

PERIPHERAL ARCHIVES IN MODERN EURASIA AND AFRICA POSTGRADUATE WORKSHOP AT SCIENCES PO, PARIS, 10TH OCTOBER 2025

*“To be an ethnographer in this archive, then, means being forced to question the premises of one’s own practice” (Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archives of Romania’s Secret Police*)*

INTRODUCTION

As noticed with Jacques Derrida’s “archival fever” and Ann Laura Stoler’s “archival turn”, archives and archival research have continuously been an integral part of historical research in one way or another. However, archives’ histories, meanings, inner logics, culture, and practices have not always been on the surface of attention among modern historians.

Professionalized archivists shaped modern historiographical inquiries, and specialists in ancient and medieval societies have apprehended archives as acts of conserving and erasing written documents with the aim of building a collective, a state, a family or religious memory, or for the practical use of taxation and trade (Orrieux, 1986; Goody, 1986; Clanchy, 1993).

French philosopher Jacques Derrida goes deeper into disassembling archival infrastructure to decipher the origins and meaning of the ‘archive’ revealing the direct connection between the physicality of archives and the question of power that endows someone with responsibility, privilege, and competence to represent lawful authority and thus accept, store and guard official documents (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995).

We do not limit the approach to archives as ‘place’-set – we are hoping to look beyond the ‘standard’ ‘domiciliation’ (i.e., the necessity for an archive to have a precise rigid location) and elaborate on archive’s ‘consignation’ principle, defined by Derrida as ‘consigning through gathering together signs’ (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995, 10). In other words, we propose to view archives not just as locations or buildings with corpuses of documents being guarded inside, but as symbolic spaces that for some reason came to be, based on someone’s design of harmonisation of the elements that are consigned. Thus, the location or the building itself can be endowed with symbolic meaning and power – something that we also propose to look at, together with the changing nature of such structures (degradation, ruination, renovation, modernisation, relocation, etc.)

Derrida views archives as governed by inner logic and striving for absolute unity and homogeneity – but what if we try to look at the imperfections, discrepancies and failures within the archives? When studying modern history of Eurasia and Africa as scholar located in established centers of knowledge production that are universities, we normally perceive archives as places, more than spaces – that we have to visit effectively in order to extract facts fundamental for our research. The limited time of the fieldwork, its costs as well as the traditional focus on the state archives and those located in capital cities, generally narrows the scope of our research.

Indeed, little room is left for investigating alternative archives: those located in remote regions and countries, as well as non-institutional archives, museums, private archival collections or grassroots-initiated archives of a family, of working-class private life, of a village or a town district. Gathering vernacular archives and literature with unusual narrative regimes and quality of conservation, for instance among subaltern groups, as well as understanding the local social meanings (from indifference to sacred value) of this material can be challenging. For this reason, this workshop aims at bringing together reflexive thoughts on practical experiences in peripheral archives in a broader sense.

We propose to understand “peripheral” archives as those located a) outside of the Western European knowledge-production domain on the level of state institutions, b) on the margins of accessibility and visibility both by their subject and their creators’ positionality. Thus, on the one hand, we would want to draw researchers’ attention to and expertise on the archives of the Global South writ large (i.e., from Southern and Eastern Europe to Sub-Saharan Africa and to Central and South-East Asia). On the other hand, we intend to bring forward the complexities and paradoxes of those archives that are “on the periphery” of a “periphery” (i.e., those related to marginalised or understudied social groups, processes, or objects). In other words, we are interested in exploring archives through the lens of what Dipesh Chakrabarty called “subaltern pasts” (Chakrabarty, 2007). We presume that the focus on “peripheral” archives can bring forward a few problematics that dominate research focusing on Eurasian and African contexts:

1- PERIPHERAL ARCHIVES AND THEIR UN(ACCESSIBILITY)

First, “accessibility” is understood not just in terms of formal restrictions, but also in relation to the opacity of imperial and state logics of classification, declassification, and categorization of archival documents. The very logic behind determining the worthiness of documents has undergone transitions across different political regimes, crises, and conflicts.

Today certain postcolonial studies are facing limited accessibility to information on the history of colonial, state and social violence due to renewed conflicts. As a result, there is a need to reflectively assess alternative and undocumented archives as well as the move towards geographical and documentary diversity (biographies, vernacular literature, hagiographies, diasporas’ archival projects).

This shift outlines two historiographical projects: a) rewriting history of the “center” through “peripheral” and geographically or socially marginalized institutions/groups, b) writing history of societies that produced peripheral archival institutions in relations to the central power but also related to their own polity. The latter can be challenging, as peripheral sources are often insufficiently contextualized by historians, as Robert McChesney notes in relation to Afghanistan’s history (McChesney, 2012). Simultaneously, accessibility of the archives is experienced differently, conditions for access are often defined by the nationality of the researcher and their established relations with the archivist(s).

