

More Troubled Waters at the KGB Archives

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Anyone who has ever had to deal with archives in Russia knows that getting access to certain documents does not necessarily mean getting the documents themselves. At every step of the way, the researcher stumbles upon man-made obstacles. An examination of the most grisly chapters of our past is often blocked by the authorities, and even when we journalists already know all, or almost all of it, we are forced to wait for permission from the powers-that-be. With this article I seek to give several case samples on the issue as well as some of the problems encountered when attempting to gain access to those files.

The motives behind some of the bans are clear, others are absurd and still others are a total mystery. One example is the case of the execution of the captured Polish officers in 1940. Almost all the documents had been uncovered and studied a year before the Soviet government officially admitted to the crime. Sometimes an investigation threatens someone's personal interests. For example, all attempts to find out the truth about the Red Army's crushing of the 1956 Hungarian uprising were stymied until Vladimir Kryuchkov—who happened to be third secretary of the Soviet embassy in Budapest in 1956—was removed from power. The ban on the use of files pertaining to the Nazi death camps appears to be absurd—but only on the face of it. And finally, I think the ban on the Raoul Wallenberg Case also belongs to the class of "incomprehensibles."

More often than not, the authorities refuse to declassify historical files not for fear of jeopardizing state interests, but because it is a way to benefit from the controlled commercialization of the archives themselves. For those working in the state archives, historical documents are a major source of income. Quite often, the directors of the archives and other officials with access to the files decide to publish certain documents, whereas independent historians have to make do with material of secondary importance. And now, finally, the sale of public records has been legalized. Widely known, for example, is the sale of documents (reportedly for 2,000 DM) to the widow of the prewar German

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ambassador to the USSR, Count Frederic Werner von der Schulenberg. Law enforcement officers are also earning an honest ruble on the side by publishing secret files—including cases still under investigation. The most sensational is the sale to *Der Spiegel* of video footage used in the investigation of last August's attempted coup. Those who leaked the material have not been located to this day. There have been numerous other cases: investigators of the Military Procurator's Office have published documents on the gunning down of the worker's protest march at Novocherkassk in 1962; the Katyn murder of the captured Polish officers; and the Trial of the Sixteen. The search for World War II burial sites is also going commercial rapidly. Various nongovernment agencies and private individuals in the U.S. have announced sizable rewards for any information shedding light on the fate of American prisoners of war (POWs) who found themselves in the Soviet Union after World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. One can only imagine the proliferation of fakes and forgeries that will soon appear and have already appeared; forgeries which a foreigner with no special pull in Russia will find very difficult to detect.

Why then do such large sections of the archives remain untouched? As already stated, absurd bans are absurd only on the surface. Professionals know perfectly well why the bans exist: to block independent investigations. It is not enough to simply close or destroy the file of a particular case, because traces will be found in dozens of other documents. For example, even if a political prisoner's file is destroyed or hidden, the fact that he was kept at a particular jail is bound to be mentioned in other prisoners' files—such are the rules of prison record-keeping.

The following are some examples from my own experiences with bans which block independent investigation. The secret protocols of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pacts, whose originals have probably not survived, became the object of heated debate at one time—first in our press, and later in Parliament. However, the records of the Nuremberg Trials contain important documents confirming the existence of a secret Soviet-German protocol. It was the Soviet government commission under Andrei Vyshinsky which drew up a list of questions which were on no account to be discussed at the open trial. In August 1989, I managed to publish those documents for the first time in a Russian-language journal in Estonia.

Another example is the so-called Trial of the Sixteen—the leaders of the Polish anticommunist underground, headed by Krajowa Armija and Leopold Okulicki. The trial was held in June 1945 in Moscow. The fate of General Okulicki, who was sentenced to ten years in prison, remained a

secret until recently. According to the case documents, he died during a surgical operation soon after being sentenced. Granted, I am not qualified to judge the medical side of the matter—it is up to independent forensic doctors to investigate the cause of his death. But among those papers, I found a report signed by a certain Smoltsov, head of the KGB jail's medical department. His name also was connected with the Wallenberg Case. His report was the only document certifying Raoul Wallenberg's death in complete conformity with the official Soviet version. All attempts to secure samples of Smoltsov's handwriting for an expert examination came to nothing: no papers written in his hand had survived, even in the doctor's personal files. But now, such a sample has appeared. And it can be said with certainty that what we are looking at are two different handwritings.

