

## Round Table 19

### **The Opening of the Archives and the History of Communism, 1990–2000**

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By ‘opening of the archives’ I mean (1) the transformation of all archives in the post-Communist countries, particularly the archives of the Communist parties, into public archives managed according to the rules obtaining in democratic countries and (2) the making of the records deposited in those archives accessible to the public in accord with set rules and the principle that all users are equal; and also (3) records originating from the period from the First World War to the end of the 1980s, whose interpretation was the most subject to manipulation and falsification by the Communist authorities.

This opening of the archives was part of the great social revolution in the Soviet Union and the Communist countries of Europe beginning in late 1989, and was determined in part by these changes; at the same time, however, the opening of the archives — or, rather, their gradual opening — was a catalyst of these transformations. The search for the truth about the recent past was part of the political struggle for a new orientation in domestic and foreign policy.

The opening of the archives was a process – still not completely finished in any of these countries – which has had many ups and downs and a number of phases in which, each time, a different problem was in the foreground, and was often very relevant politically. At first it was, almost in all countries, a matter of transferring the archives of the Communist parties to state ownership. This transfer of extensive archival record groups from the hands of the ruling Communist parties either into the existing system of state archives (in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, for instance) or into newly established archival and research institutions (such as the RTsKhIDNI and TsKhSD in the Russian Federation or SAPMO in Germany) has been more or less successful. Archives, including the files of the apparatuses of the Communist parties (up to the time of the political revolution) did not remain

in the hands of those parties or their transformed successors.

Another problem, more or less internal, was the return of part of the files of the former central institutions, which had for decades been deposited in special archival and study sections of the interior ministries or political police, to the record groups of those archives where, based on their provenience, they belong.

By contrast, the fate of the files of the state security (as the Communist political police were called in most countries) has been a matter of interest for the general public. Their protection from destruction was ensured most dramatically in the former German Democratic Republic; and making them accessible to the public (and not only to persons who had suffered persecution), including researchers, continues to be a subject of lively public debate and polemics.

Making the archives accessible for research was in each country ensured formally by legislation that usually set a thirty-year limit. The process of the actual opening of the archives was, in this sense, however, never completed; enormous differences are evident depending on the country and on the provenience of a record (the case is different for records originating in military institutions, and different again for those from state and Party institutions, the security services, and intelligence agencies). Here, technical, financial, personal, and political factors continue to play an important role. The opening of the archives in these countries has taken place under conditions of economic hardship, technical backwardness, and with a certain lack of qualified archivists. Moreover, the interests of some sections of the new political élite have prevented the declassification of files; this is most evident in Russia.

On the other hand, and this is to a certain extent a paradox of the period, the limit to the opening of the archives, which had been set at thirty years from the date of origin of a document, has been overcome in each of these countries. Historians, actively supported by part of the public came forth with the argument that the current, post-Communist democracies are obliged, in their own interest and the interest of society, to come to terms with the past, and to do everything possible to establish a comprehensive awareness of the recent past and therefore to make accessible all existing records. In many cases — although, and I repeat, it depends on the country — these efforts have been crowned with success, as is evident from

the dozens of volumes of documents published over the last ten years (the most recent are concerned with the tenth anniversary of the democratic revolution of 1989).

An exceptionally favourable situation in this respect is to be found in Germany, where all written records of state, Party, and social institutions and organizations of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) are available. The exception comprises the records of the foreign ministry, which are deposited in the Political Archive of the Auswärtiges Amt and are subject to the thirty-year limit. Probably the most complicated situation related to the opening of archives and making records accessible is in Russia, and this is true in all respects. There, it has been a matter of the so-called ‘declassification’ of whole archives (the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation and the Archive of the Defence Ministry of the Russian Federation) or their most important parts (for instance, the ciphered telegrams of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, 1941–65), as well as the cataloguing of record groups, finding aids, and other technical assistance for researchers. And it is precisely the records in the Russian archives are crucial for understanding the history of the Cold War, the nature of the régime, and, often, the causes of the most important events in the individual countries of the former East bloc.

It is impossible here to enumerate everything that has in the past decade been achieved in the study of Communism and merely to name all the topics that could once again be worked on as a result of the opening of the archives. American historians clearly deserve much of the credit for the progress made. It was they who organized the big international projects, in particular the Cold War International History Project, which dozens of leading historians from many countries have become involved in, especially Russian historians and their institutions. Just as important in this respect was the fact that at the same time as the opening of the archives in the conditions of newly achieved freedom, the quickly expanding field of contemporary history has established itself in all the national histories of the post-Communist countries. This has resulted in a number of national research projects, whose work has contributed both to a detailed analysis of the milestones of the Cold War and to a deeper understanding of the domestic factors of developments in the individual Communist countries.

If, ten years after the process of opening up began, we are that much richer, we are,

however, also poorer, in that we have been robbed of the illusion that open archives provide answers to all open questions and that documents recently made accessible will be the philosopher's stone that helps us to prise all mysteries out of the hands of the past and to dispel the last doubts about the correctness of this or that interpretation of events. There remain plenty of reasons for polemics and impetuses to them, and for various interpretations, as well as a need for discussion about how to work with primary sources that originate from the activity of the Communist parties.

For the time being, however, our primary task is not to let up in our efforts to achieve the opening of all the archives (that is to say, of all their record groups) and to ensure that the rules of their accessibility apply equally to all researchers.