

## CALL FOR PAPERS

### ARMED ARCHIVES

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

Ghent University, 19-20 September 2024

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 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 up (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.

During this workshop, we specifically want to focus on those (conflict) archives produced by or about non-state armed actors such as rebel groups, militias or paramilitaries. 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 has slowly gained methodological ground in conflict studies, the ethical implications of working with records produced in the context of armed conflict have been largely neglected.

This workshop therefore aims to provide a space for discussion among scholars who study archives of non-state armed actors in order to contribute to the ongoing wider debate on the 'archival turn' in conflict studies. We especially welcome proposals that deal with the following questions:

- 1) What are the methodological, ethical and epistemological challenges that come with the study - or even creation- of archives of non-state armed actors and how to tackle them?
- 2) Which new research avenues do archives of non-state armed actors open up? How do these archives relate to and/or complement other sources and methodologies?

If you are interested in participating, please send an abstract (max. 300 words) and a short bio (max. 150 words) to [tapas@ugent.be](mailto:tapas@ugent.be) before April 1<sup>st</sup>, mentioning "Application workshop archives Name + Surname" in the subject line of your email and in the filename of your attachment.

The workshop will take place at Ghent University (Belgium), and is jointly hosted by Eva Willems and Bert Suykens. The organization will cover all travel and accommodation costs of the selected participants. Participants are expected to prepare a draft paper for circulation ahead of the workshop. For further inquiries please contact [eva.willems@ugent.be](mailto:eva.willems@ugent.be) and [bert.suykens@ugent.be](mailto:bert.suykens@ugent.be).

Provisional timeline:

- 1 April 2024: deadline for sending proposals
- 1 May 2024: notifications of acceptance/rejection of proposals
- 1 June 2024: circulation of program
- 1 September 2024: deadline for circulating draft papers

*This workshop is organized by the Department of Conflict and Development Studies and the History Department at Ghent University, in collaboration with the interdisciplinary research forum TAPAS/Thinking About the Past and the Conflict Research Group (CRG) and with the financial support of the Research Foundation Flanders.*

