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## Basic International Reference Sources

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# Basic International Reference Sources

Lucretia McCulley

*Numerous reference sources are available to help librarians answer questions regarding the geographical and cultural characteristics of nations. In this article, Lucretia McCulley identifies the features that determine the quality of such materials, and explains how each of 13 research aids meets her criteria.*

"Who is the President of Chad?" "What is the literacy rate in Brazil?" "What is the current population of the Republic of China?" "Can you help me find information on the history of agriculture in Ethiopia?" "Who is the United States's current ambassador to Kenya?" Reference librarians are asked such questions each day. As the world becomes increasingly smaller and distant events affect our everyday lives, "people everywhere are truly eager for accurate, comprehensive and timely information about themselves and their neighbors."<sup>1</sup>

There are many encyclopedias and compendiums that help American librarians answer questions on various foreign countries. Some, such as the *Europa Yearbook* and *Statesman's Year-Book*, have been on library reference shelves for years, while others are of fairly recent publication. Some of the sources reviewed in this article attempt to cover all the countries in the world; others concentrate on a certain large region, such as the Middle East, or political division, such as the Third World. The purpose of these sources is to provide basic information such as statistics and brief histories of individual countries. Reference works that confine their focus to a single nation (such as the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Russia and the Soviet Union* or the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*) are not reviewed here.

The references reviewed in this article are *Africa, South of the Sahara, Background Notes, Political Handbook of the World, Countries of the World and Their Leaders Yearbook, Deadline Data on World Affairs, Europa Yearbook, The Far East and Australasia, Encyclopedia of the Third World, The Middle East and North Africa, Statesman's Year-Book, Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations,*

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## ***Current History Encyclopedia of Developing Nations*, and *World Factbook*.**

As librarians read individual reviews and receive advertisements on international sources, they ask themselves several questions: Does our library need all of these encyclopedias on countries? Which ones should be given top consideration? How often should such sources be replaced? It is hoped that the following comments will assist selectors in making purchasing decisions.

### EVALUATION CRITERIA

The following factors are used as evaluation criteria in this article.

1. **Coverage.** How many countries are included? How recent is the source? Are up-to-date bibliographies provided? How in-depth is the subject matter (that is, does the work only provide facts, or does it include essays, a brief history, or a summary of current issues)? Is information provided on the United Nations and other international organizations?
2. **Arrangement and format.** How many volumes are included? Does the source have an unusual format? Is there a good introduction or preface? Are there lists of abbreviations or keys to usage? Is an index or table of contents provided? Is the source easy to use?
3. **Treatment of individual countries.** Are basic facts about the country given? What and how many topics are covered? Does the work attempt to be objective, or is there an emphasis on industrialized nations or democracies?
4. **Special features.** Are there maps, symbols, charts, illustrations, photographs, travel information, tables, and other appendixes?

### COVERAGE

The number of countries covered varies from source to source. The *World Factbook* leads the way with 191 countries; *Deadline Data* follows with 185. Both *Europa Yearbook* and *Statesman's Year-Book* discuss approximately 184 countries. Other sources that claim to cover every nation, such as *Countries of the World and Their Leaders*,<sup>2</sup> *Background Notes*, *Political Handbook of the World*, and *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations*, mention between 163 and 172 countries. The works that discuss fewer than 160 nations are those focusing on a certain part of the world, such as the *Encyclopedia of the Third World* and *The Far East and Australasia*. Why is a discrepant number of countries discussed among the sources that purport to provide information on all countries? The major reason is the way in which many smaller countries are listed

in tables of contents. For example, in the *Statesman's Year-Book*, Anguilla, Antigua, and Barbuda are listed as individual countries, while in the *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations*, they are treated as part of the United Kingdom American Dependencies (within that section they are listed under the Leeward Islands). All of these books discuss virtually the same countries; however, potential buyers should be aware that they do choose to list countries differently in tables of contents or indexes.

