

International Scene

MARJORIE BARRITT AND NANCY BARTLETT, editors

Glasnost' in Archives? Commentary by Soviet Historians and Archivists

Editor's note: The following commentaries by Soviet historians and archivists are in response to Patricia Kennedy Grimsted's "*Glasnost*' in Archives? Recent Developments on the Soviet Archival Scene," *American Archivist* 52 (Spring 1989): 214-36. They were written in the spring and summer of 1989 and updated through January 1990.

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Sarra Vladimirovna Zhitomirskaja received her graduate degree in 1945. She worked for thirty-four years (the last twenty-four years as department head) in the Manuscripts Department of the Lenin Library, Moscow. She has written on Russian history and literature of the nineteenth century and on problems in the archival service of the USSR. Her dismissal from the Lenin Library in 1978 is mentioned in the Grimsted article (see page 229, Spring 1989). Zhitomirskaja is now retired and continues her research and public activities.

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Nikolai Nikolaevich Bolkhovitinov

Translated by Vladimir Kajlik

PATRICIA KENNEDY GRIMSTED'S PAPER deserves the highest praise. Based on her vast personal experience, Dr. Grimsted offers a very thorough and professional review of the current state of Soviet archives and on the recent debates in the Soviet press.

In connection with her paper I would like to express two additional observations. To begin with, I would like to point out that in spite of the pointed debate in the Soviet press, there have been no substantial changes in the work of Soviet archives. This applies to Glavarkhiv as well as to the leading archives where the most important and also the most inaccessible documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID SSSR), the Ministry of Defense (MO SSSR), the Secret Police (KGB), and the Communist Party archives are stored. On 6 January 1989, *Izvestiia* printed an article with the sensational heading, "MID opens its archives." Nevertheless, even from the content of the article, it is obvious that MID, in fact, will neither open its archives, nor is it planning to do so in the foreseeable future. To date 400,000 file units remain classified, with the only exception the documents of Marshal Tukhachevskii from 1937. As a result, in most cases the recent historical "disclosures" made in the Soviet press are based upon various disparately collected circumstantial facts, and not on primary source material stored in governmental archives.

My second comment concerns the catastrophic decline of the professional level of archivists, and particularly, managers of archival services in the Soviet Union. There was a time when there were outstanding historians such as Sergei Fedorovich Platonov, Iurii Vladimirovich Got'e, and many others heading up autonomous archives and libraries. In 1929-30 a large group of the most qualified specialists, headed by the

academician S. F. Patonov, were removed from their positions and subsequently persecuted. Since then, the management of archival repositories has fallen into the hands of persons far removed from the fields of history and archives. Certainly, this process has developed unevenly. Even in the 1950s and up to the 1970s, there have been very competent scholars (specifically, V. M. Khvostov, and S. L. Tikhvinskii) as heads of the archival administration of the Historico-Diplomatic Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But the general tendency to lowering the professional level was reflected even in those archives recently. In the 1980s, several diplomats with no archival experience assumed the leadership of the Archives of Foreign Affairs of Russia (AVPR), the pre-revolutionary foreign ministry archives, while many highly qualified archivists retired, so that now in this old and tradition-rich archives, there remains essentially no real specialist in the field. Even worse is the situation in most archival institutions under Glavarkhiv, where it is already very difficult to find people who are sufficiently trained in one or more foreign languages.

Before the October Revolution, only a few people worked in the MID archives, yet the preparation of reference materials and indices was extensive and systematic. The handwritten inventories of documents from the first half of the nineteenth century such as the *Dictionnaire*, or *Archive portative*, are very useful even today. At the present time, however, only watered-down lists of individual fonds are produced, which are useless for researchers; new reference materials such as finding aids, catalogues, and indices are not compiled at all. Meanwhile, the number of employees in the Historico-Diplomatic Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has grown, not in dozens but in hundreds of persons, so that one would like to hope that they will finally begin to pay attention to scientific

information and to the preparation of detailed reference tools and finding aids.

