

Politics in the (Russian) Archives: The “Objectivity Question,” Trust, and the Limitations of Law

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Abstract

Laws and archival regulations that assure open access to essential records and guarantee their preservation are essential to the ability of a free society to understand itself and assure freedom in the future. They represent a set of standards against which the administration of particular archives can be measured. The relationship of formal laws and regulations to actual archival practices is still a limited one, however. Because of this limited relationship, archivists and the scholars who use archival collections are involved in political contests with state authorities over who controls the information in an archives. The history of the archives of the U.S.S.R. and the states of the former Soviet Union exemplifies these conflicts and the necessity of adhering to professional ethical standards in the absence of legal regulation.

For historians as well as for archivists, the issue of politics is never far removed from any important question about the role and function of archives. Politics touches fundamental matters of acquisition, appraisal, preservation, and access. It involves essential questions of scholarly objectivity and professional integrity. It thus affects the very ways historians and societies as a whole can comprehend their past and think about their future. An understanding of the nature and form of archival politics—by which I mean the ways power is wielded over and within these vital repositories of social memory—is therefore as important to the training of archivists as it is to the education of historians and other scholars who use archival collections. This

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is particularly so in the states of the former Soviet Union, where control within and over the archives long determined what was known, and knowable, about the past.

Some forms of archival politics (and the relations of power they reflect) are obvious, and not only in Soviet-style countries: state archives everywhere are the creations of established political authorities and are designed to serve state interests. Their funding comes from the state, their employees work for the state, their rules and regulations are in some way prescribed by state decrees or legislation.¹ The founding decree of 1 June 1918 for Soviet archives was particular in this regard only in that it extended government control over *all* archives within the new Soviet state, abolishing the very possibility of independent or private collections. Even in democracies, where state interests encompass the protection of objective scholarship and a citizen's uncensored right to information, questions concerning acquisition, access, preservation, and especially classification (secrecy) of public documents or government records are almost always decided in ways that privilege the state over the public. In this respect, a primary function of state archives and state archivists everywhere has been to preserve and protect dominant political values, ideologies, and interests, whether these are formally reflected in enabling legislation like the Federal Records Act in the United States or more crudely, as in the Soviet Union, through the processes of appointment and (especially) removal. In some sense, the historian doing independent archival research is therefore always engaged in a struggle with state-protected knowledge.

In Russia, an examination of this linkage has understandably been a crucial element in the transition from Soviet authoritarianism toward Russian democracy. Even in the early days of *perestroika*, the Moscow State Historical Archival Institute (MGIAI) pressed to establish the right of free scholarly access to archival documents as a way of confirming the corresponding right of all citizens to know fully about their past. As we know, this implied a fundamental shift in the way Soviet archivists understood their political function. Between 1987 and 1991, Iu. N. Afanas'ev, the Director of MGIAI, wrote frequently on the subject in popular journals like *Literaturnaia Rossiia*, and spoke eloquently about it at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, the University of

¹ Some archivists, especially those currently entering the field, seem well aware that their colleagues need to explore further the state-based framework of their profession, and understand more fully the ways even state archives may be grounded in societal values. Lara Moore is currently exploring aspects of this issue in her Ph.D. dissertation, "Restoring Order: Archives, Libraries, and the Legacy of the Old Regime in 19th C. France," Stanford Univ., in progress, as is Jennifer Milligan, especially in "The Archives Nationales and the State-Citizen Contract in Modern France," paper presented to the Sawyer Seminar on Archives, Documentation, and the Institutions of Social Memory, University of Michigan, November 2000. See also Hans Booms, "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987): 69–107 (translation by Hermina Joldermas and Richard Klumpenhouwer, who provide a brief introduction as well of Booms' 1972 original article, published in *Archivalische Zeitschrift*, 68; and esp. Terry Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 17–63.

Michigan, and other American and European institutions. Discussions about the cardinal role archives play in a society's ability to understand itself became a central theme of *glasnost*, and with it, the necessity to undertake fundamental reform. In the process, if perhaps inadvertently, the role of archivists themselves as figures wielding enormous power "over the past," so to speak, became as evident to ordinary Russians as it had always been to the users of Soviet archives. Even very loyal and distinguished Soviet scholars were often subjected to the crudest forms of archival administrative surveillance and censorship. It was not only Western scholars who had to gain special permission to enter the documentary "holy of holies," have their themes approved or modified by people with no real understanding of their topics, and await anxiously for the archivists themselves to select the materials they would be "permitted" to see.

Prominent Soviet historians and archivists like N. N. Bolkovitinov, B. S. Ilizarov, and S. V. Zhitomirskaja added strong voices to the cause of reform; and within a number of archives themselves, courageous archivists took the first steps on their own to "democratize" access to knowledge "from below" in important ways that genuinely supported the transformatory needs of the late Soviet state itself. Writing for a Western audience in the *American Archivist* in 1990, Bolkovitinov argued that a "catastrophic decline in the professional level" of Soviet archival administrators was a natural consequence of their subservience to the Soviet state, and remarked on the absence of outstanding historians among archive directors. To the same audience, S. V. Zhitomirskaja emphasized the incompleteness of the Soviet record, a consequence not so much of the destruction of documents but of the principles for records selection; and B. S. Ilizarov echoed the views of his colleagues in pointing out the ways in which a discourse of "enemies" caused archival documents to be made secret "on an unprecedented scale."²

This situation was used craftily by the most varied departments: from those who were supposed to adhere to the regime of secrecy and therefore increased their staffs or used archival documents to falsify legal matters, to those whose information was kept from scholars and society as a whole in the hopes of hiding their failures and crimes.³

Much of the public debate understandably centered on the need for a new archival law. In 1988 B. S. Ilizarov and others at MGIAI took a strong position against efforts at Glavarkhiv (Main Archival Administration) to rework archival legislation without broad public discussion. They and others opposed Glavarkhiv's intention to transfer archival administration to the Ministry of Justice, which might well have made access to increasingly sensitive historical

² "Glasnost' in the Archives? Commentary by Soviet Historians and Archivists," *American Archivist*, 53 (Summer 1990): 469, 472, 474–75.

