

Collection Policy for Archives and Special Collections

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Note: All policies must be read in conjunction with all other SOAS policy, procedure and guidance documents. Printed copies of policies may not be the most up to date, therefore please refer to the policy pages on the SOAS external website or intranet for the latest version.

1. Introduction / Purpose

The Special Collections department seeks to support the overall aims of the School through its Collection Policy, and to ensure its continued role as a key factor in the School’s designated status as a National Research Library.¹ The focus of the Collections Policy in particular is to give clear guidance to archive donors about the kind of material that SOAS seeks to acquire, the methods by which it does so, and how the collections are managed and accessed.

2. Collection Strengths

We seek to acquire archives, manuscripts and other primary source materials relating to the history of the British experience overseas. The geographical areas we focus on are primarily, but not exclusively, Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and we collect material under the following subject categories:

- Missionaries, missionary organisations and religious groups**
 Examples of these archives include those of the London Missionary Society, the Methodist Missionary Society and the China Inland Mission, and the private papers of individual missionaries connected with these organisations
- Business and trade organisations, and individuals involved with them**
 Examples of these archives include those of John Swire and Sons (relating to China and the Far East); Guthrie (relating to South-east Asia); and the Mackinnon collection (relating to East Africa)

¹ The SOAS Collection & Acquisitions Policy for Special Collections complements the [SOAS Collections Management Policy](#), which relates primarily to art and artefacts, and the [SOAS Library Collection Development Policy](#).

- **Charities, humanitarian organisations, non-governmental organisations and political campaigning groups**

Examples of these archives include Christian Aid, War on Want and the Movement for Colonial Freedom/Liberation

- **Individuals whose life or work has been of special relevance to the study of Africa, Asia and the Middle East**

Examples of this kind of material would be archives created by individuals who may have been living, working or travelling overseas such as diplomats, missionaries, academics, teachers, lawyers, medical practitioners, journalists, linguists, anthropologists and historians, or their families who accompanied them.

While the department collects archival material relating to religious and political organisations, it does not promote any particular political, religious or sectarian views that these organisations might represent.

3. Enhancing the Collection

As one of the leading archive repositories in this field, we're particularly keen to acquire material relating to China and East Asia, to create one of the foremost centres in Western Europe for the study of these areas during the 19th and 20th centuries.

We also wish to enhance our collections relating to the Middle East and North Africa in order to match the range of archival collections relating to other geographical areas.

4. Areas Outside Africa, Asia And The Middle East

Although we seek to acquire material relating primarily to Africa, Asia and the Middle East, in practice our geographical scope is much wider than this. This reflects the geographical scope of some of the organisational archives acquired by SOAS over the years, in particular missionary organisations, which have created a rich source for research outside the areas that the School traditionally focuses on. We will therefore accept archive material relating to areas such as the Caribbean, Australasia and the South Pacific where it complements existing collections, and where it does not conflict with other archive repositories' collection policies.

Because of our broad geographical brief, SOAS is in competition with a number of other repositories, but we work closely with all interested parties to ensure that papers are placed in the most appropriate institution.

5. Archives In Special Format

SOAS has excellent storage facilities for the majority of archives and we hold collections in many formats and media. However, before we can accept archives held in electronic, cine film or audio-visual format, we will need to discuss with the donor the various options for dealing with specialised or vulnerable media. This may include directing donors/depositors to specialised repositories such as the British Film Institute.

6. Terms And Conditions

In order to protect the rights of the donor and the integrity of the archives themselves, we abide by the following terms and conditions:

- No archives will be accepted without an agreement form detailing the specific terms and conditions of donation or deposit. The department will only accept archival donations or deposits on behalf of SOAS in line with the Special Collections Acquisition Procedure.
- Only documents which, in the judgement of the archivist, are of sufficient quality for permanent preservation will be accepted. Material which is judged to be ephemeral or duplicate will be disposed of or returned according to the agreement signed in advance with the donor/depositor.
- No archives will be accepted without clear and valid title of ownership. The Head of Special Collections must be satisfied that the donor or depositor has proper authority or title to transfer them.
- Finding aids may be required with deposits where bulk is likely to render the documents otherwise inaccessible until processed.
- Where there is an on-going relationship with a donor or depositor involving the transfer of more archives at a later date, the manner and timing of these transfers will be defined in the agreement form signed at the time of the first deposit.
- Acquisitions purchased with the assistance of grant aid will be held subject to the terms and conditions of bodies from whom such aid has been received.
- All acquisitions will be recorded in the Accessions Register. Information on the nature and circumstances of each acquisition will be recorded. This will include the date and terms of transfer, the name and address of the donor/depositor, brief details of the records and any reference number necessary to allow the records themselves and any related documentation to be traced.
- SOAS Special Collections will acquire records by gift, purchase and, where necessary, loan.

