



Closing The Archives: What Russia's Renewed Secrecy Says About Putin

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It is widely known that Russia has a difficult relationship with its past. In the quarter-century since the collapse of the Soviet Union, successive governments in Moscow have been conspicuously consistent in skirting serious questions about the repressive nature of the now-defunct Soviet state and minimizing the shadow that it continues to cast over the Kremlin.

In this, Russia has lagged behind its former vassals. The 1990s saw more than a few Soviet states and satellites (among them, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Lithuania) begin the difficult process of "lustration," that is, purging former communist officials from public life and coming to grips with Soviet-era excesses. It was not until late in the decade that President Boris Yeltsin's administration took a halting step in the direction of greater transparency when it grudgingly opened some of the previously secret archives of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.

The move was political in nature; after years of promising to provide an account of his country's totalitarian past, an ailing Yeltsin was eager to finally do so in order to outmaneuver his political opponents and ingratiate himself with the West. Over the years that followed, the once-impenetrable Iron Curtain began to slowly rust, giving up some of the most sordid secrets of Soviet rule, from Stalin's capricious political edicts to the geopolitical machinations behind the Union's numerous interventions in Asia and the Third World.

On an intellectual level, these insights were a boon to researchers and historians seeking to better understand Soviet motivations and actions. On a personal one, they provided much needed closure for at least some of the families of the millions of victims of Stalin's notorious purges. In the process, Russia moved - however slightly - toward a more honest accounting of its past.

Today, however, the government of Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, is unmistakably heading in the opposite direction. Earlier this year, the Russian government commission responsible for overseeing "state secrets" officially rejected a petition by a broad coalition of political activists to open the archives of the KGB and other Soviet-era security services. In its refusal, the commission declared that the files in question "continue to have relevance to the present day and their circulation could bring harm to the Russian Federation," and it mandated that the records remain secret until at least 2044.

In recent days, the Kremlin has gone further still. In early April, the Interfax news agency reported that Putin issued an edict formally placing ROSARCHIV, the Russian federal archival agency, under his personal oversight. The move, the Kremlin explained, was taken on the grounds that the materials administered by ROSARCHIV possess "special value" and represent the "historical legacy of the Russian empire and thereafter the Soviet Union."

As scholars have noted, Putin's decision raises some intriguing questions, among them whether the ROSARCHIV collection contains incriminating evidence relating to Putin and his scandal-ridden coterie. But the most pernicious effect of the new edict will undoubtedly be the pressures on historical memory, because Putin's directive means that, as a practical matter, the legacy of the country's Soviet past will henceforth become more difficult to access - perhaps significantly so.

Notably, this falls in line with other attempts by the Putin government to reshape the political perceptions of ordinary Russians. The past half-decade has seen a dramatic constriction of free political and intellectual space within the Russian Federation, manifested in everything from onerous new restrictions on the activities of non-governmental organizations to arbitrary pressure on Western pro-democracy activists within the country. The objective has been singular and unrelenting: to reshape the already unequal balance of power between the Russian government and its people decisively in favor of the former and to squelch alternative political thought in the process. And because historical truth is essential to any such inquiry, the Kremlin has devoted considerable time and energy to silencing uncomfortable questions about the excesses of Russia's totalitarian past.

That should raise concerns among Western policymakers and proponents of Russian democracy alike because of what it tells us about Russia's future direction. Those who forget history, the old axiom posits, are doomed to repeat it. The effective closure of Russia's archives is therefore an ominous step that makes a further slide into repression all the more likely.

That, however, is likely precisely what Putin and his compatriots have in mind.

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