

“It’s Late”: How FRUS Volume Organization Teaches History (and Makes a Massive Backlog)

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Introduction

Any archivist who works with new acquisitions must be comfortable with a backlog, but the Foreign Relations of the United States series seems to have pushed that idea to its limit. Originally conceived in 1861 as a contemporary document collection, designed to increase public awareness of international affairs and support government transparency, the Foreign Relations (FRUS) archive currently wades through a twenty-five-year pile-up. Their most recent chronological publication covers the end of the Clinton administration in 2000. In 2025, they plan to release volumes to wrap up the 1977–1980 Carter administration.¹

Aside from its chronic tardiness, the Office of the Historian organizes the FRUS archives uniquely, grouped by presidential administration and divided into volumes by geographic region and/or topic. There are no hard and fast rules to segmentation. High-tension areas might receive several books, while editors combine multiple other continents into one volume. The exact number of volumes per year varies. Furthermore, the FRUS archives are significantly more curated than other government document compilations. The Office of the Historian runs a team of full-access historians to research, compile, and annotate FRUS volumes on different subject matters, which go through declassification review before publication. Researchers are especially interested in each volume’s newly declassified documents in the modern era. This is one of the most significant contributing factors to the publication backlog.

Because the volume organization is so subjective, titles and volume size alone can demonstrate US foreign policy priorities from the last 150 years. This report seeks to answer questions about those priorities, including: how has FRUS volume organization shifted over time, what regions have FRUS volumes prioritized in their naming and organization, and how does

FRUS volume organization support or otherwise impact foreign relations research?

Literature Review

In 2015, McAllister et al., FRUS historians, released an auto-ethnography titled *Toward “Thorough, Accurate, and Reliable”: A History of the Foreign Relations of the United States Series*. This book is indispensable for any reader hoping to understand the mission behind FRUS or the historical factors that impact series contents. Authors William B. McAllister et al. argue that users can divide FRUS policy into “immediate accountability” eras from the 1790s to the 1920s and “negotiating responsible historical transparency” from the 1920s on. That transitional window of the 1920s–1930s marked the start of FRUS’s substantial backlog (hence the implication that FRUS editors abandoned “immediate accountability” in favor of long-term historical transparency).² *Toward “Thorough, Accurate, and Reliable”* focuses on the information in each volume, not the volumes themselves. Users must infer details about volume organization; for example, it discusses how certain countries might have their books delayed due to declassification issues, indicating that information security is likely a factor in volume arrangement.³

On the flip side, Gökberk Özsoy et al.’s KG-FRUS novel graph-based dataset focuses solely on the metadata trends within FRUS. This 2023 study combined written text with graphs to illustrate the 217 years of FRUS documents, specifically through document-to-document metadata connections. The researchers created co-occurrence graphs to track relationships between named entities (people, jobs, countries, topics of redacted content, etc.), then contextualized them through Wikidata. Rather than drawing historical conclusions about the FRUS series, Özsoy tested new tag and search methods to increase user engagement and support a better understanding of document contents.⁴ The KG-FRUS dataset proves how an entity with high quantitative

