Digital Library Review: AHPN (Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional)

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University of North Texas

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DL Name: AHPN (Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional)

DL URL:https://ahpn.lib.utexas.edu/home

DL Mission:

The AHPN's staff have labored since 2005 to preserve, digitize, and catalogue the

Archive's contents. As of May 2011, they have processed 12.5 million documents,

predominantly those from the most severe years of the civil conflict, 1975-1985. In

addition to this archiving activity, the AHPN is quickly becoming a central actor and

catalyst in prosecutions of war-time cases of human rights violations and in facilitating

Guatemala's historical memory. It is currently used by public entities such as the nation's

Public Ministry (Ministerio Público) and Human Rights Ombudsman's Office, as well as

by other human rights organizations. The AHPN also actively supports the recovery of

information friends and families of the killed or disappeared, by providing them with

pertinent documents and professional grief counseling. (AHPN & the University of Texas

Libraries., n.d., About AHPN section, Work of the AHPN)

Figure 1. Screen shot

Historical Background and Community

The documents of Guatemala's National Police (PN) that today make up the National Police

Historical Archive of Guatemala (the Archivo Histórico de la Policia Nacional, or AHPN) were

found by accident in July 2005. The government and police had denied their existence,

particularly during investigations by the United Nations and the Catholic Church in the 1990s

which took place during the final years of the nation's protracted armed civil conflict lasting

nearly four decades. In June 2005, a massive explosion of munitions stored at the Mariscal

Zavala military base in Guatemala City raised fears that "other caches of arms from the civil war

would similarly ignite and endanger surrounding neighborhoods" (AHPN & the University of

Texas Libraries., n.d., About AHPN section, Background of the Archive). Because of such fears,

officials from the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office (Procuraduría de los Derechos Humanos

de Guatemala, or PDH) set out to inspect the former Guatemalan National Police Headquarters

in the capital's Zone 6 (Guatemala City). There, inside a dilapidated building surrounded by an

automobile junkyard, as the website notes,

> they found many rooms, piled ceiling to floor with stacks and stacks of police files dating
>
> to the first decade of the nation's police force, in 1882. Hundreds of thousands of
>
> identification cards, vehicle license plates, photographs, police logs, but also loose files
>
> on kidnappings, murders, and assassinations seemingly filled every nook and cranny of
>
> the rat- and cockroach-infested building. (AHPN & the University of Texas Libraries,
>
> n.d., About AHPN section, Background of the Archive)

After the discovery, the Human Rights Ombudsman office took custody of the Archive through a

Civil Court order. On July 1, 2009, the AHPN was transferred to the Ministerio de Cultura y

Deportes. It is currently under the direction of the Archivo General de Centroamérica (AGCA),

Guatemala's national archive (AHPN & the University of Texas Libraries, n.d., About AHPN

section, Background of the Archive).

The user communities for the AHPN (Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional) include human

rights investigators and activists, researchers, academics, writers, and friends and families of the

victims. As noted in the DL Mission above, the AHPN actively supports information recovery of

the killed and disappeared by providing their friends and families with pertinent documents and

professional grief counseling. The AHPN website notes: "The collection represents the largest single repository of documents ever made available to human rights investigators" (AHPN Library, n.d., About AHPN section, Background of the archive). The AHPN plays a pivotal role as central actor and catalyst in prosecutions of war-time cases of human rights violations as noted in the DL Mission, which also implies service to user communities that include activists and writers invested in "facilitating Guatemala's historical memory." For its users, this DL can serve as an important source of information that documents the state apparatus as a repressive source of violence and inform on its structure and machinations.

The AHPN Digital Archive is a collaborative project of the University of Texas' Lozano Long Institute for Latin American Studies, Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice, and Benson Latin American Collection, with the Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional de Guatemala. (AHPN & the University of Texas Libraries, n.d., Home section).

The "About" section notes that the UT created website, which as of date contains over 10 million images, serves as a component of a broader partnership between the Archive and UT-Austin. In this agreement that was made official through a January 2011 signing of a letter of understanding, the parties "arranged to exchange technical expertise, cooperate in research, engage in capacity-building for legal and academic networks, and to organize an academic conference around the AHPN" (AHPN & the University of Texas Libraries, n.d., About AHPN section, collaboration between the AHPN and UT-Austin). This strong sense of collaboration seems logical given the various organizations and actors involved in what is an international effort.

Content

The AHPN holds images, scanned documents such as fichas (registration cards), microfilm, etc.

