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The Soviet system, the Soviet state, and Western expertise on the USSR before and after 1991

System sowiecki, państwo sowieckie oraz zachodnia wiedza o ZSRR przed i po 1991 roku

ABSTRACT:
This article provides a brief assessment of the way Western political scientists and international relations scholars analysed and understood the Soviet Union from the 1960s through December 1991. To this end, the article begins with an overview of the nature and basic traits of the Soviet system. Although the article discusses the importance of historical evidence used by political scientists to appraise the nature of Soviet politics and Soviet foreign policy, it does not rehash the once heated (and by now tedious) disputes that arose among Western historians in the late 1970s and 1980s, with so-called "revisionists" lambasting more orthodox historians[1]. Instead, the focus here is on the quality of Sovietological analyses in the West before December 1991, the new opportunities for archival research that emerged in the former USSR after 1991, and the grave obstacles to scholarship posed by Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine starting in 2022, including the draconian internal clampdown in Russia that accompanied the invasion. As part of this clampdown, the Russian government began arresting innocent foreign citizens and Russian pro democracy activists so they could be held hostage and traded in prisoner swaps for Russian spies and assassins – a policy that was bound to affect the willingness of Western

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1 For an overview and critique, see O. Khlevniuk, *Top Down vs. Bottom-up: Regarding the Potential of Contemporary Revisionism*, "Cahiers du Monde Russe" 2025, vol. 56, no. 4, pp. 1–19, which is in part a review of a book J. Harris (ed.), *The Anatomy of Terror: Political Violence Under Stalin*, Oxford 2013.

scholars and graduate students to travel to Russia for archival research or any other purpose. The invasion and political crackdown also spurred many leading Russian scholars of Soviet history to go into long-term exile.

KEYWORDS:
Soviet system, archives, Cold War, Sovietology

STRESZCZENIE:
Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia analizę sposobów, w jakie zachodni politolodzy oraz badacze stosunków międzynarodowych analizowali i rozumieli Związek Radziecki od lat 60. XX wieku do grudnia 1991 r. W tym celu artykuł rozpoczyna się od omówienia natury i podstawowych cech systemu radzieckiego. Chociaż omawiane jest znaczenie materiału historycznego wykorzystywanego przez politologów do oceny charakteru polityki radzieckiej oraz radzieckiej polityki zagranicznej, tekst nie powtarza dawnych zażartych (a dziś już nużących) sporów, które toczyły się wśród zachodnich historyków pod koniec lat 70. i w latach 80., kiedy tzw. „rewizjoniści" gwałtownie atakowali bardziej ortodoksyjnych historyków. Zamiast tego uwaga skupia się na jakości zachodniej sowietologii przed grudniem 1991 r., nowych możliwościach badań archiwalnych, jakie pojawiły się w byłym ZSRR po 1991 r., oraz poważnych przeszkodach dla badań naukowych spowodowanych inwazją Rosji na Ukrainę w 2022 r., w tym drakońskimi wewnętrznymi represjami w Rosji, które towarzyszyły inwazji. W ramach tych represji rosyjskie władze zaczęły aresztować niewinnych cudzoziemców oraz rosyjskich prodemokratycznych działaczy, aby mogli być przetrzymywani jako zakładnicy i wymieniani w ramach wymiany więźniów na rosyjskich szpiegów i zabójców – polityka ta musiała wpłynąć na gotowość zachodnich badaczy i doktorantów do wyjazdów do Rosji w celu prowadzenia kwerend archiwalnych czy jakichkolwiek innych. Inwazja i polityczne zaostrzenie kursu skłoniły również wielu czołowych rosyjskich badaczy historii Związku Radzieckiego do długotrwałej emigracji.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:
system radziecki, archiwa, zimna wojna, sowietologia

1. The Soviet system and the Soviet state – basic characteristics

Events in the late 1980s and early 1990s underscored the importance of distinguishing between the Soviet system and the Soviet state. Until the late 1980s, the Soviet system rested on several core characteristics:

- the unchallenged rule of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the name that was officially adopted in October 1952 for the

ruling party of the Soviet state (a party originally known as the Bolsheviks under Vladimir Lenin and then renamed a few times before becoming known as the CPSU);

