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THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1989 AND THE “ARCHIVAL REVOLUTION” IN THE USSR

It is generally assumed that the “archival revolution” in Russia took place in the year 1991 when the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was dissolved and the Soviet regime opened the doors to scores of archives (mainly of the party), making millions of previously inaccessible documents available to the general public. To a great extent this is true, but it must not be forgotten that these fundamental changes—the political upheavals themselves and the new access to the archives—were determined by events of earlier years. The year 1989, which became a turning point not only for Eastern Europe but for the world as a whole, was also in many ways symbolic and significant with respect to the fate of Soviet archives and the documents contained within them.

At the end of the 1980s, when perestroika started to be implemented in the Soviet Union followed by most of the communist states of Europe, a situation arose that in Trotskyesque terms might be referred to as a new kind of “crisis of opposites.” On one hand there were half-hearted and inconsistent economic transformations, unsuccessful reforms of the unwieldy national party structures and a sharp decline in the standard of living. On the other hand a politics of transparency was unquestionably successful, which led to a rapidly developing political awareness in the population, an increase in nationalism and an end to fear of government authority. Further developments in these two directions could only lead either to an end of the existing regimes or attempts to “reestablish socialist legitimacy” by means of brute force. The revolutions of 1989 demonstrated that Eastern Europe chose the first of these options,¹ but they also triggered a deepening and irreversible development of transformational processes in the Soviet Union itself, essentially determining the future of the country that had embodied “the victory of socialism.”

When considering the links between the events in Eastern Europe and the “archival revolution” in the Soviet Union, it is worth pondering for a moment the two basic features of so-called closed (both in the literal and figurative sense of the word) institutions such as the party archives. Characteristic of Soviet perestroika were diametrically opposed tendencies appearing in all spheres of public life. This was also true with regard to the archival sector. Here the new principles of glasnost and democracy clashed directly with the same party’s aim of maximum secrecy

¹ Although the course of events was somewhat different in some Warsaw Pact countries (the GDR and Romania, for instance), this did not prevent the collapse of the regimes there as well.

regarding party and Soviet government documents. During the year 1989, which saw not only the revolutionary upheavals in Europe but also political battles at the first congresses of the People's Deputies of the Soviet Union, which were closely observed by the entire country, both tendencies were reinforced. This led to inevitable confrontations. Against this background, a "crisis of opposites" also developed that was of a specifically archival nature. On one hand, under the changing social political conditions it became practically impossible, even dangerous, for the authorities to maintain a policy of "closed archives." On the other hand, it was just as dangerous to open the archives: the Kremlin could not avoid being aware of the role the assertions of the opposition regarding various episodes in the past (e.g., the Katyń massacre, the crushing of the Hungarian uprising and the "Prague Spring") were having on the revolutions in Eastern Europe. Under these conditions the year 1989 was unique in its divisive character. The archival fortifications, which until that time had seemed to protect the bulk of historical documents of the CPSU and the Soviet Union from curious eyes, began to be washed out, in one part due to official decisions, in another, unauthorized activities.

Another issue concerns the changes that took place at that time with regard to the party archives themselves and the documents contained within them. Today, more than twenty years later, this is of course already a part of history which is documented with highly significant and interesting historical material. The former archives of the Central Committee of the CPSU, today the Russian State Archives for Contemporary History,² stored documents of the highest party and federal structures of the Soviet Union. These determined the internal and external policies not only of the Soviet state, but to a large extent also of the countries that were at that time part of the European communist camp.

The relations between the Soviet Union and its European satellites contained a number of "skeletons in the closet" that leaders of the communist states were loath to dwell upon. Accordingly, documents relating to these unpleasant episodes remained locked "with seven seals" in Moscow's archives. The democratic processes developing in the countries of Eastern Europe in the second half of the 1980s increasingly forced the leaders of the "brother parties" to demonstrate their independence from Moscow. In their struggle to stay in power, they sometimes attempted to adopt the popular demands of the opposition, especially its desire for the Soviet Union to reveal documents relating to the "blank spaces" in their common history. This was considered the least risky concession to their political opponents. But when Moscow's protégés were forced to leave the political arena, the new leaders who took their place demanded even more forcefully, almost categorically, the release of relevant documents by the Soviet regime.

² The generally accepted reference to "the former archive of the Central Committee of the CPSU" is not entirely accurate: RGANI, at the time of its formation in 1991 called the Center of Storage of Contemporary Documents, was in fact formed from a number of archives that were operating in various divisions of the Central Committee of the CPSU.

