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Social History Sources Knowledge and Research

Introduction to *A Usable Collection*

**Aad Blok, Jan Lucassen
and Huub Sanders**

The International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam has a time-honoured tradition of writing its own history, as might be expected from one of the world's leading centres of collecting social history. Jaap Kloosterman, the longest-serving director of the IISH (1993-2008), has named this tradition "IISH science". A developmental milestone in this science was the exhibition *Rebels with a Cause* and the publication of the accompanying catalogue with the same title in recognition of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the IISH in 2010.¹ The catalogue included a wealth of illustrations based on the unique exhibition featuring the vast and varied scope of the Institute's exceptional collections, based on a selection of "contemporary views about the history of labour and labour relations, representing the perspective of the entire world over the past half millennium". The selection presented at this exhibition and in the book aimed "to reveal how the principles that defined the establishment in 1935 have been conveyed in the collection over the course of three quarters of a century".

¹ Jaap Kloosterman and Jan Lucassen, *Rebels with a Cause: Five centuries of social history collected by the International Institute of Social History* (Amsterdam 2010).

In their introduction (“Working for Labour”) to *Rebels with a Cause* Jaap Kloosterman and Jan Lucassen, explain “the background to and reasons for the origin of the IISH, and how the Institute has progressed into one of the world’s largest and most renowned repositories concerning social and economic history”. In just over fourteen pages of text (plus a two-page bibliography), the authors offer a comprehensive sketch of how the Institute’s collections have evolved. They conclude that the history of this unique collection at the same time mirrors the history of those who have built it over the past 75 years. The succinct text of this introduction clearly reflects the style of Jaap Kloosterman.

Two years later, in the Festschrift for Jan Lucassen, published in recognition of his 65th birthday (the title being next to identical to that of the introduction to *Rebels with a Cause* is not entirely coincidental), Jaap Kloosterman contributed the chapter “Unwritten Autobiography: Labor History Libraries before World War I” in the final section “Sources”. In what may be considered both an extension and a sequel to the introduction of *Rebels with a Cause*, Jaap writes from the perspective that the history of libraries and their origins and development are like an autobiography of the field they cover:

Since almost any collection of books – indeed, almost any collection – tends to appear as the product of deliberate choice, historians have become interested. They have begun to realize that “the history of book ownership, and the formation of collections, [...] provides a window into earlier tastes and fashions”.²

Extending the metaphor of the history of a collection mirroring the history of the collection builders by applying it to the author, these two recent publications may be read as a reflection on the highlights of a lifelong career started 45 years ago, when Jaap joined the International Institute of Social History as an assistant on the Bakunin project. They may also be regarded as two steps in his ongoing active involvement in the development of the Institute, by contemplating and writing the Institute’s own history in that of collecting social history.

When Jaap officially stepped down as director in April 2008, he had the idea of gathering information on the history of the collection-development at the IISH. He realized that many relevant facts and ideas were in danger of being lost because of the future and near-simultaneous retirement of a group of curators. Inspired by Polanyi’s ideas on tacit knowledge, he was especially interested in things people often do not bother to record but are essential to the daily operations of a collecting institution. How a catalogue is composed or an inventory compiled belongs to this realm. To this end, in

2 Jaap Kloosterman, “Unwritten autobiography: labor history libraries before World War I”, in Marcel van der Linden and Leo Lucassen (eds), *Working on Labor: Essays in Honour of Jan Lucassen* (Leiden, 2012) pp. 395-416, quotation 395.

2009 a small team at the IISH conducted the memory project, from which selected results are presented in this Festschrift.

This involvement was expected to conclude on 1 July 2013, when Jaap Kloosterman turned 65, the official retirement age in the Netherlands at the time. Circumstances at the IISH, then undergoing one of the most extensive reorganizations in its existence, however, led him to stay on. He remained head of the collection development department until the end of 2009. From November 2012 until December 2013 he manned this post again. From November 2011 until September 2012 he once again served as deputy director. And at the time this is written, he continues to advise the present director, who started 1 November 2012. Nonetheless, from the middle of 2012, management and co-workers alike suggested that Jaap's retirement would be a logical moment to honour him with a dedicated publication. An editorial committee was formed to coordinate the necessary preparations.

