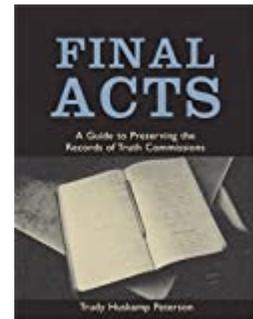




**Trudy Huskamp Peterson.** *Final Acts: A Guide to Preserving the Records of Truth Commissions.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. xii + 110 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-8172-5.



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## The Complexities of Document Preservation at Non-archival Institutions

An increasing number of countries dealing with a history of human rights violations have adopted truth commissions as a vehicle to come to terms with their past. Inevitably, the process results in the accumulation of a sizeable collection of invaluable documents.

*Final Acts* opens by addressing the question, "why preserve [truth commission documents] at all?" Trudy Huskamp Peterson explains that "Records can speak across decades, providing evidence of the transactions of the commissions and information about the people, places, and phenomena that the commission investigated. But they must survive to speak, and that survival will depend on professional management of the records" (p. 3). This is an important concept, as truth commissions may contend that their final reports are a sufficient record of proceedings. Yet in the case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the final report does not, for example, contain the findings of investigations into all cases reported to the TRC. For victims to ascertain the outcome of investigations into their particular case, they would have to access their records

through the case files at the National Archives. Without careful preservation, this wealth of information will be lost.

Peterson's guide makes for compelling reading and is an essential text for anyone working at, or initiating, a truth commission. She does not claim to have answers to questions about preservation, but instead provides a list and a discussion of questions that a commission should consider when creating a comprehensive preservation plan. These include questions regarding laws that may affect the commission documents, relevant political factors, considerations for physical preservation, and access to materials generated by truth commissions. For example, "Does the country have a freedom of information act?" (p. 9). Or, "Has the institution where the commission is considering placing the records been implicated in past abuses? Has it been reformed?" (p. 11).

Peterson recommends that "ideally, these questions will be addressed at least six months before the commission's termination date to allow a seamless transfer of the records from the commission going out of exis-

tence to the institution that will take custody.” (p. 15). However, this would be a problematic recommendation to adopt. Truth commissions seldom complete their work in the original allocated time period. For many years, the life of the South African TRC was extended by a few months at a time. It was impossible in that case to estimate when “six months before the commission’s termination date” would have been. Moreover, six months before the end of the commission is almost too late. The survival of a record needs to be attended to from the moment the record is created, not merely from the time it is handed over to a repository. Ideally, these questions need to be addressed at the initiation of the commission, and reviewed throughout the life of the commission.

The detailed discussion of each question that follows the introduction includes insightful examples of the experiences of truth commissions internationally. The guide also contains country reports and summaries of the record management procedures at twenty government truth commissions, as well as contact information for the current repository in each case.

Peterson mentions advising the South African TRC on the disposition of its records in 1998. I have no doubt that her advice was valuable, but despite being responsible for the electronic records, I was never made aware of her recommendations. Therein lies the fundamental shortcoming of this guide—it fails to address the practical issues of implementing a preservation plan on the ground level of the commission. My experiences have shown that, however essential the answering of these theoretical questions may be, unless this is translated practically into a policy that the commission staff understands and complies with on a daily basis, any real preservation efforts will be fruitless. The needs and the skill levels of the people who deal with the records from the moment any record is received or created need to be addressed, and it is essential to bear in mind that these people are not archivists. Fundamental skills such as computer literacy, policies in meaningful labeling and filing of records, keeping detailed metadata, and using specified criteria to assess what records can be destroyed are imperative factors in the long-term survival of records, not to mention simply explaining the importance of preservation to the

staff. I recall discovering that several secretaries at the TRC were filing documents in the “recycle bin” on their computers in an effort to save precious hard-drive space—a result of poor planning, a lack of resources, and inadequately trained staff who sometimes made questionable preservation decisions.

Certainly the prioritization of the limited resources of the commission needs to be considered. Preservation efforts can often fall by the wayside when pragmatic choices need to be made between prioritizing the immediate needs of fulfilling the commission’s mandate against the potential future needs of the victims and the country as a whole. These choices are often left in the hands of management and staff with limited resources or skills to deal with decisions of this magnitude, and it is therefore essential that a preservation plan contains guidelines to help make these difficult choices. For example, the tape drive that the TRC used to backup electronic data was found to be defective, and a wealth of data was in danger of being lost on deteriorating magnetic tapes as they had not been held in appropriate climate-controlled environments. Despite the urgency of the situation, I spent a year appealing to the TRC management for a CD writer (a cheaper and simpler backup option) to make additional backups of TRC data before I was allowed to purchase one. We can only speculate about how much more data would have been lost had we waited any longer. I could cite countless more examples, but my point is that these records are handled and managed by human staffers who do not have degrees in preservation or library science, and therefore often fail to understand the value of preservation.

Regardless of whether an effective plan is set up at the start of a truth commission or if plans are developed during and after the commission has concluded its work, the plans are irrelevant without the will and the resources for implementation on a daily basis. This guide is an excellent resource in addressing the preservation needs of truth commissions, but it is incomplete without a more practical guide to accompany it. Detailed planning of how and where the records will be deposited post-commission is futile without ensuring the survival of records through the life of the commission itself.

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