

## *The Current State of Soviet Archives*

translated by **GEORGE BOLOTENKO\***

George Bolotenko (GB): *What are the chief aims of Soviet archivists in the immediate future in the areas of organization of fonds, intellectual control, public service and conservation?*

Over the last several years, there has been a quickening of archival activity in the USSR in the areas of preservation and in the use of archival documents.

Presently GAF USSR encompasses 340 million archival units.<sup>1</sup> In the state archival system there are over two hundred million archival units reflecting governmental activity (documents of a permanent and temporary status); 2.4 million archival units of technical documents; 6.5 million units of photo documents; 550,000 units of film; more than 400,000 units of audio records; and one million units of records generated by private individuals.

By subject matter, the following record types have the greatest representation in the State Archival Fond: state authority and administration — twenty-three per cent of our total holdings; industry — fourteen per cent; agriculture — fifteen per cent; socio-cultural institutions — sixteen per cent. Over eighty per cent of the holdings are records from the Soviet era.

The nature of records collected by the State Archival Fond is being increasingly influenced, as in other countries, by changes occurring in record format, a result of the growth of information technology. There is increasingly more entry into the state archives of records in new information-bearing formats such as machine readable and audiovisual documents. There is also an increasing quantity of technical records being received by archives.

A significant trend in recent years has been the addition to the State Archival Fond of increasing numbers of documents created by private individuals. Amongst these, one finds records of the national economy; documents of participants in the Great Fatherland War [in Soviet historical writing this is the name given to the Second World War]; records of individuals active in academic life and the development of technology; and papers of veterans of labour. This development reflects the desire of Soviet archivists to capture much more fully, within the State Archival Fond, all aspects of the development of Soviet society and to secure the history of the nation in all its diversity.

Presently, the state archives selects two to three per cent of all government-created documents for archival preservation; each year over three million archival units are transferred into the system. Expert analysis suggests that the general extent of records held by the State Archival Fond, and preserved in state repositories, will increase by thirty-nine per cent by the year 2100, and will comprise 231 million archival units.<sup>2</sup> With the projected accessioning of three-and-a-half million dossiers [yearly?] the State Archival Fond will [by the year 2,000] grow by sixty-five million dossiers of administrative records, by four million units of technical documen-

tation, by over four million units of photo documents, and by approximately 470,000 units of film and audio records. The state archives will also be receiving records in non-paper formats (including machine-readable documents).

As a consequence of *perestroika* in the spheres of management of the national economy and socio-cultural development, the state archival service of the USSR is working on a large scale to define more precisely the sources of records which will enter the state archival system. In this connection, certain changes in the nature and quantity of records coming into the State Archival Fond are expected immediately over the next several years: we expect a reduction in the quantity of records created by state administrative organs (ministries and departments) and an increase in records of industrial/commercial undertakings and socio-cultural institutions. There will also be an increase in privately-created records. The state archives will play a much more active role in the creation of documents to capture the record of distinct events and facts of reality which are not reflected in traditional records. We have in mind such initiatives as the recording of recollections of participants in or witnesses to historical events and the photographing of disappearing phenomena of nature and architectural monuments. All this activity will allow us to achieve the necessary completeness and diversity of information requisite for archival funds.

One of the chief tasks of Soviet archivists is to assure the completeness, precision, and rapidity of information search in the interests of more intensive use of archival documents to resolve national economic and socio-cultural questions, and for ideological-instructional work.<sup>3</sup> Towards these ends we are bringing to a more complete level the *opisi*, and completing the structure and improving the information level of our catalogues.<sup>4</sup> We are devoting much attention to the development of forms and methods of information provision for users: the preparation of inter-subject, intra-archives union catalogues; archival guides; guides to document record bodies; illustrated guides of a popular genre; and advertising prospectuses and booklets.

There is significant activity in the creation of an automated data bank describing the composition and holdings of the State Archival Fond. The development of automated informational search systems in archives in the USSR is going in two directions: the creation of an automated system for the documents of the State Archival Fond on the basis of the central fonds catalogue of *Glavarkhiv*, with information about records at the fonds level; and the creation of local automated search systems for separate thematic document groupings.<sup>5</sup>

The first of these systems is intended for inter-archival information search, and also for the resolution of problems of archival management (questions of acquisition, control, and better information provision by archives [to users]). This database consists of one hundred million bytes. It includes at this moment thirty-four thousand *opisi* of fonds, one hundred thousand names of institutions, two thousand family names, thirty thousand toponyms, and over one hundred thousand subjects. Annually the system provides information in answer to [an average of] 1,200-1,500 inquiries from archival institutions, ministries, departments, educational-scientific institutes, and individual researchers.

