

THE UNITED NATIONS LIBRARY AT GENEVA

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Library was set up in London in 1919 and its first headquarters were likewise in London, at 117, Piccadilly. It was then transferred to Geneva in 1920, at the same time as the Secretariat of the League of Nations, and was installed in the dining-room and cellars of the Hôtel National, the main seat of the now defunct organization during the first fifteen years of its existence.

Even then it already had all the typical features of a library in that it comprised several thousand books, periodicals and official publications, a reading room, and catalogues; but it could more properly be regarded as a study and information centre for use by the Secretariat and by delegations, committees and journalists.

The Library functioned on these general lines until September 1927, when the Council and the Assembly of the League of Nations accepted a generous offer by John D. Rockefeller Jr. of \$2 millions for the building and endowment of a library designed not only as a source of information for the Secretariat, but also as an institution "to serve as a centre of international research and an instrument of international understanding". When the cost of constructing the Library building had been met, the balance was converted into an endowment to which two conditions attached: that the income should be used for the Geneva Library and that it should be regarded as a supplement to, not as a substitute for, funds allocated to the Library from other sources. That was a major step in the transformation of a modest secretariat library into the large international research centre it has now become. An expert committee consisting of statesmen and librarians presided over by the eminent international jurist Vittorio Scialoja drew up the general outline of the project, and in the autumn of 1936 the Library was transferred to its own wing in the new Palais des Nations.

During the war a very substantial reduction of the Library's staff and of the funds available for purchases compelled it to confine itself to

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essentials; nevertheless, it succeeded in keeping up to date its collections of governmental and non-governmental series and periodicals, which it would have been practically impossible to complete later. After the war, and when living conditions were normal again, it was able to provide outstanding working facilities. In 1946 it was taken over by the United Nations, which further enhanced and fructified the Library's resources.

COLLECTIONS

The Library now has 655,000 volumes on its shelves, including Europe's most comprehensive collections of statistical publications and legislative texts from all the countries in the world; large collections of works on international, constitutional and administrative law and of different countries' codes; books on economic, financial and social questions; general works, including a wide range of encyclopaedias from many countries; a very large number of language and technical dictionaries; and a complete collection of yearbooks concerning all the countries in the world. It further possesses a complete set of United Nations and League of Nations documents, and another, as complete as circumstances have allowed, of documents of the specialized agencies; and it has a valuable collection of reports and laboratory microfilms representing the United States contribution to the scientific literature on atomic energy, and of official reports from France, the United Kingdom and Canada.

Something like 15,000 volumes are added every year to the collections of books and government publications, and the Library regularly receives the successive issues of more than 7,700 periodicals. About 75 per cent of these publications are furnished through exchanges or as gifts; many of the periodicals are received in exchange for the "Monthly List of Selected Articles".

Following the establishment of the Economic Commission for Europe in 1946 and, more recently, of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, there is no doubt that economic and financial publications, which are of the utmost importance in the work of these bodies, are now consulted as often as the magnificent collection of texts of treaties, conventions, legislative

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acts and compendia of national laws. Indeed, to enable the Library to meet the needs of the Secretariat it has been necessary to establish and maintain a collection of the laws of all the world's countries, and more particularly of all States Members of the United Nations. This collection is kept up to date by bulletins, known as "slip laws", in which the most recent legislative texts are regularly published.

Since 1928 the Library has regularly published a "Monthly List of Books Catalogued"; the List constitutes a selected bibliography on all kinds of topics dealt with by United Nations bodies. Since 1929 it has also published a "Monthly List of Selected Articles", which is compiled by perusal of the periodicals received by the Library and lists articles on political, legal, economic, financial and social topics. The list is also printed on onion skin (one side only), and this is cut up, mounted on cards and used for a card-index on special questions, thus providing the reader with an easy means of referring to up-to-date documentation on the topic which interests him.

FUNCTIONS

The Library is placed under the authority of the Secretary-General, exercised in the administrative respect through the Director-General of the United Nations office at Geneva and with regard to principles through the Director of the Library at Headquarters, in New York.

The basic function of the Library is to make available to them as conveniently and as rapidly as possible the publications and information which delegates, the Secretariat and the permanent missions need in order to carry out their official duties. The needs of these groups determine what books and documents to acquire and what services to provide. However, it is also an obligation of the Library to make its resources available to teachers and other experts concerned with international questions and to help them in their research. Many members of the academic professions from all over the world resort to these vast collections when writing books or articles on legal, political and economic

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subjects, and many non-governmental organizations with headquarters at Geneva and having consultative status with the Economic and Social Council use the United Nations Library. The Library is also open to journalists accredited to the United Nations, to graduates preparing their doctorate theses, and, to a more limited extent, to students engaged in special studies and unable to obtain the books they need at the Library of the University of Geneva. There are thus various categories of people who use the Library, and since interest in international affairs is increasing daily throughout the world the number of these readers from outside is increasing proportionately. Nevertheless, service to the public necessarily takes second place to service to the United Nations.