All of the sources reviewed here were published in 1982, 1983, or 1984. Many, such as *Europa Yearbook* and *Statesman's Year-Book*, appear in a new edition each year. *Countries of the World and Their Leaders* is updated every year by supplements or in a new edition, and *Background Notes* provides updates on several countries on a rotating basis throughout the year. Each week, 50 *Deadline Data* cards are produced to update events around the world. Others, such as *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations* and *Encyclopedia of the Third World*, are revised at intervals ranging from two to six years.

Bibliographies are provided in many of these books. *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations*, *Statesman's Year-Book*, and the *Encyclopedia of the Third World* contain the most complete bibliographies, but the reference lists in *The Far East and Australasia*, *Africa, South of the Sahara*, and *The Middle East* are also excellent. *Background Notes* and *Countries of the World* also list further information sources, although their lists are less extensive than those in the books mentioned above. *The Encyclopedia of the Third World* is notable for its "Basic Bibliography of the Third World (from 1970)." *Current History of Developing Nations*, *Europa Yearbook*, *World Factbook*, *Deadline Data*, and the *Political Handbook* do not include bibliographies.

The depth of the information given varies among the reference materials. All of the sources discuss individual countries. Most of them concentrate on basic data about population, geography, history, political leaders, and the like. None is meant to be an exhaustive study of any country. Sources such as the *World Factbook* and *Political Handbook* are merely collections of data, while *Background Notes* and *Countries of the World and Their Leaders* present information in full paragraphs. *Current History Encyclopedia of Developing Nations* presents a single essay on the geography, population, economy, and history of each country it discusses. *Europa Yearbook*, *Statesman's Year-Book*, *Encyclopedia of the Third World*, *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations*, and *Deadline Data* survey a variety of topics and supply comparative statistical data. *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations* includes sections on famous citizens, animal husbandry, flora, fauna, and forestry. *Europa Yearbook* and its

"spin-offs," *The Middle East and North Africa, The Far East and Australasia*, and *Africa, South of the Sahara*, provide similar statistical and directory-type information, although the essay coverage of the

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last three is more extensive than that in *Europa*.

With the exception of *Current History Encyclopedia of Developing Nations*, all of the sources contain information on the United Nations and other international organizations. A full volume of *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations* is devoted to a discussion of the United Nations and its agencies. *Europa Yearbook* also includes a useful section on the United Nations and other organizations and its companion volumes provide similar information.

### ARRANGEMENT AND FORMAT

Many of the reference sources examined here are one-volume works (*Statesman's Year-Book*, *World Factbook*, and *Current History Encyclopedia of Developing Nations*). These are easy to use and quite convenient if kept on a "ready-reference" shelf for quick referral. *Europa Yearbook*, *Countries of the World and Their Leaders*, *Encyclopedia of the Third World*, and *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations* are multi-volume works. *Background Notes* has a loose-leaf binder format. *Deadline Data* is arranged in a table-top, four-drawer metal cabinet; the file on each country consists of five-by-eight inch cards, divided into sections.

Each of the sources includes a good introduction or preface, in which the purpose, arrangement, and subjects of the source are explained. In many of the works, abbreviations are explicated in the introduction. Most of the materials have tables of contents, so that the reader can tell whether countries are listed in alphabetical order, or by region. For example, *Current History Encyclopedia of Developing Nations* is arranged by regions (South America, Central America and the Caribbean, and so on); within each regional section, countries are listed alphabetically. The preface to *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations* includes "A Guide to Country Articles," which presents a key to flag and color symbols, as well as individual topic section headings in numerical and alphabetical order. *Encyclopedia of the Third World* has a "Notes and Information Classification System" which lists 384 types of information, ranging from location and area to languages and constitutions. By using the classifica-

tion system, one can easily identify topic headings and areas of comparative data.

