio, and Antonio González Quintana. *Archives and Human Rights*. N.p.: Routledge, 2022.

The role of archivist has undergone a major shift in recent decades: the idea that archivists can act as defenders of human rights by allowing access to documentation of human rights violations has gained increasing acceptance within the discipline.

Archives and Human Rights examines the close relationship between human rights and archives. In recent years archives have promoted the right to truth, justice, and reparation after state violence. In the past, many archival records were used to perpetuate state violence, but today their use has shifted; they are being utilized to promote justice. The authors describe how these records are used to bring about justice via truth commissions and also as a means to prevent disinformation. Incidents of violence are rarely the responsibility of one country; therefore, truth commissions' fact-finding missions need to be international. "Historical amnesia in educational systems was widely challenged and archives played a crucial role in that process. With the exponential growth of information which accompanies the development of the new information and communication technologies, in particular the Internet, the archives take on an even stronger role" (26). There have been backlashes against the "right to truth" and archives/archivists have served as defenders of this right. This highlights how the "right to know" and "right to justice" must be defended and constructed with each new generation.

Archives and Human Rights has three editors, Jens Boel, Perrine Canavaggio, and Antonio González Quintana, and their unique, respective expertise are illustrated in the text. Jens Boel is a Danish archivist and former chief archivist of UNESCO. Perrine Canavaggio is a French archivist and was head of the Archives of the Presidency of the Republic from 1974 to 1994. Antonio González Quintana is a Spanish archivist and chair of the International Council on Archives (ICA) Section of Archives and Human Rights. This book has chapters by nineteen authors from around the world who bring varied experiences in relation to archives and restorative justice, greatly enhancing the impact of the text. The choice to have authors write about reconciliation activities in their own countries gives much needed social context to the work. Not all of the authors are archivists, which supports the discussion of the interdisciplinarity needed on this quest for justice.

Archives and Human Rights is divided into two parts: the first is a general overview of the relationship between archives and human rights, and the second part is composed of seventeen case studies, divided into four regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. The case studies highlight some major insights, such as the shift that documents can make after a regime change. In South Africa documents that were once used to oppress are now being utilized to promote justice. The trend toward international justice began during the Tokyo and Nuremberg trials and gained speed after the creation of the international tribunals for the former Yugoslavia (1993) and Rwanda (1994). The justice fought for in these countries has not always been upheld and archives have supported continued efforts to maintain human rights.

The case studies illustrate how justice in one country has inspired changes around the world. "Well-known cases are the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the overturning of the amnesty laws in Argentina and the arrest of Pinochet in London by a Spanish judge in 1998" (321). The case studies also make clear that restorative justice work cannot be done by archivists

alone and they need to join with other professionals such as legal experts, forensic archaeologists, audio and film experts, museum professionals, historians, political scientists, IT specialists, and many others.

Archives and Human Rights has many strengths as a text. Part I is devoted to examining transnational justice and archives, which sets a strong base for the rest of the book. Part I could even be studied on its own for scholars looking for more general examples and discussion of this type of work. The case studies highlight both widely recognized incidents and more obscure examples. For example, the Africa subsection features a case study of the well-known truth and reconciliation process in South Africa as well as the lesser known Gacaca Archive which illuminates another facet of reconciliation in post-Apartheid South Africa. This book serves as a valuable survey of justice gained through archives around the world. The Latin American section is especially valuable in its illustrative examples of the use of records of past violence as a means to promote reconciliation.

The editors are aware of the weaknesses within their text, and in fact they discuss them at the end of the book. In the concluding remarks for the book, they admit their case studies are less than comprehensive. Single cases exist for each country studied, and many of these nations have other crimes that could be examined as well; Germany is a strong example of this. Some countries and regions go almost completely unmentioned.

Archives and records on colonial crimes could have been studied in much more depth in the book. The case of France and Algeria is the topic of Part 2, Chapter 11 by Gilles Manceron and Gilles Morin, but there are other obvious cases after World War II, such as the United Kingdom and the Mau Mau movement in Kenya, which we encourage interested scholars to look further into from an archival perspective.
(322)

This book's coverage of the Holocaust is rather shortsighted. The Nuremberg Trials are mentioned multiple times, but there are no articles about the path toward justice in post-World War II Germany. This absence is felt since Germany is widely seen as a model for post-violence justice. When discussing the Holocaust, the names of the persecuted groups are rarely acknowledged; this might have been done with the assumption that most people know about the holocaust, however the *U.S. Millennial Holocaust Knowledge and Awareness Survey* from 2020 showed how lacking Holocaust knowledge is in the general public. Asian reconciliation and justice also received very little coverage, with only two entries (Cambodia and Japan). North America went completely unmentioned. North America still has a long way to go with restorative justice through archives, but several interesting cases were missed by ignoring the region completely, including but not limited to reconciliation activities around residential schools in Canada and the Tuskegee patient medical files.

The editors and authors contend that process of reconciliation and justice is not one size fits all. Solutions that worked in a specific country in the past may not continue to work under new leadership. Justice is described in this text as a process that takes collaboration and criticism. In Part II, Chapter 17, Kirsten Weld illustrates the main tenet of the book well, namely, that the work by archivists and others can “transform this archive of terror into an archive of justice” (312). The

case studies highlight the variety of sources in archives that can serve as evidence of human rights violations. This text is highly readable and uses language that is accessible to people outside the field of archives. This book would be valuable to researchers from any discipline who study state violence and power. *Archives and Human Rights* also serves as a call to action for archivists around the world because they too can be revolutionary. This book encourages interdisciplinary collaboration and research that is much needed in the field of human rights. This book is an ICA project and is available for free on Google Play Books and as an open-access eBook on the Taylor & Francis website.