The demands that were most repeated and widespread concerned the fate of compatriots who had been repressed in the Soviet Union during the Stalin years. To a great extent these demands were prompted by the Soviet leadership itself, which in 1987 had instituted a “Commission of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU for the Expanded Study of Materials Related to Repression Taking Place during the Period between 1930 and 1940 and at the Beginning of the 1950s.”³ Due to tendencies toward more transparency and openness, the attempts by some leaders in the Soviet Communist Party to conceal the activities of this committee were doomed to failure from the outset. While a process of reconciliation was relatively easy for Soviet citizens, the situation for former “cominternists” and political emigrants from other countries (who represented the bulk of the politically repressed) was extraordinarily difficult. Many of them had not only been party or political figures, but had carried out “special” assignments for Soviet intelligence organs or law enforcement agencies. From the current perspective, some of the activities they had undertaken before being declared “enemies of the people” and which—under the earlier political structures—were clearly based on the principles of the struggle to establish “a dictatorship of the proletariat” could generate widely varying reactions from the general public. The question was much more than finding documents; it was a question of taking extreme caution in their declassification.

In earlier years the Central Committee (CC) had received similar inquiries, but they were of an individual nature and the information that was released was confidentially passed to “friends” (i.e. communists) along secret channels. From 1989, however, inquiries began cascading upon Moscow and information about these inquiries was being widely circulated by authorities in the countries of their origin. In February 1989, from Bulgaria alone, requests were directed to the CPSU Central Committee to provide data on more than 1,000 Bulgarian political emigrants who had been victims of repression by the Soviet regime.⁴ The Hungarians, the Czechs and the Poles followed suit. Almost all inquiries were accompanied by the urgent appeal to “remit a response as soon as possible,” with the standard rationale being the need for “aid in coping with the growing public unrest.” In the USSR, an effort was made to respond to the requests despite the immense difficulties posed by the huge volume of correspondence. In mid-1989 the KGB and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs complained to the Central Committee that their staffs were not capable of coping with the deluge of inquiries, much less deliver them within the deadlines demanded.⁵

³ Decree, CPSU Politburo, “Ob obrazovanii Komissii Politbyuro TsK KPSS po doplonitel’nomu izucheniyu materialov, svyazannykh s repressiyam, imevshimi mesto v period 1930–1940 i nachala 1950-kh godov,” 28 September 1987, in Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii (hereafter RGANI), f. 3, op. 103, d. 96, l. 3.

⁴ Documents of the Committee for Party Control regarding the rehabilitation of Bulgarian victims of Stalinist repression, February–November 1989, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 102, d. 750, l. 1–374.

⁵ Memorandum, deputy head of the CPSU International Department, V. Musatov, on the presentation to the Hungarian Socialist Party of several lists of repressed Hungarian political émigrés, 29 June 1990, in RGANI, f. 3, op. 103, d. 687, l. 1.

Another important aspect of the opening of Soviet archives as influenced by the developments in Eastern Europe was the attention given by several countries to the tragic period in their histories that was associated with Soviet military intervention. Of major interest was the insurrection in Hungary in 1956 and the “Prague Spring” of 1968. In fact, in these countries truly open discussion about these events only began with the onset of the struggles for power. In the case of the “Prague Spring,” Moscow itself was an instigator of these discussions. At the behest of the CPSU Central Committee, in mid-1989 the Soviet Academy of Sciences prepared an analytical dossier called “From the Prague Spring of 1969 to the Perestroika of Today,” which contained translations of numerous twenty-year-old documents from Czechoslovak and German sources that had never before been published in the Soviet Union.⁶ Although it was common practice to classify such documents, the dossier was not even accorded the status “for official use only,” meaning that any member of the CC apparatus could read it. In December 1989 the leaders of Hungary, the GDR, Poland and the Soviet Union (four of the five countries that had taken part in the intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968) declared that handling the matter this way was inappropriate.⁷ Nonetheless, a few months later the secretary of the Central Committee, Valentin Kuptsov, suggested to the director of general affairs of the Communist Party, Valerii Boldin, that the communist leaders who had joined the opposition in Czechoslovakia should be granted access to Politburo documents regarding the “Prague Spring.” Kuptsov argued that “there is no way to avoid disclosure of the archives relating to the ‘Prague Spring’ and that it is probably better that the CPSU gradually undertake this task itself, beginning with the ‘more benign’ material. Now it is possible for the party to benefit from disclosures of this type; later it will be too late.”⁸

The situation in Hungary was different: until the final day of the Soviet Union’s existence, the Soviet leadership continued to consider the Hungarian revolution of 1956 “an anti-communist fascist coup.” For this reason Moscow reacted with great displeasure when the leaders of the Hungarian communist party, under pressure from the opposition, agreed in 1989 to ceremoniously inter the remains of executed participants of the 1956 uprising, above all Imre Nagy, on Hero’s Square in the center of Budapest. Even more displeasing to the Soviet Union was the decision of the new—no longer communist—Hungarian parliament to declare the first day of the Hungarian uprising, 23 October, a national holiday and to ask the

⁶ Analytical dossier, Institute of Economics of the World Socialist System, “Ot prazhskoi vesny to sovremennoi perestroike,” in RGANI, f. 5, op. 102, d. 166–69. In particular, the dossier contained basic information about the “Prague Spring” that was completely unknown in the Soviet Union, such as “the programmed activities of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party” or an appeal to the Czechoslovak opposition of “2000 words,” among others.

