

[Back to index](#)**British Archival Records and their Value for Students of American and Canadian History****by Kirsty Buckthorp****University of Birmingham and Historian, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK)**

This article acts as brief introduction to records found in British archives and British document publications that are useful for the study of international diplomacy. The following is by no means comprehensive. There are many guides to archive collections that researchers must consult, some of which are mentioned in this essay. Neither does this article focus on specific areas of American or Canadian foreign affairs, aiming instead to provide an overview of commonly used British diplomatic records that graduate students researching North American foreign relations can use to supplement and complement their endeavours in North American archives. I focus upon paper documents in this piece, although I am well aware that many other sources are employed in the study of (international) history, e.g., oral histories, CD-ROMS, Internet and On-line Databases.

The study of any country's diplomatic history typically involves a trip to their respective archive. However, it is self-evident that diplomacy is never a one-way process and more often involves bilateral and multilateral ventures. Even if students are focusing on one particular nation's policies towards a certain country/issue, augmenting this with research in the archive of a closely related country/third party can be invaluable. This is certainly true in the case of Britain whose distinctive and high profile relationship with both the United States of America and Canada means that Britain's perspective on North American diplomacy is helpful, whether as friend, adversary, imperial power or as part of an international organisation.

Former editors of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's history of British foreign policy, *Documents on British Policy Overseas* (DBPO) argued that one of the aims of publishing their volumes was to ensure that assessments of British diplomacy are based on British records: 'It would be singularly unfortunate if the history of British policy was written from the archives and publications of either her allies or, worse still, her adversaries' [1]. While this may be true; the reverse, that is using the archives of other countries, in some cases will offer the historian the opportunity to cast a more critical eye at historiographical trends that often emerge because of over-dependence on certain records and archives. Many international historians, for example, eagerly await easy and regular access to former Soviet archives hoping that this will shed new light on Cold War relations. The British archives clearly offer similar opportunities, particularly in Cold War studies because of Britain's complex role as a broker between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Past DBPO editors wrote, 'it could, as we are sure you know, be argued that many of the ideas of the American Cold War revisionist historians have appeared sadly wanting when viewed in the light of the evidence from British archives' [2]. This principle applies to the most recent works by John Lewis Gaddis [3], and other US scholars such as Melvyn P. Leffler [4], who focus upon potential revelations in the newly opened Soviet archives, having not yet undertaken substantial research in London. The point that I am arguing is far from new - British scholars have urged their American counterparts to do this for twenty years - but it may serve as a reminder to some. And for those graduates who are new to archival research, it will hopefully encourage them to adopt a fresh approach to their research.

British archives

To begin, I will comment on useful archival material on international history. The following recommendations are based on my own experience but the classmark details I have found in numerous guides to the United Kingdom's national archive, the Public Record Office (PRO) in Kew. I urge students of foreign affairs to consult the following guides before undertaking their research:

- Louise Atherton 'Never Complain, Never Explain': *Records of the Foreign Office and State Paper Office 1500-c.1960*, London: PRO Publications, 1994

Extremely useful and extensive examination of various papers held at the PRO which deal with the conduct of foreign affairs.

- *British Documents on the End of Empire*, (BDEE) Series C, Sources for Colonial Studies in the PRO, Volume I: Records of the Colonial Office, Dominions Office, Commonwealth Relations Office and Commonwealth Office, London: The Stationery Office, 1998, (BDEE) Series C, Sources for Colonial Studies in the PRO, Volume I: Records of the Colonial Office, Dominions Office, Commonwealth Relations Office and Commonwealth Office, London: The Stationery Office, 1998

BDEE, Series C, Sources for Colonial Studies in the PRO, Volume II: Records of the Cabinet, FO, Treasury and other records., Series C, Sources for Colonial Studies in the PRO, Volume II: Records of the Cabinet, FO, Treasury and other records.

Certainly in the case of colonial records, which are less well ordered and have fewer finding aids, these two volumes contain detailed finding aids and later volumes also reproduce documents.