Collections

The earliest discussions made clear that this volume was not to become a standard Festschrift or *liber amicorum*. From the outset, it was understood that for someone who has been so influential in the development of the IISH and in its collections in particular, the focus should primarily be on collections, libraries, and archives. Libraries and archives may be seen in several ways. They may be considered the laboratories of the historians, a *conditio sine qua non* for historical research. As we know from Latour and Woolgar, chemists and biologists produce scientific facts in their laboratories. But they are not the sole creators of facts. In their analysis in *Laboratory Life*, they credit many more people of different ranks, professions, and positions with promoting the creation of these facts.³ And even the material objects present play a role on an equal footing. In the analogy of the IISH as a laboratory, social historians work through and select material they can use for their histories, their facts, and their creation of knowledge. They do this with raw material that upon closer consideration already consists of knowledge with a certain structure that was often devised previously by social historians in a different capacity or produced and organized by the social agents: activists transformed into archivists or historians. Archivists and librarians subsequently contribute their own viewpoints in the creative process. What a historian finds and is therefore able to use depends largely on how these other professionals have handled the raw material. Willingly or otherwise, they initiate still another process in the historical trade, colloquially known as *archivization*. What has been kept, inventoried, and classified, has, because of those actions, come to outrank documents overlooked or neglected.

3 Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory life: The social construction of scientific facts* (Beverly Hills, 1979).

In work in libraries and archives, the value or quantity of the curated documents sometimes controls the minds of the staff. Systems are built, remodelled, and ground again and again at the risk of becoming a goal in their own right. Jaap has consistently combated this outcome, from his early days in the library commission of the IISH, through his term as deputy director and head of the collections department, responsible for the introduction of library automation, to his position as general director. He has pursued a pragmatic course in all dealings with collections. In the end, the use of a collection was what mattered, not its revered status.

People familiar with the IISH take for granted that the archives and collections in its care come from individuals or organizations. We should be aware that this means there is no legal obligation whatsoever to collect these materials. Conversely, these individuals and organizations are not required to keep their own records, and there is no guarantee that the knowledge about the specific world they contain will be manifested at all. It exists by virtue of the “deliberate choice” mentioned earlier. Quite a number of collectors contributing to the IISH collections were actively engaged in ensuring that material in danger of neglect would survive. The usual motivation for these efforts was to make the voices of the people who produced the material resound.

Archive Particularities

Jaap has experienced all the particularities of archives in his career. Baptized by fire in 1969 as a young man editing Bakunin’s texts, he became familiar with all that archives could represent. As a historian and collector, he knew that archives were not only sources of information but were also sources of legitimacy and recognition, especially in our highly politicized field of interest. He witnessed two occupations of the Institute, in 1979 and 1984 by groups connected to the successors of the pre-Franco Spanish CNT/FAI. In both cases, the occupation was intended to obtain the CNT/FAI archives, which the Institute had rescued in 1939. The group able to claim ownership would clearly solidify its claim to political legitimacy as well. As director, Jaap managed many years later to deescalate the conflict and broker an agreement, whereby these archives were deposited in Amsterdam.

Jaap’s continuous interest in Russia visualizes many of the elements mentioned above as well. The highly political nature of arrangements with regard to archives is clear. In 1991 Jaap seized with unequalled skill the opportunity when communism fell in the Soviet Union. The change was both promising and ominous. Many in Russian archival circles were happy to work with Western partners and grant access to the sources hidden during the long years of the Soviet regime. Ironically, sources directly relating

to communism and the labour movement were now in jeopardy. Jaap was aware of this and invested considerable efforts in maintaining the collection of the successors of the IMEL.⁴

Cooperation with Memorial in microfilming records of Gulag prisoners tied in closely with the original function of the IISH of rescuing sensitive material not produced by but contrary to the incumbent political powers. The recent political developments in Russia and the Ukraine attest to the wisdom of the course taken back then, whatever the future outcome of the present conflicts. Jaap does not consider states by definition to be the sacrosanct protectors of the historical heritage of its citizens.

Another aspect of the new relations with the Russian Federation after 1991 manifested in the restitution issues. Overall, the fascinating story is relatively simple, but its details are amazing. German agencies in World War II seized archives and libraries in occupied Europe from those perceived as enemies of the Nazis. Some parts of the IISH prewar collection suffered that fate. In May 1945 these collections, or whatever had survived the acts of war, found in the areas under Red Army control were seized by the special archival units of the Soviets. These collections were brought to Moscow and kept in a special secret archival institution of which the existence was disclosed only in 1991. The ensuing struggle for restitution clearly revealed that opinions vary on what archives represent.⁵ These archives undoubtedly belonged to owners from the World War II allies of the Soviet Union but were nevertheless classified by Russian officials as war trophies. From a distance, Jaap followed all the negotiations with great interest.⁶ Though always pragmatic, in one instance he nonetheless adopted a principle stance: when the Russian counterparts suggested that a custodial fee was due for keeping the archives in Moscow from 1945 on, Jaap refused. He was not willing to pay for a service never requested.