- the presence of republic Communist parties in fourteen of the fifteen post-1945 union republics that were subordinated to the CPSU (the exception was the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, or RSFSR, which did not have its own branch Communist party until 1990);
- the enforcement of "democratic centralism", with lower levels of party and state organs (at republic, regional, municipal, local, and factory levels) strictly subordinate to the decisions of top authorities;
- the central role of Marxist-Leninist ideology in official discourse and practice, including all political and social institutions;
- the dominance of the CPSU and the Soviet government over economic activity, with no meaningful leeway for a private sector or private ownership;
- the dominance of the CPSU and the Soviet government over all mass media outlets and publishing houses; and
- CPSU control of the armed forces, regular police, internal security organs, and judicial bodies throughout the USSR.

The nature of these characteristics varied over the years, but until the late 1980s, they were unmistakable features of the Soviet system and were recognised as such by political scientists in the West.

Under Lenin and during the much longer reign of Joseph Stalin, the use of mass terror and unbridled violence against vast numbers of individuals and groups was another central feature of the Soviet system. Stalin and most of his associates, such as Vyacheslav Molotov, Lazar' Kaganovich, and Kliment Voroshilov, never felt any remorse about the enormous repression and suffering they inflicted on the Soviet population, including brutal attacks on the country's peasantry in the late 1920s and 1930s (attacks aimed at "exterminating the kulaks as a class"), the starvation of millions of peasants, the killing and grisly torture of millions of Soviet citizens in the 1930s (culminating in the Great Terror in 1937–1938, a frenzied spree of executions rivalled only by the Khmer Rouge's bloody reign in Cambodia in 1975–1978 as a case of official slaughter in peacetime), wholesale deportations of entire national groups in the late 1930s and 1940s, systematic deadly purges of Soviet elites at all levels, and murderous anti-Semitic campaigns in the late 1940s and early 1950s, just a few years after revelations of the Nazi Holocaust. However, the

end of mass violent terror in the USSR after Stalin's death in 1953 indicated that this feature of the *Stalinist* system – which was replicated in all other Communist systems, above all the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong – was not inherently a characteristic of the *Soviet* system per se. Rather, it was limited to the three-and-a-half decades under Lenin and Stalin. The unwillingness of Soviet leaders to continue relying on indiscriminate violence and terror after Stalin's death indicated that, at least implicitly, they did not want the Soviet system to rest on mass bloodshed, if only because it had a tendency to endanger those who initiated it[2]. The system remained dictatorial and repressive after Stalin's death, but it no longer produced many millions of victims.

The Soviet state – officially formed as the USSR in December 1922 from most of the immense landmass that had constituted the Russian Empire until 1917 – varied in its configuration over the years, with significant territory added at various points, especially at the end of World War II. But the basic organising principle was largely consistent. The USSR was set up as an ethnoterritorial federation (with the demarcation of federal, regional, and sub-regional territorial units for various national/ethnic groups), but it was a federation in name only during most of the Soviet era, when political control was centralised in Moscow, especially under Stalin. During certain periods, the union-republics received greater leeway to manage their own affairs and to encourage the use of the titular languages and promotion of local cultures (*korenizatsiya*), but these periods were followed by longer stretches in which centralised control was tightened and Russification of language and culture was intensified, particularly during the Stalin era. Thus, despite the varying size and administrative structure of the USSR over the years, the Soviet state that was set up in 1922, especially the Slavic component linking Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus with Central Asia and the South Caucasus, was still the Soviet state that existed as of August 1991.

Changes from both above and below in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s fundamentally challenged every aspect of the Soviet system. Under Mikhail Gorbachev, the CPSU began to relinquish its dominant position in the Soviet polity from mid-1988 on. Most of the republic Communist

[2] M. Kramer, *Leadership Succession and Political Violence in the USSR after Stalin's Death*, [in:] P. Hollander (ed.), *Political Violence: Belief, Behavior, and Legitimation*, New York 2008, pp. 69–92, 221–233.

parties also gradually relinquished their control over events within their societies, if only reluctantly. Increasingly, lower-level party and state organisations did not feel the need to comply as rigidly with central directives and resolutions. Gorbachev's promotion of "new political thinking" eroded some of the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism, and his encouragement of "glasnost" (official openness) increasingly enabled Soviet journalists, commentators, and academics to call into question some of the fundamental principles of the long-standing ideology in the USSR. Unofficial newspapers and other publications began to emerge outside the party's control, often gaining large numbers of readers, who lined up at kiosks to buy copies[3].

