

Ivo Banac

Yale University
Department of History
P.P.Box 208324
New Haven
SAD

SILENCING THE ARCHIVAL VOICE: THE DESTRUCTION OF ARCHIVES AND OTHER OBSTACLES TO ARCHIVAL RESEARCH IN POST-COMMUNIST EASTERN EUROPE

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Izlaganje sa znanstvenog skupa

Sve zbirke arhivskoga gradiva imaju svoje zaštitnike – vlastite glasove, koji prenose suhoparne statistike, birokratsku opreznost, ali isto tako ljutnju i strast povijesnih sudionika te težnje za plemenitim i manje plemenitim ciljevima. Povjesničari i drugi istraživači imaju popise nedoličnih i smiješnih priča o "dostupnosti" i nedostatku iste. Do sloma sustava 1989/1990. to je bila obvezatna značajka komunističkih režima u istočnoj Evropi. Danas, naročito kao posljedica ratova usmjerenih na brisanje pamćenja, arhivski glasovi su utišani daleko težim zaprekama – najgorom od svih, ogromnim uništavanjem arhivskoga gradiva. U nekim slučajevima, kao u Bosni i Hercegovini, uništenje arhivskoga gradiva bilo je dio ratne strategije. Uništite povijest "drugoga" i na putu ste da vašeg proglašenog "neprijatelja" lišite vertikalnog kontinuiteta. Ova strategija je kako pogrešna, tako i štetna. Uništenje napuljskog Arhiva u vrijeme Drugoga svjetskog rata, uništilo je povijest Napulja isto tako malo, kao što razaranje Orientalnog instituta u Sarajevu može ukinuti povijest Bosne i Hercegovine. Ali to je unatoč tomu velika nesreća. A kako povijest nije sasvim nezavisna, to nisu nikada niti izvori. Razaranje jedne arhivske zbirke šteti svima – ne samo određenoj grupi ili grupaciji. Ovo izvješće ukazuje na načine te nudi nekoliko prijedloga zaštite arhivskih izvora.

All archival collections have their familiars – their personal voices, which convey matter-of-fact statistics, bureaucratic reserve, but also the anguish and passion of historical actors and the aspirations for noble and ignoble goals. I have a vast experience with archival collections in this region, having started studying the Dubrovnik historical archives already in 1967, as part of my undergraduate honors thesis. In the meanwhile I have been in various archives of Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, but also in the collections of Hungary, Russia, and the United States. I worked in these archives under sundry conditions, when access was total or only partial, when holdings were transparent and camouflaged, when one fitted or did not into the hierarchical ladder of privileged researchers, when the proprietors were supportive and generous even in adverse circumstances and when they were sparing and uncooperative in the extreme. My fondest memories are associated not only with Dubrovnik, where the archivists were cooperative in the worst of times, but most especially, very recently, with Mostar, where the archival collection is stored in a dwelling that was literally levelled by the Croat paramilitaries in 1993 and where the collection suffered water and fire damage as a result. Nevertheless, the archival voice of this collection was friendly in the extreme.

As historians are certainly aware, twentieth century was different from the earlier periods by the incidence of ideologized fanaticism, which on occasion consumed prior archival records. But whereas the destruction of Alexandria's libraries by the Christians (391 A.D.) and the Arabs (642 A.D.) bear distinct earmarks of religious bigotry, modern twentieth-century examples of purposeful archival destruction are secular, albeit marked by ideological exclusiveness. In that sense they follow the pattern of ideological violence that marked all modern revolutions, from the Jacobin attacks against French traditional institutions to the Communist violence that marked destructive upheavals in Russia, China, Kampuchea, and elsewhere. The slogan of the Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, "Destroy the old, uphold the new!" was a backdrop to systematic destruction of premodern texts and edifices, notably in Tibet, where the ideological fanaticism of the Red Guards transformed itself into plain Han chauvinism.

