

## **Research Note: Negotiating South African Ministerial Archives (Defence & Foreign Affairs)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This Research Note provides background information on how to access records held by South Africa's Department of Defence and Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO). Both repositories in Pretoria, the nation's executive capital, hold considerable documentation of interest to scholars of the Cold War. The Note outlines the locations of the two facilities, working conditions, and policies that govern the release of their materials.

**KEYWORDS:** Military records; diplomatic records; documentation; sources; fieldwork

The importance of southern Africa as a Cold War battleground is now well understood. In particular, South Africa, the local hegemon, played a significant role in the region's geopolitics, seeking to leverage its dominant economic position to maintain the backing of Western Powers and exert influence over its neighbours.

The best known and most frequently consulted public archive in that country is undoubtedly the National Archives of South Africa. However, for researchers seeking insights on the Cold War, two less frequently utilised ministerial archives, both located in Pretoria, the executive capital, contain essential troves of information.

Their importance is reinforced by structural and capacity issues. The Department of International Relations & Cooperation (DIRCO, formerly the Department of Foreign Affairs) has ceased dispatching material to the National Archive due to space constraints at the latter.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, holdings at the National Archives contain limited foreign affairs material beyond the mid-1960s. Meanwhile, the Department of Defence (DoD) does not accession its documentation to the National Archive.

This Note will first discuss the DoD Archive, which is open to the public (with limitations), and then turn its attention to the DIRCO archive. Although the latter is closed to public access, it maintains a mechanism for researchers to access its holdings. Procedures at both archives, and even their locations, have changed since a 2005 research report by Sue Onslow on South African archives in this journal.<sup>2</sup>

### **DOD Archive**

The Cold War in Africa was often hot, primarily as a result of South Africa's military intervention in Angola, support for the RENAMO rebel movement in Mozambique, determination to maintain control over South West Africa (Namibia), and the significant numbers of security forces dispatched by Pretoria to prop up white rule in Rhodesia

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<sup>1</sup> Ronel Jansen van Vuuren to author, 25 October 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Sue Onslow, "Republic of South Africa Archives," *Cold War History*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2005): 369-375.

(Zimbabwe). Accordingly, the Defence Archive contains a considerable amount of material of interest to researchers interested in Cold War dynamics throughout the region.

This archive migrated from Pretoria's central business district to Irene Village, a Pretoria suburb, around 2017. It is the only building located at the very end of Saturnus Road (number 42). The facility is open to researchers without appointment, although its hours of operation have been impacted by the pandemic. Researchers operate from a well-lit and ventilated reading room with all desks wired for outlets to support electronic devices.

The archive is staffed by a team of personnel knowledgeable about the scope of holdings. The general environment here is much less formal than that of the National Archives of South Africa. Staff consult with each visiting researcher and upon hearing about their topic furnish relevant finding aids for the scholar to peruse (unlike the National Archive, there is no electronic database of holdings). Finding aids are sorted by archival groups. Probably of most relevance to Cold War History researchers are those of the Chief of the General Staff and Secretary for Defence. Records are classed roughly chronologically within the archival group by the order in which they are received, rather than corresponding to a particular geographic location or military campaign. Each finding aid (and box) thus contains a swathe of disparate information. This lack of precision can result in staff furnishing a researcher with upwards of two dozen finding aid binders to wade through for even a niche research topic.

Much of the material covering the Cold War era, as well as entries in the finding aids themselves, is written in Afrikaans. A considerable number of finding aids for this period are also handwritten in difficult to decipher script. Finding aids are detailed to the level of the title of each folder in a box. Usually, they also provide the date range of materials within each folder.

While the finding aids can be freely consulted, access to the archival holdings is more circumscribed. Any material prior to 1970 is accessible on demand and is retrieved promptly. Material from 1970 to 1978 is considered nominally available, but is in practice partially closed. Records in this date range can be declassified in-house through written request and free of charge. Records after 1978 are fully closed and can only be accessed through a request via the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA), the South African access to information law. Requests are handled by the Defence Enterprise System Management Division, which can be reached at [paia@dod.mil.za](mailto:paia@dod.mil.za) or +27 012 649 1400.

This request will only be considered with the payment of a fee. As of November 2021, the amount had recently been significantly revised upward from 35 Rands and staff on-site were unsure of the exact figure but believed this fee had more than tripled.

Requests for any material after 1970 must list the specific folder of interest (and its date range), so the researcher will need to first visit the archive and consult the relevant finding aids before initiating this process. Response rates for both processes seem to be a matter of months rather than weeks, so this effectively restricts access to scholars based in South Africa or those who are readily able to schedule multiple trips to the country.

Researchers at the DOD Archive can obtain a printed manual (Section 14) with further particulars on the PAIA process and which lists folders that have already undergone the

declassification process. This manual stipulates that researchers can make arrangements at additional cost for records covered by PAIA to be reproduced on their behalf by DoD personnel. However, the author of this Note, on a visit to the DOD Archive, was informed that researchers must be present to consult all records on site.

### **DIRCO Archive**

Although there were extensive efforts to isolate Apartheid South Africa, the country maintained diplomatic outposts throughout Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Additionally, Pretoria attempted to maintain a proactive diplomatic engagement with Africa, particularly during the premiership of BJ Vorster (1966-1978).

Many records of these efforts, particularly from the late 1960s onward, have not been transferred to the National Archives and are still sited at DIRCO. Unfortunately, access to these materials is even more circumscribed than the situation prevailing at the DOD Archive.

The DIRCO Archive is physically housed in an incongruously located edifice situated in the parking garage underneath the Department's OR Tambo Building at 460 Soutpansberg Road, a short distance from the National Archive. While it may be possible for an intrepid researcher to be granted a quick tour of the repository, it is not possible to consult any of the records in person, or even to review the finding aids. This is a departure from the policy in place as late as 2010 when scholars were able to personally request and review records at the facility.<sup>3</sup>

However, researchers can arrange access to these materials by working within the confines of PAIA. This process is entirely virtual and can be negotiated by a researcher based outside of the Republic of South Africa, although for documentation purposes, the address of a South African contact is required for the PAIA request.

An interested researcher initiates this process by writing DIRCO's Records Management Directorate and briefly sketching their area of academic inquiry. The current primary contacts for this office are: [ngubelangac@dirco.gov.za](mailto:ngubelangac@dirco.gov.za) and + 27 012 351 0492. If the office believes that they hold pertinent records, the Directorate will then furnish the researcher with a 'Form A' in which the parameters of inquiry can be elucidated in further detail.

Following receipt of this form and the electronic payment of 35 Rands, DIRCO personnel will review their holdings and make soft copies of files deemed relevant. These will then be electronically dispatched to the researcher, ostensibly within 30 days. Final release of these materials requires additional payment. Although the Archive's staff were unable to provide the author with a precise figure, they noted that the cost per image is generally equal to, or less than what one would pay a local retailer to print a page in black ink. One researcher notes receiving about 600 digital images for approximately £50.

Accessing any DIRCO records as well as DOD archival material from 1970 on requires patient navigation of bureaucratic procedures. In particular, scholars can expect challenges in email communication with the DOD archive around requests for that repository's partially

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<sup>3</sup> Jamie Miller, *An African Volk: The Apartheid Regime and Its Search for Survival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 340.

closed 1970-1978 material. However, given South Africa's prominent attempts to steer the political trajectory of the region and the likelihood that these records may not have previously appeared in the historiography, the rewards from perseverance may be considerable.