⁷ *Pravda*, 6 December 1990.

⁸ Report, CC Secretariat, regarding the disclosure of CPSU archival materials about the events in Czechoslovakia in 1968 to the associates of the CPSU International Department, 13 February 1991, in RGANI, f. 89, op. 11, d. 76, l. 6.

Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union to condemn their 1956 military intervention. The CPSU Central Committee issued an order to its staff for foreign affairs “to acquaint themselves with the material in the archives of the CPSU Central Committee on the decision to send Soviet forces to Hungary and other aspects of the Hungarian crisis of 1956 and prepare an assessment of the respective documents for the *Izvestiya TsK KPSS* [Newsletter of the CC CPSU].”⁹ However, it was apparently not possible to find documents in the archives that justified the Soviet military intervention in Hungary. An assessment was never published in the *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, which, like the Central Committee itself, ceased to exist in August 1991.

Nevertheless the Soviet leadership began to open its archives in response to requests from Hungary. The result of this in Budapest, however, was not as might have been expected. At the same time Imre Nagy was being praised in Budapest as “fighter against Stalinism” and “as an honest and principled advocate of democracy and the fundamental renewal of socialism,” documents from the 1930s and 40s were being released in Moscow revealing that when in Soviet emigration, Nagy had been an active and voluntary agent of the Soviet NKVD and had contributed significantly to the repression of foreign communists.¹⁰ At the request of the KGB, the Politburo of the CPSU decided to dispatch these documents to the general secretary of the Hungarian communist party, Károly Grósz, for use in his struggle with the opposition. Grósz, however, either did not have the will to exploit the documents for this purpose or simply was unable to do so.

While in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, archival documents concerning the Soviet military interventions in their countries were of primary concern, Poland, which had been close to similar intrusions more than once, had a different interest at the end of the 1980s. Warsaw insisted ever more forcefully that Moscow release documents relating to the mass execution in 1940 of Polish prisoners of war in Katyń. Without addressing the details of the Katyń massacre, which has recently been the object of much attention in professional literature, it should be noted that this issue dominated Russian-Polish relations in 1989–90. Poland was one of the first countries in the “communist brotherhood” where the communists lost power, this happening already in the summer of 1989. This created a major change in the situation concerning Katyń. Until then, the Polish researchers and public officials who were members of the joint Soviet-Polish Commission for the Study of the History of the Relations between Both Countries had adamantly yet diplomatically called for the Soviets to acknowledge that detained Poles had been executed by members of the NKVD and to declassify Soviet documents relating to this issue. But from autumn 1989, the demands became ultimatums that resonated

⁹ Report, CC Secretariat regarding the study of archival materials on the events in Hungary in 1956, n.d., in RGANI, f. 89, op. 11, d. 23, l. 1.

¹⁰ Report on the agent “Volodya” (Imre Nagy), copy, June 1941, in RGANI, f. 89, op. 45, d. 82, ll. 1–3.

at the highest levels of the government. The Polish members of the commission threatened to dissolve the commission if the Soviet authorities did not produce comprehensive information on the Katyń massacre.

Paradoxically, the Soviet members of the commission had no reliable information about the existence or absence of materials on Katyń. At the same time they had to defend the official Soviet line, a line that due to Western publications of ever more documents had become openly untenable. The chairman of the Soviet part of the commission, Georgii Smirnov, attempted in vain to convince the Soviet leadership “that under the present circumstances the only alternative is to open the archives to Soviet and Polish historians.” Gorbachev was fully aware of where the main documents confirming that the massacre had been committed by Soviet forces in 1940 were being kept. Nonetheless, he persistently continued to give orders, among others, that arrangements be made to find “conclusive evidence” and to organize “further research and study into archival materials” relating to the matter. In light of subsequent revelations that the Soviet leader had held “sealed packet no. 1” in his hands with documents relating to the Katyń massacre already at the beginning of 1989 at the very latest, it becomes quite clear why the CPSU general secretary, in his public appearances at the time, so assiduously avoided meetings and interviews with Polish journalists.