Archival institutions assure broad access to researchers and interested individuals wishing to view archival documents, in the hope of broadening the primary source basis of historical studies. In the mid-1980s there were approximately 1.11 million

dossiers in the central archives to which access was restricted.<sup>6</sup> Presently [an unstated percentage] of these dossiers have been removed from the restricted category. In 1988, restricted documents constituted not more than [an unstated percentage] of the State Archival Fond.<sup>7</sup>

One of the primary obligations of archival service in the USSR is securing the [physical] safety of archival documents. In this regard, the archival system is concentrating on resolving the following problems: increasing the shelf-life of documents; providing [proper] storage conditions for documents; reconstructing old, and erecting new, buildings in the state archival system; providing the technical capacity to conduct complex conservation-restoration activity; [and] implementing sophisticated methods of reproduction of documents.

In addition to the restoration of original documents, measures are underway to preserve their informational content by means of transfer to other information-bearing formats (such as tapes). At the present time this work is being undertaken primarily as security copying of very valuable documents. At the same time as insurance copies are made, other copies are also prepared, intended for general circulation in place of the originals (the so-called State Archives Copy Fond).

During the 1980s we achieved a number of objectives designed to improve preservation [of microfilms and film] in the KFFD.<sup>8</sup> Amongst these are the invention of a new fungicide; the construction and preparation of new installations for research into the stability of nitrate-based [materials]; the design and preparation of a frame counter for microfilms in the back-up fond SKM-2M; and the development of a method of benign stability control. These developments are being successfully implemented within the state archives system.

To be certain of success in the restoration of documents and in the creation of a back-up security fond, there is need for material improvement in the technical capabilities of archives and laboratories. By the year 2000, we intend to obtain for archives and archival laboratories four thousand pieces of equipment. In particular, we plan to supply archives holding cine/photo/phono/video documents with videodiscs so that they can realize their [preservation] responsibilities.

*GB: How do you approach the problem of massive growth and backlog of archival records, particularly in government offices? Is there a backlog of records awaiting processing?*

In accordance with the *Polozhenie o GAF SSR*, (after the expiration of a set period of time) the records of ministries, departments and other institutions, organizations, and undertakings which hold information on the socio-economic, cultural, intellectual, and all other aspects of society are transferred to the archives.<sup>9</sup> Presently there are approximately 230,000 organizations whose documents come to the state archives for preservation. To preserve these records, departments [as a first step] create archives within their purview or delegate this function to some other organizational sub-unit; they facilitate the selection, control, security, and use of documents in accordance with established regulations, based upon the fundamentals of archival theory and practice. Consequently, the preservation of documents in the departments themselves is an important element of archival activity.

After the expiration of a fixed retention period, the records of the departments are transferred to state archives in an organized (processed) condition. Yearly, more than three million archival units are so transferred. At the same time, this requirement is not always observed [by departments]. Presently departments are holding 4.8 million archival units of administrative records whose retention period has expired. The main reason for this situation is the lagging tempo of work in organizing (processing) documents and their transfer to the state archives. Soviet archivists see a solution to this problem in a more precise definition of the organization of labour in the selection of departmental documents and their transfer to the state archives, and also in the elaboration of theoretical-methodological principles of document selection. The better management of the national economy and the provision of documentation for this purpose bear directly upon the work of the state archival service, demanding a more precise definition of its organization, of the records which are transferred to state archives, and of the nature of these transferred documents themselves. The "Methodological Recommendations on the Determination of the Nature of Sources for Selection by State Archives" and the "Listing of Typical Documents, Created by the Activity of State Committees, Ministries, Departments and Other Institutions, Organizations, Enterprises with Determined Periods of Retention" (new edition), and other [such published] aids, developed over the past several years by *VNIAD* and other archival institutions, constitute the basis for this work.<sup>10</sup>

*GB: What is the situation regarding the introduction of automation into Soviet archives? Is the Soviet archivist faced with the difficulty of processing records of the computer era, such as magnetic tape, disks, and diskettes?*

Over the last several years we have taken steps in the USSR to broaden the application of electronic information processing to archival activity. To automate office management procedures of *Glavarkhiv* USSR, two automated systems, based on the personal computer, were developed: *AKID* (automated system for document control) and *ASU-MTS* (automated system for material-technical supply). Work has begun on the compilation of a microcomputer data base [and automation has commenced] in the archival management of the city of Moscow archives, and also in *Glavarkhiv* of the Belorussian SSR, and in *TsGANKh* SSR.<sup>11</sup>

In the immediate future, we plan to apply computer technology to track the usage of archival documents. We have in mind a broad application of automated systems of information search, which will be able to present retrospective documentary information in machine-readable format to interested scholars and informational institutions with the requisite technology; the publication by means of EDP of informational material; the creation of a data bank from massive personnel source collections; and a summarization and analysis of all significant data detailing society's needs for archival information.