Important legislation was adopted, allowing for private economic activity and private ownership, the first time that private economic activity had been tolerated on a significant scale. Factions began to arise in the Soviet armed forces and the Soviet internal security apparatus, mostly involving troops who were alarmed by the wide-ranging political reforms underway and demanded the restoration of orthodox Communist control and a hard-line crackdown. Factions also began to arise within the CPSU and the newly created Congress of People's Deputies (a parliament absorbing the existing Supreme Soviet, which had always been subordinate to the CPSU), mostly involving groups seeking faster and bolder changes and democratisation. Partly free popular elections were held in March 1989 to choose the members of the new Congress of People's Deputies – the first time such elections had been held in the USSR in more than 70 years. Over the next year, genuinely free elections were held in individual Soviet republics for new local parliaments. By 1990, separatist governments had come to power in several republics and begun raising the issue of outright independence. That same year, several leading figures in the CPSU conspicuously renounced their membership in the party and sought to eclipse the Soviet regime.

2. On the performance of experts

Nearly all Western political scientists and international relations specialists who studied the USSR were caught off guard by the magnitude and pace of

[3] M. Kramer, *The Dissolution of the Soviet Union: A Case Study of Discontinuous Change*, "Journal of Cold War Studies" 2022, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 188–218.

the changes that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and many predicted that hardline elements in the CPSU and KGB would step in to overturn the reforms and oust Gorbachev and his aides. Eventually, in August 1991, hardliners did take action, but their efforts failed miserably and ended up accelerating the very trends they had been trying to undo[4].

Even though the large majority of Western experts on Soviet politics fell short in their attempts to gauge what would happen under Gorbachev, this does not necessarily mean they were incompetent in the way they had been analysing Soviet politics prior to 1985. To be sure, the emphasis that many political scientists such as Seweryn Bialer had given to the "stability" of the system proved to be misguided, as did the efforts by other political scientists to rely on modernisation (or developmental) theory as a framework for evaluating Soviet political change[5]. They had never imagined that a figure like Gorbachev, who had risen through the ranks of the CPSU and won the support of his Politburo colleagues, would come to embrace drastic political liberalisation and a sweeping reorientation of foreign policy. Even the relatively small number of experts on Soviet politics who had expected at the outset that Gorbachev would move with great boldness found themselves repeatedly having to update – and update again and again – how far they thought the changes would ultimately go[6]. None of the common analytical frameworks used by Western experts prior to 1985 were of any help in predicting the momentous events that transpired.

Nonetheless, it is simply not true that, as one polemical reappraisal of US expertise on the Soviet Union claimed, "the vast majority" of US experts "failed to anticipate […] virtually any kind of political, economic, or social

4 J.B. Dunlop, *The August 1991 Coup and Its Impact on Soviet Politics*, "Journal of Cold War Studies" 2003, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 94–127; A. Knight, *The KGB, Perestroika, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, "Journal of Cold War Studies" 2003, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 67–93; B.D. Taylor, *The Soviet Military and the Disintegration of the USSR*, "Journal of Cold War Studies" 2003, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 17–66; and J.F. Hough, *Revolution and Democratization in the USSR, 1985–91*, Washington 1997, pp. 404–448.

5 See, for example, S. Bialer, *Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability and Change in the Soviet Union*, New York 1982; idem, *The Soviet Paradox: External Expansion, Internal Decline*, London 1986; and idem, *Domestic and International Factors in the Formation of Gorbachev's Reforms*, [in:] A. Dallin, G. Lapidus (eds.), *The Soviet System: From Crisis to Collapse*, rev. ed., Boulder 1991, pp. 28–36.

