

RESEARCH REPORT

Republic of South Africa Archives

Sue Onslow

One of the most extensive but under-utilized archives of the Cold War era lies in the Republic of South Africa. The apartheid governments before 1994 kept copious material on all aspects of South Africa's foreign relations, and Cold War historians should be encouraged to make the lengthy trip to the Southern hemisphere - in particular given the importance of Southern Africa to the dynamics of the Cold War in the 1960s and 1970s. It is certainly worth the ten-hour flight from Europe. Researchers should be aware that the material is in both English and Afrikaans, but non-Afrikaans speakers should by no means be deterred by this linguistic duality. There exists a wealth of material which is governed by a 20-year disclosure rule, readily available to the committed researcher which is not yet accessible in British, other European or indeed African archives.

One of the keys to understanding the archives of the Republic of South Africa is that the system remains highly decentralized. In the system of government of the apartheid era, four government ministries formed the RSA's 'security family', all of whom discussed matters of state security,¹ with the Office of the Prime Minister² at the summit of this power structure. This quartet comprised Department of External Affairs (renamed Department of Foreign Affairs in 1961); the Department of Finance; the Department of Defence; and the Ministry of Information. Under the Law of Disclosure of 1995, it was intended that all government departmental records available under the 20-year rule should be transferred and stored in the National Archives of South Africa in Hamilton Street, Pretoria. However, because of space constraints, this has not proved possible. Thus, in reality, separate departments continue to hold their own archival material for specific subjects and periods. So, although the Government Archives, Hamilton Street, Pretoria is the official repository for documents for the pre-1984 period, this is by no means a hard-and-fast rule.

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Cabinet minutes (file series CAB 1/1/6-60, covering the period 1956 to 1994³) and separate, supplementary Cabinet Memoranda, Ministers' Committees, Working Committees, Working Groups, Ministers Councils and Committee of Departmental Heads are all stored at the National Archives. These sets are not complete and must be consulted together with other archival groups. The official records are also kept here for the Office of the Prime Minister, covering Executive decisions for the pre-P.W. Botha era (President 1984-89). The PM file series held at these archives contains material/notations for the Prime Minister himself - the equivalent of the PREM series in the British National Archives. The existing Office of the President (in the West Wing, Union Buildings, Pretoria) keeps the archival material for former President Mandela, although this is not currently available to researchers; and former President P.W. Botha, the first executive President of the RSA, retained control over the executive archival material from his tenure as President. There is a rudimentary computer search facility, but researchers would be advised to use the typescript catalogue reference documents as well. Patience and perseverance are needed in equal measure, but ultimately pay considerable dividends. There are also photocopying facilities readily available.

The archives in the Department of Foreign Affairs in Union Buildings, Pretoria, are a veritable goldmine for students of South African foreign relations in the Cold War. Indeed, the Department of Foreign Affairs has an extensive collection of policy documents for the pre-apartheid era, as well as the post-1948 period. The structure of the DFA has changed over time, and was reorganized fundamentally in 1970. Overall, it evolved into a series of branches, with the supreme civil servant designated Secretary for External (or later Foreign) Affairs - confusingly, he continued to be referred to by this title until the mid-1970s. These branches are as follows: Protocol; Africa; Americas and Europe; and Asia and Middle East (covering Australasia as well). The Development and Cooperation Branch was added in the 1970s (this has been called Multilateral Development & Cooperation Branch since 1990). Within these individual branches exist separate chief directorates covering more specific geographic regions: for example, Central and Eastern Europe and Southern Africa. Below this in the structure of the DFA lay the directorates, with responsibility for country groupings - for example, Southern Africa refers to Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique. Each country had a desk officer in Pretoria.

The DFA's filing system seems somewhat confusing to the uninitiated, as is the choice of country files still retained in this building. Thus a researcher would do well to contact the Archivist (details given below) to discover exactly what files he still holds. As for taxonomy, these files were originally divided into three broad categories of confidentiality: Top Secret/Uiter Geheim (or Blue files); Secret/Geheim (so-called Pink files), and Confidential files. The Top Secret files were for strictly limited circulation and were stored separately, whereas the Confidential material was freely circulated among civil servants. As in the British Foreign Office, it was up to the author to select the level of secrecy of the circulated document. Since the institution of the 20-year rule, there has been an amalgamation of these records. Researchers should note that the files for the three categories are not necessarily divided into the same time spans, and care should be taken, when cross-referencing, to avoid confusion.