Alphabetical indexes (of subjects, names, or places) appear in every source except *Deadline Data*. The indexes to nations would not be used heavily, since the information on countries appears in alphabetical order. (However, as mentioned earlier, one should be aware that individual countries are sometimes included in a group of islands or a region, and not listed individually.) Most of the sources are fairly easy to use. In some instances, a user would need assistance in determining the region of the world in which a country is located. Some unusual formats, such as that of *Deadline Data*, may need to be explained to users.

### TREATMENT OF INDIVIDUAL COUNTRIES

All of the sources give basic facts about the countries they mention. In most cases, this information pertains to an area's geographical characteristics, population, form of government, current leaders, economy, defense, capital, date of independence, and language.

If one wishes to determine how many topic headings a book contains, one can count the broad categories (such as population, geography, and transportation) into which the data are organized. However, one should keep in mind that some works do not group data into broad categories, but use specific topic headings instead. *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations* and *Encyclopedia of the Third World* contain 50 and 56 topic headings, respectively. The other materials include between 12 and 30 headings per country. *Europa Yearbook* provides an introductory survey as well as a statistical survey and a country directory. *Statesman's Year-Book* tries to be comprehensive in providing historical and current information. The *Political Handbook of the World* focuses on politics and government, while *Deadline Data* includes three basic sections: General Data and Government, Historical Background, and a chronological file.

Many sources provide a predetermined amount of information on each country. The editors of *Worldmark* state that "the standard treatment of 50 features has been applied uniformly to all countries, regardless of their size, strength, position or prominence on the world scene. This scheme not only serves as a means for comparative study but also affords the reader balanced knowledge of the new and lesser-known nations."<sup>3</sup> *Background Notes* are "uniform in style, but range in length from three to 15 pages, depending on a country's size and complexity."<sup>4</sup> Many of the materials give more information on large, industrialized countries than on small, developing ones. For instance, *Statesman's*

*Year-Book* includes 66 pages on Great Britain, 61 on Canada, seven on Indonesia, five on Kenya, and four on Nicaragua. Books on specific regions (*Encyclopedia of the Third World*, *Current History of Developing Nations*, *The Middle East and North Africa*, *The Far East and Australasia*, and *Africa, South of the Sahara*) can be purchased in order to mitigate this uneven treatment.

The length of entries on individual countries varies from source to source. Reports on El Salvador, for example, range from three and four pages in *World Factbook* and *Statesman's Year-Book*, respectively, to 17 pages in *Encyclopedia of the Third World*. *Africa, South of the Sahara* devotes 11 pages to essays on Kenya while *Europa* includes two pages on that country. Single volume works such as *World Factbook* usually devote two or three pages to each country, while the more in-depth works such as *The Middle East and North Africa* include 25 or 30 pages per nation.

### SPECIAL FEATURES

Among the most important features to consider when evaluating reference materials are maps and symbols. Several of the sources under review contain maps of the nations they discuss; *Europa Yearbook*, *Statesman's Year-Book*, and the *Political Handbook of the World* do not. *Encyclopedia of the Third World*, *Background Notes*, and *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations* contain a full-page map of each country. *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations* and *Encyclopedia of the Third World* include pictures and descriptions of each nation's seal and flag. Other sources furnish specialized maps. *Africa, South of the Sahara* includes a vegetation map, a political map, and a map of early trade routes on the continent. At the back of *World Factbook* are excellent color maps of the regions of the world.

Tables and charts are also desirable features. The statistical survey section of *Europa Yearbook* and its companion volumes includes a variety of tables and charts, showing such data as the number of crops harvested and the number of automobiles registered in each country. Most of these data relate to the past three years. In *Current History of Developing Nations*, the essay on each nation begins with boxes containing statistics on population, growth rates, ethnic composition, and the like. *Encyclopedia of the Third World* includes fewer tables, but it has reports on such factors as a country's balance of payments, imports, and public finance. *Deadline Data* presents charts on defense equipment, economic indicators, currency rates, land use, and labor.