Finally, I have noticed that Grimsted correctly used the question mark in the title of her article, "*Glasnost* in Archives?". In an earlier version presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies conference, 19 November 1988, the printed program did not include

the question mark in the title of Grimsted's paper. To remove the question mark from the title in the program is not a difficult task, yet it is much more difficult to remove it from real life. One may still question whether there is *glasnost* in the Soviet archives, and so far there is no indication that *glasnost* will triumph in the end.¹

Boris Semenovitch Ilizarov

Translated by Amy Nelson

I HAD THE PLEASURE of meeting Patricia Kennedy Grimsted relatively recently, although I have been familiar with her work on Soviet archives for a long time. Because I understand the kinds of difficulties she has had to overcome in describing Soviet archives to American readers, I want to give her credit for an enormous amount of diligence and scholarly conscientiousness. And now, having familiarized myself with her new article on the problems of *glasnost* in Soviet archives, I note with some surprise that it seems that Dr. Grimsted has not overlooked a single relevant publication on this issue which is of such interest to the Soviet public. As a Soviet archivist, I find nothing to object to or correct in those parts of her article describing the procedure of access to documents for foreigners, and the general state of reference aids in Soviet archives. There is no need to argue with my colleague here.

Events in our country are unfolding so quickly these days, however, that not only foreign observers but even Soviet citizens cannot always follow them and, most importantly, anticipate their consequences. Moreover, it is clear to me that a foreigner may be completely unaware of the sources of the strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet archival system, which are rooted in

the depths of history and current politics. I believe that this statement is true of the archival system of any country, even including the United States.

In their seventy-year history, Soviet archives have known periods of advance and decline. They have to their credit a number of instructive accomplishments as well as failures. It is impossible to deal with all of these in a short article. Therefore I will touch only on two or three problems, which, figuratively speaking, "are shouted about from the rooftops." But from my point of view, without a fairly quick resolution of these issues, the long-standing, urgent problem of major reform of the archival system in the USSR, and even the further democratization of Soviet society as a whole, are impossible.

In spite of the fact that we have a centralized state system of archives in which archives and archival documents are inventoried and registered, no one in the Soviet Union knows for certain how many archives of various sorts the country has and

¹Editor's note: Since this commentary was written in November 1988 as an oral response at the AAASS conference in Hawaii, there have been many positive developments on the Soviet archival scene. Dr. Grimsted presented a comprehensive report on these developments at the IV World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies in Harrogate, England (23 July 1990), for which the author also served as commentator.

how many documents they contain. The information provided by Dr. Grimsted is based on published data (3,273 archives and 340 million storage units). This data tells us little because it pertains only to the so-called "state archives," i.e., specialized institutions within the national archival administration. In addition to these archives, there exists a vast network of Communist Party and Communist Youth League (Comsomol) archives, as well as an incalculably huge number (no less than two million) of agency archives—archives of state institutions that exist either independently or as a storage facility for a department's current records. Furthermore, the so-called "independent agency (*vedomstvennye*) archival systems" are becoming larger with each new decade.

I feel I must comment especially on the latter. The existence of independent agency archival systems is one of the main reasons that Soviet archives are closed, not only to foreigners, but also to Soviet researchers. Such systems currently number more than fifteen. They are formed by the most powerful state agencies, on whose activities the stability and well-being of the entire state-party apparatus depends. First and foremost are the military agencies, including the Ministry of Defense, organs of internal affairs, the KGB, courts and the procurator's office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and others. They not only restrict access to recent documents almost completely but also create their own historical archives, in which documents are stored for 70, 100, or 200 years, depending on the kind of activity to which they relate. Access to these documents is extremely limited for everyone, with the exception of a few highly trusted individuals. Thus, the idea of abolishing agency proprietorship of historical documents and archives, which was formulated by the Lenin archival decree of 1918, presently has been all but discarded. As is true of the Party archives, independent agency archival systems man-

age the fate of records with almost no outside control. Documents long ago designated as the property of the state have in fact become agency property. Incidentally, workers in independent agency archives are paid one-and-a-half to two times more than workers in state archives. This provides an additional stimulus to the struggle for survival, and, more importantly, the sense of elitism and special trust from the party-state apparatus, which has a colossal significance in our country.