To give an example of the range of information stored in the basement of the DFA building: I was researching British policy towards Rhodesia between 1961 and 1980, to evaluate the extent of this imperial problem in Britain's management of its international affairs. As such, the positions of the RSA and Portugal are key. For a variety of reasons I was unable to consult the Zimbabwe Government Archives in Harare in order to investigate the extent to which Salisbury coordinated its approach prior to its unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) in November 1965, and in the post-1965 era, with Pretoria and Lisbon. On this topic the DFA Archives are a revelation: they cover not only Rhodesia's relations with South Africa between 1963 and 1980, but also British, American, Portuguese, Japanese, French, West German and other West European nations' policy towards Rhodesia for the same period. The stance of the Commonwealth was also covered by RSA diplomats in detail, as were issues such as trade, economic sanctions, and the RSA's financial and military support for Rhodesia. This last area was particularly useful as the Department of Defence files on this issue have been filleted, given the sensitivity of the RSA's involvement in the Rhodesian insurgency in the late 1960s and 1970s; for example, enough material remains in the DFA archives pointing to the extensive activities of the South African Defence Force (SADF) in Rhodesia, such as the testing of prototype napalm weaponry for potential use against domestic insurgents. I also found it particularly useful that the Confidential files contain extensive newspaper cuttings (from all RSA newspapers, both English and Afrikaans) on the designated topics. There is, however, no page notation of the original newspaper source. The DFA also holds files covering the various Prime Ministers' speeches between 1960 and 1983 (series PM 5/5).

One of the drawbacks of the DFA's apartheid-era bureaucratic practice is that policy documents within departments are often not signed by the author; similarly, it is frequently unclear who the exact recipient of a particular briefing paper was intended to be. Initially, I was confused by the heading 'To: Secretary, Department of External Affairs, Pretoria, From: Secretary, Department of External Affairs, Cape Town'. In essence this meant that the Secretary was writing to himself, as the titles referred to one and the same person. (This is a reflection of the established practice of dividing the seat of government between Pretoria, the national capital, and Cape Town, its summer venue.) Also, the RSA did not produce the equivalent of the British Foreign Office's Diplomatic Year Book, so it can be difficult to track individuals, and heads of department/key officials. And the documents do not note within which department the material is being circulated; and often contain indecipherable initials to indicate the officials who had consulted the document. The use of Afrikaans is also idiosyncratic, depending upon the author and audience, rather than any strict code governing linguistic use.

However, this should not deter the researcher. The Department of Foreign Affairs archives have been meticulously catalogued in printed form in English, and the listings are easily accessible. Although there are no computer research facilities to identify relevant files or material, the staff could not have been more helpful and informative. Access to the DFA Archive should be made by contacting Mr Neels Muller (address given below), who also holds a vital 'Functional List' which indicates the structure and coverage of individual

sections. No research visa is required, although a letter of introduction from an affiliated university is obligatory. Photocopying is carried out at the discretion of the Archivist: there are no independent photocopying facilities available to students or researchers. Laptops can be used, but a lengthy extension cord to the nearest plug is a useful piece of equipment. Lastly, there are no cafeteria facilities in or near this building, so researchers are advised to bring their own lunch.

Of the other two great offices of State - the Department of Finance (now referred to as the National Treasury) and Department of Defence - there has also been selective retention of pre-20-year rule papers. In addition, the South African Defence Force has kept its archives separate from the Defence Department. Researchers are therefore advised to contact the archivists in these departments to verify the material held there and its accessibility (all addresses and contact telephone numbers are given below). As far as other official records are concerned, Hansard volumes, the official parliamentary assembly record, are kept at the National Library of South Africa in Pretoria; and also at the Library of Parliament in Cape Town (again the product of the arrangement whereby the RSA parliament and government sits for six months of the year in the national capital, and for the remaining period in the capital of the Western Cape).

