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## THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE SOVIET ARCHIVES

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This book addresses the economic history of the Soviet Union under Stalin from the vantage point of the recently opened Soviet state and party archives. Although considerable archive-based research on that period has been published over the past five years, relatively little work has been devoted to the economics of the Stalin system. The authors of the chapters that follow pose a common question: What can we learn about the Stalinist command system from these formerly secret official archives that we could not have learned prior to their opening? It is therefore appropriate for me to explain how pioneering researchers began to study the Soviet economic system after World War II, before turning to a discussion of new insights provided by the archives.

Students of the Soviet society under Stalin operated under restrictions that were far in excess of those encountered in the study of any other modern society. They had no direct access to the country and its citizens, for only people like diplomats and journalists could receive permission to reside there. Since they could not tap directly into the knowledge and opinions of Soviet citizens, they had to rely on whatever information they could glean from publications that the government permitted to be exported—publications which, of course, were subjected to strict censorship, and therefore possibly inaccurate or incomplete.

Occasionally the veil was lifted by the accounts of former diplomats and journalists, of visiting delegations of foreign observers, and of defectors. A further unusual source of information came from the large number of former Soviet citizens stranded in Western Europe after World War II—Soviet army deserters, forced laborers in German factories, or collaborators who had retreated with the German occupiers. Interviews with these people provided the only large-scale data set on the life experiences and attitudes of people who had actually lived in the Soviet regime.<sup>1</sup> For the rest, students of the USSR felt somewhat like historians of ancient societies, fated never to see the country whose history and life they tried to piece together from the scraps that had escaped the ravages of time.

One was able, then, to read many of the newspapers and books that Soviet people read and to see many of the films that Soviet people saw. What one missed were the books and articles that would have been written by Soviet people had they been free to offer their views and to describe and to criticize their world in the manner of writers in “normal” countries. Imagine trying to understand the British or the Mexicans if one had no access to the views of citizens who saw their country differently from the way their government wished them and the world to see it.

There were, however, several sources of insight into the society that the censors did not seek to suppress. Some of the meetings of the Supreme Soviet and the Communist Party, for example, were public events to which foreign diplomats and some journalists were invited. These meetings were the occasion for formal reports by such government officials as the prime minister, the foreign minister, the minister of finance, and the chairman of the State Planning Commission. Their reports provided varying amounts of selected information on the organization of government, on who was appointed to what position, on the progress of

1. Alex Inkeles and Raymond Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959); Joseph Berliner, *Factory and Manager in the USSR* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957).

government policies new and old, and on foreign policy developments. Because the formal proceedings of such meetings were published, their accumulation over the years provided a considerable body of information about the state of the economy and of political affairs that became an important data base for scholars. It was a small thing compared with the thick statistical abstracts, white papers, and other government reports of other countries, but it was something.

A second valuable body of material consisted of publications that the government accepted as necessary for the effective functioning of the society. The large educational establishment, for example, had to have textbooks that instructed students in how government and economy functioned. Economists and political analysts had to be permitted to publish the results of their research on issues of the day, and scientists, agronomists, and engineers had to communicate with their colleagues and inform their readership of advances in their fields. Though heavily censored to protect national security and suppress dissident views, Soviet publications of these sorts provided an important flow of information that was useful for the work of scholars abroad.

The third source of information, and the most distinctively Soviet, was the literature of so-called *samokritika*, or “self-criticism.” It derived from Lenin’s insightful concern that under conditions of full employment and job security, and in the absence of the profit motive, managers and workers might be increasingly inclined to feather their own nests, to “sit on their hands,” and to live an easy life, rather than put in a full day’s work as they had to do under capitalism. The best answer Lenin could come up with was to enlist the press and the whole society in a permanent campaign to expose and root out such instances of self-seeking and antisocial behavior. The consequence was that the Soviet press often featured articles that revealed many of the malfunctions and tensions within the system. A disgruntled engineer might criticize his factory director for deliberately omitting some stages in the production process that made it possible to increase

the rate of output but at the expense of lower quality of goods. A local planning-board official might report that several enterprises continued to spend lavish sums on “expeditors” who were sent to their supplier-factories with gifts and bribes to ensure that they received their supplies of fuels or materials on time. Such articles transformed the reading of newspapers with such unpromising titles as “For Industrialization” and “The Construction Gazette” into mines of information that might yield nuggets of gold if you worked at them long enough. They provided a certain voyeuristic thrill, like peeking into the seamy sides of a society whose government wished you not to know about.

It was evident that one had to be cautious in drawing inferences from materials of these sorts; perhaps an article may not have been written by the reported author but had been planted there by the editor to serve his own or the Party’s purpose. In the course of time, however, a lore accumulated on how to read between the lines of the Soviet press and on what pitfalls to anticipate. Initiation into that lore was part of the training of new students by their teachers.