Cooperation with Russian people and institutions is a special case of international cooperation. The International Association of Labour History Institutions (IALHI) is a central force in the international relations of the Institute. This association, which was formed in 1970 and included the IISH as a prominent member from the start, became a platform for cooperation in a sensitive world of archives that often originated from political parties and trade unions.⁷ In the beginning old grudges made for slow progress in cooperation. From 1987 to 1996 the IISH housed the association's secretariat,

4 About the IMEL: Vladimir Mosolov, *IMEL – citadel partijnoj ortodoksii iz istorii Instituta Marksizma-Leninizma pri CK KPSS 1921 – 1956* (Moscow, 2010).

5 See Patricia Grimsted, Eric Ketelaar, and F.J. Hoogewoud (eds), *Returned from Russia: Nazi archival plunder in Western Europe and recent restitution issues* (Builth Wells, 2007).

6 Eric Ketelaar was important in the early stages of these negotiations.

7 See: Dieter Schuster and Rüdiger Zimmermann, "Chronik und Dokumente zur frühen Geschichte der International Association of Labour History Institutions (IALHI)" (2008), available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bibliothek/05588.pdf>; last accessed 8 April 2014.

which was run by Jaap. Under his aegis, membership of the IALHI rose substantially. At the same time, the scope was expanded beyond Europe and the United States to comprise institutions in the global South.⁸ While this would merit a separate contribution in this volume, it is definitely thanks to Jaap's efforts that this very diverse group of libraries, archives, research institutions, and other organizations has become a serious and productive International in our field of interest. This association is now equipped to deal with the complicated EU bureaucracy in raising funds to produce international tools for social historians such as the HOPE project.⁹

Coping with Bias

The dilemmas that Jaap confronted in his Russian and international endeavours, as described here very briefly, mirror the choices faced by the IISH and similar institutes at large. Given that all actors in social history decide what they put on record, which selection they deem worth conserving, and which selection of these preserved records they wish to make available for historical research, many selections have been performed before any historian enters the picture.

As the bias is therefore huge before any document reaches a historical collection, how to cope with it without aggrandizing it? The simple answer adopted by at least the IISH is conscientiously building in checks and balances in the three steps we might discern in processing documents between the initial moment of acquisition and the final step of inviting visitors to the reading room, whether virtual or physical. These checks and balances are between different members of the collections department and, as always strongly advocated by Jaap, between that department and the researchers. He believes that the secret power of the IISH is the mutual and cordial confrontation of collections and research.

After all, and this is essential, the IISH and its sister institutes need not be personified, as institutes are not individuals but collectives. While private collectors may be guided by any kind of personal predilections and eccentricities, collectives have (or should have) this tendency to a lesser degree. They should try to adopt as their guideline questions from present and future researchers. That is why an ecumenical approach yields the best results, without the futile illusion of averting any mistake. Although by no means an unequivocal success and sometimes even rather haphazard, the history of the IISH as a collecting institute may be written by noting these three types of subsequent choices in acquisitioning, cataloguing and making items available to researchers.

8 Jaap shares some impressions of the IALHI in Jaap Kloosterman, "In Bebel's voetspoor. Wouter Steenhaut en de IALHI", *Brood & Rozen Special*, (2009), pp. 27-35.

9 <http://www.peoplesheritage.eu>; last accessed 8 April 2014.

First, in the collectioning policies, N.W. Posthumus set the standard. As a social democrat he understood immediately the value of acquiring collections of not only his own movement but also of e.g. anarchists, as proven by his decade-long effort to acquire the Nettlau collections, culminating in success.¹⁰ As the Institute grew, birds of a feather have contributed to the collections: activists have entrusted their own and their friends' papers, former activists remaining sufficiently confident about the movement, scholars with a reputation for compassion with the downtrodden, and sincere academics as such have done as well. All have come together at the IISH and continue to, argue and question each other, if need be. Not only at the Institute, but also at similar institutes, intense competition of arguments and close cooperation in preserving the past are unavoidable.

Second, in the cataloguing process. This is by no means a purely technical procedure governed by age-old principles with no room for exceptions. To start with, which papers to keep, and which to destroy or return as duplicate, irrelevant, or unimportant? The next question is whether and how to list according to different rules such types of materials as diverse as books, periodicals, archives, banners, posters, or other sorts of audiovisual materials. And, how to store them and under what conditions?

