

THE NASTY TRUTH ABOUT NATIONALISM AND NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Trudy Huskamp Peterson

19 September 2001

When two phenomena occur at the same time, it is reasonable to ask whether they have a functional relationship or whether their simultaneity is simply an accident. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the idea of nationalism dominate political thinking in Europe. It also saw the founding of the modern national archives and the archival profession. This is no accident. The relationship between the two is clear; furthermore, in the twentieth century the link continues. In this paper I will look first at nationalism as an organizing ideology for a nation state and its reliance on documents. In the second part, I will look at the influence of nationalism on the national archives and archival practices. Finally, I will raise concerns about three areas of activity where the national archives must beware of falling under the sway of a nationalist urge, to the detriment of professional practice.

I. Nationalism and documents

From the 1860s through the 1980s, historian Charles Maier argues, the “territorial premise of collective life” was fundamental: “that a nation’s ‘identity space’ was coterminous with ‘decision space,’ that the territories to which ordinary men and women tended to ascribe their most meaningful public loyalties (superseding competing supranational religious or social class affiliations) also provided the locus of resources for assuring their physical and economic security.” These geographic territories—nations—needed public loyalty in order to fulfill these obligations to physical and economic security, which included waging war and quelling social conflicts, as well as the happier tasks of managing the economy and fostering social welfare.ⁱ

To secure such public loyalty, the nation requires unifying symbols. The symbols of nationalism, the flags and banners and songs and slogans, provide what the leaders of the country hope will be positive reinforcement to the territorial construct of the nation. For example, the recent discussion in Russia over finding words and music for a suitable national anthem seems minor, but with it comes all the questions of what “common ideals” are to be reflected in the anthem. Some Russian athletes at the Sydney Olympics even complained that the lack of words to the Russian national anthem negatively affected their morale!ⁱⁱ

Symbols rooted in history have a special importance. They can be used to recall an honored past, whether mythic or real. They can proclaim an historic territorial claim or an exploit of a people. They are visible links between yesterday, today, and tomorrow. For nationalizers, they are essential.

The nations of Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, rejuvenating themselves in the 1990s, were explicit about the function of history and historic symbols in rebuilding the nations. An Albanian educator recently commented, for example, “We want the same curriculum for all Albanians in the Balkans. The three subjects--language, literature and history--are to us the most important because with these subjects you can strengthen knowledge about Albanian culture, heritage and national consciousness.” Similarly, in a report from Ukraine, where the government says it is taking the same interest in national integration as it is taking in economic reform, the national integration program has four thrusts: promoting the Ukrainian language, enhancing the figure of the President, promoting the country’s national symbols, and emphasizing the country’s common history.ⁱⁱⁱ These examples could be multiplied, but in each case the emphasis on the historic roots of national consciousness, often linked to a particular “folk,” is characteristic of this renewed nation building. Historic documents are instruments for this nationalist approach.

In some countries, a single document or set of documents forms one of the symbols of the nation. One has only to watch the hush of the schoolchildren in the great rotunda of the U.S. National Archives to see the importance of the physical Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights, and Constitution as a part of the civic religion. The Domesday Book in the Public Record Office in London similarly is both document and symbol of “the people” who made up England after the Norman Conquest.

But even where a specific document is not a central national symbol, the collection of documents that support the “collective life,” in Maier’s term, is. These are the documents that allow a people to construct its past; in this sense, the collection of documents is an instrumentality for the persons trying to shape the nation. Croatia and Serbia provide examples of two different types of emphasis on nations and documents. French writer Paul Garde, in his book on Yugoslavia, comments that the difference between the Slovenes and Croats, on the one hand, and the Serbs on the other, is whether the “territorial conscience”

preceded the conscience of being a people. The Slovenes and Croats, he writes, emphasize their land, while the Serbs view themselves as a people first and a territory afterwards.^{iv} What is interesting is that, in either view, documents are central. A Croatian document called the Baska Table, which dates from about 1100 and is often cited as a symbol of the beginnings of Croatian literature, neatly supports this argument, for it details a gift of land and buildings to a church by King Zvonimir.^v By contrast, the most important early documents for the Serbs are the ballads, handed down orally over the centuries and collected and published in the first half of the nineteenth. The ballads are in two main categories, the epics of heroic deeds and the “women’s” songs of everyday life and love.^{vi} In the Yugoslav wars of the last decade of the twentieth century, these two peoples, diseased by nationalism, looked back to very different types of documents to define themselves as a nation.

