

International Scene

MARJORIE BARRITT AND NANCY BARTLETT, editors

Reforms in Estonian Archives

PEEP PILLAK

Abstract: The archival communities of the Baltic republics are engaged in political activities to reestablish independence in archival affairs. The Estonian archival community is fighting what it considers to be a Soviet campaign to control Estonian archives by subordinating the state archives under the Ministry of Justice. Estonian archivists are addressing the problems of excessive access restrictions and the lack of adequate material and technical facilities. Perhaps most importantly, work began in 1989 on the drafting of an Estonian archives law to regulate the reorganization of archives in independent Estonia.

About the author: Peep Pillak has worked in the Estonian Archives Department since 1983 as an inspector and an archeographer. He teaches archives in the Estonian Humanitarian Institute in Tallinn. He is past president of the Estonian Council of Young Archivists and currently chair of the Estonian Society of Archivists. He is a 1982 graduate of the faculty of history of Tartu University.

This article is submitted as an elaboration on Patricia Kennedy Grimsted's "Glasnost' in the Archives? Recent Developments on the Soviet Archival Scene," which appeared in the *American Archivist* 52 (Spring 1989): 214-36. The author recognizes that Grimsted intentionally left out questions on archival activity in the separate union republics of the USSR because those circumstances are extremely different.

IN THE BALTIC REPUBLICS of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania the present aim of social and political activity is to reestablish independence, including independence in archival affairs. After World War I, with newly achieved national independence these three countries formed the basis for progress in archival developments. Unfortunately, their natural development was interrupted by Soviet occupation in the summer of 1940.¹ The archives of the Baltic states were forced into a Soviet framework with Stalinistic methods and communist ideology. Henceforth all decisions for important Baltic archives were made in Moscow; less important problems had to be coordinated with Moscow. Direct relations with foreign countries were monopolized by Moscow as well. The policy of the Soviet occupation authorities has badly damaged Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian archives. A survey follows of changes in Estonian archives connected with the so-called liberalization process involving the *glasnost* and *perestroika* of the 1980s.

At the initiative of graduate specialists employed by Estonian archives in the 1980s, a Council of Young Archivists was formed on 29 May 1986.² The establishment of the council allowed organized and progressive activities in the archives to develop under the law. The council organized autumn seminars at which archivists from throughout Estonia gathered to discuss problems connected with their work. At the public spring seminars, papers were presented on archival topics previously avoided in the

Soviet-style official history or treated only from the viewpoint of communist ideology. Participants discussed acute problems of archival arrangement. Some Estonian archival officials reacted negatively to a number of papers and there were even attempts to hinder discussions. However, due to public interest, the papers were soon prepared for publication and the seminars were reviewed positively in the press.³

Efforts at reform persisted and included archives in a larger arena of issues. In April 1987 the Council of Young Archivists called a political meeting to discuss the rapacious mining of phosphorite conducted in Estonia by Soviet occupation authorities. Although archival leaders chose not to sign the protest addressed to the government of the Estonian SSR, eighty-eight other archivists did. A year later a more radical letter was directed to the government of the Estonian SSR, supporting decisions adopted by the plenary session of the leaders of the Estonian creative unions which pressed for changes in society.⁴ The ninety-nine people who signed included some of the archival leaders. Thus, we may conclude that innovations in the archives have been closely related to the general Estonian political processes, and reflect the departure from the hitherto official treatment of history.

The Soviet campaign to subordinate state archives under the Ministry of Justice is a good example of Soviet intentions to control under the guise of *perestroika*.⁵ Estonian archivists discovered the plan quite

¹See the historical survey by Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, *Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the USSR: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Belorussia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

²Information about this council appeared in *Noorte Hää* on 11 June 1986. *Noorte Hää*, now *Päevaleht*, is one of the biggest newspapers in Estonia. The activities of the Council of Young Archivists were reflected in the article by P. Pillak, "Sovet molodyh arhivistov Estonii," *Sovetskie Arhivy* 1 (1989): 103-09.

³See I. Jürjo, "Noorte Arhivistide Nõukogu Seminar" [Seminar of the Council of Young Archivists], *Looming* 10 (1987): 1425-1426; I. Jürjo, "Noorte Arhivistide Nõukogu tegevusest 1988. a." [About the Activities of the Council of Young Archivists in 1988], *Kleio* 2 (1989): 109-11.

⁴Plenary session of the leaders of the Estonian Creative Unions, 1-2 April 1988.