In their discussions with colleagues from abroad, the history of the Katyń massacre was by far not the only topic that left Soviet historians vulnerable due to their lack of access to documents in domestic archives. At the time even more attention was being devoted to the release of documents and classified appendices relating to the Soviet-German pact of 1939 (the Hitler-Stalin Pact). The fiftieth anniversary of the event occurred in the midst of the revolutions in the countries of Eastern Europe as well as during a growing wave of resolve in the Baltic nations to secede from the Soviet Union. Calls to find and release documents in Soviet archives grew ever louder, not only from Poland, the first victim of the Soviet-German agreement, but also from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and even from Moscow itself. More cautious Soviet historians, such as for instance the director of the Institute for Global History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, academician Aleksandr Chubar’yan, suggested to the Soviet government to publish an article in a professional journal elucidating the Soviet-German agreement of 1939 and its “secret protocol.” He observed that “the article would not serve as recognition of the protocol’s authenticity, rather solely as a scholarly interpretation of questions raised in the document.”¹¹

Other researchers explicitly demanded party leaders to open “secret” archival documents, arguing that this was the only means by which they could convincingly debate with their opponents. Many historians criticized authorities not

¹¹ Memorandum, deputy head of the CPSU Department for Science and Research Institutions, V. Ryabov, and material of the Institute of Global History of the USSR Academy of Sciences regarding the Soviet-German agreement of 23 August 1939, 28 August 1988, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 101, d. 361, l. 40.

only for concealing documents, but for causing a disastrous delay in assessing the developing situation: “The Central Committee and its ancillary agencies are losing their grasp on reality.”¹² As a result the information from the archives placed at the disposal of the Commission for the Political and Legal Evaluation of the Soviet–German Treaty of 1939, which was created at the Congress of People’s Deputies of the Soviet Union, was far from complete. The conclusions of the commission were extremely contradictory and late: they appeared after the whole world—especially the Baltic states—had loudly commemorated the anniversary of the events of 1939. When Soviet historians attempted to “beat the clock” with a film on the August event using documents obtained by the commission, the plan was categorically prohibited by the higher party authorities. Despite gradually losing control of the situation in the country, leaders of the party clung to old attitudes and kept reiterating: “How can one give the commission the materials? They are being prepared for the Congress of the People’s Deputies.”¹³

Within the CPSU there were attempts to demonstrate that the proclaimed transparency and openness in Soviet society also extended to historical source material. At the nineteenth all-union party conference held in 1988, some of the most important tasks for democratizing the society included demands for ensuring the right of individual citizens to receive complete and accurate information on any question not related to state or official classified data, as well as regulating the use of archival materials and expanding access to them.¹⁴ Based on a Politburo decision, from 1989 onwards the CPSU Central Committee began to publish a new journal,¹⁵ the above-mentioned *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*. In addition to reports on the current activities of the party, the journal included information about matters such as the activities of its various divisions, and also published answers to readers’ questions. There was also a section called “from the archives of the CPSU.”

Given the times, against a backdrop of total secrecy of the party archives, this was clearly a step forward, although in reality this contribution to “expanded access to party documents” was quite modest. The archival materials published in the *Izvestiya TsK KPSS* related mainly to the period of the 1920s–40s, carefully skirting numerous “dubious” episodes in the history of the party. They dealt almost exclusively with the inner workings of the party or the domestic activity of

¹² Minutes of the meeting of the CPSU Politburo member V.A. Medvedev with historians and social scientists, 3 October 1989, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 102, d. 163, l. 21.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Report, head of the CPSU Department for Ideology, A. Kapto, and head of the CPSU General Department, V. Boldin, regarding the problem of open access to the party archives for citizens, 2 April 1990, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 103, d. 991, l. 51.

¹⁵ In fact, it was not a completely new edition: from May 1919 a journal had been published with the name *Izvestiya TsK VKP(B)*, in whose pages documents of higher Party organs reporting on current activity appeared. Later the journal was renamed *Partiinoye stroitel'stvo* (from 1946: *Partiinaya zhizn*). Here only information on the activities of local Party organizations and their Party-building experiences was published.

the CPSU. The “hottest” document of postwar history was the publication of the text of Khrushchev’s secret speech at the twentieth congress of the CPSU about the Stalin personality cult—a speech that for thirty years had been well known to the entire world except for the Soviet Union itself. The presentation of these publications in the journal was in many ways peculiar: a few were equipped with a scholarly apparatus noting that the documents were kept in the Central Party Archive (CPA) of the Institute for Marxism-Leninism at the CPSU Central Committee, an archive that was nearly inaccessible to most citizens. But most of the material lacked any information about its origin.