- Collections relating to individuals will normally only be accepted as donations or purchases and not as loans.
- Where organisations have ceased to function, their archives will only be accepted as donations.
- We aim to provide public access to the archive collections at the earliest opportunity, but we will only do so once the collection has been properly catalogued, for security reasons.

7. What We Don't Acquire

- **The School's own archives**

Although the personal papers of some SOAS academics have been deposited in the Library, the department does not deal with archives created by the School itself. There are one or two exceptions to this rule such as the SOAS Picture Archive, where records have been selected for permanent preservation and catalogued elsewhere in the School. The School's own administrative records are separately maintained by the Information and Technology Directorate.

- **Archives created by foreign nationals or institutions relating to their own countries**

We respect the principles of archival integrity and this means that we must satisfy ourselves that SOAS is the appropriate place to deposit each archive collection that is offered to the School. We actively seek to avoid inadvertently appropriating the cultural heritage of other countries. To this end, we do not normally acquire material created by foreign nationals overseas, nor archives and manuscripts that would be more appropriately held by other record repositories both within the UK and overseas.

- **Material that would normally be acquired by other archive repositories**

In acquiring records every effort will be made to avoid conflict and duplication with the collecting policies of other record repositories. There is a formal agreement in place with the India Office Records in the British Library to avoid overlap with their collections. Material deemed more appropriate to the collecting policies of the Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House, Oxford, and the Sudan Archive at Durham University will be referred to both organisations in the first instance. Other archive repositories will also be consulted or potential donors referred to them as appropriate.

No attempt will be made to secure the acquisition or removal of any records held in another record repository, except with the consent of the owner of the records and in consultation with the archivist in charge and governing body of that repository. No records will be acquired or disposed of in contravention of the terms of any legislation pertaining at the time, in particular the Public Records Acts, the Manorial and Tithe Documents Rules and the Parochial Registers and Records Measure.

In any case of dispute between SOAS and another repository as to the proper custodian of the records, the advice of a neutral arbiter such as The National Archives will be taken.

- **Archives with special requirements**

The department will not normally accept archives and records which are of a particularly specialist nature, requiring skills or equipment beyond the office's resources to preserve, exploit or interpret. Potential donors can seek advice from SOAS Special Collections about individual collections.

- **Copies or facsimiles**

We do not usually accept collections that comprise wholly or largely photocopies or facsimiles of original material, except in exceptional circumstances, e.g. where the whereabouts of the original is now unknown, or where it is known to have been destroyed and no other version exists.

- **Archives requiring long closure periods**

Archives requiring restricted access for a lengthy period of time, e.g. confidential or personnel files, will not normally be accepted, although one or two files requiring restricted access within a larger collection will be accepted.

- **Archives that are too recent**

SOAS does not restrict collections to a particular time period. However, records created within the last 20 years will not normally be accepted unless the individual concerned has died, or the collection is about to be disposed of altogether.

In the case of organisational archives, records dating less than 20 years will only be accepted if the institution concerned has ceased to function and/or the records are in danger of damage or destruction.

- **Published material**

We do not normally seek to acquire published material, as opposed to original archive material, with the following exceptions:

- Small amounts of published material forming part of a larger archive
- The libraries of organisations that have deposited their archives with SOAS, subject to their scope, scale, organisation and preservation status
- Rare or unique publications where they are deemed inappropriate for processing as a part of the Rare Books collection. This includes published material with a significant provenance, extensive annotations or other unique features contributing to original research

Donors wishing to deposit large collections of published material may be referred to the main Library.

