

Shutting Out the Past



by [Jillian Becker](#) (February 2022)

A University Has Lost an Archive

The University of Leicester has lost the archive of the Institute for the Study of Terrorism (IST).

I founded the Institute for the Study of Terrorism in London in 1984 under the aegis of Alun Gwynne Jones, Lord Chalfont, an erstwhile Minister of Defence. Its archive was built on the foundation of the research I had done for my books on terrorism in Germany and the Middle East: *Hitler's Children: the Story of the Baader-Meinhof Gang* and *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. The information I had gathered was augmented and updated continually through the six years of the Institute's existence. With a team of five, sometimes six or seven, we worked at it in subterranean offices in central London. Our register of terrorists, names of groups and individuals with details of their affiliations, their objectives, and their actions, steadily grew.

We were a registered charity, but also funded ourselves by

compiling reports for businesses needing to know what terrorist threats they could be faced with in foreign countries. Foreign contributors kept us posted on terrorist activity in their countries and regions, so quite often we received life-saving information ahead of the news agencies or even the intelligence agencies, Interpol, airport and port authorities, or the military. On one occasion, for instance, we were able to stop the import into Britain of lethal material disguised as wine in bottles with a very plausible label, because we had been tipped off by our contacts in Germany. Among our foreign advising experts was the head of the Small Arms Section of the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.

The Nature of the Archive

We built, often at grave personal risk to ourselves, a unique and irreplaceable collection of documents and recordings; lists of names of terrorist groups and individuals; photographs of perpetrators, victims, crime scenes, battlefields; descriptions and assessments of weapons and explosives.

The recordings included interviews I held with former terrorists who had served time in prison and wanted not just to return to normal life, but having come genuinely to regret their crimes, wanted to help oppose terrorism as a form of reparation. They would tell me about their organization's membership, methods, aims, actions and plans. It was easy for them to get in touch with us. Although our address was secret, our telephone number was in the directory. They would call and I'd make an appointment to meet them in a public place, usually a busy hotel.

Our chief archivist, Ian Geldard, was a brilliant researcher with an extraordinary talent for discovery and detection. Once, at the height of the scare of bombs in planes, he packed a suitcase with the apparatus of a time-bomb, including fake explosive, then passed with it through X-ray machines between

London's Heathrow airport and Berlin's Tempelhof and back again without being stopped, proving how dangerously untrustworthy the "safety measures" were. We informed the media and the airport authority of the experiment and its results. The report was filed in our archive along with many others.

My co-director Bernhard Adamczewski and I traveled across Europe, together and separately, to gather information firsthand. He found a "wanted" German terrorist in Vienna and informed the local police of the man's whereabouts. We visited battlefields in the Middle East and pulled bloodstained documents from the rubble of bombed terrorist offices and encased them in transparent plastic covers to be photocopied. The copies were translated and filed. I came upon the deserted camp of one west African terrorist organization where, in the rows of desks in the classrooms, there were exercise books in which students had taken down lessons extolling Soviet Communism as the ideal system. The course had been run by graduates of Moscow's Patrice Lumumba University. Those proofs that the organization was serving the interests of the USSR went back to London with me and entered our archive.

The Uses of the Archive

Once we had come into existence, legislators, the press, law enforcement, the transport and travel industries no longer had to rely on the announcements put out by terrorist groups themselves to know what they were doing, what they intended to do, and why. We supplied dependable information to members of Parliament, scholars, news channels, individual reporters and investigative journalists, airport and seaport authorities. We co-operated with the police in Britain, including the terrorist section of Scotland Yard's Special Branch, and were several times able to give helpful information to law enforcement in other Western and allied countries.

I commissioned experts to write about particular terrorist

organizations. We published their work as booklets in distinctive uniform yellow covers. We co-convened two international conferences, one with the Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies, one with London University's Faculty of Laws which was opened by the Home Secretary. All this was done with the aim of promoting a shared understanding among Western policy-makers that terrorism was an inexcusable evil, regardless of the cause, however high, in the name of which it was carried out.

The archive established that almost all the terrorist groups in the First World and its allies between 1969 and 1990 were supported with training, and/or funding, arms, asylum, by Soviet Russia. (A few were affiliated with China.) I called their actions *the hot spots of the Cold War*.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the defeat of the USSR in 1991, most of the terrorist wars in the West came to end. And since we had found and reported that most of them were Soviet sponsored, donors to our institute concluded that our usefulness was also at an end. In 1990, donations stopped. Businesses no longer asked for assessments of danger. I warned that the era of terrorism was not over, but few believed me. Hamas, a terrorist branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, was in power in Gaza and using terrorist methods against Israel. The ayatollahs governing Iran were supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon. Though I did not know that Osama bin Laden was just getting started with his organization al-Qaeda (so the colossal atrocity of 9/11 was already in the womb of time), I saw that the mass immigration of Muslims into the West meant that Europe and America could become targets of terrorism in furtherance of Islamic jihad.