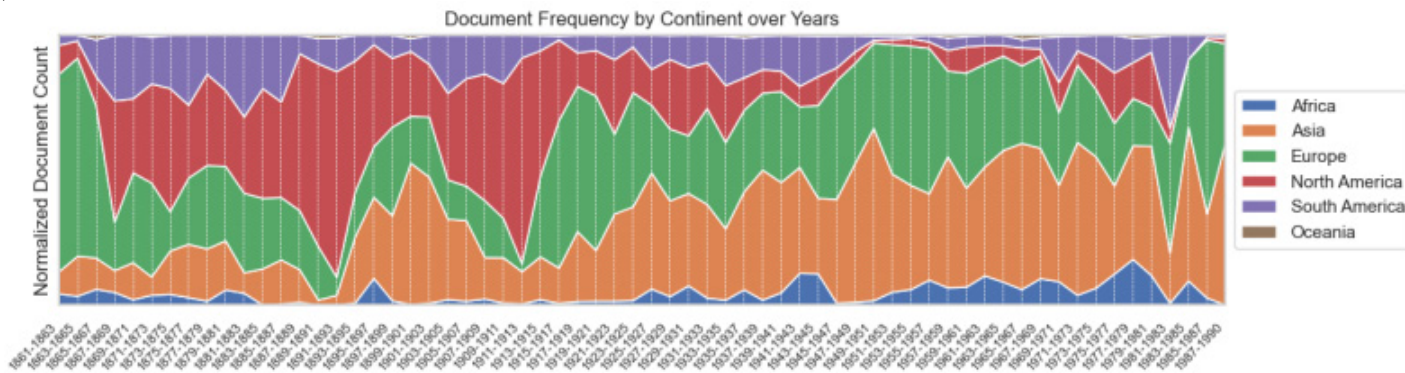


Figure 1. Stacked document count by source continent over years (excluding documents originating from the United States), in periods of two years. “KG-FRUS” dataset, Gökberk Özsoy et al. CC BY-NC-SA.

use in the FRUS series has better documentation, better networking to related concepts, and higher engagement than less commonly occurring peers, even without considering the quality of those appearances. In the context of series organization, this suggests that the mere mention of a region in one volume title may improve that region’s metadata presence across every other volume where it appears.

Methodology

The FRUS archives reached a uniform, topical organization system in 1933, so this study begins its dataset there and continues through the end of the Eisenhower presidency in 1960. This creates roughly thirty years of data to analyze without encroaching on the Kennedy assassination or simply getting too big for a single researcher to manage. The chosen dataset includes each title, the year(s) covered, the presidential administration, the volume number within the series, and the total document count. All characters and numbers in the dataset are listed exactly as written on the FRUS online archive. This was all fed into a spreadsheet, which could then compare descriptive data to the item’s size. In other words, this report could determine how prolific a given administration, topic, or year was, based on how many FRUS documents were associated with it. The volume number within the series also creates a ranking system from “first published” down to “most recently published.” The study hoped to find a trend in what topics get published first from each administration and if there is any evidence to suggest why those titles roll out before the others.

This study excluded volumes that are yet to be released. The backlog is such that three FRUS volumes are currently in production and forty-one volumes are under declassification review. While the titles, topics, years, and administrations for those volumes are public knowledge, they are still subject to change and lack any final document count, which is the most critical statistic for quantitative evaluation.

The data regarding multi year compilation volumes is further limited and this study could not easily code it to produce annual output values. This study divides those document counts by the number of years represented in the volume for estimation. However, that number is only an average and doesn’t account for some years producing more content than others. It is interesting to note that later FRUS volumes, especially those extending after this study’s dataset, are more likely to include multiple years. This makes them more difficult to analyze with straight numbers and more reliant on nuanced, content-based research.

In total, the study analyzed a total sample size of 159,331 documents from 227 volumes, spanning the years 1933 to 1960.⁵ This included the complete FRUS collections from presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower.

Analysis and Findings

First, the data shows that FRUS produced an average of approximately 5.89 volumes per administration year. It is essential to know that this is not the average number of publications per year, as those are lower (and again, severely backlogged); rather, this is the average volume needed to encapsulate a year of foreign relations. Although the numbers appear to spike at the end of the sample size in the chart below, those years are when FRUS switched to releasing volumes in three-year increments. The data accounts for this by dividing the number of volumes by three.

Secondly, text analysis of the titles proves that 20th-century FRUS strongly emphasized Europe, but that increasing region specificity might make it less searchable than other geographic designations. For example, Asia, Africa, and the Americas scored best on name consistency. FRUS labels East Asia as “Far East,” and the Americas are called “American Republics.” Africa is referred to as a whole continent rather than individual countries. Scholars can debate on how accurate these descriptors are,