Since Western accounts of Soviet society relied so heavily on published Soviet sources, a crucial question for the research community was the degree of confidence one could place in those materials. If the sources reported that 16.3 million tons of steel were produced in 1938 or that the average monthly wage was 33.1 rubles, could one use those figures with confidence in estimates of national product or levels of living? The question was widely discussed in the early postwar years, and in the course of time most scholars came to believe that the use of information for political and propaganda purposes took the form primarily of suppression, rather than outright falsification. For example, in a year when the harvest was poor, the size of the harvest would simply not be reported. One could, in fact, often infer poor results from the omission of a statistic that was normally reported.

Two pieces of evidence may be cited for the view that published data were generally usable. One was the famous 1941 Plan.

In the late 1930s the government ceased publishing its annual economic plans. It was the custom, however, for the chairman of the State Planning Commission to give the Supreme Soviet a report on the plan for the forthcoming year, which was then published in the major newspapers. The statistics presented in these reports were a primary source of information on the performance of the economy. If they were falsified, much foreign research on the USSR would have been worthless.

As it happened, when the Germans invaded the USSR in June 1941, they scooped up a large volume of documents that had been left behind by fleeing Soviet citizens—perhaps the first opening of the Soviet archives. The documents were found in Germany by Allied troops after the war, and among them was a copy of the National Economic Plan for 1941. Each page of it bore the legend, “Not for Circulation.” Examination of this document showed that the statistics publicly reported by the planning chairman in his report were virtually identical to those contained in the secret plan. It was evident that the published figures were those that Soviet officials themselves used in planning the economy. The incident greatly increased the confidence of analysts that published data could generally be used to analyze Soviet economic performance.

One could not always be sure, however, and various techniques were developed to test the validity of data, such as tests for consistency. An analyst of the construction industry, for example, noticed that in a certain year, financial expenditures on housing construction declined, but the quantity of new housing put in place increased. She also noticed what appeared to be a change in terminology; the report referred to “total floor space,” instead of “dwelling floor space” as in the past. A technical encyclopedia eventually confirmed her suspicion: total floor space included hallways and stairwells, which dwelling floor space excludes. It was evident that whoever reported the figures wanted to give the impression that housing construction had increased by using a different measure of housing, and without disclosing the fact to the

reader. In an important footnote to the story, the researcher discovered that total floor space is almost invariably about 30 percent larger than dwelling floor space, which enabled her to recalculate the data so as to obtain a consistent time series. The lesson of this and similar incidents is that one had to be on guard against individual acts of deception, but when the deception was discovered, the underlying numbers were generally accurate enough to reveal the truth.

Although the weight of evidence supported the view that the published data could be used to provide a reasonably accurate picture of the society, there always remained the slight nagging possibility that that confidence was misplaced and that we had been taken in by Soviet propaganda. Hence the opening of the Soviet state and party archives was greeted with some excitement. At last there was an opportunity to tell whether we had got it right or whether we were way off base.

This volume is a contribution to a rapidly growing body of research using materials from the newly opened Soviet archives. As several of the authors note, this research is only at its beginning and an enormous volume of material remains to be analyzed—more than enough for a generation of scholars. For example, as Davies notes, the number of published decrees of the Council of People's Commissars amounted to only about one-tenth of the total number of decrees issued in the 1930s; the unpublished decrees resided in the archives all these years and are now available for study. It is now possible to write detailed histories of policies and institutions in a degree of detail that could not be achieved before.

Although the research published thus far has “done no more than sample” the archives (Harrison), some broad generalizations may be made on the contribution of archival research. Perhaps the most significant generalization is that the Soviet Union one sees in the archives is perfectly recognizable to people who have tried to understand it through the open sources alone. The investigators of the Party Control Commission focus on the same prob-

lems that had been identified earlier by analysts of the published sources—falsification of information by managers, bribery and corruption, and so forth (Belova). In this respect the archives provide confirmation that Western research had got it largely right.

The contribution of the archives to the advancement of understanding varies from one level of society to another. It is smallest in the case of primary organizations such as enterprises, farms, schools, and hospitals. The materials collected by the inspectors of the Party Control Commission, for example, confirm the extent to which enterprises engaged in illicit behavior of various sorts. There were some practices, however, that were not detected in the published sources but are revealed in the Party Control Commission archives, such as the extent to which files disappeared from local party and government offices, and the prevalence of illegal sales and speculation in party membership cards (Belova).

The “value added” by the archives is greater in the case of the higher administrative organizations like the ministries and the State Planning Commission. From the available information, one could paint a broad picture of how they were organized and how they operated, but most of what one learned about them came from accounts of enterprise dealings with them—that is, from the enterprise perspective. Now these organizations are no longer shrouded in mystery, for the archives are overflowing with reports, decrees, and correspondence at this level of the society. The chapter by Tikhonov and Gregory, for example, reveals the intense infighting among the State Planning Commission, the State Supply Committee, and the Ministry of Finance over drafts of the Fifth Five-Year Plan—none of which appeared in the press.