- **Art or artefacts**

The department does not encourage the acquisition of artefacts or works of art unless they are a small part of a much larger archive collection, or where they have a special significance or association. Usually, donors offering artefacts or works of art will be directed to the appropriate museum or gallery, perhaps in consultation with the Head of

Galleries and Exhibitions. See the SOAS Collections Management Policy for further information.

8. Ensuring The Permanent Preservation Of The Archives

Once selected and accessioned, **archives and manuscripts will be preserved permanently** in accordance with the agreement signed with the donor or depositor. However, the department reserves the right to conduct a periodic review of material acquired prior to the department's formal creation and, where necessary, to recommend their disposal or destruction. This may be for the following reasons:

- Material has been acquired by SOAS in the past which belongs more properly with records in another repository, in which case they may be transferred there with the consent of the owner where necessary and with the knowledge of both governing bodies, subject to any relevant statutory provisions being observed
- Duplicate, ephemeral or non-archival material which in the past has been incorrectly deemed suitable for permanent preservation
- Non-archival material (e.g. books) currently stored in the archives which should either be in the main Library or held off-site
- Material acquired in specialist format which is either no longer accessible, e.g. floppy disks, or poses a threat to itself and other collections, e.g. nitrate film. In this case, every effort will be made to conserve or transfer the material to an accessible format and to find a more suitable repository for the original items where necessary
- The department becomes unable, either temporarily or permanently, to provide proper care for the collections, in which case they should be transferred, on such terms as will have been agreed in writing with the donor, and with the consent of both governing bodies, to another appropriate repository with similar overall objectives
- The owner requests the return of items on deposit. This may occur where the collection is formally on loan, in which case the return will be governed by conditions laid out in the original agreement form. However, older material donated in the past without adequate agreement terms or lack of provenance may also find itself the subject of a legitimate claim by heirs to the original owner.
- The department has no intention to de-accession records once received except, in accordance with the wishes and requirements of depositors, to evaluate and select for destruction those documents deemed not to be worthy of permanent preservation. The intention shall have been made clear at the time of transfer in the formal agreement between SOAS and the donor/depositor.
- SOAS will not sell any archives or manuscripts that it owns, save by reallocating records not deemed relevant to the collection which were originally acquired by purchase.

- Certain grant awarding bodies stipulate that records acquired or conserved with their grant may not be disposed of or transferred to another organisation, or at least not without their express authority. SOAS will honour any such terms and conditions pertaining to collections of this sort.

9. Access and Security

All records which are open to inspection by the public will be clearly described, in publicly available finding aids, whether in hard-copy or electronically.

Our aim is to make the archives collection as widely available as possible within the confines of a university library. Archives, manuscripts, rare books and theses are available for public consultation in the Special Collections Reading Room in SOAS Library. The Reading Room is under constant supervision during opening hours.

In all cases, readers will be required to produce evidence of identity before being given access to unique archival documents. Where collections are on deposit, their owners may ask for permission before readers can access the material. Contact Special Collections direct on +44 (0)20 7898 4180 or special.collections@soas.ac.uk for advice on how to obtain a reader's ticket. This information is also available on the Library website.

Readers wishing to use the archives are required to book a place in the Special Collections Reading Room. By doing so, they agree to abide by the rules and regulations of the Reading Room, a copy of which is available for inspection at the Supervisor's Desk.

Special assistance can be provided for readers requiring extra help to access the material held here by prior arrangement. Restrictions will normally only apply where the collections might be damaged or compromised, e.g. no photocopying is allowed for conservation reasons.

For security and preservation reasons, readers must put coats and bags in lockers provided and only use pencil or laptop computers to make notes. They should not write on or trace directly from any records.

While photocopying or scanning is not allowed for preservation reasons, readers may take photographs using cameras or telephones for reference purposes only. No flash is allowed, and photography can only be undertaken with the express permission of the supervisor on duty in the Special Collections Reading Room.

A copy of the Special Collection Reading Room Regulations is available on the Library website, in the Reading Room itself and on application to the Special Collections department via special.collections@soas.ac.uk.

10. Donating Archives to the Collection

Please contact the Head of Special Collections at SOAS Library, Russell Square, London WC1H, or email special.collections@soas.ac.uk, or telephone +44 (0)20 7898 4180 if you would like further information about donating archives to SOAS.