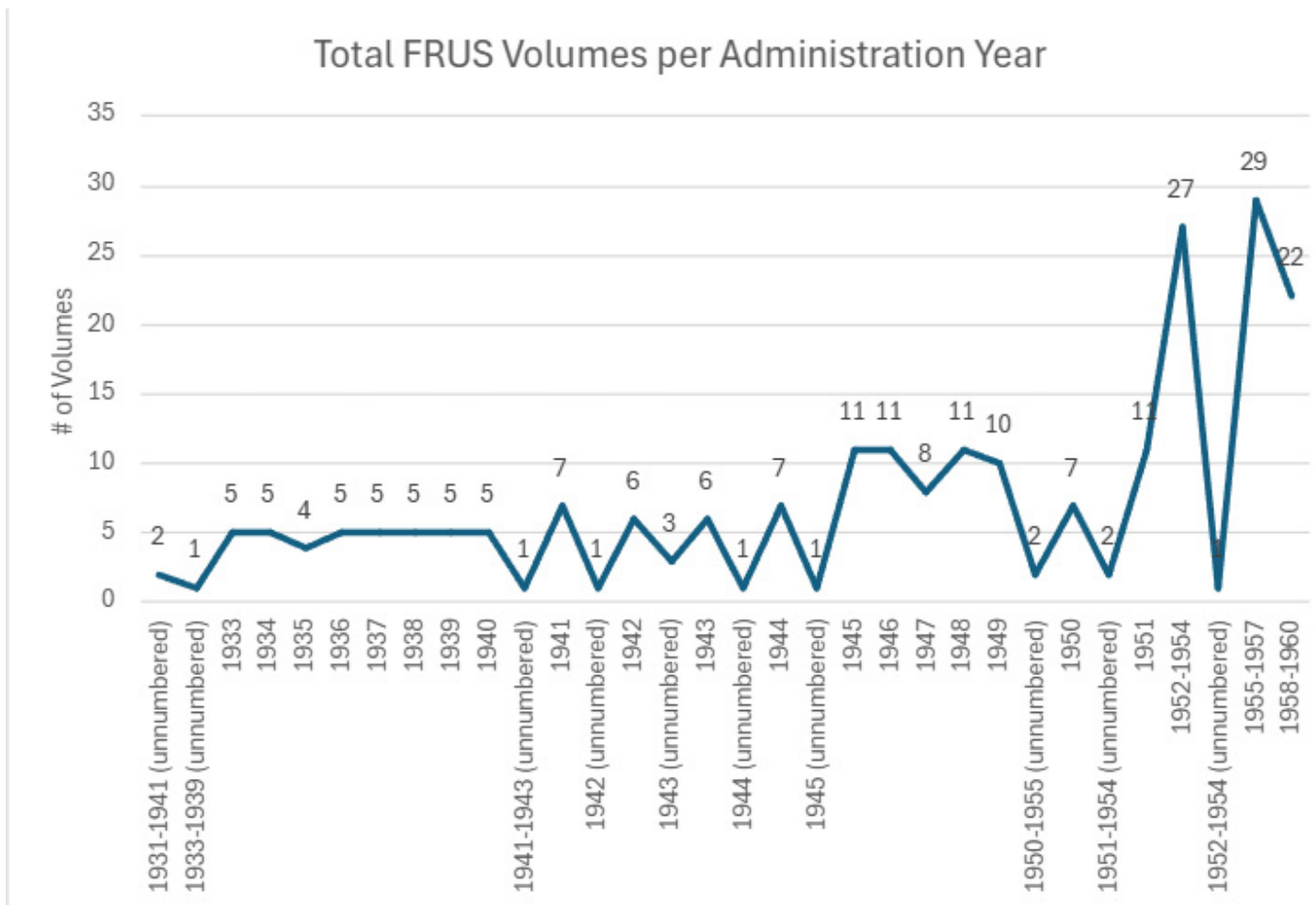


Figure 2. FRUS volume counts by year. Data compiled by Sarah Hensler.

but what they lack in nuance, they make up for in consistency. Twenty-four of twenty-seven African volumes and thirty of fifty-six East Asian volumes share matching names. This miniature controlled vocabulary makes these volumes easier to find because they are all labeled similarly. In reverse, the volumes sometimes title Europe by country, continent, and sub region, often arbitrarily determined and ill-defined in the book. The word “Europe(an)” appeared forty-five times in the titles, but in various phrase combinations, and that still doesn’t come close to the sixty-eight total volumes concerning Europe.