- See PRO Handbooks, No. 13, *The Records of the Foreign Office, 1782-1939*, London: HMSO, 1969 and No. 15, *The Second World War*, London: HMSO, 1972
- See also B.R. Crick and M. Alman, *A Guide to Manuscripts Relating to America in Great Britain and Ireland*, Oxford, 1979 Edn.

A useful guide to all archives, not just the PRO.

- See PRO Finding Aids available on their website for selected subjects, including *Records of the Colonial and Dominions Offices from 1782* (Leaflet No. 86), *The American Revolution* (Leaflet No. 33), *The Records of the Cabinet Office* (Leaflet No. 73), *Records of the Foreign Office* (Leaflet No. 22), *Intelligence Records in the PRO* (Leaflet No. 89)

Detailed preparatory investigation into archive holdings is an absolute necessity before undertaking research trips. This should be obvious, but it is surprising how many researchers waste time and money duplicating or not locating material in archives, finding that there are microfilm copies of papers in more accessible institutions or that the material is closed. Please remember the following about accessing British material: 'under existing legislation British government records are, with a few exceptions, open to public inspection 30 years after their creation. Certain records may be closed for 50 or 75 years under s. 5 (1) of the Public Records Act or may be retained under s. 3(4) if they are concerned with intelligence or security matters or have a high security content. If whole pieces are closed or retained their unavailability will be noted in the lists. Where papers from within files are withheld, a dummy sheet will be found replacing them'.^[5]

The obvious starting point for research into British foreign policy archives is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) records. The enormity of the FCO archives is often daunting to the first-time researcher. The volume of material available is compounded by the fact that the FCO is successor department not only of the Foreign Office (FO) but also of the Colonial and Commonwealth Relations Offices. FO371, the records of the FO's political departments from 1906, is the typical class for twentieth century diplomatic records. This class contains correspondence, policy papers, memoranda and minutes of political departments of the Foreign Office and is undoubtedly the most important source for the diplomatic historian. The records also often include notes of Cabinet ministers and Cabinet papers. These files are very useful for gaining a sense of how, and by whom, policy was being formulated in the Foreign Office and more broadly in Whitehall.

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Because of the density of FO 371 papers, other FO classes are often neglected. PRO finding aids, available for some subjects on the PRO's website (<http://www.pro.gov.uk>) and Foreign Office indices and the Current Guide available at the archive will point readers in the appropriate direction. For example, the PRO's FO 800 files contains the private collections of many British diplomats and ministers and is another useful FO class. There are also as many as thirty other private office classes.

Another valuable FO source is the Confidential Print, which contains papers of particular significance distributed amongst the Foreign Office, the Cabinet, other Government Departments, and missions abroad. They typically contain sensitive material and accordingly are typically subject to a fifty-year closure period. For the years 1827-1914 Confidential Print General Series is arranged numerically in FO 881. There are some 94 further classes for more recent periods. From 1914 these are arranged by geographical area and from 1947 arranged on a country basis. Confidential Print for North America 1711-1941 can also be found in FO 414.

The numerous other departments involved in the making of foreign policy mean that many papers on foreign relations can be found in the records of other Government departments. The Prime Ministers' records in the PREM class are arranged as follows:

PREM 1 1916-1940

PREM 3 1940-1945 Papers concerning defence and operational subjects

PREM 4 1940-1945 Papers concerning civil and political matters

PREM 8 1945-1951 General correspondence and papers of the Office

PREM 11 1951- General correspondence and papers of the Office

Cabinet records are another source, particularly for high level policy-making. It is necessary to look at PRO Handbooks 15 and 17 for further information on specific areas. The CAB class contains Cabinet conclusions and memoranda, minutes of Cabinet committees, the Committee of Imperial Defence, the Chiefs of Staff Committee. For example, see CAB 88 for Combined Chiefs of Staff records for US/UK liaison during World War Two.