Reluctantly, I closed the Institute and sought a permanent home for the archive. Its obvious guardian would be a university. I anticipated that our records, solidly proving the guilt of two Communist regimes for promoting decades of mass murder in the West, would be a permanent resource for

historians of the Cold War.

The Archive Bought by a University

The University of Leicester bought the archive in 1993. There, I thought, it will be safe. In due course the University archivist who had inspected the archive and negotiated the deal to acquire it, invited me and Ian Geldard to see how they were organizing it. They named it, with my approval, "The Becker-Adamczewski Archive of the Institute for the Study of Terrorism". We were shown that published books were separately accommodated on the shelves of the main library, and that the bulk of the collection was to be kept in a special building, bought and adapted for the purpose of housing special collections. It was called the Scarman Centre for the Study of Public Order and was under the department of Criminology. Our archive was one of the first two to be put in it – the other (we were told or I assumed) was that of Lord Scarman himself, the High Court judge.

I was not entirely happy with the decision of the university to categorize our archive under Crime. I was doubtful that scholars would look for research material on terrorism under that heading. I would have classed it under Politics, International Affairs, War, or History, but the decision was not mine to make. I trusted that wherever it was kept, our unique and irreplaceable collection of documents, photographs, and recordings would be properly preserved and accessible to scholars.

It was a treasure for a university to possess.

What Happened to the Archive?

In 2007 I emigrated to America, where I launched a website called *The Atheist Conservative*. In 2020, the president of Republican Atheists, Lauren Ell, posted a profile of me on their website. I had mentioned to her that the IST archive had been bought by the University of Leicester. Wanting

information about it, she contacted the university – and was told that it could not be found.

As soon as Lauren Ell informed me that the archive was apparently lost, I made my own inquiry and the loss was confirmed. The building in which the greater part of it had been housed was no longer in use by the university and there was no record of where the IST research material had been moved to. However, the Head of Archives and Special Collections, Dr. Simon Dixon, let me know that he was undertaking an investigation of the loss.

Dr. Dixon did all he could to find the archive. He courteously kept me informed of the efforts he made, which were hampered by the lockdowns imposed on the university during the Covid-19 epidemic. In the late summer of 2021 he brought his search to an end. He had failed to find any remnant of the archive except the books which had been placed immediately in the university's general library – and apparently added to with more printed material some twelve years later.

Dr. Dixon wrote to me in his final letter:

I am very sorry to report that it has not been possible to locate the full archive ... My enquiries have included correspondence with current and former members of staff and a physical visit to the former School of Criminology building ... [T]he printed material acquired by the University in 1993 was integrated into the Library's main run of holdings in 2005/6 and has subsequently been managed in accordance with our collections management policies.

The rest of the archive had not been so managed. Only a trace, a fragment of it – some “correspondence” – had been found:

While the unpublished archival material cannot be located, I have taken steps to ensure that a small amount of correspondence that has been recovered is preserved as part

of the Archives and Special Collections for which my team are responsible. I have not given up hope that further records will come to light in future, and any additional material that I am made aware of will be permanently retained in the same way.

I am extremely sorry not to be able to provide you with more conclusive information regarding the archive at this time. ...

I believe Dr. Dixon's apology is sincerely meant, but I have received no apology or expression of regret from the University of Leicester.

If our archive was not relevant to learning, teaching and research at the University of Leicester, it could have been sold or given to some other institution. There are still some academies in America, or faculties within academies that would probably value it and make use of it. It could have been a national treasure. But it was treated as a thing of little or no value. Why?

If one of the primary purposes of a university is to protect and hand on intellectual heritage, commitment to archive preservation is fundamental to that purpose. Perhaps the reason why the University of Leicester did not protect the IST archive was because it is now committed to *erasing* the past. An indication of this is in [reports](#) that the administration wants to "decolonize" the teaching of English literature by eliminating medieval studies (so Chaucer, inter alia, is to be removed from the curriculum), and "focus on ethnicity, sexuality and diversity".

Ceasing to teach something does not necessarily entail the destruction of materials used for teaching it. Is it likely that a university entrusted with documents of national and international importance would deliberately discard them because they are no longer useful to its teaching? Would it choose to waste the fruits of long, hard, even dangerous

effort exerted against a malign force threatening the Western world? Sadly, I suspect it would if it came to believe that the Western world was systemically at fault and needed to be transformed. But if therefore it would no longer protect documents of public importance, should it still be funded with public money?

The loss of an archive, whether by negligence or decision, is a calamity. To lose it by negligence is barbarously callous. To discard it deliberately is an act of intellectual vandalism, the equivalent of book-burning. If, in either case, a university is responsible, the disgrace must leave a permanent stain on its reputation.

[Table of Contents](#)

Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary*, *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal* (Europe), *Encounter*, *The Times* (UK), *The Telegraph Magazine*, and *Standpoint*. She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four

of her six grandchildren. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)