³ "Glasnost' in the Archives?" 472.

materials even more restrictive, and affirm state control rather than extending administrative autonomy and independence. The degree to which Soviet archives "remained inaccessible, and had turned into a branch of the bureaucratic system, preserving only the memories which that system wanted to preserve," as Iu. N. Afanas'ev wrote in the reformist weekly *Moskovskie Novosti*, required the complete reworking of all laws and regulations governing archival affairs.⁴ The issue was not simply one of access to the archives, but of the control retained by various Soviet agencies over their documents, the political uses of classification, the secrecy, private holding, and inadequacy of finding aids, and especially the direct control archivists themselves retained over who might see what material—in sum, the thorough politicization of all Soviet recordkeeping.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these concerns led immediately to efforts in Russia to draft one of the most democratic and comprehensive archival laws in the world.⁵ Parallel efforts occurred in Ukraine, as they had in Hungary, Poland, and other East European countries after 1989.⁶ Historians and other archival scholars eagerly awaited these laws, even as new archives directors committed to democratic practices made vast amounts of new material available on their own. What may have been lost in the euphoria of the moment, however, especially for historians, was that it was not politics per se that distinguished Soviet archives and state recordkeeping from practices in other countries. However much the subservience of Soviet archival administrators to the Soviet state directly reflected the regime's own totalitarian ambitions, and was thus an egregious example of the power of archivists themselves to repress certain memories of the past, each of the areas in which the Soviet archival record was corrupted only exaggerated—however greatly—the problems of politics common to state archival systems everywhere.

Consider the central issue of access—a matter that obviously involves not simply the question of whether one is allowed in the door (although that is hardly a trivial concern), but the specific and complex problems of freedom of information, the right to privacy, and especially the protection of "secrets," that is, matters of classification and declassification. Most democratic societies do not require that researchers have special credentials or institutional affiliations

⁴Iu. N. Afanas'ev, "Chasnye fakty i chestnye otsenki," [Private Facts and Honest Evaluations] *Moskovskie Novosti*, 25 (June 19, 1988): 8.

⁵See A. N. Artizov et al., "Osnovy zakonodatel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii ob arkhivnom fonde Rossiiskoi Federatsii i arkhivakh: Idei, printsipy, realizatsiia," [The Fundamentals of Legislation in the Russian Federation on the Archival Collection and the Archives of the Russian Federation: Ideas, Principles, and their Realization], *Otechestvennye Arkhivy*, 1996:4, 3–8. Separate laws were adopted at this time on state secrets, on external state secrets, on Russian federal security agencies, and on the rehabilitation of victims of political repression. See *Sobranie aktov Prezidenta i Pravitel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [The Collection of Presidential and Government Acts of the Russian Federation] 1993: 51, 4936.

⁶B. V. Ivanenko, "Ukrainian Archives: Statutory and Ethical Problems," *Janus* (1994, no.1): 84–86.

to gain physical access to archives, as Russian archival practice unfortunately still does in apparent violation of Article 20 of the 1993 Russian Archival Law. (In Russian, the document one needs to present is called an “otnoshenie,” or “connection,” and shows formal connection to an authorized social or educational institution.) Yet access in other ways is everywhere restricted in ways that greatly empower the archivist. It is, of course, a great step forward that Russian law now conforms to the much publicized thirty-year international standard for protecting state secrets. But this also means in practice that archivists provide relatively few important materials relating to controversial *current* state practices to researchers, a policy that is driven by the politics of official self-protection and which is especially problematic in transitional states and societies like contemporary Russia. Of course for a long time Italy protected many government records for a period of one hundred years, while in England, some foreign office materials pertaining to the American revolutionary war are still permanently closed. It is also the case that secret documents transferred from state agencies to national archives after thirty years must go through an elaborate and time-consuming process of declassification before being available to researchers, which sometimes takes years. And Russian legislation provides for restricting documents that contain personal information of various sorts about individual citizens for a period of seventy-five years from the creation of a document, which in practice can mean the withholding of large amounts of sociological (or labor camp) data.

There are obviously good reasons why access to information of various sorts relating to an individual’s private life needs to be restricted, but it would be a mistake to imagine that these protections uniformly *prevent* access. Understandable limits on how personal information can and should be made generally available essentially privilege those who organize and hold the records, or who have authority over those who do. Rarely, if ever, is the right to access, and hence the right to privacy, assured by deaccessioning personal files and returning them to the individual. In countries like the United States, The Netherlands, and Sweden, different forms of Freedom of Information Acts (FOIA) allow individuals to petition for material in the archives about themselves (or others) with the support of the courts; but these laws provide at best specific pieces of *information* and not the full archival records or any unsolicited supporting documentation that good research and full disclosure require. They are also fraught with problems of their own. For instance, when I once requested copies of all the information I knew the Central Intelligence Agency had gathered on me because of my interest in Russia, including the very sharp objections with which I had responded to their efforts to contact me, I was told the information could only be found if I provided detailed itineraries for all of my travels in the U.S.S.R. and lists of everyone I talked to! Here, in other words, is a more subtle “conventional” politics deployed misleadingly under the guise of protecting privacy that can be every bit as restrictive as the earlier and more obvious Soviet kind.