But the paradox of our archival system's development lies in the fact that, concurrent with the process of departmental decentralization, a completely opposite trend—unjustified, and carried to the absurd—developed in the centralized administration of the state archives of the Union and autonomous republics. Before the 1930s, when the Union republics had some independence in organizing their archives, their highest administrative organs were subordinate, not to the government of the Soviet Union but to the country's supreme legislative body, the All-Union Central Executive Committee (VTsIK). Under Stalin, the Union and autonomous republics were increasingly deprived of independence, even in the area of archival affairs. All of the country's state archives were subordinated to the Commissariat of Internal Affairs in 1939, and under Khrushchev were set off in a special administrative body under the Council of Ministers. But right up to the present day, Union republic archives and archival organs are subordinate to the decisions of the Main Archival Administration (Glavarkhiv) in Moscow in all matters—from decisions about which records to collect and how, which categories of documents to destroy and which to keep, to decisions on the use of documents. Such strict centralization quite often leads to arbitrariness from Glavarkhiv, and to the constant loss of materials of a specific regional character from republic-level archives. It is the minor national groups in

our country, especially those who don't have their own state within the Soviet Union (according to some researchers there are now about four hundred such groups) who are deprived of the opportunity to form their own national archival fond, reflecting their history and unique culture.

The most complicated problem is that of access to archival documents. Dr. Grimsted correctly points out that the leadership of the Soviet Union's archival administration, in all of its public statements, maintains that Soviet archives are among the most open in the world, and at the same time announces that they have begun wide-scale work on removing restrictions from archival documents classified under "restricted access." This classification of documents (not to be confused with the classification of "secret" documents) first appeared in the mid-sixties after the Khrushchev "thaw," and was one of the first stages in the struggle against "dissidents." Access to twenty million items was restricted for twenty years. This affected 10 percent of all documents stored only in state archives. Here the "special storage units" (*spetskhrony*), which exist in almost all major state and department archives, should also be mentioned. They were organized in the early 1930s for storing secret documents. In practice, all party archives are closed, even to party members, and the agency archival systems mentioned above are almost as inaccessible as they were before the beginning of *perestroika*. This all means that even now, in various types of archives, up to 50 percent of archival documents are unavailable. In actual numbers, this involves several hundred million items. I have already written about all of this in the Soviet popular press. Several well-informed people concur with my findings.

As reported in the newspaper *Izvestiia* on 29 April 1989, the mechanism of making documents secret has been working spontaneously in this country for a long time.

In the long years of Stalin's repressions, the idea of an internal enemy, acting in the interests of an external foe, the "enemy of the people," caused archival documents to be made secret on an unprecedented scale. This situation was used craftily by the most varied departments: from those who were supposed to adhere to the regime of secrecy and therefore increased their staffs or used archival documents to falsify legal matters, to those whose information was kept from scholars and society as a whole in the hopes of hiding their failures and crimes.

Not long ago I learned from material in the Soviet press that in the United States there is a special body called the Information Security Oversight Office, which sees to it that state secrets are not made public, but also keeps agencies from needlessly making documents secret. It has the right to report directly to the president of the United States. From these same materials I found that the basic mass of secret documents in the U.S. comes from the military, the State Department, and the CIA. This is, of course, a well-known combination. But in our country there is not, and never was, a similar body, and the number of secret documents here, if one believes the available information, is incomparably greater than in the U.S. However, in this area as well there are now positive, if slow, processes under way. The Soviet government is working on a complex program of regulating the procedures for making documents accessible or secret. The stamp "restricted access" has been removed from several million items. The press has begun to print extremely interesting, previously completely unknown documents from party and state archives.