Third, availability policies offer a wide range of choices, including admission policies for researchers. Under what conditions may readers consult the holdings of the Institute? Is everything universally available? Do former or current owners (in case documents have been given on loan) have to be protected from themselves, or, on the contrary, do they need to be convinced to be more generous in matters of accessibility? And what about the options for generating hard and digital copies?

Finally, although these three steps may be distinguished analytically in the activities of any institute, sometimes and in fact more often than not, they may be combined in specific persons. The IISH, for example, following the time-honoured example of the Moscow IMEL, applied the "cabinet" model for the first half century of its existence. This entailed combining acquisition and listing of documents and even source publications by region in one and the same organizational unit, such as the German, the Russian, and the Dutch etc. cabinets. As these cabinets consisted of more than one person, checks and balances were not absent, but they functioned less well than in the new structure. In this structure, run by Jaap for so long, the IISH was organized in different units dedicated to acquisitions, cataloguing, and the reading room, as well as in a separate research department – checks and balances from now on had to be realized by a continuous exchange of views.

This volume offers a fascinating albeit incomplete catalogue of examples of the dilemmas and adopted solutions previously listed, in part in the pe-

10 On the Nettlau collection, see: Maria Hunink, *Das Schicksal einer Bibliothek: Max Nettlau und Amsterdam* (Assen, 1982), pp. 4-42.

riod when Jaap was at the helm of the IISH, in part during earlier periods of the Institute, and in part at other institutions similar to the IISH.

Overview

The three steps involved in building a usable social history collection as explained above are represented or depicted in the contributions to this volume in a variety of ways. Most authors deal with the first step of the actual creation of a collection or part of one. The first section, “The Emergence of Social History Collections”, offers a variety of perspectives on the early history of social history collections, as practised by the Institute’s founder Posthumus. Eric Ketelaar’s “Prolegomena to a Social History of Dutch Archives” sketches the larger infrastructural context of writing the history of archival collections. Huub Sanders explores the personal history of Posthumus in an interview with his daughter Claire Posthumus and covers the modest professional contacts of Posthumus with the great Dutch historian of his era Johan Huizinga in another chapter. Alex Geelhoed contributes to the early post-1945 history of the Institute in the context of the reconstruction of the Netherlands in his portrait of Posthumus’ student Cornelis de Dood. Co Seegers adds the economic history aspect of collection building by portraying the recent acquisition of an important addition to the NEHA collection. One prominent IISH competitor, the Marx-Engels Institute and its famous first director Rjazanov, features in Irina Novichenko’s fascinating story of Harry Stevens’ activities as a correspondent for the early Soviet acquisition endeavours, while Francisca de Haan and Annette Mevis explore how Posthumus was involved in setting up the International Archives for the Women’s Movement (Internationaal Archief voor de Vrouwenbeweging, IAV) and the IISH.

The next section, “The European Collections of the IISH: Acquisitions and Catalogues”, is focused on what could be called the classical core of the IISH collection and its relations with European sister institutes. The politics and strategies around building a social history collection may be traced in the account from Bert Altena of how Posthumus tried to incorporate the library of Dutch early socialist and anarchist leader Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis. Collection building may as well be seen in the essay by Wouter Steenhaut on the deliberate strategy of dispersion by Hendrik de Man’s heirs of his personal papers, as well as in the chapter by Margreet Schrevel on the laborious manoeuvring around the Dutch Communist Party archives. In the contribution from Rüdiger Zimmermann, we discover the relation of the IISH with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, which progressed from its tense start to increasing détente, while Karl-Heinz Roth describes in his essay how Jaap and the IISH were involved in founding the Stiftung für Sozialgeschichte, two examples of the importance of institutional relations in this context. Another specifically Dutch institutional context is the background to the incorporation of the KNAW library in the IISH library collection, as told by

Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Marien van der Heijden and Franck Veyron, Andrew Lee, Kees Rodenburg, Marcel van der Linden, Francis Ronsin, and Jenneke Quast in their contributions in this section each focus on a specific collection or document in their explorations of topics that Jaap cherishes, remarkably all of them concerning writings in the Romance languages French and Spanish.

The second step, processing and cataloguing, is represented in this section by the contributions of Coen Marinus on the origins of the cataloguing rules, and how this process has driven changes in IISH cataloguing practices. Henk Wals concludes this section by documenting the essential role Jaap played in the early digitization of both cataloguing and providing access.

