

RUSSIAN ARCHIVES AND ARCHIVISTS IN A TIME OF TROUBLES

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Text of Keynote Address given at a joint conference of the Archives Association of British Columbia and the Northwest Archivists at the RN Atkinson Museum and Archives in Penticton, B.C. in April, 1996.

In late October and early November of 1995, I participated in a 21-member delegation of archivists and Slavists visiting Russian and Polish archives. This delegation was led by former Archivist of the United States, Bob Warner. In the course of two and one half weeks the group visited a number of archival institutions in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Warsaw. My remarks this morning are based primarily upon my observations of various archival institutions, meetings with archival administrators, and conversation with host archivists during the course of the visit.

I have made the conscious decision to limit my remarks to Russian archives for several reasons: the majority of our time was spent in Russia, my time this morning is quite limited, and I neither read nor speak Polish and thus my ability to communicate with our Polish colleagues was quite limited.



Photograph of the Bronze Horseman equestrian statue looking over the Neva River in St. Petersburg, Russia.

In the background is the Senate and Holy Synod Building, home of the Russian State Historical Archives. Photo by Michael Holland, November 1995.

The archives of Russia and the archivists working in those repositories are in a state of intense uncertainty and instability. The archival documentation of one of the worlds most powerful and intriguing empires and our colleagues who work with these materials are in a desperate situation and there seems little hope for amelioration in the near future. The archival holdings of Russia are imperiled by a matrix of competing and interacting forces of both a socio-economic nature and a professional nature.

The most destructive of the forces are economically based and they are at work with a vengeance on archives, archivists and Russian society as a whole. These are enormously powerful forces which threaten archivists as individuals and the archival materials currently preserved in the federal archival system and in local and independent depositories.

Other destructive forces are specific to the Russian archival profession and derive from Russian archival practices which for generations developed in isolation from European and American practices. Controversy and contention have arisen when Western scholars' expectations for access to new and exciting materials have run into unfamiliar archival practices not standard in Western depositories. The uneasy relationship between Russian and Western scholars and archivists can best be understood as a clash of differing expectation, and alien professional cultures. Such misunderstandings have led Russian scholars and archivists to retreat into xenophobia and nationalistic rhetoric and have resulted in Westerners countering with charges of corruption and provincialism in Russian archives. Thus Western Slavacists see the replacement of Communism with Democracy in Russia as presenting an opportunity to mine an "Archival Bonanza," an attitude which puts some Russian scholars and archivists on the defensive against documentary treasurers being bargained away too cheaply in an "Archival Beriozka," or hard-currency tourist shop.

From October 23 through October 31 we visited two archival institutions in St. Petersburg and five institutions in Moscow. In St. Petersburg we made calls and had discussions at the Russian State Historical Archives and at the Russian State Archives of the Russian Navy, the only two national level archival repositories of the Rosarkhiv in St. Petersburg. We were not able to visit several Oblast level archival depositories that had been scheduled prior to our departure, the Central Historical Archives of St. Petersburg and the Department of Archives of the Mayor's Office, as they had closed for an indefinite period of time due to lack of funds. We also made no calls upon archives within universities or colleges as these have mostly been closed for lack of support for quite sometime.

After transferring to Moscow by sealed and guarded night train we visited the Russian State Archives of the Ancient Acts, the Center for Contemporary Documentation, the Russian State Archival Service (Rosarkhiv), The Moscow Institute of Historians and Archivists, and the State Archives of the Russian Federation.

One of the repositories of the Russian State Historical Archives in 1993. The shelves date from the late 19th century when they served as records storage areas for the State Council of the Russian Empire. Photo by Seda-S Art Publishers, St. Petersburg.



ROSARKHIV STRUCTURE AND HISTORY

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Because I will be discussing primarily the situation as I found it within the constituent archives and centers of the Russian State Archival Service (Rosarkhiv), I think it would be useful to look at the organization chart that I have provided in your handouts. The extent and limitations of the holdings in these depositories requires that one understand much more about the history of Soviet bureaucracy than I will ever be able to master. It is important to know that the Bolsheviks, upon coming to power, gave quite a bit of attention to the archives of the nation. One of Lenin's early decrees, although its date and authenticity are subject to debate, dealt with the preservation and organization of state and party archives. The Soviet government, at very high levels, involved itself in defining the "Russian Archival Fond," and as archivists the fathers of the Bolshevik revolution made very good politicians.