Thus, we invite participants to deal with such issues as access to archives, their lacunas, emotional and sensorial sides of working in the archives, archival censorship and archives as representations of social hierarchies which silence certain voices or discard them as worthless, including the non-human traces in the archives (Moss & Thomas, 2021).

Therefore, we propose to look at archives and archival research from the angles of social interactions, hierarchies, conflicts, as well as sites of cultural practices and political biases. We also want to shift the look from researchers as the main actors within the archives to ‘peripheral’ archival workers and their world.

2- PERIPHERAL ARCHIVES AND COLONIALITY

Control of and decolonisation of knowledge production is another proposed axis. By interrogating the ‘peripheral’ archives, we can explore how alternative meanings emerge from archival colonial or imperial “ruins” formed by “imperial debris” (Stoler, 2013). How do former ‘peripheral’ societies of colonial empires reuse those documents today, now that colonial documents are held in national archives of independent states? For instance, how did Soviet Central Asian historians gather various archival material (papers of the Russian Governorate in Turkestan, chancellery of the Bukharan emir, oral history) to write about the late 19th century Russian colonialism in the region after the revolution? As Stoler and Mbembe note, the archive is central to this colonial ordering, as it codifies the colonizer’s worldview while marginalizing other ways of knowing.

One reason for this is the prevalence of a lingua franca (English, French, Russian, Persian) combined with documents in local languages in central as well as peripheral archives of the imperial and colonial era. As historiographies were nationalized after the fall of colonial empires and language learning is better developed for students in area studies than for historians, grasping the polyphony of colonial archival documents is challenging. Thus we would like to explore how coloniality, like ruination, operates as both a condition and a process, entangled with (post)colonial spatiality, racialized and gendered hierarchies, and global inequalities.

3- VERNACULAR ARCHIVES AND GRASSROOTS ARCHIVAL PROJECTS

The relationship between peripheral positionality and vernacularity is a third aspect we propose to explore. Methodologies of oral history and memory studies as well as creation of 'alternative' archives (collections of records emerging from individuals, local communities, 'invisible' or marginalised groups) have challenged researchers' and activists' views on what archives are or can be (Péquignot & Potin, 2022). Archive-creating had been democratised and utilised as a self-assertion tool of underrepresented and marginalised groups, of preservation of personalised memory of actors previously invisible in the society or prosecuted by the state.

Sometimes such archives exist in a digital form or on the verge of online and physical presence, which evokes, on the one hand, the 'physicality' feature of 'traditional' archives, and, on the other, their accessibility. On one hand, digitized archival project can be conceived of as more inclusive, considering a rather universal Internet connectivity. On the other hand, digitalisation processes also reveal continued hierarchies of power. Besides, they do not solve the question of what societies have historically produced outside the archival paradigm (Anheim, 2020). Also, there is an important difference – symbolic, political, spatial – between 'central' state institutions that can afford to make their documents visible, and smaller 'peripheral' ones that don't necessarily have enough means to proceed to digitalization. Nonetheless, there is significant potential in collaborative and multidisciplinary archival building as seen in the 500 projects supported by the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library or the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (Rice University) or Monash Country Lines Archives working in partnership with Indigenous Australian communities (McKemmish et al., 2022).

We invite participants to look at the agency of grassroot archives promoters, how they challenge societal conventions and epistemic structures, cultural and gender norms and established hierarchies, as well as methodology necessary to constitute and/or work with such archives theoretically and on a practical level.

We invite submissions on any aspect which address the themes above in relation to the modern history of Eurasia and Africa, regardless of the time period. We particularly welcome proposals in English from PhD students (post-graduate researchers) and early-career researchers.

The one-day workshop will take place at **Sciences Po, Paris on October 10, 2025**.

We expect participants to give 15-min presentations that will be discussed by panel chairs and peers.

Financial aid for traveling to France will be partially available upon request. Please send 350- word proposals and short academic CV to the organisers: peripheralarchivesworkshop@gmail.com by **July 1st, 2025**.

Scientific committee

- Florence Bernault (professor, CHSP)
- Sophie Coeuré (professor, Université Paris–Cité)
- Sabine Dullin (professor, CHSP)
- Camille Lefebvre (CNRS/IMAF)

Organizing committee

- Ebunoluwa Iyamu (CHSP)
- Isabelle Linais (CHSP)
- Semiu Adegbenle (Northwestern University)
- Alexandra Koroleva (CHSP)

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