Once the titles are clustered by region, it is finally possible to see some trends in diplomatic relations. Most notably, Africa only appears in twenty-seven volumes and doesn’t receive a standalone book until vol. 18 of the 1955–1957 series (the 195th volume in the study). It only received one use of a sub-region title, and no African countries were referred to by name. By contrast, China racked up twenty-one direct title mentions and has seven standalone volumes. Africa also appears in titles with up to four unrelated regions stuck together.

Some regions perform well during specific eras but come and go as global politics shift. Great Britain did this in the early

years: the British Commonwealth appeared in titles yearly until 1947, when it abruptly stopped and was absorbed into broader European categories. Iran made its FRUS title debut in 1951 and stayed on through the end of the sample data. The series listed Germany and Austria in 1945. Countries with brief blips on the radar are more likely to represent specific events than long-term American diplomatic affairs. Great Britain featured heavily in the 1930s and 1940s because they were a dominant European ally with a massive lend-lease agreement. As the United States took on its post war role as the new Western superpower, it no longer relied on Britain to mediate relationships across the Atlantic. Meanwhile, Germany and Austria couldn’t appear before 1945 because the United States had no standing relationship with the Nazi regime. Diplomacy began again after the war, with the organization of Allied-occupied zones.

The longest volumes were, by and large, from the immediate post war era. Six of the twenty longest volumes were from 1945, and ten out of twenty fit between 1945 and 1950. The oldest was from 1939, and the newest covered 1952 to 1954. In other words, FRUS produced all the largest volumes during fifteen years, and 50 percent represented just 18 percent of the total time span.

227 records

Show as: **rows** records Show: 5 10 25 50 100 500 1000 records Sort ▾

▼ All	▼ Year	▼ Volume #	▼ Title/Topic	▼ Administration	▼ Document Count	
☆	123.	1949	8	Far East, China	Truman	1698
☆	157.	1952-1954	9	Near East, Middle East	Truman, Eisenhower	1573
☆	75.	1944	7	American Republics	Roosevelt	1556
☆	124.	1949	9	Far East, China	Truman	1463
☆	171.	1945	2	Potsdam Conference	Truman	1433
☆	164.	1952-1954	13	Indochina	Truman, Eisenhower	1421
☆	72.	1944	4	Europe	Roosevelt	1339
☆	71.	1944	3	British Commonwealth, Europe	Roosevelt	1321
☆	83.	1945	8	Near East, Africa	Roosevelt, Truman	1294
☆	39.	1940	5	American Republics	Roosevelt	1267
☆	73.	1944	5	Near East, South Asia, Africa, Far East	Roosevelt	1253
☆	120.	1949	6	Near East, South Asia, Africa	Truman	1242
☆	57.	1943	4	Near East, Africa	Roosevelt	1233
☆	84.	1945	9	American Republics	Roosevelt, Truman	1216
☆	79.	1945	4	Europe	Roosevelt, Truman	1214
☆	78.	1945	3	European Advisory Commission, Austria, Germany	Roosevelt, Truman	1206
☆	160.	1952-1954	11	Africa, South Asia	Truman, Eisenhower	1166
☆	102.	1947	7	Far East, China	Truman	1164
☆	30.	1939	1	General	Roosevelt	1157
☆	82.	1945	7	Far East, China	Roosevelt, Truman	1155
☆	95.	1946	11	American Republics	Truman	1135
☆	22.	1937	3	Far East	Roosevelt	1112
☆	94.	1946	10	Far East, China	Truman	1111

Figure 3. OpenRefine analysis of twenty volumes with most documents. Compiled by Sarah Hensler.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect is that titles with more regions listed don't necessarily have more documents than their single-topic peers. Eight of the twenty titles only covered one area (although the size of that area could vary greatly). An additional nine titles covered two areas, many of which functioned like sub headings; that is, "Europe, British Commonwealth" or "Far East, China." Regional distribution was also remarkably flat; American Republics, Far East, Near East, Africa, and Europe were all named four or five times apiece.

These findings are limited by the study's methodology, particularly in the rough division of multi year volumes and the lack of data after 1960. However, it is interesting that later FRUS

volumes are more likely to span multiple years and avoid regional divides.