6 See, for example, A. Brown, *Change in the Soviet Union*, "Foreign Affairs" 1986, vol. 64, no. 5, pp. 1048–1065; and idem, *Gorbachev and Reform of the Soviet System*, "The Political Quarterly" 1987, vol. 58, no. 2, pp. 139–151.

change"[7]. Most experts certainly did not envisage how bold Gorbachev would eventually prove to be, but the Soviet leader himself did not anticipate that, either. Evidence that has emerged over the past 35 years indicates that far-reaching political liberalisation was not a sure thing in 1985. Gorbachev nearly lost out to Viktor Grishin in early 1985 in his bid to succeed the ailing Konstantin Chernenko as the leader of the CPSU, and even after Gorbachev became the party's General Secretary, there was no assurance that he would embark on radical political changes. He did not come to office with that intention, and it is doubtful that he would have pursued revolutionary political changes if his initial measures of *uskorenie* (acceleration) had proven successful in spurring major economic and technological improvements.

The real question should be whether US experts did a reasonable job before 1991 when analysing the Soviet system. The verdict on this score is mixed, in part because of the paucity of reliable information available to foreign scholars during the Soviet era. As with any academic discipline, some experts on the Soviet Union were better than others in making use of exiguous information to gauge how the system worked, and some scholarship was tendentious or of no lasting value. Yet, despite the formidable obstacles to research, many experts gained valuable insights into the Soviet system as far back as the 1950s and were able to produce scholarly works that have generally stood the test of time. Despite the many shortcomings of the scholarly literature in the pre-1991 era, wild exaggerations about a supposed "failure to anticipate . . . any kind of political, economic, or social change" and shrill broadsides against Western (especially US) experts' errant predictions are of no use in advancing the field. More balanced reappraisals of Soviet studies can be found in such works as *Beyond Sovietology: Essays in Politics and History*[8], *Beyond Soviet Studies*[9], and *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse: Sovietology, the Death of Communism, and the New Russia*[10].

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7 Ch.I. Xenakis, *What Happened to the Soviet Union? How and Why American Sovietologists Were Caught by Surprise*, Westport 2002, p. x.

8 S. Gross Solomon (ed.), *Beyond Sovietology: Essays in Politics and History*, Armonk 1993.

9 D.T. Orlovsky (ed.), *Beyond Soviet Studies*, Washington 1995.

10 M. Cox (ed.), *Rethinking the Soviet Collapse: Sovietology, the Death of Communism, and the New Russia*, New York 1998. Another collection, F.J. Fleron, E.P. Hoffmann (eds.), *Post-Communist Studies and Political Science: Methodology and Empirical Theory in Sovietology*, Boulder 1993, consists mostly of essays (some already published elsewhere) by scholars striving to defend their own approaches, rather than reappraising the field to determine what went right and what went wrong. Numerous other retrospectives on

Even though the political upheavals in the USSR in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought an end to the Soviet system, the Soviet state could potentially have survived without the Soviet system. If the Soviet Union had continued to exist, it would certainly have done so under a different name (the Union of Sovereign States was one proposed new name) and with a smaller number of republics (the Baltic states, Moldova, and Georgia were the most plausible to leave), but if the Slavic core had been maintained, the Soviet state would have remained extant. After being elected president of the RSFSR in mid-1991, Boris Yeltsin was hoping to preserve the larger union, albeit under Russian (rather than Soviet) control. But Yeltsin's plans were derailed by the change of public mood in Soviet Ukraine in the aftermath of the failed August 1991 coup in Moscow. The overwhelming vote in favour of independence in Ukraine on 1 December 1991, and the imminent departure of Ukraine from the USSR, left Yeltsin with little choice but to move ahead with the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the formal dissolution of the Soviet state. The quest for empire and expansion that has been such a central part of Russian history over the past 550 years is still extant, but the Russian state that embodied that quest was temporarily dismantled in December 1991 (though the Russian Federation even now remains by far the largest country in the world, nearly double the territorial size of the second largest, Canada, and is seeking to add more territory from Ukraine)[11].