The practices of declassification clearly present an additional level of "conventional" politics in the archives, and not only in the most obvious ways of protecting politically sensitive material. Under all regimes and I daresay in all cases, classification and declassification decisions are based on the familiar question of whether the documents under review contain information whose release would irreparably harm state or individual interests. In other words, they are decisions about content, even if the materials for entire institutions or agencies, like the Communist Party of the Soviet Union or the U.S. National Security Council, are thought by definition to contain this kind of material. The evaluation of content, however, necessarily requires interpretation, which means, of course, interpreters employed by and in service to the state; and almost everywhere, the decisions of those within the originating agencies or the archives who decide what is a state secret are not readily subject to appeal.

Sometimes archivists act with other state officials to conceal the subject matter and even the very existence of secret documents themselves from researchers, choices which reflect a dramatic imbalance of power between the archivist and the scholar, and which reflect choices and processes that are, by very definition, political, since their purpose is to conserve or protect particular authorities or power relations. Governments, in effect, entrust their secrets to the bureaucrats who run them, and who invariably find it much less work to keep documents secret than to review them carefully to see if they are "safe." Even in countries like Belarus, where declassification is officially automatic in the sense that all state documents are required to be transferred to the archives after thirty years, transferring agencies readily impose specific exemptions. In Hungary and the United States, declassification has long been a slow and laborious process, even with documents older than thirty years, because there are simply not enough competent people to review the huge volume of materials that need attention, and governments themselves usually lack the incentive to speed the process forward. In Washington, D.C., a warehouse of outdated C.I.A. materials is reportedly awaiting detailed review, even though the time limit for their release is well past.⁷

A discussion of archival politics in this area could readily be expanded to other familiar and restrictive practices. Ministries of defense and foreign affairs, and intelligence agencies are almost always politically strong enough to be exempt from national archival laws, or can arrange to be governed by separate, more accommodating legislation, as in the well-known "PROFS" case concern-

⁷In October 1999, the "Public Interest Declassification Act" was introduced in the U.S. Congress to address this problem. It was sponsored by Senator Patrick Moynihan, who had been known as a supporter of broad declassification reform. This bill addressed only special searches around specific incidents, such as the records related to Pinochet, the American church women murdered in Central America, and the Kennedy assassination. The declassification authorized by this bill was only of selected documents, not entire record groups. It was strongly opposed by the Association of American Historians and the American Historical Association, which argued that it would not in any productive way "advance the imperative of agencies to declassify all but the most sensitive of their older records that are of historical significance." See *NCC Washington Update* 6 (February 4, 2000). <<http://www2.hnet.msu.edu/~ncc/ncc00/ncc0003feb4.html>>

ing U.S. National Security Agency records.⁸ Specific transfer agreements between originating agencies and national archives are usually written to accommodate the agencies, rather than scholars or the public at large, in order simply to assure that transfers take place. Whole categories of materials might be exempted. Researchers rarely know the basis for exemptions, or even of their existence. The widespread introduction of information technology might well improve archival access by allowing more comprehensive finding aids to be prepared and linked, and by facilitating document retrieval, but many of these problems are likely to become even more complicated, rather than easier. Different electronic languages, the ease of concealment, the ready possibility, even, of altering electronic records obviously pose new and serious political issues, since they further increase the power that individual state agencies and officials may have over the records. The “delete” key is, in effect, a revolutionary paper shredder, allowing vast amounts of material to disappear in a matter of nanoseconds. Early in January 2000, the National Archives and Records Administration, the agency responsible for issuing guidance to all other U.S. government agencies on the preservation of their electronic records, reported that it had “lost” 43,000 electronic messages of its own through accidental erasure. Although the National Archives was supposed to have a backup system, it was not working properly. There was no way to restore the lost material.⁹

What seems at first to be at issue in all of these cases is the set of laws or administrative regulations governing archival practices. Indeed, the implicit assumption behind the strenuous efforts of most post-Soviet bloc countries after 1989 and 1991 to draft new comprehensive archival laws was precisely to objectify these processes through carefully drawn laws and regulations. Subjective biases, personal interests, and overt politics were to give way to professionalism and professionally regulated practices that would defend, in a non-partisan way, the needs of “person, society, and the state,” to use the formula of the 1998 symposium celebrating the eightieth anniversary of the Russian state archival service.¹⁰ Recent efforts to bring the 1993 Russian archival law into

⁸ This was the subject of an important suit brought against the U.S. Federal Government by the National Security Archive, a nongovernmental, nonprofit research institute and library of federal documents, with the support of the American Historical Association, among others. The director of the U.S. Presidential Library system had ruled that only electronic messages that had been printed out and retained by the White House could be considered “official records” and subject to the jurisdiction of the U.S. National Archives. On August 6, 1996, a Federal Appeals Court reversed a lower court ruling favorable to the plaintiffs, and declared in a split decision that the U.S. National Security Agency, acting under the direction and direct supervision of the President, was *not* a federal agency subject to the Freedom of Information Act and did not have to manage its records in accordance with the Federal Records Act. See the authoritative but as yet unpublished Dissertation by David A. Wallace, “The Public’s Use of Federal Record Keeping Statutes to Shape Federal Information Policy: A Study of the PROFS Case,” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1997).