On a more general note, military matters can be found in records of defence departments – The Ministry of Defence, the Admiralty (ADM), the War Office (WO), and Air Ministry (AHB and AIR). There are also specific PRO classes broadly spanning the British Government's involvement in international organisations such as the League of Nations, the United Nations, and NATO.^[6] World War One Conferences/Paris Peace Conference and inter-war conferences can be found in Cabinet Office records (CAB 25, CAB 28-31); World War Two Conferences can be found in War Cabinet: Commonwealth and International Conferences (CAB 99), Operations Papers (PREM 3) and Confidential Papers (PREM 4); World War Two Cabinet minutes and memoranda: CAB 23, 65, 128, 24, 66, 129; and the Potsdam Conference has its own class: FO 934.

In her excellent book, 'Never Complain, Never Explain', (see above) Louise Atherton also recommends that researchers consult Foreign Office Background Briefing Papers. She gives the following examples: Peace Conferences of 1919-1920 Handbooks produced by the Historical Section for use by officials attending conferences (FO 373); Foreign Policy Documents 1978-1992, prepared in the Research Department as background information for officials, which are wide ranging in content and global coverage (FO 972). The advantage of these records is that some are released before the end of the thirty-year period. Atherton also refers to FO Research Department background briefs 1978-1992, covering topics such as Vietnam in 1980 (FO 973); and Information Reports 1948-1954 (FO 975) by the Information Research Department that focus upon conditions in the Eastern bloc, China and Indo-China at the time.

On the more specific subject of Canadian foreign relations, the FCO's records are an obvious source because of the intimate nature of Anglo-Canadian relations: from 1909-1918 Canada was not fully autonomous in her conduct of foreign affairs; British representatives were still signing international agreements on her behalf and Canada had no diplomatic missions abroad. By the late thirties, when Canada had assumed full authority over her diplomacy, she began developing her own framework for the conduct of international diplomacy that was independent of Britain, however the British Empire continued to provide much of the context of Canadian foreign policy.^[7]

Canadian-related records in the PRO are vast. Not only is the density of material daunting, but the records can be found under the auspices of a variety of departments, although since the Second World War Foreign Office records are the main source. It is definitely worth consulting *BDEE* for a brief history of the Colonial, Dominions, Commonwealth Relations and successor Offices between 1925 and 1968 which explain the name changes and organisational restructuring.^[8] Because of the thirty-year rule on closure of records, material in the process of release to the public over the next couple of years will in fact incorporate the records of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which was formed in 1968.

BDEE collate references for a wide range of subjects, including nineteenth century British North America and Confidential Print records for North America from the Colonial Office (CO 880) between the years 1839-1914 (32 volumes). Information is also available concerning records on twentieth century Canadian provinces. A typical example of the type of records available are those on Alberta (Sessional Papers CO 643 1906-1909, 1 volume; DO 95 1937-1965, 36 volumes; Government Gazettes CO 556 1905-1924, 15 volumes; DO 14 1925-1980, 144 volumes). Similar records exist for British Columbia, Hudson's Bay, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, North-West Territories, Nova Scotia and Cape Breton, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Saskatchewan, and Vancouver Island. For information about Canada in general, see *BDEE* for details because these records for the years 1700-1978 exceed 2000 volumes.[\[9\]](#)

The information in this article is a mere summary, only touching on the material available in the UK. Inevitably researchers will need the specific details for their area. More detail can be found using the aforementioned guides and contacting the PRO for further details or photocopying requests. However, graduate students may not have the time or money to undertake these research trips, particularly if the sources are complementary rather than essential. In these instances, published volumes of documents are a very useful alternative. Even if you are planning a UK research trip, consulting these volumes would be valuable preparation; introducing researchers to key documents, to the policy-making process of the given area, and file references for work at the PRO.

Foreign Office publications

There are a number of official publications of documents on British foreign policy, produced by the FO/FCO:

- GP Gooch and Harold Temperley, *British Documents on the Origins of the War* (11 volumes 1898-1914)
- *Documents on British Foreign Policy* (64 volumes 1919-1939) (64 volumes 1919-1939)
- *Documents on British Policy Overseas* for the post war period. for the post war period.