That example (Smoltsov's) explains quite well why the archives continue to be under lock and key. And that is why even with the files we do manage to obtain, the pagination has been changed several times over—a dead giveaway showing that certain documents have been removed.

The Wallenberg Case is the most characteristic in this aspect. We remember how his personal effects were handed over to his family—things found "in a cloth bag," according to KGB officials. However, under prison record-keeping rules, a prisoner's money, identification papers, and personal effects must be kept in different places and can be recovered only after cross-checking with the list of his belongings—a list kept in his personal dossier. Thus, it is clear that there was a Wallenberg Case—at least by the moment when his things were handed over to his relatives. Right after the abortive coup in August 1991, the KGB's new administration presented several new documents connected with the Wallenberg Case, including records of three interrogations by Grossheim-Krysko, who headed the Soviet Interests Department at the Swedish embassy in Budapest. The pagination shows that the records were taken out of a larger case. And yet, KGB officials maintain that there was no Wallenberg Case.

The Wallenberg Case continues to be one of the most involved and intriguing affairs in the KGB's history. We can only guess why the facts about his arrest by the Soviets in Budapest are still being kept secret. Most likely, the KGB tried to turn him into the principal character of political "show trials" in the capitals of Eastern Europe. We also have reason to believe that he fell victim to the deadly struggle between the KGB's two top men—Lavrenti Beria and Viktor Abakumov. It is a known

fact that the investigators who handled the Wallenberg Case also handled the case against the Jewish Antifascist Committee—the result of which saw the flower of the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia be decimated. Later, the same investigators "exposed" the so-called Zionist plot inside the KGB, with some of State Security Minister Abakumov's closest associates named as those among the plotters.

Attempting to obtain documents about POWs is always another problem. Several years ago, as I was going through the files of the NKVD Department of Convoy Troops when I found lists of 195 British, French and Belgian POWs held in a Soviet camp in 1940-1941. Through the British historian Lord Betell I learned that those men had escaped from Nazi captivity, but were then arrested on the Soviet border on spying charges. Right after the outbreak of the Soviet-German war, the British captives were repatriated (two of them are still alive), but the Frenchmen and Belgians have most likely vanished in the gulag. The USSR was not at war with Britain, France or Belgium and even had diplomatic relations with them. Hence, the men were held in Soviet camps in violation of international law. This case may explain why so many documents relating to POWs are still classified.

Another important source of information is eye-witness accounts and evidence given by the actual participants. Among those participants, there are former security service employees who now want to help clear up the dark spots of our past. The problem is that all of them once signed an agreement not to divulge state secrets. And these agreements remain in force to this day—even though both the agency and the state it professed to protect have ceased to exist.

Strange events have recently been taking place at the former KGB archives. On the one hand, the files remain classified, but on the other, new documents keep appearing which seem to shed some light on them. Yet upon closer inspection, the new information often proves to be false.

The following is an example of this falsification. On 1 July 1960, a Soviet fighter downed an American RB-47 over the Barents Sea. Soviet officials claimed the plane had been shot down over Soviet territorial waters. A *Komsomolskaya Pravda* issue dated 3 August 1991 published an interview with Leonid Gomziakov who was at the time an officer with the Air Defense Division headquarters at Severomorsk. The interview disclosed that the fighter's pilot, Vladimir Poliakov, had opened fire without any orders to do so. When Gomziakov wrote his report to Moscow, he attributed Poliakov's action to "his personal hatred of the American aggressors." A curious turn of phrase, is it not? But where is

the proof? However, in the West the incident at Barents Sea is known in great detail, something which Gomziakov, judging by his report, had not even suspected. I will not burden the reader with excessive technical detail, particularly since details are almost completely absent in Gomziakov's report and the ones he does provide are so absurdly inaccurate that it is obvious even to the amateur. Both the U.S. diplomatic note and the speech by U.N. American Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge provide details that corroborate evidence given by John McKone, the surviving navigator, at KGB headquarters. The captured Americans of course had no conceivable chance of contacting Washington. They were allowed to write to their families only in August 1960 (their letters being carefully scrutinized by KGB censors), after the incident was discussed at the U.N. Security Council in July of that year.

During the Security Council session of 25 July 1960, two resolutions were put to the vote: an American one requesting that an international commission be set up to examine the circumstances of the downing, and an Italian one giving International Red Cross representatives access to the surviving airmen in Soviet captivity. Only the Soviet and Polish delegates voted against the resolutions. The USSR, as a permanent Security Council member, blocked both resolutions (Soviet vetoes 88 and 89).