As for the private papers of contemporary politicians, the University of the Orange Free State in Bloemfontein has an extensive collection of politicians' papers in its Archive of Contemporary History. These include Prime Minister Vorster's voluminous press cuttings collection, as well as the papers of Dr Verwoerd, Dr Hilgard Muller (these were still being catalogued at time of writing), Chris Heunis, Dr Hertzog and PW Botha. The holdings for these collections can be investigated on-line. Enquiries about access should be made to the Archivist (see below). Vorster's private papers are held at the University of Stellenbosch. The University of Fort Hare on the Eastern Cape acts as a repository for both the ANC and other national liberation movements.

Given the disparate nature of these archives and the sheer size of this country (for example, Pretoria is a 40-minute drive from Johannesburg International Airport; the flight between Johannesburg and Cape Town takes approximately two hours; Stellenbosch University is approximately 60 miles from Cape Town, etc.), researchers would do well to plan their trips with care. Inevitably frustrations occur, despite the most meticulous prior planning: the innate good manners of archivists, and their wish to encourage and please the researcher, may inadvertently mislead an enquirer; email contact is not always reliable; careful use of telephone calls to follow up and confirm arrangements before departure is advisable, but not always 'fail-safe'. Public holidays should also be verified well in advance. Some are fixed in the calendar (such as Independence Day, or Human Rights Day); others (such as National Tree Planting Day) are not, and may surprise the unwary, resulting in a frustratingly non-productive day - when *everything* is shut. Opening hours tend to be 8.00 am until 4.00 pm, although the National Archives open at 9.00 am on the first Thursday of every month; there is also now limited opening on Saturday mornings (first and third Saturdays in each Month, 9.00 am–1.00 p.m). All university and state archivists were very helpful

in identifying hotel accommodation nearby; and which hotels could provide courtesy transport to and from their archives. This is an important consideration in South Africa where the security situation is not ideal.

Useful Addresses:

National Archives of South Africa
24, Hamilton Street
Arcadia
Private Bag X236
Pretoria
Tel: 00 27 12 323 5300
Email: archives@doc.gov.za
See <http://www.national.archives.gov.za/naairsdb.html> for full list of databases

Mr Neels Muller
Archivist
Department of External Affairs Archives
Union Buildings
Private Bag X152
Pretoria 0001
Tel: 00 27 12 351 0248
Email: mullercj@foreign.gov.za

Department of the National Treasury
Vermuelen Street
Pretoria
Tel: 00 27 12 315 5111

Department of Defence
Documentation Service
Sweikert Building
Pretoria
Tel: 00 27 12 355 9111

South African National Defence Force (SANDF) Documentation Centre
Sweikerdt Building
20, Visagie Street
Private Bag X289

374 *S. Onslow*

Pretoria
Tel: 00 12 339 4600
Email: sandfdoc@mweb.co.za

The National Library of South Africa
Old Mutual Centre
167 Andries Street
Pretoria 0001
Tel: 00 27 12 312 8931 (Reference Room)

Ms Ester Jones
Archivist
Archive of Contemporary History
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Bloemfontein 9300
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University of Stellenbosch
Privaatsak X1
Matieland
Stellenbosch 7602
Tel: 00 27 21 808 9111
<http://www.sun.ac.za>

Library of Parliament
PO Box 15
Cape Town 8000
Tel: 00 21 403 2911
Email: info@parliament.gov.za

University of Fort Hare
PO Box X134
Alice 5700
South Africa
Web page not currently available. Contact: The Department of History.

Notes

- [1] The DFA formed the 'kingpin' department in the Strategic Plan for every government with relations with South Africa. This structure and system was the brainchild of Premier PW Botha in response to the growing tension and domestic crisis in South Africa from 1976 onwards. The other government agencies involved were the National Intelligence Agency (involved in domestic intelligence gathering), the Department of Defence, and the South Africa Security Services (concerned with intelligence gathering abroad.) The file series SVR contains details of the formulation and execution of each strategic plan. At the time of writing (2004), little of this material is currently available.
- [2] In 1961 when South Africa became a Republic, the position of President was created; however, no executive authority was vested in this office. This constitutional position was altered by PW Botha, who became the first executive President of the RSA in 1984; thus researchers in the post-1984 era should refer to the Office of the President for supreme executive authority decisions.
- [3] The Cabinet minutes of 1956 to 1976 were written into registers in chronological order and according to portfolio. After 1976, the records were typed - and thus are infinitely more legible. They are all in Afrikaans, and tend to be very brief.