FCO Historians publish the current series, *Documents on British Policy Overseas* (DBPO). It continues for the postwar period the FCO tradition of publishing collections of the most important documents for the study of British foreign policy. The series are edited by historians working in the FCO who are given full access to FCO archives; subject only to the requirement to seek permission to publish closed papers.[\[10\]](#) DBPO primarily use FO/FCO records but also supplement these with Cabinet Papers, Prime Ministers' Papers, and records from the Ministry of Defence, Board of Trade and Treasury. As with *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS), most volumes of DBPO go to Government Libraries, Universities and Historical Institutes.

The following volumes have been published:

Series I

Volume I The Conference at Potsdam July-August 1945 (1984)

Volume II Conferences and Conversations 1945: London, Washington and Moscow (1985)

Volume III Britain and America: Negotiation of the United States Loan August-December 1945 (1986)

Volume IV Britain and America: Atomic Energy, Bases and Food December 1945-July 1946 (1987)

Volume V Germany and Western Europe August-December 1945 (1990)

Volume VI Eastern Europe August 1945-December 1946 (1991)

Volume VII The United Nations: Iran, Cold War and World Organisation 1946-7 (1995)

Series II

Volume I The Schuman Plan, the Council of Europe and Western European Integration May 1950-December 1952 (1986)

Volume II The London Conferences: Anglo-American Relations and Cold War Strategy January-June 1950 (1987)

Volume III German Rearmament September-December 1950 (1989)

Volume IV Korea June 1950-April 1951 (1991)

Series III

Volume I Britain and the Soviet Union 1968-1972 (1997)

Volume II The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe 1972-1975 (1997)

The Historical Branch is currently preparing volumes covering British Policy in the Middle East: Oil c. 1951-1954; Détente 1973-79; and Britain and the Near East 1970-1975.

All these volumes are relevant to post-war international historians. Obvious choices for those particularly interested in Anglo-American relations include: the volumes in Series One on Potsdam; US loan to Britain; Atomic Energy, Bases and Food; and the UN. Although the relationships are often characterised by bipolar superpower conflicts or Big Three negotiations, the volume on atomic energy inevitably closely looks at British relations with Canada. Indeed the role of the Commonwealth in the Cold War is a recurrent theme in all volumes. In the second series, the volumes on the London Conference, Cold War strategy and Korea are obviously of interest for analysis of US foreign policy.

While usually all of the material in Series One and Two is available to the public in the PRO, Series Three breaks new ground because the material is still closed under the thirty-year rule. It is also the first series to incorporate files from the FCO's Permanent Under-Secretary's Department (PUSD): although intelligence-related material from these files is generally withheld from release to the PRO with the approval of the Lord Chancellor under Section 3(4) of the Public Records Act. Needless to say, the fact that the material contained in these volumes is closed to the public means that DBPO is currently the only source for post-1968 British foreign policy based upon British Government records.

The Foreign Office Confidential Print has also been published in a series of *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*. This project is published independently of the FCO. Edited by world-renowned diplomatic historians, these volumes have been described by Ernest R. May, Charles Warren Professor of History at Harvard University, as 'one of the prime sources for a student of international history'. [\[11\]](#) The following areas have been covered:

- Part I: Mid Nineteenth Century to First World War
- Part II: Inter-war Years
- Part III: World War Two

There are also five topical series: World War One; the Paris Peace Conference; the League of Nations; Economic Affairs, Cultural Propaganda and Reform of the Foreign Office; and World War Two and General 1940-1945.

Both DBPO and the Confidential Print volumes contain key primary documents on world history and international relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including diplomatic reports, dispatches, and telegrams. Important not only for revealing international interaction and observations on world diplomatic developments, these volumes also contain commentary and analysis of the domestic situations of foreign countries. These published volumes are without doubt a vital source for any modern diplomatic historian.

By way of a conclusion, I recommend that researchers interested in British archive material also begin their inquiries through British academics and their writings. The notorious under-use of British material by American academics working on post-1945 history means that it is unlikely that they will be familiar with the *details* of archive collections. Conversely, the PRO is often the first port of call for British academics. In addition, for further information about publications produced by the FCO's Historical Branch, contact:

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