The Microfilm section notes:

> In addition to its 80 kilometers of paper documents, the Archivo Histórico de la Policía
>
> Nacional holds a number of reels of microfilm. Specific information on the content of
>
> these reels is currently incomplete and it is unclear if the documents on film also exist on
>
> paper in the archive. These microfilm reels are not yet indexed, but sample digitized
>
> images of the film can be downloaded….We plan to provide access to additional reels of
>
> the AHPN microfilm here in the future. (AHPN & the University of Texas Libraries, n.d.,
>
> Microfilm section)

The AHPN has a 44-page user guide to help the user navigate a rather complex archive given the

Policía Nacional's clandestine nature and their denial of such documentation in the first place. In

this user guide, the section "Finding and Consulting a Ficha: The Case of Manuel Colom

Argueta" notes that one of the best ways to find documents related to a certain individual is

through the ficha (registration card). The ficha contains important information that can help the

user navigate and find documents related to a certain individual, such as date of an event or

crime; branch within the National Police that handled the case; and internal number of the

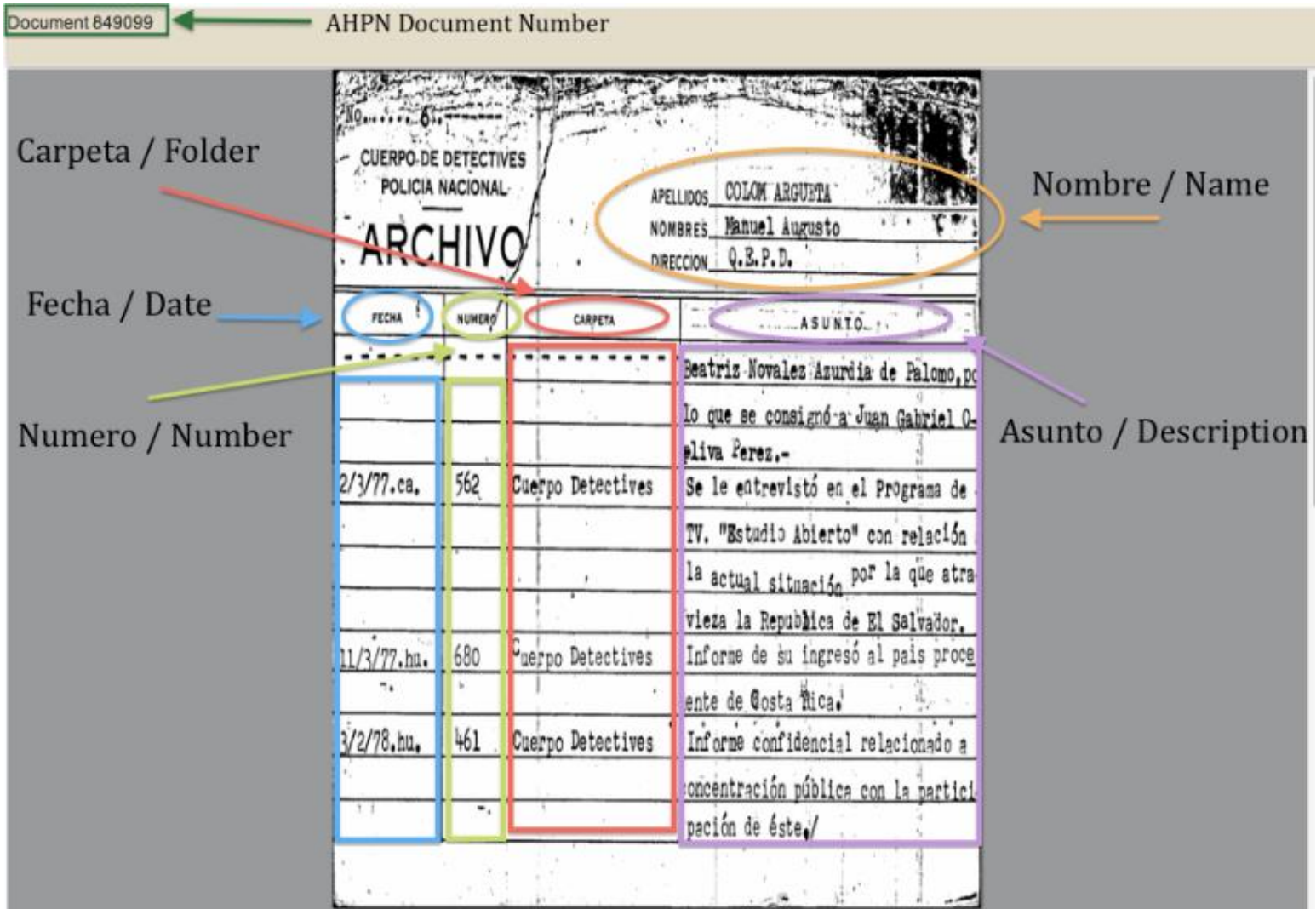document (AHPN Digital Archive User Guide [PDF]., 2013, p. 11-12).