⁹ *NCC Washington Update*, 6:2 (January 19, 2000). <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~ncc/ncc00/ncc0002jan19.html>.

¹⁰ See *Otechestvennye Arkhivy* (1998, no.6): 9–38.

correspondence with more recent legislation on freedom of information and state secrets have been based on similar assumptions. As V. A. Tiuneev and others involved in the project described their working group, "It preserved the conception of the organization of archival affairs on the basis of democratization, depoliticalization, the accessibility of state archives, and respect for the property rights of other [private] archives."¹¹

These admirable efforts at objectivizing and depoliticizing archival practices through new laws and regulations are obviously of vital importance to the democratization of all post-Soviet societies, but especially to Russia, whose vast holdings contain vital sources of knowledge about why so many things went so terribly wrong in so many places. Objectivized and depoliticized practices provide the key to self-scrutiny, the means through which the past can be most fully and effectively interpreted. Yet even in the most democratic regimes, comprehensive archival laws cannot fully regulate the ways archivists hold and exercise power over the records they control. Politics in some form thus remains an inescapable part of archival practice, fettering access to the artifacts of a society's past in ways that are often not readily apparent. This is not in any way an attempt to minimize the egregious ways in which Soviet archives were politically colored, to depreciate the effects of these actions on our understanding of the Soviet and Russian past, or to express any lack of support or appreciation for the important efforts at democratizing archival law. It is to suggest instead, first, that the task of addressing adequately the objective questions of archival law, and especially those about its effectiveness, necessarily requires an understanding of the actual locations of power in the archives, and the subjective as well as objective ways this power influences administrative practices; and second, that the inability of any law to fully regulate this power means that archival politics, which is to say the administration of a society's documentary past, is also fundamentally a matter of ethics. In other words, even with the most democratic archival laws in the world, an archival scholar's access to the past still depends essentially on relations of trust.

Let me argue the point in the simplest way: by first reviewing what actually happens when a historian initially enters an archival reading room—a moment of some anxiety and concern that many archivists may not fully comprehend. The nervousness often seen in first-time visitors is not simply because the archives itself is unfamiliar or that scholars need to learn their way around. Instead, it is because most researchers, and especially those in Russia who have come from some distance, have made important decisions about their time, resources, and research plan, only because the available general registers (or

¹¹ *Otechestvennye Arkhivy* (1998, no.6): 21. See also "Proekt. Federal'nyi zakon. O vnesenii izmenenii i dopolnenii v Osnovy Zakonodatel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii ob arkhivnom fonde Rossiiskoi Federatsii i arkhivakh. [Draft. Federal Law. On Changes and Additions to the Basic Legislation of the Russian Federation on Federation Archives and Archival Holdings]," *Otechestvennye Arkhivy* (1998, no.6): 22–33.

colleagues or archivists themselves) have suggested that particular archives hold records that will be useful for research. The historian does not really know this yet, since few general registers (and none in Russia) tell users exactly what records are in the archives, how comprehensive they are, whether similar or additional records may be housed elsewhere, or even whether they may be fully accessible. The scholar can only *trust* that even the imperfect registers of the Soviet period have pointed in the right direction.

Detailed lists of holdings and, hopefully, descriptions of a particular fond that report on its provenance, nature, and perhaps even its scope may be found in most Russian archives in individual registers. They can be found as well in Ukraine and Belarus, where archivists responsible for assembling collections under Soviet rule were usually very skilled indeed in these matters. Even here, however, the historian has to trust that archivists have fully understood their material, cataloged it according to an appropriate and transparent schema, represented it accurately in the descriptions of individual files, and highlighted the contents of those files without distorting what they may contain. This is not simply a matter of competence, but of the biases, explicit or implicit, that may have come to affect the archivist's work. Again, relations of trust underlie the historian's link to the archivist, and now more intensely, since no archival legislation whatsoever can assure transparency in these matters and few researchers are ever able to verify them on their own. Even more important is the historian's trust that unless the registers specifically say otherwise, none of the documents have been left uncataloged or otherwise concealed, that the collection was not distorted to begin with by an originating agency that held back important records. Again, verification other than by archivists themselves is almost always impossible, a circumstance which further shapes and delineates archival relations of power.

The organizational structure of a fond involves an additional level of trust, since the complex question of how documents should be organized involves important assumptions about how they relate to each other. Here one encounters important epistemological issues, since the analytic categories that structure the ways documents have been assembled and cataloged necessarily reflect a series of assumptions about what needs to be known, and hence what is knowable. The historian has to rely on the archivist to create a cataloging system that reflects discrete and useful analytical categories within even well defined subject areas. The historian must depend that a cataloging system's descriptions of labor protest, for example, which may appropriately be labeled as "correspondence of the factory inspectorate" in terms of the office creating the record, are not hiding records under that label as a way of preventing access, or otherwise concealed under very different and misleading topical descriptions. In principle, this can be verified by looking at all the documents themselves. In practice, this is almost always impossible, both in the archives of

the former Soviet Union and elsewhere. With many newer research interests—gender roles for instance—the historian is likely to address a topic for which provenance as an organizational scheme effectively deters research, since its guiding precepts may scatter relevant materials without notice through very large numbers of files. Here the issue is not simply whether provenance itself should be reexamined as a basic archival practice, but whether archivists wrongly allow cataloging principles to serve (for whatever reason) as a means of concealment, burying materials just as deeply as if they were sent into distant or unmarked storage. Even discrete subject categories within archives reflect certain understandings of what kinds of knowledge are important to preserve, and hence what aspects of the past are most readily accessible. Archives of the former Soviet republics, like all colonial archives, may be more valuable for understanding the practices and values of their imperial collectors and those who have preserved the records than the societies on whom they ostensibly report. Collections organized by ministries containing ministerial reports and correspondence may not preserve records that best reflect the attitudes or outlooks of their offices, such as records of conversations, appointments, or even unsent letters. For the contemporary period we might include readable documents, electronic or otherwise, such as the famous doodles of John F. Kennedy that his secretary Evelyn Lincoln saved on her own initiative from the wastebasket.¹²

