

Call for Papers for Special Issue

ARMED ARCHIVES

Studying Archives of non-state Armed Actors: Methodological challenges and new research avenues

Archival sources have for a long time been overlooked in the field of conflict studies. Recent scholarship has pointed to the danger of 'presentism' in the study of contemporary armed conflicts and underscored the value of archival sources to understand the micro-dynamics of war (Mac Ginty 2021, 3). In their special issue *New findings from conflict archives* for the *Journal of Peace Research*, Balcells and Sullivan point to conflict archives' great potential to, among others, 'reveal the hidden mechanisms underpinning political conflict' (2018, 2). In contrast to post-factum testimonials of people directly involved in conflict (either as victims, perpetrators or bystanders), archival records indeed constitute time documents that allow researchers to go beyond an understanding of conflict as a sequence of violent events and delve deeper into its different layers and dynamics. In the field of (critical) archival studies there has moreover been a growing consensus over the past two decades that archives are 'active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed' (Schwartz en Cook 2002) and that archives can 'serve as tools for both oppression and liberation' (Caswell, Punzalan, en Sangwand 2017, 1). It is increasingly acknowledged that the actors and spaces that create archives merit reflecting upon rather than taking them for granted.

This also means that the assumption that archival research always takes place within the confines of public institutions no longer holds true (Subotić 2021, 349). Documents are produced in all kinds of formal and informal spaces, within or outside of the boundaries of official bureaucracies - with all due consequences for the afterlives of these records, especially in unpredictable contexts of violence and unsafety. In other cases, archives emerge online as armed movements, but also outside supporters or even researchers, post a continuous stream of documents, propaganda material (including videos) or evidence of state repression, either on dedicated websites, or on more generic platforms. These at the same time are produced in the moment and provide or transform into historical records of rebel group engagements. These online archives of non-state armed actors – susceptible to government bans – again pose a different set of questions around accessibility and longevity.

This special issue contributes to the ongoing wider debate on the 'archival turn' in conflict studies by focusing specifically on archives produced by non-state armed actors such as rebel groups, militias or paramilitaries either during (internal) armed conflicts, situations of protracted political violence or during post-conflict transitions. While such archives can have great scholarly potential for a better understanding of conflict dynamics, studying them often comes with many ethical challenges regarding their preservation, access and use. In the disciplines of history and anthropology there is generally more awareness about the politics of archives and the ethical conduct of archival research than in political science, yet, working with records that testify to political violence comes with specific ethical challenges

(Subotić 2021, 349) and arguably even more so when they are produced by armed actors themselves. Among others, important dilemmas arise around the question of how to deal in an appropriate manner with the sensitive nature of records of human rights violations, including confidential details about the perpetrators and victims of these crimes. While, in recent years, the use of archival sources is slowly gaining ground in conflict studies, the methodological and ethical implications of working with records produced by non-state armed actors have been largely neglected.

The aim of this special issue is to reflect upon these methodological and ethical implications while at the same time demonstrating the scholarly value of archives produced by non-state armed actors and their potential to open up new research avenues. We especially welcome the following types of contributions:

- 1) Cases-studies that explore existing archives of non-state armed actors produced during times of (internal) armed conflict or political violence and reflect upon both the related opportunities and challenges for research
- 2) Case-studies that explore the 'making-of' archives of non-state armed actors, including processes of data collection and preservation, and reflect upon both the related opportunities and challenges for research
- 3) Contributions that take archives of non-state armed actors as a starting point to reflect upon the relation between archival research and ethnography in conflict studies
- 4) Contributions that take archives of non-state armed actors as a starting point to reflect upon alternative forms of 'state-making' and governance during conflict
- 5) Contributions that consider existing archives or processes of archive-building from underrepresented voices within non-state armed groups (e.g. women, LGBTQI+ persons, indigenous peoples)

If you are interested in contributing to this special issue, please send a 500-word abstract and short bio to Eva Willems (eva.willems@ugent.be) and Bert Suykens (bert.suykens@ugent.be) by December 1st.