In order to satisfy at least some of historians’ “hunger” for information from hitherto secret archival materials and to demonstrate the success of its democratization and glasnost policies, the Soviet party leadership decided to intensify the declassification of documents in state custody. As mandated by the Central Committee on 3 December 1986, the state archives of the USSR began actively to remove existing restrictions to researchers on access to collections of the USSR state archives and to transfer classified material to open storage. The head of the main archive administration of the USSR, Fedor Vaganov, reported to the CPSU Central Committee that on the first of January 1989, the state archives of the country made more than 5.5 million files available for open access and that the work on this process was continuing.¹⁶

Archivists and historians, however, encountered a very serious and even intractable problem. The most interesting and important archival documents were kept in the archives of governmental agencies whose administrators had no interest in transferring them to state storage, nor in declassifying them, much less in making them available for research. This went as far as archivists being forced to suspend their work on preparing numerous volumes of documents because, despite the decisions of higher party organs, the archivists of governmental agencies refused to make materials stored in their archives available, even if they concerned “innocuous” matters such as “Industry and the Working Class of the USSR in the years 1946 to 1975.” Needless to say, acquiring archival documents from governmental agencies with the aim of publishing on foreign policy affairs was a hopeless cause. This was well known to the Soviet leadership, but they chose to create the impression that the issue was a moot point. At a meeting of historians and social scientists at the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party in October of 1989, CC Secretary Vadim Medvedev displayed surprise when he heard that all governmental agencies were keeping their archival documents under wraps: “Which governmental agencies? You mean all agencies including the Council of Ministers of the USSR? And the Central Committee?”¹⁷

¹⁶ Memorandum, head of the Main Archival Administration of the USSR, F.M. Vaganov, to the CPSU Central Committee, regarding the declassification of archival documents, 14 April 1989, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 102, d. 164, l. 12.

¹⁷ Minutes of the meeting of the Politburo member V.A. Medvedev with historians and social scientists, 3 October 1989, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 102, d. 163, l. 56.

Apparently at least this party leader “didn’t know” that all requests of Soviet historians for access to archives relating to the past of the Soviet Communist Party received the following stereotypical answer: “The issue of access to requested documents is the purview of the respective governing bodies of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party.”¹⁸ Moreover, when in October of 1989 the director of the Administration for Protection of Printed Classified State Secrets, Vladimir Boldyrev, brought forward an initiative that “authorization for the release of secret and restricted for publication documents of the Central Committee of the CPSU [...] can be obtained from the General Department of the Central Committee,” he was corrected by the Old Square (i.e. the Central Committee headquarters) that this could be done “not by the General Department of the Central Committee, but only by the leading organs of the Central Committee of the party, the Politburo and the Secretariat of the CPSU.”¹⁹ Under such conditions a significant general disclosure of party documents was hardly likely.

Regular calls of party leaders for more “openness,” and their criticism of those agencies not willing to declassify their documents looked increasingly incomprehensible in the face of the actions of the Central Committee itself in this respect. Thus it happened that on 20 September 1989 the Politburo finally approved the resolution “On raising the level of information regarding the events of the years 1939 to 1941,” by which the Foreign Ministry of the USSR was to expedite the publication of the respective volumes in the series *Documents on the Foreign Policy of the USSR*. The attempts, however, of the Foreign Ministry to acquire meaningful documents for this period from the Archives of the Central Committee of the party (above all transcripts of conversations between Stalin and Molotov with representatives of Germany and other Western countries) were unsuccessful. Equally unsuccessful were requests of the CPSU Central Committee to representatives of the KGB²⁰ and the efforts of the editorial collective of the Institute for Marxism-Leninism working on a ten-volume edition of the history of World War II. The scholars of the collective received only scattered documents, with material from official archives of party leaders and the government as well as documents

¹⁸ See for instance Memorandum, head of the Institute of Military History at the USSR Ministry of Defense, D.A. Volkogonov, to the CPSU Central Committee, requesting permission to read CPSU archival documents, 13 March 1989, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 102, d. 992, l. 4.

¹⁹ Memorandum, Main Administration for the Protection of State Secrets, with a resolution by CC secretary V.I. Boldin, regarding the publication of secret documents and CPSU materials in the public press, 19 October 1989, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 102, d. 992, l. 50.