Indeed, the modern nationalist movements contributed their share to the destruction of archival collections. A lost collection deprives the "enemy" nation of arguments in favor of its territorial and historical claims. Hence the deeper meaning of a seemingly senseless destruction of archival holdings at Sarajevo (Oriental Institute, Academy of Sciences and Arts of Bosnia-Herzegovina) by the Serbian paratroops, or attempts at the destruction of Dubrovnik's archival collections (State Archives, manuscript library of the Franciscan Monastery) by the Yugoslav federal army (JNA), or of the Mostar archival collections by the Croat paratroops (HVO).

Still more typical of nationalist manipulation of archival holdings is concealment of documents. This practice was typical, too, of totalitarian regimes in the Communist countries, where whole collections were closed not only to the foreigners, but also to the nonofficial domestic researchers. (Until the perestroika in the U.S.S.R. one could not read the issues of the *Pravda* from the 1920s for fear that the purged "unpersons" might appear to the reader more favorably than was officially warranted.) The new post-Communist ideological regimes are no strangers to this practice. For example, there are many recent instances of theft and destruction of archival files by the Ukrainian nationalist groups. A typical instance concerns the files of the Ukrainian Catholic Church (1995) that are deemed inconsistent with the nationalist interpretation of history.¹ No less serious are threats against researchers who engage in the study of taboo topics, for example, on the scale of wartime collaboration. This is not a pattern in all the post-Communist countries but is frequent enough in a number of Soviet successor states and in the Balkans.

Nationalist pressure groups have argued strongly against full archival access. In April 1993, the Moscow-based right-wing newspaper *Den'* (Day) carried an article with an attack on the Hoover Project, that is, a project to microfilm significant sections of the Russian archives, sponsored by the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace at Stanford University, Palo Alto, California. The *Den'* author charged that, in the aftermath of the Cold War, America, "as a victor country, is taking materials and spiritual values out of the vanquished country in amounts and of a quality sufficient to deprive the vanquished state of any possibility to resist, and to preclude any possibility of national resurgence. In the twentieth century information is the highest value and those who have information gain the upper hand over those who do not. Russia has been deprived of its seaports, geostrategic defense frontiers, the military-industrial complex and military potential. It has been deprived of its material products and resources and independent domestic and foreign policy. National ideology and culture have been strangled. Now Russia is being deprived of its information 'gene', its organizational secrets that contain the substance of the structure, the engineering blueprint that helped to bring up a power that won the biggest war in human history and developed unique forms of civilization that have withstood the test of postwar history."²

Pressures of this sort led to the reclassification of Russian archives. After a relatively open period of archival access (1991–1993), the State Secrets Act of August 1993 reversed the period of openness and ushered in the familiar regime of restricti-

¹ Jeffrey Burds to the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, Rochester, N.Y., 31 July 1996.

² "Russia Under Siege: Western Scholarly Research as Intellectual Imperialism", *Den'* (Moscow), April 11–17, 1993.

on. In essence, this law deprived archives of the independent right to declassify documents, the process that henceforth became vested in the successor institutions of the Soviet period. The consequences were felt immediately. Whereas in 1992 Russian archives declassified 2,867 documents, in 1995 the number dropped to 663.³ The Russian pattern of reclassification was typically arbitrary, giving rights of overseeing access to the ministries and, when applicable, to the host republics of the former U.S.S.R. For example, a responsible expert in a Russian ministry will refuse to consider declassification of non-Russian documents under his control because these are "not our property," thereby denying access.⁴ Most ominously, on the pattern practiced in various countries, where personal archives from the crisis periods of twentieth-century history are considered too sensitive for research access (Greece, Poland, etc.), the "personal files" in Russian archives were effectively closed by an imposition of a new 75-year limit. The new policy ostensibly guards the "right to privacy" of current generations. As a Russian archivist said to an American researcher, "A person living today has a right not to know that his grandfather was a rapist."⁵ Similar practices were introduced in Ukraine (1995) and several of the other ex-Soviet states, significantly restricting the archival access of foreign scholars. In fact, various discriminatory rules against foreigners also were introduced. The copying fees for foreigners in Russian archives became over 1,000 percent higher than those for the domestic users. Some depositories started requiring fee payments, and several St. Petersburg archives introduced daily admission and research fees.⁶ Moreover, archivists who were particularly cooperative with foreigners became subject to harassment.

