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# Why More Russian Archives are Likely to Close

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

**Window on Eurasia** covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

A quirk in Russian law allows an official President Dmitry Medvedev has charged with combating historical falsifications to have a decisive voice in determining whether the archives of the former Communist Party will be opened &mdash an arrangement that one rights activist says could mean the archives needed to fight falsification may become less accessible.

In an article in the current issue of Moscow's "New Times," Nikita Petrov, the deputy head of history society and activist organization the Memorial Center, wrote that this is one manifestation of what he describes as the "serious illness" Russia's archives now suffer from, "the unconstitutional prohibition on access to information."

Russian laws call for "systematic and regular" declassification of documents, he pointed out, "but this work is not being carried out" consistently and across the board. Decisions regarding the declassification of archived materials belonging to Soviet institutions that have

continued to exist are made by those institutions' own officials, who often find reasons not to release information.

The situation is even more serious in cases when there is no direct "heir" to an institution, as is the situation with the former Communist Party. In such circumstance, decisions on declassification and access are made by an inter-agency commission on state secrets, a body that since the start of 2009 has been led by Sergei Naryshkin, who has also been appointed head of Medvedev's new committee to fight historical falsifications.

The Russian law on state secrets, Petrov notes, "establishes a maximum period of secrecy of 30 years, with a longer period &mdash 50 years &mdash only for documents of intelligence services and materials relating to the Soviet nuclear program." If the latter exception can be justified, the former is more problematic, as recent events have shown, the Memorial official wrote.

Not long ago, Vladimir Kozlov, the head of the Russian State Archives, said that "Russian archivists have irrefutable documents that supposedly show that the famine in Ukraine in 1932-33 cannot be considered a genocide, but they cannot publish them because they are secret." Such an assertion, Petrov suggests, is "a shame."

There would seem to be only two possible justifications, the Memorial researcher wrote. On the one hand, some of the data to which Kozlov referred may include personal information of the kind that can legally remain classified for up to 75 years &mdash although even in such cases, the archives about what happened up to June 1934 should already be open.

On the other, there is yet another quirk in the law relevant to this situation: If an archival document includes information about someone who has not been "rehabilitated" &mdash meaning cleared of charges brought against the person during the Soviet era &mdash then the person's case is considered still open and "access to [archival materials about it] can be obtained only by lawful representations of the repressed, their lawyers and relatives."

But the most important reason that Russian archives remain closed despite the existence of a law requiring them to be opened is that none of the agencies of the Russian government have lived up to the 1992 decree of then-President Boris Yeltsin who called for the declassification "of all &mdash without exception &mdash cases involving the violation of human rights and political repressions" regardless of date.

The FSB, Petrov continued, "froze this process in its enormous archive under the pretext that in these documents were data about sources and methods. But the law about [that] establishes a 30-year limit on classification," meaning that any case before 1979 should now be open but often is not.

This is creating "an absurd" situation, Petrov wrote, because Ukrainian and Baltic officials have declassified copies of KGB documents that were left behind when the Soviet Union fell apart. As a result, many "Russian secrets" are now in circulation as a result of the "declassification" of documents "from the archives of republic KGBs."

Indeed, although Petrov does not speculate on this, it is entirely possible that Moscow might seek to use new legislation on punishing those who deny the official Russian version of World War II as a way of putting pressure on the governments of neighboring countries to restrict access to such archives.

This is not the only absurdity in this situation. In the age of the Internet, once information is released from whatever archive, it acquires a permanent life of its own on the World Wide Web, as three extraordinarily interesting and important reports in the Russian electronic and print media show.

First, one blogger posted information from the KGB archives on mass disorders in the the former Soviet Union between 1957 and 1986. In another instance, a blogger provided materials showing that the information posted by the other author, which was prepared for the Politburo in Gorbachev's time, was incomplete.

And in a third instance, Novaya Gazeta published an article recounting the testimony of someone who saw documents before they were destroyed showing beyond a doubt that Stalin was behind the December 1934 murder of Sergey Kirov that the Soviet dictator used to start the purges.

As Memorial's Petrov noted in his article, the situation regarding Russian archives is bad and is likely to get worse, but as in so many other areas, the Moscow regime is playing defense against the truth. And while it may succeed in hiding some things for a time, even an extended one, new generations and technologies make its final victory extremely unlikely.

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