But again there is a paradox—a portion of the documents pulled out of "restricted access" are immediately transferred to the "secret" category, and there is no mechanism of control over this process. Recently, a decision was passed on the full

rehabilitation of victims of Stalin's terror, but the fate of millions of judicial records, on the basis of which people were repressed, has not been decided yet. They are all still tightly locked away in the "*spetskhrany*." As a rule, documents published in the popular press are not referenced with archival citations or even the name of the archives, so that it is difficult to determine how these documents were obtained. And that, as archivists well know, puts their authenticity in question, and does not allow other researchers to turn to the same archives. Even if all of the archives in the Soviet Union were to throw their doors wide open, Soviet as well as foreign researchers would be cruelly disappointed, for the majority of these records do not have adequate reference aids. Such records have not been properly processed for decades, and now decades are needed before it will be possible to use them.

As a Soviet archivist, I want to note with all sincerity that something of utmost importance still does not exist in our country—the legal machinery to regulate work in all of our country's archives. Dr. Grimsted already informed American readers that the archival administration, following our "traditions," decided in honor of the seventieth anniversary of the 1918 decree, "On the Reorganization and Centralization of Archival Affairs," to legalize the existing state of affairs. A projected law on archives was drafted and sent to the higher governmental authorities with a minimum of publicity. But the public and, especially, professors from the Moscow State Historico-Archival Institute (MGIAI) sharply criticized this draft law. I also took part in these criticisms. But very soon, understanding that it was practically impossible to change radically the position of the archival administration, and that, from its inception, the draft law was anti-democratic in spirit, I decided to organize a group to work out an alternative draft law. Professor

Iurii Afanas'ev, rector of MGIAI and Peoples' Deputy of the USSR, gave moral support to our group. The group included archivists as well as historians, jurists, and a philologist specializing in archival terminology. The draft is already prepared, and I hope it will soon be published for discussion.

Its basic ideas can be reduced to the following: the definition of general policies for the development of the country's archives (policies, not leadership) will be determined by a public-state body—a Main Archival Committee—which will be formed by and subordinate to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, i.e., the newly elected supreme legislative body. Central state archives of all-Union significance will be subordinate to the Archival Administration (Glavarkhiv) under the Council of Ministers of the USSR. In other words, the Main Archival Administration will only be in charge of state archives of all-Union significance, while the republics will create independent administrative bodies, and correspondingly, their own state archival fonds. All national minorities will receive the right to create their own national archival fonds and national archives. The legal right to independent existence will extend not only to party archives, but also to archives of churches, social organizations, co-operatives, and individuals. All agency archival systems will be abolished, and new central state archives will be formed from their historical material. The formation of any secret archives is forbidden. A time limit will be established, after which a large part of secret documents will be made available, etc.

In my work as the head of this group, I was convinced over and over again of the importance of the work of the historian-archivist in a genuinely democratic society. On this moderately optimistic note, allow me to conclude my short response to the work of my American colleague.

Sarra Vladimirovna Zhitomirskaja

Translated by Vladimir Kajlik and Amy Nelson

PATRICIA KENNEDY GRIMSTED'S ARTICLE, "Glasnost' in the Archives?" is of extraordinary interest to the Soviet scholarly and archival community. Although she appears to confine herself only to the task of reviewing the heated debate that occurred in our [Soviet] press in the years of *perestroika*, Grimsted, who devoted many years of her study to Soviet archives, goes far beyond the limits of her task by offering us her own views on this most complicated and painful problem.

As an authoritative scholar, Dr. Grimsted has personally experienced the hard results of the deformed development of Soviet archives. Her views appear to me particularly important and justified whenever we talk about the principles and practices of collecting documentary materials, and of the state of information about these materials. I would like to focus on these two issues.