Both *Worldmark* and *Encyclopedia of the Third*

*World* provide further charts and tables in their extensive appendixes. *Worldmark* includes information on conversion tables, global indicators (population, gross national product, commodity prices), demographic indicators, cultural indicators, world energy and agriculture, and international organizations. The appendix of *Encyclopedia of the Third World* gives information on consumer prices and energy production and consumption in developed and developing nations. It also notes of each developed nation whether it provides economic assistance to the Third World, and reports statistics relevant to the status of women in developing countries. *Statesman's Year-Book* contains tables comparing nations' wheat, barley, and crude oil production, and territorial sea limits.

*Background Notes, Countries of the World and Their Leaders, Deadline Data*, and *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations* give helpful information on factors related to international travel, including the climate, customs, health regulations, and tourist highlights of each country. *Background Notes* and *Countries of the World and Their Leaders* seem to address a United States audience; they provide a synopsis of the United States's relations with each country and list principal United States officials such as ambassadors, deputy chiefs of mission, and public affairs officers; and the locations of United States embassies, consulates, and foreign service posts. These books also tell American tourists how to seek the assistance of the United States state department while abroad.

Photographs are not a strong feature of any of these sources. Black-and-white photographs appear in *Background Notes* and *Current History Encyclopedia of Developing Nations*. To see a large number of good photographs of a particular country, one should consult a book whose only subject is that country.

Another special feature is the inclusion of very recent information. *Europa Yearbook*, *The Middle East and North Africa*, *The Far East and Australasia*, and *Africa, South of the Sahara*, include a section entitled "Late Information." Many of the entries in *Background Notes* and *Countries of the World and Their Leaders* are up-to-date; however, some reports are three or four years old. This constitutes a major defect of these two sources. If all the articles were updated yearly, the books would be much more useful. Timeliness is *Deadline Data's* strong point. It provides a *Weekly News Summary* which consists of concise day-by-day reports of significant events. Subscribers to this service receive the 50-card weekly supplement mentioned above.

## CONCLUSION

Because so many changes occur in the world each year, it is important that researchers have access to current information. For that reason, most libraries should place a standing order for either *Europa Yearbook* or *Statesman's Year-Book*. Libraries on

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limited budgets may prefer *Statesman's Year-Book*, since it is more reasonable in price than *Europa Yearbook*. Both books provide basic and comprehensive information on all of the countries in the world. Libraries with numerous requests for very timely information on world events should consider purchasing *Deadline Data* but should bear in mind that it is somewhat expensive and that its format can be awkward.

Large academic and research libraries should consider obtaining *The Middle East and North Africa*, *The Far East and Australasia* and *Africa, South of the Sahara*. Although *Europa Yearbook* provides much of the basic information found in these books, the essay sections in the more specialized works are much more in-depth and lengthy.

*The Encyclopedia of the Third World* is the best choice for libraries that need a source of information on the underdeveloped countries. It provides much more extensive discussions of these nations than does *Current History Encyclopedia of Developing Nations*, and is updated more frequently. Its excellent bibliographies and appendixes also add to its value.

*Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations* is an excellent choice to supplement *Europa* or *Statesman's*. Its strengths include maps, symbols, flags, up-to-date bibliographies, a wide range of topics, and its attempt to treat every country equally. *Worldmark's* major flaw is its failure to remain current. So far, new editions of the work have appeared only every six or eight years.

*Background Notes* or *Countries of the World and Their Leaders* should be purchased only by libraries in which a large number of people search for facts on foreign nations; these books present basic, concise information, and can be used to augment sources like *Statesman's Year-Book*. It is less expensive to subscribe to *Background Notes* through the Superintendent of Documents than to purchase *Countries of the World and Their Leaders*.

The *Political Handbook*, one of the oldest sources examined here, is not recommended by this reviewer, unless a new edition appears in the near future.

Many of the facts in the *Political Handbook* can be located in more up-to-date sources such as *Europa Yearbook*. The inexpensive *World Factbook* is an excellent "ready-reference" book in any library that buys the latest edition each year.

Most of the sources described here are appropriate for all patrons, including high school and college students and more advanced scholars.