In some instances nationalizers create documents. In many parts of Europe, the nineteenth century saw devoted academics and amateurs actively recording tales, ballads, and traditions of folk life (the ballad collecting just mentioned in Serbia is one example). In Finland, for instance, various activists devoted great efforts to recording the Finnish folk-epic poem “Kalevala,” as recited by Finnish-speakers living in remote regions, and documenting the lives of Fenno-Ugric peoples during the years leading up to the establishment of the modern Finnish state in 1917. In other places nation builders seek to preserve documents that already exist; for example, the first historical societies in the United States were founded by veterans of the Revolutionary War, who wanted to ensure the preservation of the documentation of their heroic deeds. But whether creating or preserving, nationalism is inextricably linked to the shaping and reshaping of history, and that in turn gives documents the pride of place.

II. National archives and the nationalist impulse

National archives as institutions are clearly linked to the revolutionary and nationalizing impulse. If one is to depend on documents for part of your *raison d’être*, it is important that they be preserved and, if not exactly accessible to everyone, then at least the knowledge that they are preserved has to be public.

We know that archives can be traced to antiquity, but the idea of a national archives, one that contains the history of the nation for the people to use by right, dates from the French Revolution, and any discussion of professional practice must begin with the French adoption

of the principle of the “fonds” in 1839. National archives in Europe and North America were transformed in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century:

**founded* (Switzerland, in 1848, when the current Swiss Confederation was formed; Canada in 1872; Italy in 1874),

**built* (the cornerstone of the grand building of the U.K.’s Public Record Office on Chancery Lane was laid in 1851; the Rijksarchiv in Sweden moves into its brick fortress on Riddarholmen in 1891; the apotheosis of this trend comes at the end of the period when the cornerstone of the national romantic Hungarian National Archives, swathed in murals of Magyar history, is laid in 1913);

**professionalized* (the Royal Society of Archivists is founded in the Netherlands in 1891 and the first archival manual published in that country in 1898; the Prussians adopt and publish regulations on the professional principle of provenance in 1881);

**educated* (the French ordinances of 1846 and 1850 that require a degree from the Ecole des Chartes in order to be appointed as a departmental archivist in France; the German decree in 1894 that declared that no applicant would be admitted to the state archives service without successfully passing the examination at the archives school at the University of Marburg; the Austrian Institute for Historical Research whose graduates, since 1895, similarly are entitled to archival positions).

This is just as one would expect: the tide of national feeling that sweeps over Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century is reflected in the enhanced protection of the documents that symbolize the nation. The history of the modern national archives and the history of nationalism are the two faces of Janus.

The last decade of the twentieth century provides an interesting comparison. With the dramatic political changes in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and with the phoenix-like rise of nationalism in these territories, do we see a renewed interest in documents and in national archives? The answer is yes, but in rather different ways than in the late nineteenth century. Archives were reestablished, to be sure: Lithuania, whose state archives had been established in 1921 and then was subordinated to the central archives of the USSR, formally reestablished itself in 1990; in the parts of the former Yugoslavia, former state archives simply swapped hats and became national archives. But because these regions had all had archival structures before the political changes, the question of true establishment of a national archives, so prominent in the late nineteenth century, is not the real marker. Some new buildings are constructed, such as the dramatic building for the Czech National Archives

in Prague or the second building of the Hungarian National Archives in Budapest, but most of these countries are not economically ready to support a major building project—and they do not need the symbol, because most of them already have major archival structures to which the nationalizers can point.