There is no doubt that a major task facing historians today, and not only Soviet historians, is to research the history of our tragic century, of which the history of the seventy years of Soviet power is of the utmost importance. In spite of extensive literature devoted to the subject, originating both in the Soviet Union and abroad, genuine research on this phenomenon is only in its beginning. In the past the hindrance to such research here in the Soviet Union was the impossibility of publishing anything that would contradict the official conception of Soviet (and even prerevolutionary) society. Abroad, it was the lack of access to Soviet primary sources. Today, when access to the archives is somewhat eased and historians and society feel the burning need for the creation of a genuinely scholarly history of the USSR, there is yet another obstacle—a deliberate incompleteness

in the archival materials being collected and those already collected.

This incompleteness cannot be explained by Stalinist years only, when the archival materials suffered a considerable destruction, as Grimsted describes in her article. From my own experience, I may say that in the Manuscript Division of the Lenin Library where I worked, not one single document was destroyed from the archives of individuals who were repressed in the late 1930s. The archives were simply inaccessible to researchers and information about them vanished for long years. Now somewhat more accessible in recent years, documentation regarding the Stalinist repressions shows, to the contrary, how the authorities attempted not so much the destruction of documents, but the creation of documents that would give future historians a false impression about events, by giving the appearance of legality where there had been massive neglect of the law.

Yet another basic problem is that of the principles of selecting records for permanent archival custody that have governed Soviet archival affairs for more than half a century and that continue to this day. The selection of records to document operations of state has been extremely narrow. As a rule, preference is given to summary-type documents that are often a quite inadequate representation of the mass of documents on which they have been created. The problem of representativeness in selection of documents continues to be ignored by Glavarkhiv. This is the first barrier preventing the totality of the documents generated by society from serving the study of history in their entirety. As far as the past is concerned, it is irreversible. But we would like to hope that we will be able to overcome this barrier in the future, provided that the new thinking will ultimately penetrate into archival work.

The second barrier is the information barrier between archives and science. This

is today the major obstacle for reaching the new frontiers of historical science. Grimsted's article presents a horribly accurate analysis of the state of archival description and information in our country. For many decades our whole archival system was oriented toward the utmost restriction of information. Occasional breaks in this area, such as the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, were followed by new and prolonged periods of restrictions.

The main duty of the archivist—to lead a researcher directly to the maximum amount of primary sources—was neglected for a long time. The system of “scientific-reference apparatus,” considered satisfactory for the needs of historical theory and practice, results in the waste of scholars' time and inadequate scholarship. This is because the general reference directories about existing archival repositories are incomplete, offering no idea about the existing fonds. The guides to individual archives are also incomplete and obsolete after the year of their publication, since they provide no information about subsequent accessions. This makes it very difficult for the scholar looking for unknown sources. He finds before him such a mass of documents that he cannot familiarize himself with it without a unified, clear-cut, accurate, and coordi-

nated system of information. Without such a system, the effort of the researcher cannot be directed toward creative selection of the documents relevant to his problem. This responsibility for selection cannot be transferred to the archivist. Because for us such a system remains all but a dream, the enormous mass of archival materials is not used in scholarship. Researchers continue to work with the same range of already-known sources, limiting themselves to new interpretations.

What we need, of course, is a much bigger effort to work out a substantially different system of archival information for the intensive description of documents suited to the conditions of the computer revolution. We need new professionals, well-prepared and scientifically-minded, not formed by the ideological dogmas of archivists. But all this will take much time and much effort. Such a bastion of conservatism as the Soviet archival service strives to preserve its policy and situation, and accordingly proposes a new law on archives which in effect would legalize the status quo. At the same time, the majority of archivists enter on a new path under the pressure of the revolutionary changes taking place in Soviet society. Grimsted's article undoubtedly helps in this process.