⁵Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, "Glasnost in Archives? Recent Developments on the Soviet Archival Scene," *American Archivist* 52 (Spring 1989): 218-21.

unexpectedly on 10 April 1988.⁶ The subordination of archives under a single ministry would no doubt have had a most detrimental affect. Archivists, historians, and the Ministry of Justice of the Estonian SSR all opposed the idea. The protest was directed at the government of the Estonian SSR. As a result of this active protest, which was fortified by articles in the press and experiences gained from the earlier actions, the archives in Estonia were not subordinated to the Ministry of Justice.⁷ Several other union republics were not as fortunate.

By the mid 1980s, discussion about the Estonian archives reached beyond the ceremonial aspects such as what an invaluable cultural heritage the archives were to discussion of problems that had previously been silenced. First, the problem of so-called "special fonds" was tackled. There was open recognition that the archives had suffered from pointless and excessive restrictions that obstructed the development of historical studies and hindered the arrangement of archives. There was also an open appreciation for the need for objective and well-founded studies of secret documents which would shed light on the past. In 1987, committees were assembled to examine and declassify secret documents in order to open them to the public. At first the process moved slowly, since the committees doubted that there would be support "from above" for an objective presentation of history. The

press followed this development of *glasnost* in the archives.⁸

Out of the 5.9 million file units stored in the Estonian state archives 360,000 had limited access. Seventy-eight thousand items were examined in 1987 and access restrictions for 67,000 of them were removed. By July 1988, about 144,000 items had been examined and 134,000 of them opened to the public.⁹ By August 1988, archivists had opened 125,713 of the remaining 170,000 file units pertaining to the "special fonds" of the Central State Archives of the October Revolution and Socialist Construction of the Estonian SSR, which was the major Soviet-style repository for the post-1940 records in Estonia.¹⁰ At the end of 1988 archivists mounted an exhibition of newly accessible personal documents of public figures of the Estonian Republic.¹¹ The first of its kind, this exhibition was a tremendous success.¹²

At first the declassification committee examined documents rather thoroughly. The pace, if continued, would have caused the

⁶In his paper presented at the session of the Supreme Soviet, Bruno Saul, head of the Council of Ministers of the Estonian SSR, said that "the Ministry of Justice of the Estonian SSR will take over the functions of the Head Office of the Archives of the Estonian SSR." His speech appeared in *Rahva Hää* on 10 April 1988.

⁷L. Laks, "Arhiivid pakuvad oma teed" [Archives Propose Their Own Way], *Sirp ja Vasar*, 20 May 1988: 13. See also J. Tust, "Mis saab Eesti arhiividest?" [What Will Be the Future for Estonian Archives], *Edasi*, 3 July 1988: 5; and R. Helme, "Arhiivide kasutamine vabamaks!" [Quit the Restriction on the Archives!], *Õhtuleht*, 6 July 1988: 2.

⁸E. Allkivi, interview by P. Pukk. This interview appeared as an article entitled "Laupäevaõhtune kohtumine" in *Noorte Hää*, 3 October 1987: 1. See also R. Helme, "Arhiivide vabanemisest" [About the Liberation of the Archives], *Sirp ja Vasar*, 26 August 1988: 4; L. Laks, interview by P. Raidla, in the article "Arhiivid avanevad" [Archives Are Opening], in *Noorte Hää*, 22 September 1988: 1, 3; and L. Laks, "Tallinna arhiiv—kas tasub vaeva näha?" [The Tallinn Archives—Is It Worth the Trouble?], *Rahva Hää*, 4 May 1989: 4.

⁹L. Laks, interview by R. Amos. This interview appeared as an article entitled "Tunda minevikku tulevikku nimel" [To Know the Past for the Sake of the Future; an Interview], in *Noorte Hää*, 10 June 1988: 1.

¹⁰R. Helme, "Arhiivide vabanemisest" [About the Liberation of the Archives], *Sirp ja Vasar*, 26 August 1988.

¹¹See P. Pillak, "Erifondist näitusele" [From the Special Fond to the Exhibition], *Õhtuleht*, 3 December 1988: 2.

¹²During one month there were more than 5,000 visitors. Information about the exhibition appeared in the Estonian exile newspaper in Sweden, the *Eesti Päevaleht*, on 30 November 1988.

examination to take years to complete. The rapid process of *glasnost*, however, demanded an accelerated tempo. Archivists responded by declassifying entire fonds at once. By now there is full access to records concerning the Estonian Republic and the 1941-44 German occupation, which had previously belonged to the category of special closed fonds.¹³

Restrictions still exist. Those in the Estonian state archives now pertain mostly to files of earlier decades. Their creating agencies still retain the authority to deny or grant access. In addition, the archives reflecting the activities of the Soviet occupation authorities remain secret. These archives do not belong to the state archives system but are instead subordinated directly to their corresponding Moscow institutions. There is therefore no access to the archives of the KGB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Defense, and other archives of USSR-wide institutions. Furthermore, most historians do not have access to documents of the Communist Party of the Estonian SSR, which played such a decisive role in recent decades.