Only when these various relations of trust have been traversed can the scholar finally emerge at the “moment of truth”: the delivery of actual files and the use of the documents themselves. At this most important point of research, however, almost every use the historian can make of the material is still contingent on a set of assumptions, each difficult or impossible to prove: that the archives is providing all of the documents in the file; that some have not been held back out of favoritism to other scholars; that microfilm or other reproductions have captured the original as well as is technologically possible; and especially that the documents themselves have not been falsified or distorted in any way. Here we encounter the critical issue of classification, the researcher’s final point of access to the knowledge in archives and that part of the archival process where the archivist’s power is most clearly and problematically reflected.

Classification issues are intrinsically difficult, always and everywhere. However necessary in principle it is to protect individual privacy or sensitive interests of the state, the very process of classification creates a unique sphere

¹² See, for example, Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (New York and London: Verso, 1993). In the Kennedy case, Evelyn Lincoln was charged with sifting through all sorts of Kennedy papers and memorabilia, but neither she nor anyone working directly with her had any archival training or background. See Robert M. Adler, “The Public Controversy over the Kennedy Memorial Project,” unpublished paper presented at the Sawyer Seminar on Archives, Documentation and the Institutions of Social Memory, University of Michigan, March, 2001.

of “privileged” knowledge, accessible only to a “trustworthy” few. Always among them, of course, are a select group of archivists themselves, carefully chosen because state officials trust them to protect their secrets. In this capacity, the archivists’ power over the past is not only very great in absolute terms, but again reflects potent relations of power. The researcher without access to secret files knows he cannot see the “entire picture,” that is, understand particular events or state behaviors that are defined as important by the very act of classification itself. He or she can only rely on the professional integrity of the archivist to assure that what is labeled “secret” actually conforms to the provisions of archival law, or better (but more rare), the competency and trustworthiness of an archival commission responsible for reviewing classified material. In states where Freedom of Information Acts can be used to pry loose materials that are being withheld, the issue is even more graphic. The researcher will typically receive a document that has been partially blacked out and where the censored material is not subject to any ready legal appeal. The black ink of the archivist-censor explicitly reduces the legalities of state control to a relationship of trust. The researcher can only hope and pray that the archivist has handled the material in a knowledgeable, professional, and responsible manner, knowing the many reasons why this might not necessarily be the case.

Here again we see practices in which archival politics—the relations of power over the past—are extremely uneven at best. On one hand, the imbalance obviously reflects the archivist’s position as a professional civil servant (the term “civil” in English nicely obscuring what is actually the archivist’s formal subordination to particular officials of the state). But even more important, it reflects on the other hand the ways in which the trust necessarily placed on the archivist to serve society as well as the state begins to create the most difficult of ethical problems. What is the archivist’s responsibility, for example, when he or she knows that classified materials show that state officials are not telling the truth about some important past event, or otherwise distorting knowledge of the past or present for their own purposes? All of the sanctions created by law to prevent the revealing of classified documents or information are predicated on the assumption that secrecy protects vital state interests or safeguards individual privacy, and hence human rights and the welfare of society more broadly. But no laws, to my knowledge, allow the release of secrets to demonstrate that state officials are lying, even if their falsification is obviously harmful to recognized state and social interests. As was the case with Daniel Ellsberg, who illegally leaked secret Pentagon materials during the Vietnam War, the archivist faces the severest of sanctions for doing what is ethically right. Here it is not only the question of whether social loyalties or personal ethics should supersede subordination to officials who lie, but of the integrity of scholarship itself, since the collusion of archivists with government falsification thoroughly undermines the integrity of all of the scholarship being done on the issues or events being falsified or concealed. Thus it is not only

the individual historian who must trust the archivist to place the subjectivities of conscience above the objectivized criteria of archival law, but civil society as a whole.

The integrity of scholarship is at stake here, however, not simply because archivists may collude with state officials in falsifying the historical record. It has to do as well with what I would term the particular "grammar of objectivity" with which histories based on archival sources were usually written in the Soviet Union, and which, even in fully democratic environments, bespeaks in itself a specific form of scholarly and archival integrity. What I have in mind is not any very complicated discourse theory, but a style of representing evidence, a "grammar" that, in itself, further touches the question of how archives function politically, and hence the limits of law.

By "grammar of objectivity," I mean the apparatus of archival reference in scholarship in which any potentially contested fact or any presentation of new data is "objectively" validated by reference to a specific archival source. The archival citation is, in effect, a testament of authenticity. In response to the implicit question "How do you know?" the scholar answers that his knowledge comes from an original archival record located in a specific fond and file, and is verifiable by anyone who wants to make the effort to check.