It was at the very top of the level of power that the open sources provided the least information. How the Politburo and the Party Central Committee were organized, how they carried out their work, and the role of Stalin in their activities, was a virtual void, except for bits and pieces found in occasional memoirs, many of them by foreigners who had top-level access from time to time. The archives provide an exhilarating view of the

activities at this level. Reading Stalin's marginal notes on a report by Molotov, one is without doubt seeing the system at work. Particularly striking is the arbitrariness with which major decisions were made. Stalin, for example, repeatedly interfered with the planning process, raising or reducing investment targets by large amounts with no apparent economic justification (Davies; Gregory). On the other hand, he was generally well informed (Rees) and he did listen to different opinions, and was sometimes influenced by them; he greatly scaled down the size of planned grain collection in 1932 after hearing the reports from the localities on how severe the consequences would be (Davies). The casualness with which important decisions were made provides strong evidence for Eugène Zaleski's conclusion that the Soviet economy should be regarded as "managed" rather than "planned."<sup>2</sup> These archives are of greatest use to political historians who, in the past, had to figure things out from open sources alone. Such histories can now be based on archival sources.<sup>3</sup>

The archival material tends to generate a certain sympathy for the plight of the State Planning Commission. On the one hand they were subject to arbitrary changes in their plans by Stalin, either on his own account or in response to the numerous appeals by commissars to change planners' decisions. On the other hand, they worked with an exceedingly small staff, consisting of only 900 people in the early 1930s (Gregory). The archives thus throw a new light on the State Planning Commission and its performance; much of what appeared to be inefficiency should perhaps be ascribed to an overload of work and an undersupply of staff.

The archives also present a rather different picture of the nature of the control exercised by and within the top leadership. From the history of purges and dismissals of ministers and planning officials it had been evident that there were periods of sharp

2. Eugène Zaleski, *Stalinist Planning for Economic Growth, 1933-1952* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

3. O. V. Khlevnyuk, *Politburo: Mekhanizmy politicheskoi vlasti v 1930-e gody* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1996).



conflict among the top leadership. The archives now make it clear that the source of the conflict was the extreme difficulty for senior officials, starting with Stalin, to maintain control over their juniors. The Politburo feared disloyal technicians in the State Planning Commission (Gregory), the Party Control Commission had to punish corrupt judges and local party officials (Belova), industrial ministers who were also Politburo members pursued their own agendas (Gregory), and local party officials defied Politburo orders (Belova). Differences in objectives within the center suggest an extremely complex system that was difficult to manage.

The contribution of the archives varies not only by level of power but also by sector of the society. It is greatest in the case of those sectors about which the government had been most secretive, such as the security apparatus, the Gulag, and the military. The archives bearing on these sectors provide a picture of how they operated that could not have been put together on the basis of the published sources alone—for example, Khlevnyuk's detailed account of the scale of labor-camp operations. His evidence confirms the view that political and not economic motives dominated in the decision to build the Gulag, and that the camps were in fact grossly inefficient. With regard to the military, the published sources gave virtually no information about the activities of defense contractors. The archives, however, made it possible for Harrison to study them in depth. He finds, among other things, that defense contractors acted much like civilian managers, concealing costs, raising prices when they could, and withholding information from the military.

In general, the value of the archives is that they make it possible to fill in much of the detail regarding policies and organization that was previously unknown. They offer glimpses of things that were not brought to light at the time, such as the "strong impetus to reform" manifested in the steady stream of reformist proposals from the staff of the Commissariat of Finance and other agencies urging a greater role for prices and profits (Davies). And they provide information that helps to settle issues that in the past could

be no more than surmises. For example, it had been charged the USSR falsified and understated its published military budgets in 1931–1933 in order to influence the Geneva disarmament negotiations (Harrison, citing Davies). The material in the archives makes it possible to reconstruct defense expenditures at that time, and it turns out that the charge was valid. What was formerly a surmise can now be taken as fact. On the other hand, some surmises turn out to have been incorrect: For example, Stalin was not a nonentity in 1920s at the time of Lenin's death but was already a favorite of those in the know (Rees). Nor can the view be sustained that the Politburo was divided into moderates and hard-liners; the whole leadership varied from moderate to hard-line policies according to the issues. Nor is there any evidence of Stalin's involvement in Kirov's assassination (Rees). Also, the Soviet military was much stronger in 1941 than was sometimes supposed; if not for secrecy, the Germans might have known the true Soviet strength and might not have attacked (Harrison, citing Samuelson).

In conclusion, the archives have confirmed that the sources available to foreign scholars in the past, though not abundant and heavily censored, enabled them to draw a fairly accurate picture of the USSR in Stalin's time. As Davies writes, "The new information has not brought about a revolution in our understanding of the Soviet economic system." But our understanding is now, because of the archives, much more complete, detailed, and nuanced. One waits with anticipation the further new insights that may be expected when scholars get beyond the "first sampling" phase of archival research, which the following chapters describe.