As soon as access to the archives was possible, the catastrophic situation created by the extreme material and technical poverty became apparent. Several archives, especially the Historical Archives of Estonia and the Film Archives of Estonia as well as a number of city and regional archives, suffer from lack of space and poor environmental conditions for storing historical sources.¹⁴ During the Soviet regime only

one special repository for archives was built. The single restoration was of the building housing the Tallinn Central Archive. This building is among the few of the twenty-one state archives where preservation conditions are satisfactory. The first photocopy machine was obtained by the State Archives of Estonia as recently as the end of 1989. It is still the only photocopy machine available in the entire state archival system. Not one of the archives possesses a computer. Restoration materials and laboratory equipment are in short supply. Documents continue to suffer damage by insects and mold.

These and other major archival problems were summarized by ten archivists and historians in a public memorandum which was presented to the government. The memorandum demands the following steps: the establishment of the Estonian State Archive Fond to embrace all documents in Estonian archives; the development of an archival law which would serve as a basis for archival management in an independent Estonia; the recognition of the principle of the general public character of archives; and the return of archival fonds deported from Estonia; the reorganization and decentralization of the Estonian archival system; the improvement in the physical conditions and technical equipment of archives; the recognition of special qualifications for archival directors; and the establishment of legal proceedings against individuals responsible for damage suffered by archives.¹⁵

Some of the issues cited in the memorandum have already been solved. The process of removing Moscow-given names for archives has started; the Society of Es-

¹³See L. Laks, interview by P. Raidla in the article entitled *Arhiivid avanevad* [Archives are Opening], in *Noorte Hää*, 22 September 1988; L. Laks, "IME-tabased arhiivid," *Noorte Hää*, 6 January 1989: 2-3.

¹⁴See the article "Uus arhiivihoonne siin ja praegu" [New Building for the Film Archive], *Theater, Muusika, Kino* 4, 1988: 49-51; M. Päril and A. Lõhmus, "Vaikimisest tegudeni" [From Silence to Action; about the Historical Archive], *Edasi*, 12 May 1988: 6.

¹⁵These were first published in abbreviated form in an article entitled "Ettepanekud arhiivinduse parandamiseks" [Proposal to Improve the Situation of Estonian Archives], *Sirp ja Vasar*, 10 February 1989: 13; a more complete version appeared in *Edasi*, 28 February 1989: 5.

tonian Archivists has been reestablished; the state bureaucracy has been reduced considerably; access restrictions for foreign researchers have been abolished; direct contact with foreign countries has been established; and salaries of archivists have been raised.¹⁶

At the beginning of 1989 work began on the drafting of an Estonian archives law to regulate the reorganization of archives in independent Estonia. In the Estonian Republic an archives law had been passed in 1935, but the Soviet Union still has no such law.¹⁷ The hollow and stagnant proposals of the Main Archival Administration of the USSR (Glavarchiv) were appraised and rejected as unacceptable and Moscow was informed accordingly.¹⁸ An alternative archives law proposed by the Moscow State Historico-Archival Institute is considerably

more democratic but still it envisages a centralized archival system for the USSR and thus is neither appropriate nor applicable in Estonia.¹⁹ Instead, Estonia is considering two different drafts of laws, just as Moscow is. One of the drafts in Estonia was compiled at the initiative of Leo Laks, the director of the Main Archival Administration of the Estonian SSR. A special committee was appointed to draft an alternative project at the all-Estonian meeting of archivists held in Tartu in March 1989. In addition to archivists, the committee also includes representatives of Tartu University and the Institute of History of the Estonian Academy of Sciences. The aim of both projects is to establish fundamental principles for archival management in independent Estonia. The draft compiled by the alternative committee turned out to be more radical. It envisages the liquidation of the bureaucratic Main Archival Administration. The final version is to be elaborated by the Archival Committee, headed by Professor Piirimäe and established by the government.²⁰

Due to the shift in the last five years towards a more positive attitude about Estonian emigration, several newspaper articles have appeared on the topic of Estonian archives in exile.²¹ There have been pro-

¹⁶By the resolution dated 22 November 1989 of the Main Archival Administration of the Estonian SSR a number of archives acquired new names. The changes are as follows: the State Central Archives of the October Revolution and Socialist Construction of the Estonian SSR became the State Archives of Estonia; the State Historical Central Archives of the Estonian SSR became the Historical Archives of Estonia; the State Central Film, Photograph, and Sound Recording Archives of the Estonian SSR became the Film Archives of Estonia; the State Central Archives of Scientific-Technical Documents of the Estonian SSR became the Technical Archives of Estonia; and the Tallinn State Central Archives of the Estonian SSR became the Tallinn City Archives. For the corresponding Russian names, see the article "Novye nazvaniia arkhivov," *Sovetskaia Estonia*, 23 November 1989.