We also intend to use EDP to determine who uses retrospective information and the nature of their informational needs, the intensiveness of their use of archival fonds and the distinct categories and forms of the documents they require, as well as the effectiveness of use to which archival information is put.

Work on the creation of an electronic network within the framework of the State Archival Service of the USSR will continue, as well as the organization of regional computerized centres.

We need to address seriously the question of developing appropriate and sufficient programmes for automated systems. Our intention is to transfer those forms of archival activity to an automated format, for which it is economically feasible and organizationally sound.

To organize the preservation of machine-readable documents is one of the activities of the Soviet archivist. In this, we have as our task the preservation not only of the data bases of a historical nature, created by the transfer of information from traditional archival documents into machine-readable formats, but also the acquisition by archives of machine-readable documents created by computers in various branches of the national economy.

A significant precondition for the creation of this archival network for machine-readable documents was the recognition of the legal validity of such documents according to government standards, and the development of organizational and technological conditions for their use as the equivalent of traditional documents.

In organizing ourselves for the preservation of machine-readable documents, we are paying due consideration to the mutual inter-relationship, as well as to the distinct peculiarities, of such documents in the operational, departmental, and state (archival) stages of preservation. In the mid-1980s, methodological instructions established a uniform approach to the preservation of machine-readable documents in the computer centres of the country. A fixed normative and theoretical-methodological basis for the preservation of machine-readable archives in the departmental and government (archival) stages has now crystallized. These developments found their expression in the "Regulations Concerning the State Archival Fond of the USSR" and in the "Regulations Concerning Selection, Receipt for Preservation and Provision to Requestors of Documents Created by Computerized Technology," now accepted [as standards] by *Glavarkhiv*. A special depository is being constructed for machine-readable documents in the Central State Archive of the National Economy (*TsGANKh SSR*).

In 1988 we intend to commence a far-reaching programme [in the methods of] preservation and use of machine-readable documents throughout the whole of the State Archival Service of the USSR.

GB: *What are the principles which govern the activity of Soviet archivists? What changes are you proposing in the preparation of future archivists?*

Soviet archival activity is based on academic/scientific principles elucidated by V.I. Lenin, who contributed greatly to archival matters.

One of the fundamental Leninist principles of socialist archival development is the centralization of archival activity. The creation of the *Edinyi Gosudartsvennyi Arkhivnyi Fond* is a result of this principle.<sup>12</sup> There was created in the USSR a single centralized system of state archival institutions. (This allows us to achieve a scientifically-based classification of fonds and documents, to facilitate better the preservation of documents, and to utilize [archival] documents in the interests of society more intensively and with much more planning).

One of the singular features of socialist archival activity lies in the fact that, along with the selection and preservation of documentary sources, archival institutions are called upon to satisfy society's needs for retrospective information, to utilize archival documents for the purposes of socialist construction. The idea that archives cannot and should not exist solely for the purpose of preservation lies at the basis of the Soviet archivist's understanding of the role and meaning of archives within society. The facilitation of intensive use of the accumulated documentary wealth of archives is a significant and responsible archival function. At the present time, archivists are making their contribution to *perestroika*, actively participating in the provision of information to very significant national economic programs, to original and sophisticated scientific-technical development. Broader use of archival documents reflects the growth of interest in archives on the part of Soviet people, especially amongst the young generation, of interest in the historical past of the country, and of the processes of multi-faceted democratization of the life of Soviet society.

New tendencies in archival development [and] the increasing complexity of tasks facing archives, indicate that there will be greater demands made upon archivists. In particular, the incipient automation of archival informational processes demands that we attract to archival work specialists in contemporary information technology, having practical work skills in the area of electronic technology. Hence, it is necessary to improve the training of archivists by the inclusion, in educational programmes, of new disciplines connected with contemporary information technology.

*GB: What problems do Soviet and Canadian archivists share, and how could we work together to resolve them?*

In our opinion, there are real opportunities for the mutual resolution of the following problems:

- principles and criteria of selection for preservation in state repositories of documents created by [private] individuals;
- the preservation in archives of [records of] personal witnesses, the creation of so-called "oral archives";
- the implementation of computer technology in archives;
- the creation of methodologies for long-term preservation of documents;
- research into physical-chemical and biological methods for preservation of documents;
- research into new methods for the recording, creation, and preservation of audiovisual information in new formats, such as optical disks with the use of laser technology;
- the application of new, highly efficient EDP methods to increase the effectiveness of restoration procedures used on archival documents.