An aspect of discriminatory measures is not ideological/political but financial. In many of the former Communist countries, particularly in the former U.S.S.R., the state support of archives has rapidly declined. For example, the 1992 budget of the RTsKhIDNI, the former Central Party Archive in Moscow, declined by 25 percent in comparison to the previous year. In addition to the reduction of budgetary support, the budget appropriations frequently werot made at all. By 1993 the state debt to the Russian archives rose to 50 million rubles (\$25,000). Due to the decline in state support and low staff salaries the Russian archives slashed preservation activities and radically reduced the purchase of basic office supplies. The archives started sav-

³ J. Arch Getty, "Secrets and Money: an Update on Russian Archives", *Newsnet: The Newsletter of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.), vol. 37, no. 5, November 1997.

⁴ Jeffrey Burds, "Patterns of Declassification in Former Soviet Archives, 1987–1995", paper presented at the American Historical Association annual convention, Chicago, 7 January 1995.

⁵ Burds to the Guggenheim Foundation, *op.cit.*

⁶ Burds, "Patterns of declassification", *op.cit.*

ing on such necessities as light bulbs and heating. In addition, much of the trained old staff started leaving in search of better opportunities. Hence the need for the archives to generate income outside the limited state budgets. And search for income led to various corruptive practices.⁷

Discretion of archival administration is notable throughout the world. But discretion is not the same as privileged access that is bought in cash. Scarcity drove the Russian archival administrations to agree to the purchase of documents and copying rights on a purely commercial basis that simultaneously cut off the access of non-privileged researchers. Since the Russian archives often have attributes of personalized fiefs, headed by the director and his circle, social control over their dealings is often difficult to establish. This has led to special deals with targeted foreign partners (usually American university consortia), loss of access to others, and purely commercial restrictions.⁸ Corruption is as destructive to the freedom of research as any ideological obstacle. Hence the need to rethink the rules of archival service.

Archivists and researchers cannot prevent the wanton destruction of archival collections. They can, however, promote the following pattern of behavior in five sensitive areas: (1) All archival services ought to practice the regime of equal access for all legitimate researchers, foreign or domestic. (2) Due to the substandard archival budgeting in many countries, preservation must become an international obligation, promoted by the international consortia that would be solicitous of the need to introduce modern technology in archival institutions. (3) Every attempt should be made to standardize time limits and classification rules throughout the world. The 30-year rule is reasonable and should be practiced internationally, without exceptions. (4) International consortia ought to provide financial support for impoverished archival services. (5) Bilateral and multilateral exchanges ought to be promoted in the broad area of archival publishing and personnel training. These operational rules ought to reduce many of the current abuses. They will certainly render precious aid in providing the training for the professional utilization of archives.

⁷ J. Arch Getty, "Commercialization of Scholarship: Do We Need a Code of Behavior?", *Perspectives of the American Historical Association* (Washington, D.C.), May–June 1996.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Summary

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All archival collections have their familiars – their personal voices, which convey matter-of-fact statistics, bureaucratic reserve, but also the anguish and passion of historical actors and the aspirations for noble and ignoble goals. Historians and other researchers all have their lists of embarrassing and silly stories about "access" and lack thereof. Until the systemic collapse of 1989/90, these were an obligatory aspect of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Nowadays, especially as a consequence of wars that aim at obliterating memory, the archival voices are being silenced by far more challenging obstacles – worst of all; with the wholesale destruction of archival collections. In some cases, as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the destruction of archives is a strategy of war. Destroy the history of the "other" and you are on the way to having your proclaimed "enemy" deprived of a vertical continuity. This strategy is as flawed as it is dangerous. The destruction of Neapolitan archives in the Second World War abolished the history of Naples as little as the destruction of the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo can abolish the history of Bosnia-Herzegovina. But it is a disaster nevertheless. And since history is not particularist, the sources never are. The destruction of an archival collection harms all – not just one group or constituency. This paper points out how and offers several proposals for the protection of archival sources.