²⁰ A KGB request for documents from the archives of the Central Committee for the set referred to as “Soviet military counter-intelligence (May 1945–May 1954)” received the following response from the main office of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party: A review of the requested documents has shown that they neither “contain data of the activities of military counter-intelligence,” nor “relate in general to specific questions of operational activity.” Memorandum, KGB to CPSU Central Committee, regarding the publication of a volume of documents on the activities of military counter-espionage organs, 6 November 1990, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 103, d. 992, l. 82.

from the so-called special folders remaining inaccessible.²¹ In addition the preparations for publishing materials related to the fourteenth congress of the CPSU and the regular edition of the complete works of Lenin were stalled. Indeed, while the first edition had become a victim of ideological and political dissension among its authors, to publish the new one-hundred-volume *Leniniana*, the party firstly had insufficient resources and secondly the work's publication involved real risks: "If the publication does not have a large number of subscribers, this will be actively used by opponents of Leninism for political purposes."²²

Along with the struggle to open party archives, Soviet archivists and historians of this period had another serious concern: the contents of the federal archives. At the end of the 1980s, federal archives began to be transferred from all of the soviet republics, with the exception of Russia and Ukraine, to the regional Ministries of Justice. Archivists were not convinced by assurances of the Central Committee that "the scientific-methodological management of the archives in the union republics will remain in the hands of the central archive of the Soviet Union."²³ They remembered only too well the unfortunate times when the Soviet archives were controlled by organs of the NKVD. Attempts to secure the adoption of a law regarding the federal archive collection of the Soviet Union that would regulate all aspects of the archives' activities (including the declassification of documents at certain times and their release by authorities to federal storage) vanished in the *nomenklatura*-bureaucratic quagmire.

Events in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s accelerated the disintegrating forces in the Soviet Union. This was also reflected in the situation concerning archival documents. Many republics began demanding the transfer of documents "representing their historical interests" to their own archives and their own supervision. Such initiatives, many of which, it should be noted, never became law, posed a real threat of once unified archival collections being torn apart. Another rapidly spreading phenomenon that could be observed in this period was the effort to "privatize" archives and their collections. This process quickly gained momentum both at the government policy level and with the general public. In the year 1990 the Lithuanian parliament passed legislation to transfer the ownership of

²¹ Report, CPSU Institute for Marxism-Leninism, on problems in preparing a 10-volume series on the history of the Great Patriotic War, November 1990, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 103, d. 992, l. 76. Still one more paradox of the Soviet system of Party archives: The Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Central Committee of the CPSU, which was responsible for the administration of the central Party archive, tried unsuccessfully to convince higher Party officials to give them at least rudimentary information about the documents kept in the General Department of the Central Committee.

²² Memorandum, head of the CPSU Department for Ideology, A. Kapto, on the preparation of the sixth edition of the complete works of V.I. Lenin, 11 October 1990, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 103, d. 303, l. 97.

²³ Report, CPSU departments, regarding the memorandum of the head of the Main Archival Administration, F.M. Vaganov, on the situation in Soviet archives, 8 June 1988, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 101, d. 360, l. 42.

a building containing documents pertaining to the local communist party. The prime minister of Lithuania, Kazimira Prunskiene, even appealed to Gorbachev to resolve this issue.²⁴ After Vilnius similar propositions began to appear in other republics. The CPSU Central Committee attempted to declare such actions illegal by citing recently enacted normative provisions of the Soviet Union regarding property rights,²⁵ but it was clear that stopping this process of "usurping" party archives was becoming increasingly difficult. In the same period, commercial enterprises emerged that provided Russian, but mainly foreign researchers information services regarding documents in archival collections in the Soviet Union.

With the exception of a few Soviet leaders, who repeated their mantra that the developments in the countries of Eastern Europe were not a model for the Soviet Union, which would construct its own individual destiny, there was a growing general awareness that the Soviet Union could avoid neither economic reform and free markets, nor multiple political parties and free elections. The experiences of the former communist camp countries, where the shifts in political structures were resulting in changes in all spheres of life, including wide-scale access to archives, graphically demonstrated that power over archival information meant both a huge advantage in the struggle for political power and—a good source of hard cash.

Obviously, the CPSU Central Committee understood this, and it was therefore to be expected that the "archive mania" at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s did not go unnoticed within higher party structures. With the creation of the office of President of the Soviet Union and election (or elevation) of the CPSU general secretary, Gorbachev, to this office, the dissection of the party archives and the documents contained within them began. While to a great extent this was arbitrary, the most valuable documents were transferred to the presidential archives. From 1989 intensive, albeit incomplete, work began at the Central Committee to prepare a new "order for the use of documents from party archives" and "regulations concerning the use of documents in the archival collections of the CPSU."²⁶ But as it turned out, those carrying out these preparations saw the future of the archival legacy of the party in a different light. Actually the project initiated by the Institute for the Theory and History of Socialism (as the Institute

²⁴ Report, deputy head of the CPSU General Department, P. Laptev, "Ob otvete na pis'mo prem'er-ministra Litovskoi Respubliki K. Prunskene po voprosu ob archive Kompartii Litvy," October 1990, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 103, d. 991, l. 107.