The real issue in this last spurt of nationalism in Europe has come over the question of access. Just as the French Revolution proclaimed, “every citizen is entitled to ask in every depository . . . for the production of the documents it contains,”^{vii} in virtually every country of Central and Eastern Europe, the result of political change was an absolute demand for access to the records of the secret police. From the Stasi in Germany to the StB in Czechoslovakia and the Securitate in Romania, the public demand has been loud and enduring. Romanians have, for example, been arguing about the disposition of the records of the Securitate for over ten years now.^{viii} Even Serbia recently passed legislation to allow citizens to look at the secret files kept on them by the former state security services.^{ix} What is important here is to look at the demand. The French revolutionaries wanted access to the records of the ancien regime, primarily for judicial or other legal purposes. As Ernst Posner noted, writing of a slightly later period, “the vast imperial archives that Napoleon accumulated in Paris were by no means intended for the general use of the public.”^x The demand was for access to the records of the past, discredited regime. Just so the public demand for the archives of the former security services. The nexus between a surging nationalism and a demand for access to records of former regime holds.

III. Nationalism, national archives, and archival practice

If national archives are a product of the nationalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, what of it? National archives are a good solution to the management of records created by the government; in the best cases, they serve as a broker between the citizens who wish to know what the government did and the current government apparatus. And in the cases of new countries, whose economies are weak and whose borders are controversial, why not emphasize the archives as a national symbol through which the public can find a common background, common experiences reflected in documents?

Recognizing that the history of modern archives is colored by nationalism, archivists must be wary of its effects on two key areas of archival practice: access policies and public programs. If, as in many countries, the national archives also has a mandate to collect historical materials

from non-governmental sources, there is a further possibility that the collecting policy will be influenced by nationalist considerations.

A. Nationalism and access policies

National archives in Europe and North America tend to fall into three categories: those that are attached to an educational or cultural ministry, those that are attached to an entity that deals with law (home, interior, or justice ministries), and those that report to the central organ of state.^{xi} But at a more general level, national archives are supported by two arguments, one roughly “good governance,” i.e., that the professional management of records and archives helps provide the necessary accountability of the government to the governed; and, second, a “cultural custodian” argument, i.e., that the archives ground the citizens in their history. To overstate the case, one emphasizes an appeal to reason and the other emphasizes emotion and devotion. The first tips the argument toward current records and the second towards the older archives, and this may be more significant for determining the programs and practices of the archives than where it reports bureaucratically. National archives often do not choose which of these two arguments the government emphasizes about its archives, and none relies on one argument to the total exclusion of the other. Archives are, however, shaped in important ways, including funding, by this emphasis.

Nationalist regimes can have many different guises—dictatorial, democratic, and fascistic among them—but the demand for access to current records comes from the nation-states with a democratic system. Leaving aside the Swedish tradition of access under its Freedom of the Press Act, which dates from 1766, the modern tradition of freedom of information acts dates from the post-World War II period. An ineffective freedom of information act was passed in the United States in 1966, but the first truly workable law was Norway’s Freedom of Information Act of 1970. The U.S. law was amended to provide enforcement mechanisms in 1974, and by 1991 similar laws were passed in most countries in Western Europe, plus Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Access to current records, with all the difficult balancing between, on the one hand, the right to know, with, on the other, the desire for efficiency in government and the need to protect the citizens’ rights of privacy (among many vexing problems), is rooted in a good government idea. Its attraction is an intellectual conviction that knowing what a government does is essential to protect citizen rights. It has vocal support from journalists, academics and from

limited numbers of the population who have a direct interest in reading a record (usually one that has something to do with themselves or a close family member or friend). It does not usually have a broad constituency among the general public. It has a very different resonance than the demand to look at the records of a former regime, which as we have seen is a typical demand in the immediate aftermath of governmental change.