In this volume published to honour the man who started his IISH career working on the Bakunin project, the ample consideration for the IISH Eastern European collections and activities in the third section (“The IISH and Eastern Europe”) is perfectly logical. The story of the acquisition of the Posrednil and Slovobodnoe Slovo publishing houses, as related by Els Wagenaar, offers a fine example of the kind of small collections special to Jaap as a connoisseur. The essays by Francesca Gori and Nanci Adler connect very directly to the aforementioned essential role Jaap played in the post-1990 era in the restitution and preservation of archives that became endangered by the end of Soviet communism. So do Touraj Atabaki and Solmaz Rustamova-Towhidi more indirectly in their contribution on the politics of archives in Azerbaijan in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. A remarkable form of ensuring sustained access to the newly opened Soviet archives is the ArcheoBiblioBase (ABB), the online directory of Russian archives and archival repositories, developed and maintained with extensive support from the IISH. The story of its origins and development over the past decades as told here by the project’s indefatigable coordinator and advocate Patricia Grimsted underlines Jaap’s pivotal role as facilitating advisor, with deep concern for the accessibility of collections. The activities to enable ongoing and improved access to archives in Russia and the former Soviet Union, in which the IISH has played such an important – though not always very visible – role, has in fact brought about a new frontier in historiography, as Gijs Kessler analyses in his contribution on the effects of these newly available sources on Russian and global social history. Lex Heerma van Voss’s essay, concluding this section, brings to our attention another example of the early adoption of new digital techniques devised under Jaap’s directorship: the process of making available the complete Bakunin Archive on CD-ROM, which in a way may be interpreted as Jaap’s IISH career coming full circle.

The last section, “The IISH Goes Global”, brings us to the most recent emergence of globalization in both research policy and collection development at the Institute. Starting with the establishment of a Turkish department, as described in Zülfikar Özdoğan’s contribution and followed by the description by Roel Meijer of the acquisition of Egyptian and Sudanese communist documents, these collections were among the first steps on a new

course of collecting that Jaap once captured in an IISH brochure as “Go East, young man!”: turning the lens beyond the Atlantic region to a truly global perspective on social history. The trek eastward started quite suddenly with the archival impact of the events on Tiananmen Square in 1989, as contained in the source for the Chinese People’s Movement Archive brought to Amsterdam by Tony Saich, who has recorded this story in his contribution. The South Asian part of this globalization movement in the IISH collecting and research profile is represented in Willem van Schendel’s story of the Nepal Nag Papers. That this globalization movement is not limited to an eastward direction is shown in the last two contributions. Stefano Belluci takes on the more principled issue of defining what constitutes an archive and what defines an archivist in our increasingly digital networked contemporary society. Rossana Barragán, last but not least, portrays the Bolivian archivist Gunnar Mendoza, who may be seen as both a geographical antipode and a kindred spirit of Jaap: largely an autodidact in the field of social history collecting but influential beyond direct measurement.

An unusually large number of colleagues from inside and outside the IISH have contributed to this volume, reflecting not only the extraordinarily long but also intense involvement of Jaap with the Institute. As such, these essays not only pay tribute to the Institute’s longest serving director but also, we believe, constitute a new and important addition to “IISH science”.

At the same time, anyone who has come to know Jaap over the years understands that one of his defining characteristics is modesty: both his soft voice and his affinity for understatement have mitigated any effort to highlight Jaap’s own career and personality. For a volume in honour of Jaap, asking a wide group of colleagues from outside and within the IISH to base their contribution in the IISH collection or any element therein, or, more generally, on collecting in international social history seemed apposite. This broadly defined framework, apart from the considerable freedom of choice, of course included the invitation whenever and wherever possible to connect the theme or topic of choice to Jaap.

This has led to a volume with an at first sight dazzling variety of subjects at the same time strongly focused on honouring Jaap Kloosterman and figuring as a sequel to his own recent work in *Rebels with a Cause* and in *Working on Labor*.¹¹ It is indeed a reflection of the history of collecting in social history and nicely illustrates the deliberate choice of our nonetheless limited knowledge.

The result is a fairly coherent collection of contributions. The Dutch modifier *tamelijk*, meaning “fairly” and being among Jaap’s favourites, immediately raises the question of wherein this coherence lies. We believe that it concerns the very close connection between collections and historical knowledge. It relates to the principal political nature of the existence of his-

11 Of course, some biographical and bibliographical notes on Jaap’s career had to be included as well, to elucidate his personal role in the processes described here.

torical knowledge, which in turn implies that all activities involving writing and collecting history are intensely personal. Because of this personal character, it is also contingent and narrative. Whatever laws and structures we think we discover as social historians, human agency will always play a role. In collecting and in history writing, people make deliberate choices. If they are helped by pragmatic people with usable collections in institutions that do not forget their origins, they will enlarge knowledge for the benefit of all of us.

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