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Russia's Archives: Opportunities & Restrictions

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For many decades, historians of the Soviet Union were forced to rely on a very limited set of sources. Scholars had to make do with published materials which had been carefully screened by the employees of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism attached to the Central Committee (TsK) of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (KPSS). Naturally the approved documents ensured that scholars would reach the conclusions which were desired by the authorities. The available material was meant to demonstrate all-too-familiar themes: the unwavering development of the USSR under party guidance; the unanimity of opinion among policy makers; as well as the uninterrupted and ever-accelerating course of progress. Scholars could either carry out the role assigned to them or deliberately construct independent versions of history that they would be unable to document and that would not be published.

Soviet historians worked in a highly controlled environment, where censorship was applied not only by the appointed official but also by the editors and publishers of scholarly journals. This system ensured that published works on history would be more than consonant with the official interpretation of events: Scholarship would in fact strengthen the prevailing dogma. In exceptional cases, if researchers chose topics on which there was as yet no official position or that were deemed unimportant, they had more room to maneuver and some archival materials were made available. A change in the leadership was often accompanied by a reevaluation of the preceding ruler--Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev--which also created opportunities for historians. On such occasions single-volume and multi-volume editions of History of the CPSU, History of
the USSR, and History of the Great Patriotic War were rushed to print. Each time, historians were given access to new information, albeit in measured doses.

Sovietologists in western countries had a somewhat wider range of sources than their Soviet colleagues, but they too were constrained by the very limited set of data available from the Soviet Union. Their sources generally included everything that was available to the Soviet scholar, plus materials pertaining to the USSR that were stored in western archives, Soviet publications that were "forgotten" for political reasons, and other unofficially forbidden materials. Individuals from the Soviet Union contributed to the oral history of the period—which was at times highly revealing—but, on other occasions, facts were so distorted by reflecting second- or third-hand versions that they came closer to apocrypha than history.

The tectonic shift in the availability of sources for historical research occurred in 1990: Finally researchers were allowed access to the multiple strata of archival holdings. Gorbachev's instruction to begin declassifying materials from the TsK KPSS archives and transferring these items to open collections constituted a real revolution. For the first time scholars could study documents that reflected the nature of political power in the Soviet Union, the mechanisms by which the government functioned, and, most crucially, the true structure of the governing bodies. Using materials from the Politburo, the Secretariat, the Orgburo of the TsK KPSS, and the departments of the TsK, a researcher could establish who initiated a given act, who made a decision, as well as how and by whom a document was prepared. These materials pertained to every aspect of Soviet life, including foreign and domestic policy formation.

Unfortunately, in January 1992 the new regime in Moscow substantially slowed the declassification process. What was initially envisioned as an automatic procedure—the handing over of documents from the TsK KPSS to a reorganized and accessible Party Archive of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism (now called the Russian Center for the Storage and Study of Current History Documentation, the RTsKhIDNI)—became a
needlessly complicated bureaucratic process. Declassification has stretched over six years and is still nowhere near completion.

The transfer of documents (which, after all, belonged to a disbanded organ of a banned party of a dissolved country) was further hampered by the arbitrary classification of the materials into three collections by members of the presidential administration.

- The first collection contains all the documents of the TsK KPSS for the period preceding the XIX Party Congress (October 1952): That material is being transferred to the RTsKhIDNI.
- The second collection consists of party documents below the Politburo level, from October 1952 to August 1991. A new archive--the Storage Center for Contemporary Documentation (TsKhSD)--contains the second collection and is located in the same space as the former "closed" archive of the TsK KPSS.
- The documents that are to remain secret are stored in a third archive, created specifically for this purpose: the Presidential Archive of the Russian Federation. The personal fondy of Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev and other first secretaries of the TsK KPSS, as well as the protocols of the Politburo since October 1952, represent only a small portion of the materials that remain in this closed facility (1). This arrangement was undertaken with the full blessing of such widely respected figures as the former member of the Politburo A.N. Yakovlev, the former political officer of the Soviet army, D. A. Volkogonov, and the historian V. P. Naumov. The process by which the three collections were established and the decisions regarding declassification have not been governed by existing Russian laws pertaining to freedom of information and government archives.

In addition, as in the past, declassification and the transfer of documents to the government archives have not been extended to collections like the active archive of the Federal Security Service (former VChK-OGPU-NKVD-MGB-KGB), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the Ministry of Defense. The continued inaccessibility of these collections also constitutes a flagrant violation of Russian laws. On rare occasions, if the
researcher wins the favor of the archive's director, he may be allowed a visit; but permission to work there is virtually impossible to obtain. A researcher is prohibited from learning the contents of the archive and ordering the documents he needs. He is not even given a complete delo (case); instead, he is provided with separate pages (in some instances, material that the archive has already published in Russia or abroad).