Figure 2. Screen shot

The user guide further notes that the most efficient way to locate a ficha is through a name search; however, it warns that just because a ficha is available in the digital archive, the documents referenced in them may not be available online for various reasons such as being lost or destroyed, or not having been scanned yet since only 12 million of approximately 80 million documents are available online (AHPN Digital Archive User Guide [PDF]., p. 11-12).

In regard to its organization, the home section notes the complex nature of the archive and the challenges it poses to our conventional ideas of organization and automated search functions:

> This is not a full text search engine like Google, but rather a digital iteration of what you would encounter working in the massive paper archive in Guatemala. When you go to an archive, you will seldom find the exact document you are looking for right away. It will often take many hours of investigation to find relevant documents, if they exist at all. This Archive is arranged in accordance with the professional archival principles of provenance and original order to reflect the Guatemalan National Police administrative structure, and understanding that structure is a valuable way to start. (AHPN & the University of Texas Libraries, n.d., Home section).

Due to such challenges, the AHPN "About this Site" tab provides more detailed instructions on search strategies and examples through the 34-page Digital Archive User Guide and for those conducting more in-depth research using the Digital Archive, the About this Site page recommends consulting *From Silence to Memory: Revelations of the AHPN*. This is a 537-page volume, originally published by the AHPN in 2011 and translated to English by the University of Oregon: "It contains extensive details on the organizational structure and functions of the National Police and its many constituent units, information which is essential for navigating the archive" as the AHPN webpage notes (AHPN & the University of Texas Libraries., n.d., About this Site section, para. 1). It seems clear that the user of such an archive must invest serious time and effort in understanding how to navigate such content but also have background knowledge on the facets that make up the Guatemalan National police.

The AHPN User Guide section "I. Using the Digital Archive: A Brief Overview" warns that while navigating the AHPN Digital Archive may seem "initially daunting for users given that the process of collecting, categorizing and digitizing the vast amounts of information the Archive contains—some 80 million pages of records in total—is certainly a tremendous undertaking" (AHPN Digital Archive User Guide [PDF]., p. 2), there are helpful steps to making the research process easier:

—First, understanding the relationship of the digitization process used at the AHPN to the organization of the Archive itself.

—Second, learning how to navigate the Digital Archive and understanding the structure of the National Police and how that relates to where certain documents are located.

—And third, learning how to develop strategies to locate the documents you are looking for. (AHPN Digital Archive User Guide [PDF]., p. 2)

A "key element to be aware of in the organization of the Digital Archive," according the the User Guide, is that "it is conceptually similar to a physical paper archive," meaning that organization of digitized documents resemble the physical organization of documents at the AHPN in Guatemala City. For example, "a document that was originally in a certain filing cabinet belonging to a certain police unit or office will be digitally grouped with other documents that were found in that same filing cabinet of the same unit or office" (AHPN Digital Archive User Guide [PDF], p. 2, para 1-2). Therefore, documents will be grouped according to similar time periods, "as a filing cabinet would be filed" (AHPN Digital Archive User Guide [PDF], p. 2, para 1-2).

Due to the nature of its organization, the metadata also proves to be another deviation from the

norm in terms of typical examples of metadata. While the AHPN alludes to the possibility of

trying to locate records in the archive by typing a person's name, place name, or other keyword

into the search box, it also reminds us that "there are currently more than 10 million images in

this database with very little accompanying metadata" (AHPN Library, n.d., About this Site

section, Keyword Search). A keyword search will look for matches within a limited name index

and text of the archive finding aids. The name index "consists largely of a list of personal names

taken from the archive file 50.S001 Archivos Departamento de Investigaciones Criminológicas

(DIC): Registro Maestro de Fichas" (AHPN Digital Archive User Guide [PDF]., P. 4).

Figure 3. Screen shot.