Groups of records and the holdings of archives have been variously divided and combined throughout the Soviet period. Similarly, Glavarkhiv, the Soviet predecessor of Rosarkhiv, functioned throughout the Soviet period under various commissars and ministers. One side-note for all of you archivists and records managers that are frustrated by departments and agencies that will not transfer or destroy records on schedule, is that the Archives was under the administrative control of the NKVD, predecessor of the KGB, from 1938 until 1961. It gives one a new view of records schedule compliance if you were both an archivist and a KGB Major.

The Russian State Archival Service or Rosarkhiv is a massive and bureaucratic organization that is directly responsible for 16 national level archives or document centers and has oversight responsibility for hundreds of local government archives and record centers throughout the republic. The agency reports directly to the office of the President and has its own budget line within the federal budget. Rosarkhiv, like most Russian government agencies, is financially destitute in the current free-fall economy. State appropriations to support Russian Archives are being reduced and further being reduced by the effects of inflation. The Ruble has fallen from \$2/Ruble in 1990 to 4,800 Rubles/\$1 in 1995. State appropriations for Rosarkhiv, thus far have managed to cover most salary and utility expenses. However, several archival institutions have had to close for extended periods because personnel and building maintenance funds have run out and new appropriations have been late in arriving. Two visits planned for our delegation to federal level depositories in Moscow were canceled because the archives had closed for unspecified periods of time for budgetary reasons. Due to inflation and the unreliability of government revenues the Russian government does its budgeting on a monthly basis as opposed to a quarterly or annual basis.

Several government archives have had to leave new storage facilities half finished and current facilities that house most archives are in very bad condition and growing worse due to deferred maintenance. The facilities are becoming to say the least shabby and unpleasant places to work and some are actually dangerous and unhygienic due to neglect. The Russian State Naval Archives in St. Petersburg has a building that is half finished and it is unlikely to be completed any time in the near future due to lack of funds and ravenous inflation.

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Staff attrition is a very serious threat to the profession in Russia. While there are more and more materials ready for transfer into federal custody the number of archivists to affect these transfers is seriously diminished. The central administration, its archival depositories, document centers, and branches, at their full strength, employ around 24,000 persons. However, due to reorganization massive budget cuts and disastrous attrition this figure may have been halved by this time.

The professional ranks of Rosarkhiv are thinning at an alarming rate as archivists earning an average monthly wage of \$60 are leaving to take up more lucrative lines of work. Archivists with modern language skills are especially prone to be lured away by commercial opportunities. Younger archivists who have less time invested in the profession and more foreign language training are especially prone to leave the profession for the new private sector. For economic context: a street vendor in Russia makes many times the \$125/month salary of a physician, or the \$30/month earned by a school teacher. The retiree or pensioner can look forward to around \$17 per month. There is real hunger and desperation in the streets of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Morale of the profession is at a very low point and a sense of hopelessness is present among the rank and file archivists still practicing the profession. Thus the brain and experience drain in Russian Archives due to economic ramifications is tremendous. In order to slow this process several archives have petitioned and received special designations as Russian National Treasures a designation usually attached to institutions such as the Bolshoi and Kirov Ballet companies and the Pushkin Museum. This designation upon the Russian Archives of the Ancient Acts and the Russian Archives of Literature and Art, institutions needful of ancient and modern language skills, allows salaries to be increased by 50% above those of other Rosarkhiv employees. Thus a few of the most marketable archivists in Russia may be bound to their professions for a while longer by this pay inducement.

The structure of Rosarkhiv is found in the organization chart which I have provided you in the handouts in both the original Russian and my probably inelegant translations. The grouping of boxes on the left side of the chart are the departments within the central administration of Rosarkhiv. The boxes on the right are the regional and local archives and records centers that Rosarkhiv is nominally responsible for but provides no budgetary support to them. Thus, the authority of Rosarkhiv over these institutions is rather problematic. The vertical list of institutions on the left side of the chart constitute the 16 individual national level archival depositories and archive centers of Rosarkhiv. For a little more detail on the holdings of these national archives and document centers, I refer you to the last page of the handout on which I have prepared a very superficial description of the institutions and their general holdings. Rosarkhiv has prepared a brief but very useful guide to their archives and centers in this little book, unfortunately it is available only in Russian.

EDUCATION OF RUSSIAN ARCHIVISTS

Of the institutions mentioned only Moscow Institute of Historians and Archivists is not directly responsible to the Russian State Archives Service (Rosarkiv). The MIHA is an example of the European institute system in that it is a relatively small, independent, and specialized association of research faculty that grants degrees within very narrow disciplines as opposed to the universities which confer degrees within a wide variety of disciplines and specializations. Most Russian Archivists are trained at one of two archival programs in the Russian Republic. The larger number of

working archivists are trained at the Moscow Institute of Historians and Archivists, while a smaller and possibly more prestigious groups are trained at Moscow State University.