How can such strange conditions persist? Over a period of two hundred years, Russian society has developed a tradition of limitless and arbitrary bureaucratic power. Those entrusted with the collections have come to regard these documents as their personal property and hence seek to gain profit from the holdings. On the one hand, there are prohibitions and limitations on the availability of certain documents for research purposes; on the other hand, there is a readiness to sell the publication rights for the more important or interesting documents, preferably to a foreign client—for dollars. If this fails, one can always publish the documents piecemeal in the journals like Istochnik or Istoricheski Arkhiv, or collect them in volumes. Better yet, archival workers can hold on to the material for their own research.

A survey of the accessible materials

Nevertheless, despite all the difficulties with the declassification process, the opportunity that we have dreamt of for decades has arrived, at least in part: All scholars now have access to very substantial deposits of material. Researchers looking for materials to use for a reevaluation of Soviet history find most of what they seek concentrated in the RTsKhIDNI.

The RTsKhIDNI collection contains all the protocols of the Politburo from the creation of the party to October 1952. Each protocol is stored in two forms.

- The first consists of the copies made for distribution—the original and two copies. These files contain the majority of the decisions and resolutions of the Politburo, which were frequently adopted in the name of the Central Committee of the VKP(b). (2) A small number of protocols—those pertaining to questions of
espionage and counterintelligence, the development of new forms of weaponry, and secret diplomatic operations—constitute special files (osoby papki). The special files are declassified up to the year 1935. For the last three years, the presidential administration has been in the process of declassifying the remainder.

- For many researchers the second form of storage of the Politburo protocols is of even greater interest. Individual files contain the protocol of each session and the materials that pertain to its adoption; they include all the documents that were used to initiate an action and all the materials relating to questions that were proposed for Politburo consideration. The documents show who made a given proposal, what reasons he gave, and how that proposal was formulated. Moreover, this set of files contains all the drafts of the protocol, often handwritten, by such persons as Stalin, Molotov, Beria, and other Politburo members. Using this form of the protocol files, one can trace precisely how a decision was adopted, as well as who initiated and revised it. A historian who traces those behind-the-scenes details of the Kremlin power structure can describe the interior functioning of Soviet governance, which remained hidden for so long and from which Soviet law derives.

The stenographic records of all the congresses and conferences of the KPSS and plenums of the TsK constitute another invaluable resource located at the RTsKhIDNI. These documents are of use not only for those original transcripts that have never been published, but also for those that were published, since in many cases the original transcripts were modified for publication. The files for each such transcript also contain other documentation pertinent to the occasion: requests and applications, notes, materials pertaining to the convocation, voting tallies, and other records of this kind.

Other documentation available at the RTsKhIDNI include the protocols of the Communist Party's Secretariat, Orgburo and Central Committee, the transcripts of many of their meetings, and all of the preparatory documentation for their meetings. The latter are often interesting in themselves for the view they offer of the details, the texture, of party life. For four years, the documents of the Government Defense Committee (GKO), the supra-party and supra-government organ that ruled the country during the Second
World War, were available for researchers. These papers include previously unknown materials on the atomic weapons program. Obtaining access to this material has become increasingly difficult, however; researchers now must submit special requests.

During 1997 the RTsKhIDNI finally declassified and made available to scholars the personal fondy of several Politburo members: Trotsky, Sokol'nikov, Radek, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Rykov, Andreev, Voroshilov, Zhdanov, Kaganovich, Molotov, Malenkov, and Shvernik. The title of the files may be misleading: The "personal" files do not contain anything really personal in nature; rather they hold correspondence with Politburo members and other notes or requests. For instance, using the materials contained in Malenkov's personal fond, one can trace: the fate of the Armenian diaspora repatriated to the Armenian SSR; the underlying motives behind the events that gave rise to the "affair of the cosmopolitan theater critics"; the history of the creation and use of rocket-propelled artillery in 1941; the creation of the airborne forces, etc.

The same archive contains the protocols of the sessions as well as the resolutions of the highest executive organs--the Sovnarkom, the labor and defense council (for the years 1917-1924), as well as all of the materials of the Komintern, the Informburo, and the Kominform.

Other documents pertaining to domestic and foreign policy making, also available at the RTsKhIDNI, include almost all of the materials of the TsK departments. Limitations are imposed on access to documents of the foreign relations department, and the records of the cadres directorate remain off-limits to everyone except for scholars employed by the archive and those who obtain special permission from the presidential administration.

It is clear from the survey above that, for the period from 1917 to 1952, a great wealth of documentation is available to scholars and is concentrated in one institution--the RTsKhIDNI. Should the researcher find that he requires additional sources, he can make inquiries at the Central Government Archive of the Russian Federation (TsGA RF, formerly the Central Government Archive of the October Revolution and Socialist
Construction, TsGAOR), where the materials of the Sovnarkom, the Council of Ministers, and all of the ministries (except for MGB-KGB, MID, and Defense) for the period prior to October 1952 have been made available for research purposes.