The fundamental assumption here is a positivist claim that truth itself is objective, verifiable, and not subject to the scholar's own manipulation. Implicitly, the archival citation thus connotes research as an objective process of uncovering truths whose very collection and preservation in the archives itself also represents them as authentic. By inviting verification, the citation in and of itself indicates both objectivity and accuracy. Since what is known to be true is dependent on how much of the truth has been collected, one can also agree with the historian Steven Shapin that what is assumed to be true is also determined by what is collected, preserved, and subsequently "discovered" in the archives.¹³ The very process of archival research itself is thus essentially one of authenticating particular ways in which the past can be understood. Indeed, the historian's own implicit claim is that archival data proves how the past *must* be understood, since the documents objectively indicate that it is so.¹⁴

As many archivists are aware, this claim to objectivity by historians—the so-called "objectivity question" in Western historiographical literature—has been the subject of furious and fractious debate among historians, especially in the

¹³ Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth Century England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹⁴ This epistemological issue is the subject of a substantial literature, especially in the American journal *History and Theory*. See also Richard Campbell, *Truth and Historicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992); Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1984); Michel de Certeau, *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975, English ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

United States.¹⁵ The complicated issues here range from whether the kinds of presuppositions historians bring to their research necessarily affect their determination of what is “factual,” to the post-modern epistemological quandary concerning the very accessibility of past “reality,” given the layered processes of mediation by which past events are recorded, remembered, and retrieved.¹⁶ There is also by now a rich literature about the ways historical writing itself, and especially the narrative form, leads historians to “tell stories” in which the histories have a clear beginning and end, a historical trajectory or purpose, rather than being constituted from the chaotic and often unconnected realities that actually constitute much of past experience.¹⁷ And finally in this acrimonious discussion there is the argument over the ordinary propensity of historians simply to make mistakes, especially while working in the archives. As Lawrence Stone, the distinguished Europeanist and past president of the American Historical Association, put it:

When you work in the archives you’re far from home, you’re bored, you’re in a hurry, you’re scribbling like crazy. You are bound to make mistakes. I don’t believe any scholar in the Western world has impeccable footnotes. Archival research is a special case of the general messiness of life.¹⁸

We have already seen, however, that what is collected, preserved, and ultimately made available to scholars to “discover” is always the result of clearly

¹⁵ See especially Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Among other virtues of this book is its detailed discussion of the celebrated case of the young American historian of Weimar Germany, David Abraham, whose use of archival sources was the object of a furious, and, in my view, grossly unjust critique by several senior historians holding views Abraham challenged. As a result, a decision to grant him tenure by Princeton University was reversed, and he was forced to leave the profession.

¹⁶ Among other works, see Natalie Davis, *Fiction in the Archives* (Stanford, 1987); Michael Kammen, *The Past Before Us* (Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980); Bernard Bailyn, “The Challenge of Modern Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 87 (February, 1982): 1–24; Jacques Barzun, *Clio and the Doctors: Psycho-History, Quanto-History, and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Hayden White, “Interpretation in History” and “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” in his *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); and especially, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994). Keith Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), contains a number of interesting articles including pieces by Lawrence Stone, Patrick Joyce, Catriona Kelly, and Gabrielle Spiegel on “History and Postmodernism” and extracts from *Past and Present* and *History and Theory*.

¹⁷ See especially Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), and his *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Margaret Somers, “Narrativity, Culture and Causality: Toward a New Historical Epistemology,” in T. McDonald, ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Philip J. M. Sturgess, *Narrativity: Theory and Practice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Dominick LaCapra, “History, Language, and Reading: Waiting for Crillon,” *American Historical Review* 100 (June 1995): 799–828. Among other pieces in K. Jenkins, ed., *The Postmodern History Reader*, see Hans Kellner, “Language and Historical Representation.” The subject has received extended discussion as well in the journals *Representations* and *Critical Inquiry*.

¹⁸ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 619, in connection with the Abraham case. Stone was a strong and articulate defender of Abraham.

political processes, that is, affected by the locations and forms of power within the archives itself as well as the broader archival community. Whether the historian is sloppy or not, the truths that historians present to their readers are thus *always* "politically created" in the sense that they are the consequence of biases, prejudices, secrecies, and other political subjectivities embedded in archival procedures as well as a function of the confidence the historian must place in the archivist. For their part, many archivists have become increasingly aware of this or the historicity in the archival process, challenging and even in some instances rejecting their profession's traditional claims to objectivity and neutrality. Even before Jacques Derrida's *Mal d'archive* appeared in either French or English, Richard Brown, Brien Brothman, Terry Cook, Verne Harris, and others began to explore the implications of the various forms of mediation archival work necessarily involves and their relation to how archival research can and cannot "uncover" or "recover" the past. Indeed, "postmodernism" in the archives may well become as powerful a challenge to historical positivism as critical theory, providing historians take the time to explore seriously their archivist colleagues' articles and journals, and archivists publish more broadly.¹⁹