Separate from the dataset itself, this study also investigated the declassification process behind the FRUS series. The most recent key legislation was the 1991 H.R. 1415, "Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993," now Public Law 102-138. Section 198 of H.R. 1415 amends explicitly the State Department Basic Authorities Act of 1956, also called the FRUS Statute, and authorizes Office of the Historian workers to compile all necessary documents for future volumes.⁶ It also mandates the publication of all FRUS volumes within thirty years of the events they discuss. In his signing statement, President George H.W. Bush said:

This section also must be interpreted in conformity with my constitutional responsibility and authority to protect the United States' national security by preventing the disclosure of state secrets and protecting deliberative communications within the executive branch. To the extent that section 198 addressed the standards for declassification of national security information, it will be interpreted to effect no change in the standards outlined in the existing Executive Order on national security information. Further, section 198 will be implemented in a manner and on a schedule that will not risk ill-considered release of protected information.⁷

This statement illustrates the tensions between the need for secrecy and the desire for “Thorough, Accurate, and Reliable” documentation. It appears to be an early example of adversarial relations between the president and the historian of the United States.

The combination of selective volume grouping and delayed publication helps the government maintain control and privacy over the historical narrative. Delaying the publications by thirty years allows some events to fade from public memory, and consistent trends in volume arrangement, for or against certain regions, influence user expectations about the documents they can access. While it may be comparatively easy for a researcher to focus on an underreported current event, it is much harder for historians to investigate events that were semi-ignored thirty years ago and don't have a clearly defined space in the FRUS volume organization.

Conclusion

The Foreign Relations of the United States series has worked hard to polish its organization and research for users, especially in the last thirty years. While the old adage claims that one shouldn't judge books by their covers, FRUS covers have proven to be excellent gauges of American diplomatic priorities and mindsets throughout history. When users follow FRUS's historical arrangement system, it forces them to think like the authors and editors did, which can encourage understanding of foreign affairs in that era. Users should not take these perspectives lightly. The dataset suggests that countries with consistency in their identity received better metadata than those without. However, that consistency only benefited those countries if the FRUS editors identified their documents as valuable. The titles and document counts show intentional gaps in the FRUS series, brought on by historical disinterest in or bias against certain global regions. One area for further research would be to combine this report's work at the volume/

serialization level with document-level work akin to the *KG-FRUS* visualizations. Comparing those datasets might allow users to determine whether biases in the FRUS series stem from diplomats or historians.

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Notes

1. “Status of the Foreign Relations of the United States Series,” US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Shared Knowledge Services, Bureau of Administration, Accessed April 27, 2025, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/status-of-the-series>.
2. McAllister, William B. and Joshua Botts, “Introduction,” in *Toward “Thorough, Accurate, and Reliable”: A History of the Foreign Relations of the United States Series*, eds. William B. McAllister et al. (Washington, District of Columbia: US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, 2015), 1–5, <https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo66202>.
3. Botts, Joshua, “Implementing the FRUS Statute, 1992–2002,” in *Toward “Thorough, Accurate, and Reliable”: A History of the Foreign Relations of the United States Series*, eds. William B. McAllister et al. (Washington, DC: US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, 2015), 304–326, <https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo66202>.
4. Özsoy, Gökberk, et al., “KG-FRUS: A Novel Graph-Based Dataset of 127 Years of US Diplomatic Relations,” *eprint arXiv:2311.01606* (October 23, 2023): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2311.01606> CC BY-NC-SA Specific information and Figure 1 are found on p. 8. The figure is reproduced here under the original CC BY-NC-SA license.
5. US Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1933–1960 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), US Department of State, Office of the Historian, Shared Knowledge Services, Bureau of Administration, Accessed January 23, 2026, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments>.

6. *Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993*, P.L. 102-138, 105 Stat.685, <https://www.congress.gov/102/statute/STATUTE-105/STATUTE-105-Pg647.pdf>; *Foreign Relations of the United States Historical Series*, 22 USC 53b, § 4353 (1956)
7. Bush, George H. W., "Statement on Signing the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1992 and 1993," *The American Presidency Project*, October 28, 1991, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-signing-the-foreign-relations-authorization-act-fiscal-years-1992-and-1993>.