In mid-August 1960, a meeting was arranged between the American pilots and the Soviet pilot who shot them down, Poliakov, who by that time had been awarded the Order of the Red Banner. Poliakov stated he had opened fire after the Americans refused to obey his command to land. When McKone asked what sort of signal Poliakov had used, the latter stated that he had wagged his wings. This signal is, of course, known to pilots the world over, but it means something quite different, and that was not the only discrepancy in Poliakov's evidence. John McKone and his co-pilot, Bruce Olmstead, spent nearly seven months in the KGB prison. Judging by the interrogation records, investigator Colonel Pankratov was preparing a show trial along the lines of the Powers Case. The pilots were released right after John F. Kennedy's inauguration—officially as a goodwill gesture, but in reality it was because the KGB never did get a confession out of them. Here, too, we see a glaring contrast with what *Komsomolskaya Pravda* wrote. Gomziakov claimed that Soviet Defense Minister Malinovsky had personally telephoned division headquarters and dictated the questions he wanted the Americans asked. According to Gomziakov, the airmen stated that if they really did violate Soviet airspace, it was by mistake: the aim of their flight was to study radio-frequency radiation in the upper layers of the atmosphere. Yet according

to American sources, the men refused to answer any questions or admit to any border violation. That explains why the Kremlin was silent until 11 July 1960, and why top Soviet officials pretended not to know anything about it. The RB-47's commander, Willar Palm, lies buried at Arlington National Cemetery. The bodies of the three other crew members—Eugene Posa, Oscar Goforth, and Dean Phillips—were never found. U.S. officials claim a total of 75 American pilots died near Soviet borders in the period 1950-1960 and another 22 were reported missing. I am prepared to believe they all really did violate Soviet air space. But where are the documents?

Another case is taking shape before our eyes. I am referring to American POWs in Indochina. In October 1991, ex-KGB Major General Oleg Kalugin made a statement admitting (among other things) that his subordinates (he later mentioned one name: retired KGB Colonel Oleg Nechiporenko) had taken part in questioning American POWs in Vietnam. Nechiporenko later confirmed having taken part in one such interrogation, but corrected the year from 1978 or 1976 to 1973. Nechiporenko had been introduced to an American (a CIA agent, by the way) as a Foreign Ministry official from an East European country (but the American probably did not believe this). During the questioning, the American causally dropped a few Russian phrases, closely watching Nechiporenko's reaction. Finally, the American completely refused to talk. Nechiporenko had to return to Moscow, leaving the questionnaire with his Vietnamese colleagues. A year later, he was sent to Hanoi again, but this time he dealt only with documents. Nechiporenko held a press conference in Moscow on 9 January 1992. However, a week earlier, on 3 January, the CIA, in reply to Kalugin's statement, had confirmed that two of its agents had been in Vietnamese captivity. They also confirmed that one of them had been questioned in March 1973 by a European—most probably a Soviet intelligence officer, as far as the captive could estimate. The dates also coincide. Nechiporenko stated he thought the American had been taken prisoner five years before the interrogation. The other CIA agent was questioned by the Vietnamese, but they clearly used a questionnaire created in Moscow. Thus, Nechiporenko had invented the whole story years later.

Oleg Nechiporenko was involved in yet another intriguing episode. According to John Baron, author of a book about the KGB, Nechiporenko went to Mexico City to meet Lee Harvey Oswald, John F. Kennedy's assassin-to-be. The KGB colonel admitted to his two meetings with Oswald in September 1962 at the Soviet embassy compound, but refused

to disclose details, claiming that it was a "trade secret" (oddly enough, another example of commercialization is that Nechiporenko is writing his memoirs). In November 1991, an aide to former KGB chief Vadim Bakatin announced that journalists would soon obtain access to the Oswald case. They now say, however, that they meant not the documents themselves, but rather, the KGB's interpretation of events.

Today, "new evidence" of the Katyn Case has been made public, though the investigation is far from over. Two eyewitnesses claim that they saw a document, signed by Stalin himself, ordering all the captured Polish officers to be shot. Who are those witnesses? Perhaps Soprunenko and Tokarev, the former NKVD men now being accused of the actual execution? Obviously, the "new evidence" serves their own interests.

Thus, we find the same pattern in all the above cases: a minimum of authentic documents and a maximum of invention and fabrication. It is clear that KGB files must be examined by independent and impartial researchers—not by those who actually committed the crimes or have something to gain from hiding the truth: KGB officials.