¹⁹ For example, many historians would be surprised by the discussions on these important issues in the *South African Archives Journal*, *Archivaria*, *Archives and Manuscripts*, *Archival Issues*, and other archival journals, where Brien Brothman, Richard Brown, Terry Cook, Verne Harris, Eric Ketelaar and Francis Blouin, among others, have led the discussion. See, e.g., Terry Cook, "Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal," in B. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honor of Hugh Taylor*, (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992); "Electronic Records, Paper Minds: The Revolution in Information Management and Archives in the Post-Custodial and Postmodernist Era," *Archives and Manuscripts* 22 (November 1994): 300–29; and his "What is Past is Prologue." Brien Brothman and Richard Brown raised the postmodernist issue in Brien Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991): 78–100, and Richard Brown, "The Value of 'Narrativity' in the Appraisal of Historical Documents: Foundation for a Theory of Archival Hermeneutics," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991): 152–56; "Records Acquisition Strategy and its Theoretical Foundation: The Case for a Concept of Archival Hermeneutics," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–92): 34–56; and "Death of a Renaissance Record-Keeper: The Murder of Tomasso da Tortona in Ferrara, 1385," *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997): 1–43. Derrida's writing and especially the publication of his *Mal d'Archive: Une Impression Freudienne* (Paris, 1995, English translation, Chicago and London, 1996) evoked penetrating commentary from archivists. See esp. Brien Brothman, "The Limit of Limits: Derridean Deconstruction and the Archival Institution," *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993): 205–20, and his review in *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 189–92; Verne Harris, "Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa," *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997): 132–41; and esp., "Postmodernism and Archival Appraisal: Seven Theses," *South African Archives Journal* 40 (1998): 48–50. More recent work has included Preben Mortensen, "The Place of Theory in Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999): 136–50; Eric Ketelaar, *The Archival Image: Collected Essays* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1997), which contains, among other essays, thoughtful work on archival theory, and his "Archivalisation and Archiving," *Archives and Manuscripts* 27 (May 1999): 54–61; Francis Blouin, "Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory," *Archival Issues* (forthcoming); and Bernadine Dodge, "Places Apart: Archives in Dissolving Space and Time," *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997): 118–31. A number of important but as yet unpublished contributions to this discussion were presented at the University of Michigan Sawyer Seminar, including Nancy Bartlett, "Past Imperfect (l'imparfait): Mediating Meaning in the Archives" and "The Healthy Distrust of the Archive's Inhabitant," Verne Harris, "A Shaft of Darkness: Derrida in the Archive," Terry Cook, "Remembering the Future: The Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory," Eric Ketelaar, "The Knowledgeable Archive," Joan Schwartz, "The Archives Effect: Social Knowledge and the Politics of Institutional Discourse," and Elisabeth Kaplan, "Practicing Archives with a Postmodern Perspective," and Margaret Hedstrom, "Interfaces with Time," first presented at the Australian Society of Archivists in August 1998.

I want to emphasize that what the historian presents as the result of his or her archival research is not in any sense false (leaving aside deliberate misrepresentation or inadvertent errors). Rather, it simply cannot be under any circumstances all of “what happened,” even if one allows that it is objectively true. It is the historian’s professional task to weigh whether it is sufficiently true to support the claims being made for it, that is, whether the archives has actually provided enough data to support the historian’s arguments and descriptions. Here is where, and why, the “grammar of objectivity” is so important to the historian. Once he judges that he knows enough of “what happened” to make his case, the archival “truths” on which his descriptions and analyses are based are carefully footnoted or otherwise displayed. The language of archival citation, in other words, objectively “authenticates” his views—his version of history.

As this occurs, moreover, the trust the historian has had to place in the archives and the archivist not only becomes a formal and essential element of the historian’s craft, but begins to extend onto his own shoulders as well. It is now the broader society at large that must trust that *the historian and archivist together* have created an appropriate memory of its past, which is, in effect, what the writing of history effectively does. And just as archivists can violate a scholar’s trust by keeping him from materials he needs for his work, or a society’s trust by colluding with state officials who falsify the past, the very “grammar of objectivity” with which archival citations are written makes it relatively easy for the historian to yield to particular pressures under which he might be working, and to use this grammar to manipulate, rather than objectively represent, the past, as so much of Soviet historiography unfortunately attests.

There is, first, the judgement as to whether the archival document can support the claims the scholar wants to make on it, a subjective process that, among other things, distinguishes good historians from bad. Sometimes historians are tempted to shout “Eureka!” on the basis of the thinnest of documents, especially if they stumble on something after hours and even days of fruitless searching. The archival citation, in effect, covers the document’s thinness not only by substituting for its literal content in the historical narrative, but also by saying to the reader, in effect, “If you don’t believe me, check the document yourself.” Paradoxically, the very claim to authenticity provided by the archival citation allows the historian to assume, fairly, that few, if any, readers will actually check his or her arguments out.

Verifying a historian’s archival citations (and thus his claims to a particular set of objective truths) is rare enough when the cited documents are completely accessible, but as we well know, this is not usually the case. Indeed, nothing is more frustrating to a reader of Russian history in America than to be told in a citation, “See the materials in the Samara Regional Archive, fond XX,” since the practical likelihood of the reader being able to do this is close to zero. When archival access is strictly limited to those privileged with special credentials, as it was broadly in the U.S.S.R. and still is, to some extent, in Russia, ver-

ification is completely impossible for those outside the privileged community itself. Of course research in secret or closed archives like the KGB files, or, before 1989, in virtually all party and political materials for the Soviet period, makes the authenticating power of the "grammar of objectivity" all the stronger. Since the ordinary reader again has absolutely no way of checking the historian's sources, the archival citation itself acts to overcome a logical skepticism by asserting, in effect, "Here is the authentic document that has provided me with the information I am telling you, so you can believe me, since if you saw the document you would know I am right."