In lieu of this challenge regarding metadata, the User Guide notes "Finding Aids and Descriptions" to support the user's search. Finding aids are the archival cataloging and inventory tools used to describe the contents of the archive. Finding aids describe each category of records and provide information about department's files. Some of the information that can be found here relates to concerned organizations, departments; types of documents; size of collection; and entities:

> For example, by clicking on the "Finding Aid" link for the Department of Chimaltenango *[Guatemalan territory]*, we are provided with information that tells us that the collection of items available for this department includes 51,040 linear meters of documents, and 249 books, and that the dates of the documents available are between 1960-1997. (AHPN Digital Archive User Guide [PDF]., P. 8-9)

AHPN finding aids are organized using the General International Standard Archival Description. These finding aids include standard elements describing the content of the archive. These are (among others):

1.1 Reference code(s)

1.2 Title

1.3 Date(s)

1.4 Level of description

1.5 Extent and medium of the unit of description (quantity, bulk, or size)

2.1 Name of creator(s)

2.2 Administrative history

2.3 Archival history

2.4 Immediate source of acquisition or transfer

3.1 Scope and content

3.3 Accruals

3.4 System of arrangement

4.1 Conditions governing access

4.2 Conditions governing reproduction

4.3 Language

4.4 Physical characteristics and technical requirements

4.5 Finding aids

5.1 Existence and location of originals

5.2 Existence and location of copies

5.3 Related units of description

6.1 Note

7.1 Archivist's note

7.2 Rules or conventions

7.3 Date(s) of description

(AHPN Digital Archive User Guide [PDF]., P. 8-9).

The AHPN issues the following statement concerning the relation between the digital and

physical objects:

> The digitized documents are also publicly accessible at the AHPN in Guatemala City.
>
> They were made public under the Ley de Acceso *[Law of Access]*, including its article
>
> 24, which makes special provision for the unrestricted disclosure of public records in

connection with human rights investigations. (AHPN & the University of Texas

Libraries, n.d., Disclaimer and User Statement Section, para. 2)

Finally, it's noteworthy to mention that the archive is Bilingual (English/Spanish) and that there

is a "Spanish" pointer on the upper right hand side of the dashboard as seen on Figure 4:

Figure 4. Screen shot.

Services

The AHPN has an open URL with no need for membership. As the Disclaimer and User

Statement Section note: "In the spirit of that law, we have made every effort to make these

records, which are deeply pertinent to Guatemala's recent human rights history, as accessible as

possible" (Disclaimer and User Statement Section, para. 2). This policy of open access is at the

very core of the purpose of the archive, which is to counteract the clandestine nature of the

archives' creation.

To add to the previous discussion of searching and browsing capabilities (and their restriction

due to the organizational structure of the DL), the user guide emphasizes the importance of

understanding that the scanned records in the Digital Archive have not been transcribed; consequently, there is no full text search capability and only limited search capabilities for metadata connected with the records. For this reason, the User Guide notes:

> This means that unlike Google, it is not possible to search for specific words or phrases that are in a document, and users should not expect immediate or exhaustive results using the search function of the Digital Archive. In most cases, better results can be obtained by using the browse function. (AHPN Digital Archive User Guide [PDF], p. 3, para. 3)

Additional services such as FAQ, email queries, query forms, etc. are not provided directly from the AHPN website but rather from the University of Texas Libraries website which may be accessed through AHPN by going to the "Help" button on the upper right hand side of the toolbar. From this website: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/help/ the user may email, chat, or call a librarian or the research help desk with general questions about the library. Alternatively, the user may follow this path: "About the Libraries" >>>>> "Libraries, Centers, and Museums" >>>>> "Human Rights Documentation Initiative" >>>>> "FAQ."

Additional resources include a Teaching & Research section that may be retrieved from http://blogs.lib.utexas.edu/ahpn/, which includes the aforementioned User Guide, bibliographies on related resources, theses and dissertations related to the AHPN, and other publications (AHPN & the University of Texas Libraries, n.d., AHPN Digital Archive: Teaching & Research section). There are no discussion forums or interaction services for users and that would seem appropriate given the sensitive nature of the documents.

Technology

The AHPN uses an in-house digital library management system as previously noted:

> The University of Texas at Austin is honored to collaborate with the AHPN and to serve
> as an on-line and universally-available, digital repository for the AHPN's entire
> collection. This UT-created website, which to date contains over 10 million images,
> serves as a core component of a broader partnership formalized through the January 2011
> signing of a letter of understanding between the Archive and UT-Austin. In this
> agreement, the parties arranged to exchange technical expertise, cooperate in research,
> engage in capacity-building for legal and academic networks, and to organize an
> academic conference around the AHPN. (AHPN & the University of Texas Libraries,
> n.d., About AHPN section, collaboration between the AHPN and UT-Austin)

The files/databases/servers all reside at The University of Texas at Austin.