Although relatively few Western scholars before 1991 had much expertise on the non-Russian republics (or on the RSFSR outside Moscow and one or two other large cities), the ones who did closely study the outlying republics and oblasts did not anticipate how the Soviet Union would break apart. Hélène Carrère d'Encausse had speculated as far back as the late 1970s that the Soviet Union might disintegrate along union-republic lines, but she was convinced that if this happened, it would be because of demographic

"Sovietology" – some polemical and tendentious, others perspicacious and constructive – appeared in the 1990s and 2000s. Among numerous articles in the latter category, see in particular C. Kelly, *What Was Soviet Studies and What Came Next?*, "The Journal of Modern History" 2013, vol. 85, no. 1, pp. 109–149; and S. Kotkin, *1991 and the Russian Revolution: Sources, Conceptual Frameworks, Analytic Categories*, "The Journal of Modern History" 1998, vol. 70, no. 2, pp. 384–425.

[11] The push for territorial expansion and imperial domination at the heart of Russian national identity is well brought out in S. Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation*, New York 2017.

pressure from Muslim republics in Central Asia[12]. The Ukrainian and Russian republics played no role in her predictions. Similar views were held by other experts on Central Asia, notably Alexandre Bennigsen, who contended that demographic, social, and political trends would eventually lead to a Muslim rebellion against Soviet control[13]. Events on the ground contravened his and d'Encausse's forecasts. No separatist movements emerged in Central Asia, and the governments there were staunchly supportive of preserving the Soviet state.

3. New archival opportunities for reassessments of the Soviet Union

Although epistemological reassessments of pre-1991 Western academic literature on the Soviet Union have been (and are) worth undertaking, the more important task for scholars over the past few decades has been to exploit research opportunities that were unavailable before the end of the USSR. Declassified archival materials in former Soviet republics, substantive memoirs, interviews with key figures, and larger surveys of local communities throughout the former USSR are among the sources that have greatly enriched and, in some cases, altered what scholars had long "known" about Soviet politics, Soviet society, the enormous scale of the Stalin-era repressions, Soviet ethnic groups, the Soviet economy, the Soviet internal security apparatus, the Soviet armed forces, and Soviet foreign policy. In some cases, the release of archival documents produced a consensus (or near-consensus) on issues that had formerly been debated, such as the outbreak of the Korean War. No serious scholar would deny any longer that North Korea launched the war with direct approval from Stalin[14]. In other cases, the deluge of formerly secret

[12] H. Carrère d'Encausse, *L'Empire éclaté: La révolte des nations en URSS*, Paris 1978. A year later, the book was published in English translation.

[13] A. Bennigsen, M. Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State*, London 1983.

[14] The translated documents and first-rate essays published by numerous scholars in the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* in the 1990s and after, especially the work of Kathryn Weathersby, established this point definitively. For recent analyses of the outbreak of the war, see S.F. Wells, Jr., *Fearing the Worst: How Korea Transformed the Cold War*, New York 2020; A.V. Torkunov, *Zagadochnaya voina: Koreiskii konflikt 1950–1953 godov*, Moscow 2000; W.W. Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History*, Princeton 2005), and Zh. Shen, *Sino-Soviet Relations and the Origins of the*

information emerging from the archives after 1991 did not generate greater consensus or reduce the intensity of scholarly disagreements, but the newly accessible sources at least ensured that academic debates, especially about the Stalin era, were based on a much more solid footing than in the past[15].

A great number of these sources are still available now, but one of the many onerous costs of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is that, for the indefinite future, archival research work and field work in Ukraine and Russia can no longer be conducted safely by Western scholars and graduate students. Compared to the terrible bloodshed and destruction Russia has caused in Ukraine, the adverse impact of the invasion on academic research may seem trivial, but in the scholarly world, the impact clearly has been and will continue to be severe. The Ukrainian central and regional archives had been a gold mine of materials since the early 1990s, with files of the Ukrainian Communist Party and Ukrainian government, and the opening of the former Ukrainian KGB archive (now known as the HDA-SBU) in 2015 yielding superb collections of declassified documents pertaining to the state security apparatus and its work in Ukraine, and also important collections of formerly top-secret items from the central Soviet KGB. Working conditions in all of the Ukrainian archives were excellent.

