

## RESEARCH REPORTS

# The Development of the NATO Archives

LAWRENCE S. KAPLAN

For almost a generation NATO historians had urged the authorities in Brussels to make available to scholars documents that would illuminate the interesting and important history of the longest and most successful alliance in Western history. The lack of access to the records of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has inhibited scholarly research into its role in American foreign relations, in the evolution of the Cold War, and in the movement towards European unity. Partial access to government archives of member states as well as published documents covering the two generations of the organization's existence filled some of the gap, as have memoirs of leading actors on the NATO scene. But while there is a vast literature on the organization itself, most of it is by necessity journalistic. There has been no coherent study of the inner workings of the organization, of how its activities are translated into policy, or of successes and failures of the 'NATO method' of consensus.

Efforts were made to open records in the early 1980s. With the support of the *chef de cabinet* the issue of declassifying materials in the Ismay years made its way to the North Atlantic Council in 1984. The proposal was rejected. It is tempting to speculate that the ministers were concerned about breaches of security or embarrassing disclosures. More likely, the opening of the records was simply not important enough for busy officials to give the time needed for the enterprise. Nevertheless, the project did not die with this rejection. Over the next 15 years archivists were consulted about the scope of the project and the possibilities of bringing it to fruition. It was a long road but eventually the close collaboration between the NATO staff

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Lawrence S. Kaplan, Director Emeritus, Lyman L. Lemnitzer Center for NATO and European Union Studies, Kent State University

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and archivists from the member states resulted in a decision to release NATO materials and a plan to put it into effect. The International Staff's Archives Section played an important role in working for public release of NATO documents.

The NATO Archives were officially opened in 1999, in conjunction with the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty. It accompanied the establishment of a Public Reading Room at NATO headquarters in Brussels and the release of the NATO Document series (1949–65). The celebration of the occasion was festive, but given the small reading room dedicated to the Archives along with the more pressing problems facing the NATO allies, there were some sceptics wondering if this was a cosmetic concession to scholars, a token of interest without serious prospects for development. They were mistaken. In the same year a formal Archives Committee was appointed, composed of archivists from the 19 member states and chaired by NATO's Deputy Executive Secretary. Its mission was to serve the North Atlantic Council in the corporate management of the Archives and to ensure that standard archival principles were properly applied. An important step taken in 1999 was the appointment of an Archival Adviser to assist with the programme.

The first task of the Archival Adviser was to survey the holdings and record keeping practices throughout NATO. Within a year a Pilot Project team, supported by the Archives Committee and staffed by professional archivists from the member states, implemented an integrated record and archives management programme. Over the last two years the team has produced an archival manual – the *NATO Information Manual* – and prepared archival descriptions for the 30-year-old subject files of some of the major NATO Divisions/Directorate (Political Affairs, Economic Affairs, Scientific Affairs, Civil Emergency Planning). At the same time, the next slice of the NATO Document series (1966–72) was reviewed for public disclosure and new procedures for the declassification of subject files were developed. A NATO Archivist has been recruited to manage the organization, appraisal, processing, description, and public disclosure of the NATO archives.

### The NATO Documents Series

The NATO Documents series consist of documents issued by the Council and its committees, military commands and agencies, which

have been circulated to each of the member states. A list with a short description of the component agencies along with a number of documents issued by each committee has been posted on the NATO website, with information on how to access them. The series includes documents issued by the Council, the early Council Deputies (1950–51) and operational boards or committees. The list of committees was expanded to include the Infrastructure Committee (AC/4), the Annual Review Committee (AC/19), the Committee on Political Affairs (AC/119), the Committee on Information (AC/137), among others. The Military Committee and Standing Group records comprise the military component. The NATO Documents also have sets of documents produced by the Private Office of the Secretary General (PO) and by the Executive Secretary, in addition to other official memoranda issued by the civilian and military staffs.

The NATO documents have been released in three consecutive slices (1949–52; 1952–58, 1958–65). Within each slice they are organized by committee and type of document therein (agenda, document for consideration, record of meeting, memoranda). Most of the series have been digitized and can be consulted on CD-ROMs in the NATO Reading Room. The reports and lists of documents prepared by the consultant archivists for the access review process serve as inventories to the series. They can be seen on the NATO website. The review of the next slice of NATO documents (1965–72) is currently in preparation.

### The 'Subject Files'

With the exception of the Harmel Report files (1967), which were disclosed as part of an experimental test for the release of the subject files, none of the records maintained by the various divisions of the NATO International Staff, the International Military Staff, commands or agencies, has been released. These divisional files – or subject files – contain the Organization's internal correspondence, correspondence exchanged with member states' governments, as well as successive drafts of the documents described above. Most of the 50-year-old material generated by the International Staff has been transferred from its divisional sub-registries to the Archives Section of the Central Registry. The International Military Staff maintains all its material in its Central Records/Archives, as do the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and the Supreme Allied Command Atlantic (SACLANT).

A team of archivists has been examining the subject files during the past two years for possible disclosure to the public of 30-year-old declassified material. These arguably are the most valuable of all NATO files, as they give the entire history of policy and decision making as well as operations of the alliance. An effort to release International Staff records relatively more sensitive than the Harmel Report files is now under way. The approval of the 19 member states and of the relevant civilian and military documents will be needed to bring this project to completion.

Most of the material of interest to historians is available in the meetings and reports already released in the NATO documents series. But there is more in the subject files that needs to be opened to scholars. The collection of the 30-year-old material is still fairly small (c.3,000 ft) but the information contained in it can shed light on many facets of transatlantic history during the Cold War.

It is to the credit of the alliance that it has responded to the strong interest of archivists from member states' archives to open the records in the NATO archives to the public. At this juncture too few scholars are aware of the valuable resources in the Reading Room at NATO headquarters. Historian Ronald D. Landa of the US Secretary of Defense's Historical Office has offered useful information about lodging and transportation as well as the archives in the *SHAFR* (Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations) *Newsletter* 32 (June 2001), pp.10–11. Students of NATO's history have waited a long time for the opportunities that are now unfolding, and an increasing number of historians is expected to take advantage of them in the near future.

#### NOTE

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