The assumptions about user expertise are high general, domain, system, and information seeking knowledge. To synthesize the varying components, the user must have a high or moderate general knowledge, but also a high domain, system, and information seeking knowledge since the ideal user should be bilingual, be able to sift through various historical documents, user guides, analyze, search, and synthesize all the information. The biggest challenge is that there is so much information the user must maximize research and study time by sifting through the most relevant help tools, which are vast.

Related Literature

One of the vast number of publications that interests me the most is the recommended reading in the "About this Site" page titled *Silence to Memory: Revelations of the AHPN*. As noted

previously, this is a 537-page volume, originally published by the AHPN in 2011 and translated

to English by the University of Oregon: "It contains extensive details on the organizational

structure and functions of the National Police and its many constituent units, information which

is essential for navigating the archive" as the AHPN webpage notes (AHPN & the University of

Texas Libraries, n.d., About this Site section, para. 1). As one can see, this is quite a bit of

information that would take a significant amount of time to devote to. For this reason, I focused

on exploring the User Guide.

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Personal Analysis

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The AHPN Digital Library is an impressive collaborative project that has required long years of

effort drawing from various sources ranging from human rights activism to scholarship to legal

experts to strategic marketing (in the sense of bringing international attention to the cause). I

recall reading about the inception of this project in a *Harpers* magazine article authored by Kate

Doyle (2007) who in the article is described as a senior analyst and director of the Guatemalan

Documentation Project of the National Security Archive. The *Harpers* article was titled "The

Atrocity Files: Deciphering the archives of Guatemala's dirty war." The unearthing of such

information has been fraught with life threats to everyone involved due to the incriminating and

sensitive nature of the contents which involves human rights violations from those in power

against the civilian population and various groups in the country during the civil war. From my

previous personal research, it seems that bringing international attention to such a process has

been one of the various strategies to protect those involved in gathering and disseminating this

content.

The impact of such work is of great importance given the lives at stake and the closure given to families and friends of the victims. For me personally, this project is important since it touches upon my creative research for a novel I have been working on and had to stop but hope to one day complete. My mother and extended family, though the Guatemalan nation at large, have been greatly affected by the protracted 36-year civil war and one of the ways in which I have sought to reconcile such a heavy past has been by attempting to understand the agents involved, particularly the role of the Guatemalan National Police since my father worked for this state apparatus and also for an elite counterinsurgency unit known as the Kaibiles. To complicate matters, my mother's ex-boyfriend during her youth was a guerrilla fighter so I suspect he may have been a victim of the government violence. I have sought to find out more information about him and I wonder if I ever will now that I have access to all this information. The challenge is, of course, investing much energy and effort into this endeavor given the complexity of this DL.

I think that this DL is very useful for the obvious reasons and that it does what it sets out to accomplish as a central actor and catalyst in prosecutions of war-time cases of human rights violations and in facilitating Guatemala's historical memory, as its mission states. However, I don't know to what extent justice will be served despite the best collaborative international efforts since those in power, especially those at the highest ranks, seem to continually evade justice. I can imagine, however, that it is no small comfort to find out what happened to a loved one and to mourn their memory. Furthermore, as a potential user in the role of an aspiring writer, the examination of this information strikes me as an incredible possibility.

It won't be easy to find what I am trying to find given the vast amount of information and its organizational method, which is a result of the clandestine and unreliable methodology of the Guatemalan National Police; however, I think to have a better idea of this will require reading the User Guide in its entirety and additional suggested readings more in depth. For me the most interesting features of the DL involved the Related Resources tab and the information compiled there. I was particularly interested in the Teaching and Research section which also connects the user to a syllabus for a fascinating history course offered at the University of Texas that explores the archive: http://blogs.lib.utexas.edu/ahpn/hist-386l-syllabus/.

To conclude, I found the mere existence of such a DL as incredible given my long search for it since December 2007 when I first read about it. I would like to end by quoting from the Harpers article authored by Kate Doyle (2007) which expresses and mirrors my sense of incredulity:

> The survival of the National Police archive may seem difficult to comprehend. But its destruction would have contradicted the force that drives bureaucracy itself: 'I record, therefore I am': the files are the proof of a governments' power. They shelter the history of its officers, of their importance, achievements, and investigations. During times of state terror, even the most incriminating documents may not be discarded, because the agents responsible for them believe that their institutions will survive forever. And afterward, it is often too late. Enduring regimes like Guatemala's produce a massive paper trail, which cannot be disappeared overnight.

> But the citizen also needs the files. The archive does more than simply confirm his status as victim; it preserves and restores his history. (Doyle, 2007, p. 64)

References

AHPN & the University of Texas Libraries. (n.d.). *AHPN: Digital archive of the Guatemalan*

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