²⁵ Only in 1990 were measures taken with respect to this question: the Law "On ownership in the Soviet Union" (6 March 1990), the Decree of the president of the Soviet Union "On measures to protect the inviolability of the right to ownership in the Soviet Union" (10 October 1990), and the Decree of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union "On measures to protect private property in the Soviet Union on the territory of the Lithuanian Socialist Republic" (27 March 1990). None of these measures, however, had the power of authority under the conditions as they were developing.

²⁶ Report, CPSU General Department, regarding the CPSU archival holdings, 5 August 1991, in RGANI, f. 89, op. 20, d. 76, l. 2.

of Marxism-Leninism began to call itself in 1991) for “regulations regarding the archival collection of the CPSU” was an attempt to secure the Institute’s monopoly of control and use not only of documents in the Central Party Archive, but of all archives related to the party. But even before the Central Committee of the CPSU ceased to exist and the doors of the party archives were thrown open to researchers, a number of “most trusted” scholars had begun to work on classified documents from the party archives with the permission of high party leaders. Later, after the demise of the party and the Soviet Union, some of these researchers actually began to sell copies of these documents abroad.

It should be noted that the structuring and development of party archives in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s was strongly influenced not only by processes taking place within the country, but also within the party itself. The transformation of the social and political situation and the accompanying changes in public life forced improvements to be made in higher party structures. Democratic processes affecting the party during this period led to a certain amount of streamlining of party filing activity, whereby the number of documents entering the archival departments of the Central Committee was reduced. Certain elements of transparency (if such a term can even be used in association with the archives of the Central Committee of the party at the time) became apparent in less material being designated as classified. Earlier this designation had been almost automatically applied to any document produced at the CC headquarters or directed there from external sources. This less restrictive practice, of course, was not applicable to documents of the Politburo or the Secretariat of the Central Committee, nor for materials relating to foreign relations, but nevertheless at the end of the 1980s more and more documents began to appear without this limiting and intimidating designation. This fact, combined with the general decline in the level of secrecy of party documents (even during the tensest moments of the upheavals in Eastern Europe materials were designated “confidential” as opposed to “secret” or “top secret”), marked an important step towards shredding the shroud of party secrets covering the archives of the Central Committee.

The archives of the Central Committee were also seriously affected by attempts to rid the CC apparatus of redundant elements in order to turn it into a more dynamic, flexible and effective operation. The end of 1988 saw the most ambitious reorganization of the CC apparatus in its entire history, resulting in only eight departments remaining. These oversaw all aspects of public life in the country. What is more, while most of the former departments of the Central Committee were consolidated or merged, there were also some that “died a natural death.” One of these, in light of the ongoing revolutionary upheavals in Eastern Europe, was the Department for Relations with the Communist and Workers’ Parties of Socialist Countries: it simply disappeared from the Central Committee apparatus, together with the disappearance of communist structures in the majority of these countries.

The number of sections, however, soon began to grow again. This was a result of departments being needed to deal with new matters the CPSU Central Committee now had to address, including policies concerning nationalities, relations with public political organizations, legislative initiatives and legal issues. These new departments became the focus of a huge number of documents concerning some of the most pressing issues facing the country: the tragedy at Chernobyl, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the activities of public organizations such as "Memorial," "For a Democratic Union," "The Socialist Initiative," and "We Remember." One set of documents contained material concerning events that the party leaders would have considered nightmarish two or three years earlier. These included the "de-partying" of constituent republics and public organizations, referendums on preserving the Soviet Union, and elections for the president of the Russian Federation.

The fundamental political changes at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 90s triggered changes in the contents of the documents being stored in the archive of the CPSU Central Committee. A line was drawn below the entire complex of historical documents of those organizations that, with the collapse of the communist camp, also ceased to exist. The collections of the Central Committee archive filled with the final documents on the International Conferences of Communist and Workers' Parties, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) and the Warsaw Pact. In general there was a reduction in the number of international material (especially those relating to the former communist camp) and, conversely, an increase in the proportion of documents relating to domestic affairs. The increase in the number of analytical reports as well as current and future prognoses on the possible development of the situation both in the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe was remarkable. (The range of views expressed in the latter were extremely wide—from assertions that these nations would still remain within the sphere of Soviet foreign policy to the conviction that these countries would soon be absorbed into the West.)

Evidence of how these prognoses influenced the Soviet party leaders in their decisions or references to leading figures in the country (as was so characteristic in earlier periods, with features such as underlining, editorial comments, and notes in the margins) is essentially missing from the documents in the archive. In fact from the last years of its existence the archive of the Central Committee must be viewed from a very broad range of perspectives. For more than ten years, until the turn of the century, RGANI staff worked on reviewing and processing the remaining documents of the Central Committee that were referred to as "archival loose ends," that is, documents, most of them dating from 1985 to 1991, which were in a fragmented and unordered state (often entirely unrelated to one another) and came from different departments of the Central Committee of the CPSU apparatus.