Support for the cultural heritage arguments, on the other hand, is found in the public at large, unlike the shallow support of the public for the good governance model. The emphasis on preservation, the link to the historic past of the nation, the symbolism of the archives as the protector of the national patrimony are all easily understood—and are entirely compatible with the nationalist impulse. This is not to say that archives with a cultural emphasis are not concerned with access; they are. It is, however, a much less important element in their archival foundation. Furthermore, the cultural heritage argument usually emphasizes older records; in fact, the definition of cultural heritage supported by the European Union is materials that are over fifty years old. The two storm surges of nationalism in Europe--that of the last half of the nineteenth century and up to the First World War and then, in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, in the last decade of the twentieth century—are distinguished by the cultural arguments for archives.^{xii}

What is the problem here? The difficulty is quite simple. The strong and intuitive links between nationalism and the promotion of cultural heritage can easily trap archivists and archival programs. Archives can and have been manipulated by nationalist regimes, in order to control access to the archives and selectively make information available. The opportunity for the regime to shape the view of the history of the nation is usually irresistible to strongly nationalist regimes. “Why should we open our records on x?” the government can argue. “It would only make us look bad.” Archivists, as intermediaries between the government and the demanding public, are caught in the middle of these events. It is one thing to work out an access policy for the records of the discredited former regime; it is quite another to open records of your own administration. Furthermore, while it is difficult to open controversial recent records in a democratic national government with an openness orientation, it is supremely more difficult to do so when the archives is viewed by the governing power as one of the levers of cultural control and an important element in reinforcing public loyalty to the regime.

B. Nationalism and public programs

No modern national archives is considered complete without a program of exhibits, publications, and public outreach. Funded in various ways, these programs provide a direct link from the archives to the public at large. The success of these activities is measured by their public acceptance: attendance figures at exhibits, sales of publications, participation in archives-sponsored activities. In planning public events, the question is, naturally, “What sells?” At the U.S. National Archives in the last part of the twentieth century, the answer was, “If it has a swastika, it sells.” The Second World War, the “good” war, the triumph over the Nazi evil, had an immense drawing power. So did the U. S. Civil War, which “saved the nation” and triumphed over the evil of slavery. The ambiguities of the First World War or the Korean War did not draw. But neither, as the U.S. Air and Space Museum learned, did an exhibit based on a serious review of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima succeed. Triumphalism sells, revisionism can get you in trouble, was the message. It is safer to concentrate on the glories than the gories of the nation’s past.

Nationalism emphasizes both triumphalism (or its sinister twin, victimization) and the claim of exceptionalism: “We are a different people, we are extremely fortunate or we are horribly misunderstood and victimized, no one understands us but us, our history is special.” To some extent, of course, this is true. Each nation’s history is unique, and it is natural for archivists to view their own nation’s history through the lens of the participant. And yet the great themes of modern history are persistently transnational: the slave experience in the various countries of the Americas as well as the slave trade experience in Africa; the experience of being a colony of a European colonial power; the flows of immigration and emigration; the arms race and the emergence of the new global economy: these are all themes that, if dealt with only in a national context, impoverish the discussion.

National archivists and national archives must talk and write about the history of the nation, as revealed in its records: it is part of their jobs. The temptation to yield to the pressure of the public demand for rhetoric about the glorious or tragic history is considerable, for it wins approval from national audiences and from funders most of the time. But national archives have a responsibility to avoid destructive nationalist trends, in their public programs, in their speeches, and in their publications.

C. Nationalism and collecting strategies

Any collector has a mote in his eye: he loves his type of car or this style of painting or baseball cards but not postcards. If national archives have broad responsibilities for documenting the history of the nation, they must adopt a strategy to ensure that the blind spots in their collecting area, as much as possible, are eliminated. This is very difficult to do. For example, most archivists admit that, in classic manuscript collections, the papers of women are terribly underrepresented. There is no question that women are part of the nation; it is simply that their documents were not valued by the persons making the selection in the same way as the papers of the “great men.” A similar argument could be made for the records of labor organizations or extremist political groups or small business, to name only a few.