At its peak the Institute enrolled several thousand students in programs that range from the first professional degree through the candidate or Ph.D. equivalent degree. In previous decades the Institute was quite selective and required high scores on the general entrance exam. Currently, while the entrance requirements remains selective for state supported students, entrance exams are waived for students who can afford to pay tuition. According to the director of the Institute, Dr. Eugeny V. Starostin, the result is that less qualified students are taking the place in the institute previously reserved for the most able state supported students. While I accept this as probably an accurate assessment, I try to remain cognizant that party membership and connections served as the hard currency of the previous regime. However, with student stipends to attend the Institute constituting little more than pocket change, the Institute's enrollment is in free fall, and any student with desire and hard currency is quickly admitted. Until the Russian economy stabilizes it seems unlikely that enrollment in these training programs will regain their past appeal.

A smaller number of archivists are trained at Moscow State University through a program in the department of history. These students seem to be in many of the leadership positions of the Rosarkiv and the directorships of subordinated depositories. One of the profound problems of the Moscow Institute of Historians and Archivist and every educational institution (K through Graduate level) is the shrinking and graying of the teaching ranks. Younger professors and teachers, especially those with linguistic or entrepreneurial skills, are deserting the academies and institutes in staggering numbers.

Archival training and archival administration in Russia are tied closely to academic history. This is especially true of most archives administrators who have in large part been history graduates of Moscow State University or other prestigious universities. This is more widely true now than was the case before the 1991 attempted coup. Prior to the end of Communism, the director of institutes or archival depositories were more likely to be well-connected communists with sound ideological credentials rather than historians or archivists. With Yeltsin's victory over the CPSU in 1991, leadership positions in Rosarkiv have fallen to respected and competent academic historians who are known to the President and support his reforms. The reform-minded head of Rosarkiv, who incidentally resigned a month or two ago, Rudolph Pikhoia, a respected historian of 18th century Russia had served as the Vice-Rector of Ekaterinberg State University (the same Ural region from which Yeltsin hails). Leadership of the Post-coup, Rosarkiv while still containing long-time Communist apparatchniks, does have a rather large number of academic historians with no intimate connections to the defunct CPSU, i.e. Academician Vladamir Kozlov at the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Modern History, and Academician Sergi Mironenko of the State Archives of the Russian Federation

However, as Yeltsin eliminates more and more of the reformers around him in order to gain the support of the Communists and the far-right ultranationalists, the upper ranks of the archival establishment are quite likely to be depleted of competent and trained historians and archivists. For the Russian archival establishment both the top and the bottom strata are melting away due to forces that are moving the whole of Russian society.

The point that I wanted to make here is that Russian Archivists are more closely tied to academic history than is true in the United States and parts of Western Europe. There is a distinct separation between the practice of librarianship and archives in Russian training and practice, much like there

librarianship and archives in Russian training and practice, much like there is a separation between archives and academic history in this country.

IN-HOUSE PUBLICATION IN RUSSIAN ARCHIVES

The close relationship between archives and academic history in Russia have produced several interesting differences in American and Russian archival practice. One of the most interesting is the prevalence of document publication in Russia. Almost every Archival collection in Russia has pursued the long-lived practice of publishing documents on specific topics within the holdings of the particular archives. Many of these published documentary series date from the nineteenth century and constitute journal-type periodicals and some special issue sets on specific topics. The in-house publication of a large quantity of primary documentation has cemented the place of academic historians within the Russian archival bureaucracy, throughout the tsarist, soviet, and current times. In-house publishing has also resulted in the allocation of a sizable portion of professional personnel and fiscal resources into producing publications. This allocation has continued until the present time, when personnel resources for research, editing, and production; atrophied budgets; and ridiculously high printing costs have forced a reduction of the document edition factories. Personnel are currently being reallocated from the publications role to other activities within the new and decimated archival establishment.



One of the reading halls of the Russian State Historical Archives in the administrative building, formerly the Pompeii Hall.

Ceiling painting by Semion Bessonov and M. Medici after a design by Theodore Charpentier. Beginning of 20th century. Photo by Seda-S Art Publishers, St. Petersburg.