The Library's resources are also placed at the disposal of the specialized agencies so far as possible, and a liberal policy based on reciprocity is applied with respect to them. Under the plan for the use of the Library by the specialized agencies a special arrangement on this subject was concluded with the World Health Organization, as a result of which the loans policy put into effect between the two organizations' libraries is extremely liberal.

In a memorandum to the Supervisory Commission of the League of Nations, the Director of the International Labour Organisation, noting that the League of Nations Library and the Library of the International Labour Organisation were largely complementary, urged that arrangements should be made ensuring the closest possible co-operation between them in the future. Moreover, the Common Plan for the Transfer of the Assets of the League of Nations to the United Nations, approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 12 February 1946 and by the Assembly of the League of Nations on 18 April 1946, provided that "the International Labour Organisation may use the Library under the same conditions as other official users thereof". Since then, co-operation between the Libraries of the International Labour Organisation and of the United Nations has continued on the same basis: exchanges of information and loans of books, periodicals and documents, etc., are very widely practised, and it may be added

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that the two Libraries' joint collection of official gazettes is probably the most comprehensive in Europe, and perhaps in the world.

The geographical recruitment of Secretariat personnel, which takes account of the policy of equitable distribution of posts among the States Members of the United Nations, is inevitably reflected in the staff of the Library; indeed, the multiracial character of the staffs of international libraries in general is something quite out of the ordinary in other spheres. The United Nations Library at present has thirty-eight staff members of sixteen different nationalities, knowing twenty-eight languages between them.

The Director of the Library is also curator of the Archives and the Historical Collection of the League of Nations. The Archives were transferred to the Library in 1958 and cover the period between 1920 and 1946. They include the files of the Central Registry and the documents of Secretariat departments, special missions, etc.; they are of incalculable value to researchers interested in the history of the period between the two world wars.

In 1965 the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace generously offered funds sufficient for a three-year study to develop a definitive system of classification for the Archives and to establish rules governing their use. The provisional rules (see below), drafted by an Advisory Panel, were approved by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in August 1967; the final rules will be adopted before the project comes to an end in 1969:

General
conditions
of access

1. The Archives of the League of Nations shall, with the exception of the categories of material defined in paragraph 3 below, be open for consultation in situ from the beginning of the calendar year following the date on which the most recent item in the file concerned has become forty years old.

Proposed
exemptions

2. An exemption from the foregoing rule may be granted in favour of researchers proving a legitimate interest in subjects

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concerning a more recent date, but only in exceptional cases and in so far as the work of classifying the archives permits. The beneficiary may be required to undertake to submit the manuscript of his work before publication.

Continued
general
inaccessi-
bility of:

No access
to docu-
ments of
States

Documents
which
might en-
danger
indivi-
duals

3. The following items shall remain closed after the time-limit of forty years:

(a) files which contain internal documents of national administrations unofficially communicated at the time to League of Nations officials or commissioners by Governments whose archives are not open to researchers for the dates in question.

(b) files containing documents which, if divulged, might injure the repute, affect the privacy or endanger the safety of individuals.

Repro-
duction
and publi-
cation

4. The copying, reproduction and publication of documents to which access is given shall be subject to the following principles:

(a) Researchers shall be warned that the United Nations is not in a position to release them from any obligations in respect of copyright held by persons whose works may be found in the archives;

Whole
archive
groups

(b) The reproduction or publication of large bodies of files (whole archive groups or large series therein) shall not be permitted;

(c) The United Nations Services shall not be obliged to carry out the actual work of reproduction, even against payment.

5. The Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva shall be responsible for the implementation of this decision, particularly with regard to the determination of reserved files, the practical methods of providing access and the granting of the exemption for which provision is made in paragraph 2.

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The Historical Collection of the League of Nations might be regarded as an international museum of diplomatic history; it houses documents on the history of international organisation and such historic instruments as the Geneva Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes of 1924; the original of the Treaty of Locarno (1925), and others. There is also an international collection, probably unique in the world, of caricatures, published between the two world wars, about the League of Nations. Lack of space forbids a longer listing of these treasures, but anyone interested in this eventful period of history is strongly advised to visit the Collection.

Thus the United Nations possesses at Geneva a library which is highly specialised in the fields referred to in the foregoing, is prepared to furnish answers to the questions posed by the economic and legal problems of our time, and is anxious to promote international cooperation through cultural understanding, i.e. to make its own modest contribution to world peace.

NORMAN S. FIELD

Geneva, December 1968