The important point here, again, is not that secret materials in closed archives are not "true" or unfalsified (although falsification is always possible), but how the archival "grammar of objectivity" disguises complex archival politics and important underlying relations of trust. Throughout the entire Soviet period, when it was virtually impossible even for scholars to check someone else's citations without some form of official sanction or recognized authority, the objectivizing archival grammar was often a powerful tool of misrepresentation. But even in non-authoritarian systems, if a historian deliberately misquotes or misrepresents an archival document, the archival citation itself gives this falsification the appearance of *unintentional* error. In this case, as in the Soviet Union, the implication that the source can be objectively verified becomes a clever disguise.²⁰

The grammar, or language, of "objectivity," the mantra of historians and archivists alike trained in the Rankean tradition, is thus an additional dimension of archival politics, however different in form it is from what we usually think of as political.²¹ Like the more familiar ways power is deployed in the archives, the ways historians present their sources to readers is the form through which the past plays many of its tricks on the present, to bend an old adage in a new direction. This is to say, of course, tricks played by archivists and historians alike: those who selected, appraise, and retain the artifacts of the past, and those who "discover" them in order to remember and recreate the past through their analyses and descriptions. For this reason, some of the very best historical work in post-Soviet Russia has been the collaborate efforts between archivists and historians to produce comprehensive documentary collections, especially those which combine sophisticated description and analysis with the presentation of the sources themselves. The return to archives and

²⁰ Since the opening of Soviet-period materials to Western scholars in the late 1980s, I have been distressed several times to find that archival documents referenced in prominent earlier monographs on the Bolshevik revolution said precisely the opposite of what had been argued, but this has been the case with Western historians whose citations I have checked as well. See my discussion of the subject in William G. Rosenberg, review of *Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War: Political Parties and Social Movements in Russia, 1918–1922*, by Vladimir Brovkin, *American Historical Review* 100 (June 1994): 924–25.

²¹ For the archivist's role classically defined as an objective and neutral guardian of history's authentic sources, see Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 2nd ed. (London: P. Lund, Humphries and Co., 1937), reprinted 1965.

the documentary record in this way amounts, in effect, to a fundamental change in the way archival sources were generally presented in Soviet Russia, where documentary collections themselves “authenticated” a very inaccurate representation of the past by means of biased selection.²²

By now I hope what I mean to suggest by “the limitations of law” in the title of this essay is apparent. Lest there be any misunderstanding, my point in all of these observations is emphatically *not* that laws and regulations governing archives are in any sense unimportant, especially for Russia. It is just the opposite. Laws and archival regulations that assure open access to essential records and guarantee their preservation are absolutely essential to the ability of a free society to understand itself and its pasts and assure its freedom in the future. As I hope this essay has demonstrated, however, the relationship of formal laws and regulations to actual archival practices is still, in my view, a limited one. Laws encapsulate a vital set of standards. They represent social values, and provide an explicit as well as implicit set of administrative directives. Together with an effective judicial process, they can provide an essential restraint on efforts to conceal information or otherwise restrict access, however costly and time consuming their enforcement may sometimes be. Effective laws also codify values, affect attitudes, and help set administrative styles. They represent a set of standards against which the administration of particular archives can be measured. The recent efforts to correct weaknesses and limitations in the 1993 Russian Archive law are welcome not only in terms of improving archival practices, but also for the opportunity they provide for focusing concern on the contending and interrelated interests of “individual persons, society, and state,” to which all state archives in democratic societies must be responsive.²³

Yet like the historian’s responsibility to his or her readers, the fundamental relationship between the archivist and the interests he or she is obligated to serve is still founded on trust, not on law. It is essentially an ethical not a legal responsibility. It creates for the archivist a very high degree of moral as well as social, political, and legal responsibility. This may be achieved, perhaps,

²² Some of the most impressive of these include some 14 volumes of political party documents published in an effort to restore understanding of pre-revolutionary Russia’s diverse political past; new volumes on the Kronstadt anti-Bolshevik uprising in 1921; and on the collectivization of the Russian countryside in 1930. See, for example, Z. Galili and A. Nenarokov, et al., *Men’sheviki v 1917 godu* [The Mensheviks in 1917], 3 vols., (Moscow, 1996), and their publications covering the earlier and later periods, along with comparable volumes on the Constitutional Democratic, Socialist Revolutionary, and Octobrists parties, and the parties of the Right; V. P. Kozlov, et al., *Kronshtadtskaia tragediia 1921 goda* [The Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921], 2 vols., (Moscow, 1999); V. Danilov, R. Manning and L. Viola, et al., *Tragediia sovetskoi derevnoi* [The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside], 5 vols., Moscow 1999. Excellent examples of documentary collections combined with original analysis are those by S. V. Iarov (St. Petersburg) on workers, peasants, and city dwellers, e.g., *Gorozhanin kak politik: Revoliutsiia, voennyi kommunizm i NEP glazami petrogradtsev* [City Dwellers as Political Actors: Revolution, War Communism and NEP through the Eyes of Petrograders] (St. Petersburg, 1999); and V. Iu. Cherniaev, et al., *Piterskie rabochie i Diktatura Proletariata’, Oktiabr’ 1917–1929* [Petersburg Workers and the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat, October 1917–1929”] (St. Petersburg, 2000).

²³ See T. I. Bondareva, “Arkhivy Rossii na sluzhbe lichnosti, obshchestva, gosudarstva,” [The Archives of Russia in the Service of Individuals, Society and the State] *Otechestvennye arkhivy* 1998:6.

through a self-conscious understanding of the profession’s importance to society as well as its historicity and a much greater degree of accountability for decisions affecting archival practice. One encouraging element in the Russian situation is the apparent willingness of leading archival authorities to take counsel with historians and other scholars about procedures and standards, a practice whose introduction elsewhere might help keep archival politics transparent. In democratic societies, the politics of appraisal, acquisition, access, preservation, reproduction, and even the training and management of archivists themselves are rarely the “high politics” of repressive state control and blunt ideological manipulation that characterized the Soviet period; but they are vital fields of politics and power nonetheless. They place a weighty moral burden on the archivist to properly serve the often contending interests of individuals, society, and the state—in other words, to understand the ethics of archival politics and to be able to know and to do what is right.