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## On the State of the Art Moscow 1972

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ON THE STATE OF THE ART

MOSCOW 1972

Ann Pederson\*

It was difficult to imagine a more elaborate setting. Massive white columns supported a ceiling of crystal chandeliers in Moscow's Trade Union House. Over 1,000 delegates from 64 countries sat in red (of course!) plush seats, conversing reverently or adjusting their translation receivers. Promptly at 9:30 a.m. on August 21, a gavel rapped sharply. Earphones crackled as a voice announced: "The Seventh International Congress on Archives is hereby declared in session."

The four-day Moscow meeting, the seventh since 1950, was designed to serve three major functions. One purpose was to report the results of international surveys authorized by the previous Congress. These studies concerned the relationship between state and agency archives, new technology in archives, finding aids for scientific purposes, preservation and handling of non-paper records, and technical assistance for archival development. Secondly, the Congress worked to identify and schedule for investigation areas of archival concern which would benefit from international study. Finally, the assembled delegates hoped to produce a number of useful recommendations and guidelines which could be applied in individual countries.

Through the maze of meetings and report topics, four issues emerged as the major concerns of the Congress's participants. It was interesting, although not surprising, to note that opinions on these topics tended to accentuate, rather than blur, ideological and socioeconomic differences among the various countries.

One subject focused upon the relationship between agencies (creators-administrators of records) and archives

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(ultimate depositories of records). Within this sphere, a number of related problems were discussed, such as central planning, records management, intermediate records depositories, and the role of the archivist. It was felt that, using the tools of standardization and central control, archivists should strive for a total records program which would distribute the responsibility for selection, arrangement, and description between the archives and the agency. Appraisal of records ought to be a shared and continuing function, based upon agency purpose and importance, record form and content, and research needs and potential. Although cooperation and coordination were emphasized, it was clear that archival concerns would dominate the overall planning.

In the area of central planning, a marked difference of opinion emerged between the archivists of the socialist countries and those of the non-socialist camp. The socialist countries, notably the U.S.S.R., believe that true archives are possible only when all records are "the property of the people." When private ownership of records persists, one can have only scattered, incomplete, and confusing funds of information. Although their point concerning the ease of central planning under their system was well taken, the Soviet archivists acknowledged that such planning might, in time, be legislated or voluntarily accepted in non-socialist countries. Western archivists also disagreed with their Soviet colleagues over the principles of arrangement of archival records. In the U.S.S.R., separate collections of materials are maintained to document the development of Marxist-Leninist theory, the Communist Party, and economic development. The delegates from the West believed the maintenance and creation of these distinct subject-oriented archival funds within the socialist countries was a controversial archival practice.

The second focus of attention concerned the role of the archivist in modern information management. Congress members agreed generally that the archivist must adopt a more aggressive stance than was considered desirable in the past. The limits of this new posture, however, were not clearly defined. Dr. James B. Rhoads, Archivist of the United States, in his presentation, "New Archival Techniques," raised the question of whether or not the archivist should have a hand in records creation.

As a profession, we may well ponder whether the archivist, if he chooses to limit himself to the selection and preservation of official

records, has not weighted the scales of research in favor of official history. As custodian of the most basic documentary sources for scholarly research, does he--or should he have--an obligation to seek out and acquire and preserve, by any possible means, a more balanced and complete documentary record of the present for the future than that which he has inherited from the past?

Although one cannot interpret the question as a statement in favor of such a role for archivists, the suggestion is there; and the fact that the issue was posed at the Congress by such an influential figure as Dr. Rhoads may indicate a major shift in archival thinking.

A third principal area of debate centered on technical assistance for archivally developing countries. The distinction was carefully drawn between economically or technologically underdeveloped, and archivally underdeveloped, countries as they are not always one and the same. Economically advanced states are generally termed "metropolitan" countries, while those less matured are described as "emerging" nations. In archival concerns, the terms are "donor" and "developing" countries.

The matter of international aid is treacherous in any field, and archives is no exception. The mass of problems generated by aid programs intensifies where the "donors" are primarily "metropolitans," often former colonial powers, and the recipients are former colonies. During the often heated debate, several suggestions emerged. "Donor" countries were advised to be less selfish and to coordinate their aid programs with each other and with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). They were cautioned also to modify their "know it all" attitudes and to work more closely with the "developing" countries in planning priorities and assessing needs. "Developing" nations, on the other hand, were urged to be more practical in their demands, placing emphasis on basic archival orientation, adequate facilities, and personnel training programs, rather than on expensive technology and the transfer of colonial materials from "metropolitan" archives.

The fourth primary sphere of interest, particularly for the delegates from the more technologically sophisticated countries, embraced those special areas that have their genesis in modern technology: automated data processing (ADP)

materials and techniques, and audio-visual archives. The use of ADP materials and techniques is still in the experimental stages in most countries. Though all delegates were aware of the problems of appraisal, use, and expensive equipment, none could report more than that "studies are in progress." Surprisingly, the socialist countries appeared to have utilized ADP techniques less than their Western counterparts, despite the advantage of central planning. Leading countries in its application are Canada, Federal Republic of Germany, Israel, and the United States.

The proliferation of valuable audio-visual materials and the lack of standards for their proper handling and control concerned many delegates. The most successful approach to handling such materials has been to keep them in a separate audio-visual fund with adequate cross-referencing to related paper records. This segregation enables archivists to provide the special facilities, conditions, and techniques sufficient to preservation. For most Congress participants, the primary concern associated with these records was not handling, but the control necessary to insure the preservation and orderly deposit of such materials in archives and to protect them while making them widely available to researchers. In many instances, radio, television, and film companies maintain their own archives of such materials, independent of any central control. There is always the threat that commercial, rather than historical, interests may exercise the major influence in determining selection, maintenance, and access to these records. A number of suggestions emerged from the survey. Archivists should make every effort to provide suitable facilities for audio-visual materials and should seek such records for their institutions. Furthermore, to promote preservation, archivists should cooperate with and advise private firms and institutions on standards for appraisal, storage, preservation, repair, and circulation of their audio-visual holdings.

There were, of course, many other topics of discussion at the Moscow Congress. Detailed reports of the proceedings have been published and are available in many repositories throughout the country, including the Georgia Department of Archives and History in Atlanta.

The delegates had four days to solve the problems of the archival world, and considering the difficulties of semantics and the unavoidable conflicts between sessions and scheduled sightseeing, they performed superbly. Perhaps more could have been accomplished had opportunities been

provided for delegates to meet informally to discuss individual problems with their colleagues. Decentralized housing, communications problems, and lack of time and facilities made such contact virtually impossible.

The Eighth International Congress on Archives will meet in Washington, D. C., in 1976. No archivist should miss it.