After the war is over, the Ukrainian archives will undoubtedly restore the first-rate access and working conditions that existed before Russia's invasion. Full restoration may take some time, but there is little doubt that it will eventually happen both at the central state archives and at the former Ukrainian KGB archive under its director, Andriy Kohut, who has done a superb job of opening the HDA-SBU for research and posting large thematic collections of declassified KGB documents on the archive's website. The long-term outlook for the Russian archives is much less certain. The adverse impact of the war on scholarly research opportunities is hard to overstate. Contrary to what one might expect, the Russian central and regional archives had afforded enormously valuable research opportunities for foreign scholars up to the time the Russian invasion began.

Korean War: Stalin's Strategic Goals in the Far East, "Journal of Cold War Studies" 2000, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 44–68.

[15] For an interesting essay on why disagreements persisted even as formerly classified documents continued to pour forth, see H. Kuromiya, *Stalin and His Era*, "The Historical Journal" 2007, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 711–724.

This appraisal of the situation in the Russian archives may come as a surprise to some. A common narrative about the Russian archives – especially among those who rarely or never did research there – is that the opportunities for scholars (in terms of access, working conditions, etc.) were very good in the early to mid-1990s but steadily deteriorated after that, as the political situation turned increasingly turbulent under Boris Yeltsin and especially after the ascendance of Vladimir Putin, who steadily returned Russia to a repressive, authoritarian system. Because of Putin's autocratic proclivities, the narrative goes, the window of opportunity for archival research largely disappeared after the 1990s.

This narrative, which one can find in academic journals as well as articles in prominent newspapers, is inaccurate, but it is understandable that it has circulated. After all, archival openness usually goes hand-in-hand with democratisation, including in former Communist countries. In Russia, however, that proved not to be the case; in 1992, just after the USSR disintegrated, Yeltsin was the one who made key decisions to deny general access to several crucial archives (the Presidential Archive, the State Security archive at the Lubyanka, the Foreign Intelligence Service archive in Yasenevo, the military intelligence (GRU) archive on Znamenka, etc.), and he was also in office in 1993 when significant restrictions on archival research were put into place through various laws, especially one regarding state secrets[16]. The partial opening of some archives in Moscow to scholarly research after 1991 was certainly very welcome, but the 1990s were not as wonderful as often suggested, not least because working conditions in many of the open archives were often deplorable, with researchers prevented from photographing or scanning documents. In the Russian State Archive of Recent History (RGANI, as it was renamed in July 1999), which for 25 years was in the same complex that housed the Russian presidential administration, researchers were barred from using laptop computers starting in 1995, ostensibly because of concerns about terrorism. Hence, they had little choice but to transcribe documents laboriously by hand. It is hard to overstate what a hindrance these working conditions were for scholars who did not live in Moscow.

[16] For a detailed account of the early years in the Russian federal archives after the breakup of the USSR, and some of the methodological challenges scholars were facing in dealing with the new materials, see M. Kramer, *Archival Research in Moscow: Progress and Prospects*, "Cold War International History Project Bulletin" 1993, no. 3, pp. 1, 18–39.

The partial opening of archives in Russia during the Yeltsin era was certainly a huge boost to scholarship, and many dozens of important collections of declassified documents appeared in the 1990s on all aspects of Soviet history and Soviet foreign policy, ranging from the scale and nature of the Stalinist terror in the 1930s to the fundamental changes implemented by Mikhail Gorbachev a half century later. Nonetheless, the restrictions imposed in 1992–1993 and the deplorable working conditions in many archives in the 1990s continued to hinder academic research on Soviet history and the nature of the USSR.

During Putin's first two terms as president (through May 2008), the archival situation in Russia did not improve, but it also did not significantly deteriorate, despite the worsening political conditions as Putin moved in a much more authoritarian direction. Then, when Putin temporarily served as prime minister from 2008 through 2012, the situation with the archives started to turn around, and, contrary to what one would expect, the improvements not only continued but accelerated after he returned in 2012 for his third term as president (the prelude to establishing himself as de facto president for life through constitutional amendments he forced through in 2020).

