

# History That Lives Again— Archives in the U.S.S.R.

By G. BELOV\*

*Main Archive Board  
U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers*

**T**HE first collection of public records was established in Russia exactly 250 years ago. In the U.S.S.R. there are 9 Central State Archives, as well as 300 collections in the Union and Autonomous Republics, the territories, regions, and districts. They constitute a unique chronicle, in the form of legal deeds and papers, of the life of the Soviet people.

The earliest Russian public records are found in the Central State Archive of Old Deeds. Preserved there are rare documents like the Order of Veliki (Great) Novgorod to envoys to the Prince of Tver and the wills and testaments of Ivan Kalita ("the first Russian collector"), Dmitri Donskoi, the Moscow Grand Prince Ivan III, and his grandson Tsar Ivan IV, known as "The Terrible." Also housed there are the most important collections of the legal enactments of the ancient Russian state: the *Russkaya Pravda* or "Book of Russian Laws," the collected legal statutes of various periods known as the *Sudebniki*, and Tsar Alexei Mikhailovitch's original "Councillor Code" or *Sobornoye Ulozheniye* (1649). The original of Stepan Razin's famous *Prelestnaya Gramota*, written down in the hand of a folk scholar, is still in an excellent state of preservation. Another valued possession of this Archive is the personal archive of Tsar Peter the Great.

Prerevolutionary records of later date (the documents of the Tsarist Government, ministries, stock companies, banks, etc.) are housed in the Central State Historical Archive of the U.S.S.R. in Leningrad, while the material on the history of the Russian Army, and on its strategy and wars, is collected at the Leningrad Central State Military and Historic Archive and the Central State Archive of the Navy.

Then there is the Central State Archive of the October Revolution, without whose rich collection it would be quite impossible to reconstruct the history of the revolutionary movement, the victorious march of the Great October Revolution, and the multiform

\* The author is Chief of the Main Archive Board of the U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers.

activity of the first workers' and peasants' Government in the world. This collection of several million records was established at the suggestion of V. I. Lenin and with his direct participation.

Other important collections include the Central U.S.S.R. State Archive of Literature and Art and the State Archive of Film and Photo Documents. At the former, one can make the acquaintance of original manuscripts by Zhukovsky, Lermontov, Gogol, Chernyshevsky; of musical scores and manuscripts of Glinka and Chaikovsky; of sketches and drawings by Repin and Vasnetsov; and of autographs of Henri Barbusse, Victor Hugo, Romain Rolland, and many other authors, poets, composers, and artists. At the latter, one can see the first Russian photographs, shots from the earliest films, documentaries of socialist construction and the Great Patriotic War, and the matrixes of phonograph records as well as modern recordings done on magnetic tape.

The historical records stored in the State Archives are being studied, then worked on scientifically; and they are being used. Soviet archivists are making a valuable contribution to other branches of science and culture as well. They are promoting the idea of peaceful foreign policy and are taking a direct part in communist upbuilding. The ancient records, of which archivists are the custodians, have proved very useful in planning industrial construction, for instance.

Soviet archivists were also able to put more than 40,000 records of forgotten mineral deposits at the disposal of the scientific and economic organizations concerned. They brought to light considerable information on the hydrology and hydrometry of the rivers on which new hydroelectric stations now stand. The good use to which that information was put in the planning and construction of the big power stations that have been constructed in recent years has saved the state huge sums of money. Old records were put to work in the restoration of the towns, factories, ports, bridges, and cultural monuments that had been destroyed by the Nazis during the Great Patriotic War.

Every year archivists supply answers to about three million questions from the public. Artists, authors, and scholars who are writing books and compiling school aids often turn to the Archives for help. As many as 30,000 researchers come to the State Archives yearly, and more than two million records are taken down from the shelves at their request.

No little part of the endeavors of Soviet archivists goes into the arrangement of exhibitions, for both domestic and foreign

showings. Such exhibitions were successfully displayed in Paris and Vienna at the time of N. S. Khrushchev's state visits to France and Austria in 1960. The exhibitions drew much attention on the part of wide sections of the general public and the scientific world.

Soviet archivists keep in touch with their colleagues in forty-odd countries. The Main Archive Board of the U.S.S.R. is affiliated with the International Council on Archives and participates in the Round Table archivists' conferences.

Foreign scholars arrive in the U.S.S.R. every year to work on the records collected in the Archives or to acquaint themselves with Soviet experience in the organization of such collections. There have been visiting scholars from the socialist countries, as well as France, Britain, the United States, Italy, Japan, Sweden, and other countries.

British historians are frequent guests. Historians K. Hollingsworth and A. Gottlieb have studied the records on the life and activities of the Decembrist N. I. Turgenev and on Russian relations with the Balkan states and the Near East between 1900 and 1917. A. Popman has examined the records of the work of the distinguished Russian poet Alexander Blok at the U.S.S.R. Central State Archive of Literature and Art.

Quite recently Soviet scholars presented the Public Record Office with various papers relating to the Kings of England of the latter half of the sixteenth and early half of the seventeenth centuries. They include the King's edicts concerning trade and royal instructions to British envoys. Literature on the organizational aspects of archive work has also been forwarded to Britain.

Many American scholars have had recourse to the Soviet Archives. Historians W. Edgerton and W. Podd have been delving into the material on the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov. Conversely, during his tour of the Soviet Union, the American publisher A. I. Yarmolinsky presented Soviet archivists with original autographs of Sergei Yessenin.

Other such documents have been received from abroad. Poland and Rumania have given back to the Soviet Union many records of interest to it that were housed in their archives. Czechoslovakia has presented the U.S.S.R. with documents from the manuscript department of the former Russian Foreign Historical Archive in Prague and with records carried out of the Ukraine by the Fascists during World War II. The Bulgarian Academy of Sciences has turned over to the U.S.S.R. Academy the collection of M. I. Dragomanov, which contains valuable documents by I. S. Turgenev,

A. I. Hertzen, and Vera Zasulich. From Yugoslavia have come microfilms of documentary material bearing on relations between the two countries.

From the United States to the Central State Archive of Literature and Art have come microphoto copies of quite a few literary manuscripts, one of the most interesting of which is a passage of the rough copy of the beginning of chapter two, part two, of Dostoyevsky's *Notes From a Dead House*.

Soviet archivists have in turn sent microfilms and facsimiles of various documents to their colleagues abroad. Soviet archivists saved millions of unique documents during the Great Patriotic War both in the U.S.S.R. and in eastern and central Europe. Later much of that material was returned by the Governments of many countries abroad.

***“ . . . only with the lapse of years . . . ”***

One of the limitations of any organization is its inability to see the importance of its own work at any one moment, or to see that work in perspective. As a consequence, it often happens that no adequate record is preserved of what prove in retrospect to have been epoch-making events, and the historically minded person is in despair at the paucity of material which so obviously should have been saved. It is indeed difficult to estimate the significance of a piece of work upon which either an individual or a group of individuals is immediately engaged, and it is only with the lapse of years that a chain of events can with logic and accuracy be traced to the source from which action in the first instance emerged.

For these reasons very few organizations have the forethought to plan their records or their output of publications in any orderly sequence, in accordance with a carefully devised system out of which a complete story may be made. Still less can be foreseen the persistent pleadings of libraries or of collectors for the wherewithal to complete their files. And least of all do organizations have in mind the historical significance of their own archives, and the use that may in the future be made of them.

—MARION TALBOT and LOIS KIMBALL MATHEWS ROSENBERRY, *The History of the American Association of University Women, 1881-1931*, p. 310 (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1931). Quoted by permission of the Houghton Mifflin Co. and the American Association of University Women.