REFERENCE SERVICES IN RUSSIAN ARCHIVES

From conversations with archivists and historians, I believe that the practice of primary source publication can be linked to another practice peculiar to Russian and Soviet Archives: the controlled selection of materials to fill research requests. One of the most curious and frustrating aspects of conducting research in the Soviet Archives, aside from having so much modern material classified as secret, is that one was permitted to actually see unpublished documents only after a formal application to do research in a specific institution. Research topics and specific areas of inquiry had to be offered up in letter form with the researcher's activities and qualifications supported with letters from the employing institutions and the Soviet sponsor.

When the research topic was approved, reference archivists would select documents related to the topic and present them to the researcher in the reading room. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the letters and permission letters are gone, but reference archivists are still selecting specific records in response to researchers needs. This is the reference service that has been taught and practiced in Russia for as many years as Russians have permitted public access to state records, and it shows no signs of disappearing.

Despite the complaints of western researchers, the practice of short-order reference service is proving especially robust in this period of grinding poverty for archivists and archives. A number of outraged and boisterous Western scholars, especially Americans, have lobbed recriminations and charges of corruption at individual Russian archivists and depositories desperate for revenue. The primary concern is that preferential services and "better" documents are provided to paying customers and the less affluent scholars and students are left out of the bonanza. The highest paying customers during the archival gold rush have been publishers and journalists vying for the first publication, and in some cases exclusive access rights, of titillating and exciting archival revelations. In the non-Russian historical community there circulates the much quoted story of the American Slavist who in complaining of this unequal reference service to a Russian archives administrator and was told "why should I talk to you when a German journalist would pay \$10,000 for a single file properly selected?"

Contributing to this misunderstanding is the long accepted custom among reference archivists in Russia and the Soviet Union of taking on paid reference assignments in their employing depositories from individual scholars in a hurry or working from abroad. While this is a violation of Western archival ethical standards it was and is an acceptable and wide-spread practice in Russia. Charging journalists and others for providing especially juicy archival tidbits for cash is different from the standard Russian practice of paid research only by degrees. Western and Russian archival professions developed in isolation from one another and thus differences in form must be expected and tolerated, at least in the short-term, until practices evolve and assimilate in an environment of mutual understanding.

There have been other accounts of archivists either providing exclusive access to highly publishable items for a cash payment or "selling" exclusive publication licences to documents of special interest. It is certainly not my place or my inclination to justify or condone such practices by archivists or archives, however, I believe that there are some mitigating circumstances to help understand the practice. The most obvious one is that archivists and their families are literally starving and desperately need either a lot more rubles or a little hard currency to keep body and soul and

archivist and archives together. This is not an excuse, but an explanation of actions taken by people in desperate situations that might not be readily apparent to scholars or graduate students on modest stipends who are considered rich by Russian standards. Archival "corruption" that some scholars deplore within the sacred walls of historical archives is actually quite mild when compared to the rapid and violent criminilization of the entire country and society.

PUBLICATION DEALS WITH THE WEST

Similarly, archival institutions that have engaged in the sale of access to exciting documents are also functioning in a very new and strange milieu. Government support for state archives depositories has dwindled and the archives have been encouraged by the government to seek self-supporting opportunities. It is this instruction to the archives from the government to seek sources of outside funding that have led to some very serious consequences for not only the Russian State Archives Service but the Yeltsin government as well. The Russian historical and journalistic communities are not without their super-nationalists factions that favor reform only to a point. It is the need for non-governmental funding, the Russian archival and academic traditions of document publication, and isolation from Western archival and historical traditions that have led to the recent resignation of Rudolph Pikhovia from Rosarkhiv.

In March 1992 Rosarkhiv entered into an agreement with The Hoover Institution and the publisher Chadwyck-Healey to microfilm around 25 million pages from the choicest and most secret archives of the Soviet Union, the State Archive of the Russian Federation, the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Modern History, and the Center for the Preservation of Contemporary Documentation. Rosarkhiv in return was to receive microfilm copies of Hoover's holdings in Russian history as well as preservation and distribution copies of the filmed records from Rosarkhiv. Rosarkhiv and the deal with Hoover were attacked initially by Yuri Afanasiev, Director of the State Humanities Institute, at first as being a sale of Russian heritage. This first barrage, taken up by the Russian press did not differentiate the production of microfilm copies from the sale of original documents. Afanasiev objected to the massive transfer of microfilm copies to the Hoover Institution and their sale by Chadwyck-Healey because while Russian historians would be bound by privacy laws regarding holdings in the archives, western scholars would have no such limitations and thus the center of Russian history would shift from Mother Russia to the Hoover Institution and the West in general. Afanasiev's later attacks centered around Rosarkhiv selling the microfilm rights too cheaply. It was one of the true high-points of the trip to witness Afanasiev, a deep voiced bear of a man, attack the Russian archival establishment and the spirited response of Russian archivists at a meeting at the Moscow Institute of Historians and Archivists. Such a passionate and vituperative exchange between Russian academicians would of course been unimaginable prior to 1991 coup.