Regarding the documents from the end of the 1980s as they relate to the revolutionary upheavals in the countries of Eastern Europe, a familiarity with the

contents of these documents reveals less about the course of these events than about the CPSU leadership's reaction to them. The two examples of documents cited below demonstrate how inconsistent, contradictory and incoherent policy was in Moscow when dealing with regimes that had only recently been their allies.

When the first communist regimes began to collapse, the Soviet Central Committee initially still attempted to implement immediate measures to take care of their "friends" in a difficult moment and to provide them full support. Resolutions to this end were enacted that aimed at creating a framework for major activities of the CPSU in some of the relevant countries. The first of these resolutions was passed on 28 September 1989 and was called "Regarding the situation in Poland, possible forms of its further development and prospects for Soviet-Polish relations." In the long list of measures designed at supporting Polish communists as well as preparing agreements with the new Polish government, there were points dealing with exchanges of opinions on the basis of historical documents concerning "de-Stalinization of Soviet-Polish relations, and their general improvement."²⁷

With a notable delay, a comparable document relating to Czechoslovakia appeared. Its contents were brief, but nevertheless in addition to a promise of support to the demoralized representatives of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, a reference was made to "forming a Soviet-Czechoslovak commission of party historians to study current problems in the relations between the two countries and their parties."²⁸ The resolutions mentioned here remained solely on paper, and for the rest of the countries involved, resolutions of this type were never taken. The contents of the resolution regarding Czechoslovakia even contained a provision to assist the Czechoslovak Communist Party to acquire paper "essential for the uninterrupted publication of the newspaper *Rudé právo*." Two months later the decision was in effect rescinded by the ideology section of the CPSU Central Committee, which commented that "in connection with the severe crisis and the scarcity of paper," aid to the Czechoslovak communists "does not seem possible."²⁹

A second episode demonstrating the processes in the Soviet leadership in the 1980s and 90s also regarded the Czechoslovak Communist Party. A report about a CPSU delegation visit to the CSSR in 1990 mentions a complaint of Czechoslovakian communists concerning the Soviet embassy in Prague: after the Communist

²⁷ Decree, CPSU Politburo, "Ob obstanovke v Pol'she, vozmozhnykh variantakh ee razvitiya, perspektivakh sovetsko-pol'skikh otnoshenii," 28 September 1989, in RGANI, f. 89, op. 9, d. 33, l. 5.

²⁸ Decree, CPSU Politburo, "O nekotorykh merakh po usilieniyu politico-ideologicheskogo vliyaniya na Chekhoslovakiyu," 23 April 1990, in RGANI, f. 89, op. 9, d. 124, l. 2. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia lost power in November of 1989 and the resolution of the CPSU Politburo "On certain measures to strengthen political-ideological influence on Czechoslovakia" was not adopted until 23 April 1990.

²⁹ Memorandum, deputy head of the CPSU Department for Ideology, A. Degtyarev, on the impossibility to provide the Czechoslovak communist party with paper, 23 May 1990, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 103, d. 310, l. 55.

Party of Czechoslovakia had lost its governing power, the Soviet ambassador had not participated in a single conference with party leaders and instead had actively participated in meetings with representatives of the right-wing Civic Forum. The following short exchange that ensued between Soviet leaders concerning the complaint is instructive:

The deputy general secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, V. A. Ivashko: “Comrade V.M. Falin, it would not be a bad idea to have a conversation with our ambassador: ambassadors’ heads at times can begin to spin.”

Head of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party: “Vladimir Antonovich, ambassadors fulfill confidential orders of the leadership of the Foreign Ministry [...]. The difference is that intelligent ambassadors are very cautious and others de-paralyze to the utmost.”

V. Ivashko: “Comrade G. I. Yanaev. It is clear that we must talk with the leadership at the Foreign Ministry about all of the problems that have built up.”

Vice-President of the Soviet Union, G. I. Yanaev: “This conversation will take place without fail.”³⁰

In concluding it should be noted that twenty years ago these documents did not, and could not, become subject to glasnost. Now, together with many analogous materials, they have become generally accessible. They are priceless historical sources of the Russian Federation that tell us of our recent past. This is one of the results of the revolutions of 1989: a more open path to the study of a historical legacy that was long hidden behind a double Iron Curtain of party secrecy—from the world community as well as from the USSR’s own citizens.

³⁰ Notes of CPSU Politburo members regarding a report of CC secretary V. Kuptsov on his trip to Czechoslovakia, 26 October 1990, in RGANI, f. 5, op. 103, d. 346, ll. 11–12.