If one chooses a topic that belongs to the period 1917-1952, restrictions on the availability of documentation are minimal. If not all of the information, then certainly the most important kind of information, can be found: Who was really in charge? What were the actual opinions and ambitions of the members of the ruling circle? (This group was not invariably composed of Politburo members, nor did it include all of those members.)

For a wider perspective on Soviet society, two other archives are worth mentioning: The Russian Government Archive of the Economy and the Government Archive of Literature and Art. The economics collection contains materials that reflect the activities of all the economic management organs with the exception of those concerned with the defense industry. The literature and art collection contains the documents of all the cultural councils, the committees concerned with cultural affairs and the culture ministry--all of those materials are "open." Of course, these materials must be evaluated in the context of the materials of the RTsKhIDNI, because without the knowledge of the political underpinnings it is well-nigh impossible to discern the motives behind the activities of various cultural institutions.

Obtaining archival documentation for the period beginning with 1953 remains virtually impossible. As mentioned above, the documents pertaining to this time are located in two collections, access to which remains highly problematic. The Presidential Archive is simply off-limits, while the overwhelming majority of the holdings at the TsKhSD remain classified. Moreover, in this day and age, the TsKhSD continues to classify materials that were briefly declassified! For instance, recently the dela of the Secretariat of the TsK, which were available to scholars for three years, have been deemed secret again. The documents of the TsK international department and the medium machine-building department (which managed the production of atomic weapons) and some other departments remain classified. Without undue trouble, scholars can obtain the materials
of the departments of agriculture, culture, the sciences, and, most importantly, the
documents of the party congresses, the TsK plenums, as well as the so-called "collected" documents (another misnomer: these contain separate, unrelated
documents). There is a possibility that the materials of the administrative department
(which managed the work of the KGB, the MVD, the procuracy, and the judicial organs)
will be declassified in the near future, probably in the summer or the fall.

**A few notes and suggestions**
The organizational and administrative hurdles of archive work often prove as formidable
as the complications involved in finding declassified information; for that reason a few
seemingly mundane peculiarities of the Russian archives deserve attention.

First of all, to avoid rediscovering material that has been published already, consult the
journals *Istochnik* and *Istoricheski Arkhiv*, which regularly publish archival materials.

Materials in the Russian archives are arranged in fondy--each fond represents either an
independent party or government organ or a structural part of an organ, which in the
course of its operations has produced a great deal of documentary materials. For
instance, in RTsKhIDNI one can find: Fond 17--documents of the TsK apparat, including
most of its departments; Fond 163--Politburo documents; Fond 128--the international
department; Fond 19--the Sovnarkom and the Council of Labor and Defense. At the
TsKhSD are: Fond 1--party congresses; Fond 2--plenums of the TsK; Fond 5--TsK
departments. Fondy which often contain thousands of dela (or cases) are subdivided
into opisi which represent either a particular period or a structural division within an
organ. Fond 17, opis 3 contains copies of the Politburo protocols. The scholar does not
need to know in advance the number of the fond and opis that he requires; the archivist
can familiarize the researcher with an annotated list of the holdings. (This list is also
called opis.)

The TsKhSD accepts visitors only three times a week (Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday);
the RTsKhIDNI is open five days a week, Monday through Friday; the TsGA RF is
accessible six days a week, and is closed on Sunday. The hours of the reading rooms vary: Some open at 10 a.m. while others do not open until 1 p.m. Once a month, usually during the last week of the month, the reading rooms are closed for maintenance and sanitation purposes. During the month of August the RTsKhIDNI and the TsKhSD are closed because the staff members usually take their vacations then.

Documents are issued to researchers no earlier than two or three days and sometimes up to five days after the initial request. To gain entrance to the TsKhSD, one must obtain a special pass, because that archive is located in the building of the presidential administration. Copies are prepared by the archive staff; this can take as long as a month and is expensive. Rush orders (two weeks) incur an additional charge. This schedule, which results in part from the fiscal shortfalls the archives are confronting, poses some substantial limitations. Visiting scholars are best served when they choose a pre-1952 topic and when they plan to spend at least one month in Moscow.

Notes:

1 See the last section of this article for a note on the organizational structure of the archival holdings.

2 Subsequently KPSS.

Correction:

This is to correct errors that appeared in "Russia's Archives: Opportunities & Restrictions" in the most recent issue of Perspective, Vol. VIII No 3 (January-February 1998), page 5.

First, the podlinnye/genuine Politburo documents at the RTsKhIDNI are in fond 17 opis 163 not fond 163 as reported. Second, the GARF is not open on Saturdays. None of the archives are open on weekends.
The Hoover Archive at Stanford University, the Widener Library at Harvard University as well as some other American institutions have microfilmed copies of many of the opisi from the RTsKhIDNI. The book "Otkrytyi archiv," which gives extensive listings of published archival materials, is another resource that allows scholars to determine the availability of materials before going to Moscow.

We welcome responses from our readers and would like to encourage those of you who have worked in the Russian archives to send us any comments or suggestions that might be of interest to others who are contemplating this work.

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