## NOTES

- 1 This text was supplied by Mr. V.P. Tarasov, Head of the Foreign Relations Section of the Chief Archival Directorate of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, who kindly sent it to me in response to my request for information as I was preparing a paper on Soviet archives for the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists in Windsor during 1988. The material arrived too late to be incorporated into the Windsor presentation. My sole contributions to this publication are the translation of the text into English and the provision of explanatory footnotes. I would like to thank Dr. Ian McClymont for encouraging me to undertake this translation. Throughout this text, rounded parenthesis indicate parenthesis in the original; squared brackets indicate additions by the translator.
- 2 The acronym *GAF USSR* stands for *Gosudarstvennyi arkhivnyi fond*, the "state archival fond." By a decree dated 1 June 1918, Lenin declared that all archival holdings in the nascent Bolshevik state be treated as a single entity, as the common property of the state and people, and come under the management of one central agency. "Fond" is not used here in its narrow application, i.e. a single or discrete body of records originating from a single source of creation. Henceforth, in translating *GAF*, I will use the term "State Archival Fond." "Archival unit" is the English-language equivalent of the Russian *edinita khraneniia* (literally, "unit of preservation"). Single fonds are most commonly subdivided, not into series, but into such units. They are, in fact, equivalent to our "dossier" or "file," and may consist of anything from a one-page document to a dossier of several hundred pages. Another term used interchangeably with *edinita khraneniia* is *delo* ("event," "case"), especially for records of a government agency.
- 3 Rough calculations suggest that the year 2100, given in the original, is erroneous, and should probably read 2000.
- 4 As the context of this passage indicates, Soviet archives are used much more regularly than in the West for state economic planning and political propaganda activity. Hence, archivists play a much more active role in political and economic processes, implementing state policies by providing retrospective information in the development of state-wide five-year plans, and in inculcating desired political values into Soviet citizens through very active and vibrant publication, exhibition, and other diffusion and outreach programmes.
- 5 *Opisi*, "shelf lists," are control documents, usually to the *delo* level, for the use of Soviet archivists to aid them in searching out material requested by researchers.
- 6 The acronym *Glavarkhiv* is a syncopation of *Glavnoe arkhivnoe upravlenie*, the "Chief/Main Archival Directorate." This agency, with ministerial status, stands at the apex of the Soviet archival pyramid, and is charged with the management of the whole Soviet archival structure and its activity. It was only logical that, as a result of the decree of 1918 nationalizing all archives into a solitary fond, a single agency be created to manage that fond. It should be noted, however, that *Glavarkhiv's* reach is limited; archival depositories of the ministries of external affairs and internal security, various military departments, and the archives of the Communist Party are beyond its scope, as well as many manuscript collections of other institutions, such as the Academy of Sciences.
- 7 By "central archives" is meant the eleven central repositories located in Moscow and Leningrad, holding material of all-Union significance, directly under the control of the Chief Archival Directorate. Aside from these central bodies, at the republic level there are also central archival repositories, usually in the capital cities, managed by republic-level *glavarkhivs*, with subordinate repositories reaching out into county and district capitals.
- 8 No percentages given in original.
- 9 A new central repository to house film, audio, and photographic documents.
- 10 The *Polozhenie o GAF*, "Regulations Governing the State Archival Fond," is a compilation of detailed instructions regulating archival activity throughout the archival institutions of the USSR.
- 11 *VNIAD* stands for *Vsesoiuznyi nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut dokumentovedeniia i arkhivnogo dela*, the "All-Union Scientific Research Institute on Documents and Archival Affairs." Established in 1966, it performs valuable theoretical research on the substantial difficulties of managing *Glavarkhiv's* massive body of archival holdings.
- 12 *Glavarkhiv* of the BSSR means the central governing archival body of the Belorussian SSR, which manages the republic-level archival pyramid. *TsGANKh* is the acronym of the *Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv narodnogo khozaistva*, the Central State Archives of the National Economy. Because of the managed economy of the USSR, this is a significant repository to which administrators often have recourse for retrospective information as they draw up new economic plans for future years.

- 13 The *Edinyi gosudarstvennyi arkhivny fond* is the same as the State Archival Fond. Originally, this was the name used to convey the notion of the single state archival fond, stressing the notion of unity (*edinyi* means “unified”). A statute of 1929, among other things, simplified the name to simply *Gosudarstvennyi arkhivnyi fond*.