Microfilming historical materials is quite a new practice in Russia and thus wild prices were proposed by nationalist historians and journalists as just compensation for allowing documents to be microfilmed. One newspaper article whipping up public fury over the selling off of Russian history to the west, proposed a charge to Chadwyc-Healy of \$23/foot of microfilmed documents. Again Russian isolation from western practices such as microfilm duplication had allowed nationalistic opponents of the the project to confuse the NARA charge for duplicating a 100' roll of microfilm with a charge for the right to make and publish a linear foot of microfilm. This confusion allowed opponents to encourage outrage in a Russian public already suffering from bruised nationalism and hightened sensitivity to slights from the West.

Similarly, Russian critics of the Hoover and other publication projects have failed to realize that while document publications of these types are very important and useful, they seldom make any money or even break even. Making such deals dependent upon huge payments is to doom them to failure and discontinuation. The cash bonanza that some Russians expected from sale of microfilm duplicates and the hysterical headlines castigating Rosarkhiv for selling Russian history at bargain-basement prices became a political issue for Communist and ultra nationalist opposition to the Yeltsin government. This anti-west and anti-Yeltsin rhetoric facilitated the resignation of a strong advocate of reason and cooperation within the Russian State Archival Service. It is likely that as Yeltsin fights harder to stave off political gains from former Communists that other reformers in the archival profession will follow Pikhoia out of Rosarkhiv before the national elections in June.

The controversy has forced the Rosarkhiv and Hoover to significantly scale back the scope of the project and the extent of the anticipated product. Potentially there will also be some fiscal consolations offered to save the mutually beneficial project. Other projects such as the Yale Publications Project may also have to be modified or resized. Several additional proposals for similar documentary projects from other foreign publishers and institutions have been refused by the Rosarkhiv.

FINDING AIDS IN RUSSIAN ARCHIVES

Traditional Russian Archival practice has required the archivist to make the selection of documents in order to answer specific research requests. This created in Russian archivists a belief that finding aids were strictly in-house tools. Similarly, the prestigious practice of publishing large volumes of primary documents has had the effect of giving priority and resources to publishing documents rather than publishing finding aids to those documents.

Until quite recently the researcher in Russian government archives had to contend with the absence of either published or public access finding aids and guides. A few of the historical show collections have published finding aids in very small print runs, but by and large most Russian archives are without finding aids for users. In many archives throughout the period, finding aids consisted of either massive card catalogs of highly variable quality or internal topical listings of materials. The predecessor to Rosarkhiv, Glavarkhiv, never sanctioned guides or finding aids that were revealing of the structure of the fonds or the organization of the agency of origin. Series level finding aids called "Opisi" that bear the closest resemblance to western series level finding aids were usually quite crude with classified and special subseries omitted and replete with pencil and pen annotations representing the editorial work of generations of archivists. These valuable but unrefined finding aids were never shown to the user during the Soviet period and shown with reluctance now to users in the Russian archives. Because of this profound lack of basic description, efforts of foreign publishers and scholars and senior level Rosarkhiv administrators have concentrated with some very good results on the problem of getting finding aids and guides into the hands of researchers and potential researchers. Among the first materials microfilmed in the Hoover Rosarkhiv project were the opisi.

One of the most successful finding aid projects is the "Russian Archive Series" which is a long-term publication project of Rusarkhiv and the Center for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. In your hand-outs you will find copies of some of the promotional materials for this splendid series of archival publications.

BRIEF CONCLUSION:

These are my very inexperienced observations of a society and a profession that is in desperate trouble. I frankly do not see how efforts of the world archival community or even the United States government can stay Russia from its unrelentingly grizzly destiny. Even our best efforts will not be Godunov to save Russian Archives from this Time of Troubles. Perhaps in this Time of Troubles even Boris will not be Godunov.

Archivists (l to r) Michael Holland, Oregon State University; Robert Warner, former Archivist of the United States; and Gretchen Lake, University of Alaska, Fairbanks. They stand in front of the Neva River and the Fortress of Sts Peter and Paul, the burial place of the later Romanov Tsars. Photo taken by Walter Uhler in November, 1995.



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