Archives and Human Rights

Reviewed by Andrea Howard, Visiting Processing Archivist, Grand Valley State University

Archives and Human Rights is a compilation of case studies written by contributors with backgrounds in archives, law, activism, and political science, among others. Introductory chapters provide an overview of historical archives as evidence of human rights violations and crimes against humanity. In part one, the editors discuss the changing role of the archivist, particularly from 1974 to 1995 and beyond, as dictatorships fell and administrative bureaucracies left behind records detailing the crimes of these regimes. Facilitating access to these records became a central focus of archival work to further victims’ right to truth, justice, and reparation.

Part two of the book consists of seventeen case studies arranged by the following continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. The case studies provide examples of ways in which bureaucratic institutions, archivists, activists, survivors, and others have come to terms with past human rights violations and how archival access can assist human rights and legal contexts. The cases are all post-World War II to demonstrate how archival work changes in conversation with an evolving scope of human rights, increasingly complex legal definitions, and expanded legal protections for all people living within a nation’s borders.

One of the key takeaways from Archives and Human Rights is that the right to know and the right to justice are not static rights given once in a society, but rather each successive generation must constantly construct and defend these rights. This point is proven by the current political climate in much of the world—in which “fake news” has entered our lexicon and “post-truth” was selected as the international word of 2016 by the Oxford Dictionaries (p. 3). Archivists play a crucial role in this post-truth context by facilitating access to authentic and verifiable materials.

This book is an accessible introduction to human rights and the crucial role that archives and archivists play in documenting and utilizing records in the continued fight for enhanced human rights protections. The case studies were fascinating examples of this process and the different ways in which societies and cultures have reckoned with their pasts, though I wish there had been case studies from Canada and/or the United States as well. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about the use of archives as evidence in human rights contexts.