The Society of Estonian Archivists, established in 1939, was liquidated by the Soviet occupation authorities. It resumed its activities again in 1989. See P. Pillak, "Eesti Arhiivaaride Ühing taasloomisel" [Reestablishing of the Society of Estonian Archivists], *Sirp ja Vasar*, 10 February 1989: 12.

For information on Estonian archival relations with neighboring Nordic countries, see P. Pillak, "Soome arhiivaarid Eestis" [Finnish Archivists in Estonia], *Noorte Hääli*, 26 September 1989: 1; P. Pillak, "Rootsi arhiivinoonik Eestis" [Swedish Archives Councillor in Estonia], *Noorte Hääli*, 17 October 1989: 1.

¹⁷President's decree, 12 June 1935; see *Riigi Teataja* 53, 13 June 1935.

¹⁸L. Laks, "Ühe seaduse sunniloost" [About the Birth of One Law], *Sirp ja Vasar*, 6 October 1989: 12.

¹⁹The author delivered a speech on this topic at the discussion of the alternative draft project held at the Moscow State Historico-Archival Institute on 21 November 1989.

²⁰Professor H. Piirimäe was a member of the committee set up by the archivists; he is also lecturer on archival arrangement at Tartu University.

²¹The number of living emigrants (who left Estonia mostly in 1944) is about 70,000. See B. Pilvre, "Eesti kirjandusuurimise elu ja olu" [About the Situation of Estonian Literary History], *Looming* 12 (1987): 1710-1712; K. Muru, E. Nirk, H. Peep, and A. Vinkel, "Eesti kirjandus paguluses" [Estonian Literature in Exile], *Looming* 1 (1988): 93-108; M. Jõgi, "Mõni sõna Eesti arhiividest Kanadas" [About the Estonian Archives in Canada], *Looming* 5 (1988): 710-12; J. Kahk, "Kultuurifondi ühest tegevussuunast" [About One Activity of the Cultural Fund], *Kodumaa*, 23 March 1989: 3; P. Pillak, "Eesti arhiiv Ühendri-

posals to bring back archival fonds to Estonia.²² The idea met with opposition by Estonian emigrants as well as by Estonians still living in their homeland.²³ This question will not be settled until Soviet occupation is over.

ikides" [Estonian Archives in the USA], *Looming* 6 (1989): 847-48.

²²See E. Nirk, "Eesti pagulaskirjandus kui kirjanduslooline probleemidekompleks" [The Complex Problem of Estonian Literary History], *Sirp ja Vasar*, 11 December 1987: 5; see also B. Pilvre, "Eesti kirjandusuurimise elu ja olu" [About the Situation of Estonian Literary History], in "Kultuurifondis" [In the Fond of Culture], *Sirp ja Vasar*, 1 January 1988: 9.

²³T. H. Ilves, "Pagulaste arhiive saab paigutada ainult Moskva vastavasse fondi" [Exile Archives Can be Stored Only in a Special Fond in Moscow], *Teataja* 4 and 5, 1988; S. Ruutsoo, "Kultuurifondis," *Sirp ja Vasar*, 23 September 1988: 4; P. Pillak, "Eesti arhiividest meil ja mujal" [About Estonian Archives in Homeland and Abroad], *Kleio* 2, 1989: 9-12; and "Pagulasarhiivide üleandmine okupeeritud Eestisse pole mõeldav" [It Is Impossible to Take Exiled Archives into Estonia], *Vaba Eesti Sõna*, 8 February 1990: 3.

In conclusion, the general liberalization of Estonian society in the second half of the 1980s has brought with it noticeable improvements in the state archival system. Changes in the state archival system have been initiated because of the needs of everyday life. These changes have been implemented quite smoothly. Although it is possible to distinguish between more conservative and more liberal trends in Estonia, the conflicts here are not as severe as similar trends in Moscow because Estonians are joined by their common desire for independence. The changes are only the first step towards the goal, and they are often not legalized. In contrast to the Estonian state archival system, the Estonian branches of the archives of the KGB, the Communist Party, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs have undergone no changes whatsoever. The final solution for the problems facing the Estonian archival system can only occur in an independent Estonia.