The above examples, however, are simple to resolve by comparison to collecting which seeks to document groups that are not fully acknowledged as part of the nation. Documenting the Roma, for example, although they make up as much as 10% of the population in some Balkan countries, is probably not on any nation’s priority list. What of documents of a church that is not the official state church? What of documents in a language that is not the official language? What of papers of people who, while recognized as part of the population, are viewed as a potential third column for a neighboring state? In those cases, the national archives that seeks to document these people and movements will find skepticism from the communities themselves and, at best, a lack of support if not downright hostility from nationalists. Here a formal, written collecting policy is essential to ensure that misunderstanding of motives does not give rise to political problems for the archives.

Conclusion

The evaluation of the role of nationalism in the recent history of nations is beyond the scope of this essay. It is enough to recognize its role in the history and management of national archives. Nationalism is potent, present, and persistent. National archives owe their current form to it. But it is important to recognize that nationalism can deform archives in two ways: first, by hindering access to research materials with the concomitant deformation of historical knowledge in the country, and second, by emphasizing nationalism in public programming, thereby promoting a distorted view of the history of the nation. In the first instance, access, the archives shapes history by controlling the available materials (the archives is a secondary actor), while in the second the archives is the primary actor in promoting a view of history. By recognizing the reciprocity between nationalism and archives, archivists can steer a course

that avoids the excesses of nationalist claims and centers the history of the nation in the complex of historical factors that formed it. If the past is prologue, it will not be easy.

ⁱ Charles S. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," American Historical Review, June 2000, p. 823.

ⁱⁱ Sophie Lambroschini, "Russians Search for Suitable National Anthem;" "Artists, Intellectuals, Right-Wing Politicians Slam Decision on Anthem;" and "New-Old National Anthem Approved, Played," all RFE/RL Newswire, October 26 and December 6, 2000, and January 3, 2001. Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to use the music of the Soviet Union's national anthem with new words. The opponents said, "No new text will be able to erase the words attached to [the music] that forever glorify Lenin and Stalin." The text reads:

Russia, our sacred state!
Russia, our beloved country!
A mighty will, a great glory
[Are] your inheritance for all time!

[Refrain:]
May you be glorious, our free Fatherland,
An eternal union of fraternal peoples.
Popular wisdom given by our forebears.
May you be glorious, country! We are proud of you!

From the southern seas to the polar region
Extend our forest and meadows.
You are unique on earth! You are the only such!
Native land protected by God.

A broad space for dreams and for living,
The years open up the future to us.
Our loyalty gives strength to the Fatherland.
Thus it was, thus it is and thus it will be forever!

ⁱⁱⁱ "Albania: State of the Nation," International Crisis Group Balkans Report No. 87, 1 March 2000, p. 9; Tara Kuzio, "Ukrainians in Search of their Identity," RFE/RL Newswire, October 5, 2000.

^{iv} Paul Garde, Vie et mort de la Yougoslavie, quoted in "La guerre en Europe," L'Express, 3 juillet 1992, p. 25.

^v Radoslav Katicic and Slobodan P. Novak, Two Thousand Years of Writing in Croatia (Zagreb: Sveucilisna naklada Liber, 2d edition, 1989), pp. 28-29.

^{vi} Geoffrey N.W. Locke, trans., The Serbian Epic Ballads: An Anthology (Belgrade: Nolit Publishing House, 1997), pp. 31-32.

^{vii} Ernst Poser, Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays, Ken Munden, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967), p. 26.

^{viii} For example, the 9 July 2001 issue of "RFE/RL Newswire" reported that the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church said "that its opposition to including priests among officials whose collaboration with the former communist secret police must be made public reflects 'the defense of the Holy Mystery of Confession.'"

^{ix} BBC, "Serbia opens secret files," 19 June 2001.

^x Posner, op. cit., p. 29.

^{xi} Statistics from a 1993-1994 survey by the International Council on Archives showed, for European and North American national archives, 51% under education and culture, 20% under home-justice-interior, and 26% to central organ of state (e.g., president, prime minister, council of ministers).

^{xii} Many of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe attempted to pass Freedom of Information Acts in the 1990s. These had much less support than the laws governing the records of the secret police, and only a few, such as that in Hungary, had workable enforcement powers.