From 2012 through February 2022 – the decade before Russia embarked on its large-scale war against Ukraine – the archival situation in Russia improved a great deal despite Putin's forceful authoritarian clampdown at that time. The political situation in Russia kept getting worse and worse from 2012 on, but access and working conditions in the country's federal archives steadily improved. Thanks to rulings by Russia's highest courts, researchers gained the right to photograph and scan documents with digital cameras and phones[17]. The greater archival openness and improved working conditions clearly had nothing to do with democratisation, which had come to a complete halt during Putin's first two presidential terms and remained in abeyance thereafter. Democratisation has been non-existent throughout Putin's lengthy tenure, yet the archival situation markedly improved by 2022.

Extremely important collections of Soviet documents became available for the first time at RGANI, the Russian State Archive of Social-Political History (RGASPI), the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), and the

[17] *Russia's Supreme Court Issues a Ruling That Could Revolutionize Archival Research*, Meduza, 2 May 2016 https://meduza.io/en/news/2016/05/02/russia-s-supreme-court-issues-a-ruling-that-could-revolutionize-archival-research.

Archive of Russian Foreign Policy (AVPRF) in Moscow in 2014, and even larger collections (amounting to many millions of pages of sensitive materials) were opened at RGANI and RGASPI in August 2015, giving researchers a huge number of new research avenues to pursue. Other crucial collections became available in Moscow in December 2018 when RGANI, which had been closed for two-and-a-half years during a move to a new location across the Moskva River, reopened with much better working conditions (including the right to photograph and scan documents) and much greater access to important collections than previously.

Other voluminous, extremely important collections were made available at RGANI and RGASPI in 2020 and 2021, after the relatively brief pandemic-related closures ended. Thus, despite the dismal political situation in Russia under Putin's autocratic restoration, opportunities to explore Soviet history and the Cold War based on documents from the Russian archives were much better as of mid-February 2022 than at any time in the past – certainly much better than at any point in the 1990s.

For some 30 years after 1991, foreign graduate students as well as senior scholars had the opportunity to pursue archival research in Russia, but that will not be the case for the indefinite future. This grim prognosis does not augur well for those who have been seeking to go back and reexamine the nature of the Soviet system and the Soviet state. If archival access and conditions in Moscow had truly deteriorated as a result of Putin's political clampdown before 2022, the lack of access to those archives as a result of the war would not be so dispiriting. But what makes the impact of this ghastly war on scholarly research even more regrettable is that the indefinite cessation of research opportunities came at the very time that archival conditions had markedly improved.

At some point, Russia's war against Ukraine will end, and the Russian government will cease its arrests of innocent people to hold them hostage – and at some point, Putin will be out of power – but the situation in the Russian archives by then is impossible to predict. In the meantime, scholars will have to pursue research in other former Soviet republics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Moldova have long been extremely hospitable to researchers) and to make maximum use of the large quantities of archival materials that were amassed at several research centres in North America, Europe, and Japan, including the archive of the Cold War Studies Program at Harvard University (stored in several locations on and off campus), the Hoover

Institution Archives at Stanford University, and the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The Woodrow Wilson Center was inexplicably dismantled by the administration of Donald J. Trump in the spring of 2025, but fortunately, thanks to the heroic efforts of Christian Ostermann, the digital archive and other records of the CWIHP will be preserved under a new institutional home[18]. Hundreds of invaluable volumes of declassified documents on all aspects of Soviet history and Soviet foreign policy, including sensitive topics such as the Soviet nuclear weapons program, the murderous policies of the ruling organs of the Soviet Communist party, the inner workings of the Soviet state security apparatus, and Soviet relations with various countries such as China, Vietnam, and Cuba that are still of great significance for Russia nowadays that were published in Russia and other former Soviet republics over the past 35 years are available at numerous locations in the West.

Thus, excellent research opportunities are still available for graduate students and senior scholars and will remain so regardless of what happens in Russia. Even so, there is no question that Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the severe internal clampdown in Russia, and the Russian government's penchant for arresting innocent people have dealt a major blow to scholarly research on the USSR, at least for now.

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[18] See *Round Table on the Cold War International History Project*, with contributions by Mark Kramer, Leopoldo Nuti, Hope Harrison, Alexandra Southgate, and Michael P. Brill, published in the "Passport" newsletter of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations in September 2025.

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