## NOTES

1. Moshe Y. Sachs, ed., *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations*, 6th ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1984), xii.
2. It is acknowledged in the introduction to *Countries of the World and Their Leaders* that that work is based on the information contained in *Background Notes*.
3. Sachs, ed., xv.
4. Frank Bair, ed., *Countries of the World and Their Leaders* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1984), xii.

## WORKS REVIEWED

*Africa, South of the Sahara*. 14th ed. London: Europa Publications Limited, 1984. 970p. \$130. LC 78-112271. ISBN 0-905118-98-7. OCLC 1087495.

*Background Notes*. Irreg. \$25. (\$32 per issue.) U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC; for sale by the Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office. ISSN 0501-9966. SuDocs No. 51.123: (cutter). Depository Item No. 0862-B. OCLC 7437325.

Banks, Arthur S., ed. *Political Handbook of the World*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983. 728p. \$49.95. LC 81-643916. ISBN 0-07-003631-4. OCLC 10381824.

Bair, Frank, ed. *Countries of the World and Their Leaders Yearbook*. 2v. Detroit: Gale Research, 1984. 1,400p. \$80. LC 80-645249. ISBN 0-8103-1641-2. OCLC 10767678.

*Deadline Data on World Affairs*. 1956-. W. \$450 (Libraries: \$275.) DMS, 1297 Park Ave., Bridgeport, CT 06604. Ed.: Rolf Memming. ISSN 0011-5061.

*Europa Yearbook*. 25th ed. 2v. London: Europa Publications Limited, 1984. 2,700p. \$210. LC 59-2942. ISBN 0-905118-95-2. OCLC 1452859.

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LC 74-417170. ISBN 0-946653-00-3. OCLC 1345792.

Kurian, George T., ed. *Encyclopedia of the Third World*. 3v. Rev. ed. New York: Facts on File, 1982. \$145. LC 81-9851. ISBN 0-87196-457-0 (set). OCLC 7334958.

*The Middle East and North Africa*. 31st ed. London: Europa Publications Limited, 1984. 720p. \$120. LC 48-3250. ISBN 0-905118-99-5. OCLC 2473588.

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Thompson, Carol L., ed. *Current History Encyclopedia of Developing Nations*. New York: McGraw, 1982. 395p. \$49.95. LC 80-21623. ISBN 0-07-064387-3. OCLC 6707755.

*World Factbook*. A. \$10. Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, DC; for sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office. ISSN 0277-1527. SuDocs No. PrEx3.15: (year). Depository Item No. 856-A-7. OCLC 07390695.

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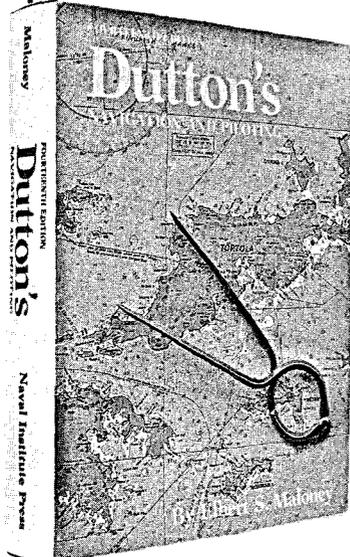


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*The Acquisition and Cataloging of Music and Sound Recordings: A Glossary*, by Suzanne E. Thorin and Carole Franklin Vidali, 1983. MLA Technical Report no. 11. \$14.00.

*Library of Congress Subject Headings for Recordings of Western Non-Classical Music*, by Judith Kaufman, 1983. MLA Technical Report no. 14. \$10.50.

*Analyses of Nineteenth-Century Music*, 2nd ed., 1940-1980, compiled by Arthur Wenk. MLA Index and Bibliography Series no. 15. \$13.25.

*Analyses of Twentieth-Century Music: 1940-1970*, compiled by Arthur Wenk. MLA Index and Bibliography Series no. 13. \$7.50. *Supplement*, 2nd ed., 1970-1980. No. 14. \$14.25.

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