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On the (supposedly) sensational documents from the Gorbachev Foundation Archives

LSE Ideas

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Some of the readers of this blog may have heard of one Pavel Stroilov. Over the last year or so he has gotten quite a bit of attention from the main stream press. He claims to be sitting on a treasure trove of archival documents from the Gorbachev federation, which he stole by manipulating the computer system there. He claims, further, that these documents have been unavailable to other researchers, and that they reveal a dark side to Gorbachev. His story has gotten another retelling in a recent article in the Spring 2010 issue of City Journal, outlet of the conservative Manhattan Institute.

The article (read it [here](#)) is full of factual errors, but this being a blog for Cold War historians, I will just focus on the issue of the documents.

According to the article, Stroilov has 50,000 documents on his computer. He claims that these are unavailable to researchers, a claim that the article repeats. In fact, the vast majority of these documents have been available to researchers for at least the past decade. I worked in the Gorbachev Foundation Archives (GFA) in 2006, 2007, and 2008, and was able to see the available notes taken at Politburo meetings, Chernaiev's diary, various papers written by Gorbachev aides, and some memorandums of meetings and telephone conversations (memcons) between Gorbachev and foreign leaders. The only time documents were withdrawn was when they were being prepared for publication by the GFA; even then, after explaining that I was working on a PhD thesis and did not want to spend my entire life in grad school, I was given access to the documents. The one exception is some of the memcons of conversations with foreign leaders – for reasons that are not quite clear, many of these were kept from researchers. Even the memcons, though, have been included in the excellent volumes the GFA has been releasing over the past several years, including one on the German question, several editions of the Politburo notes, and a series approaching 15 volumes of what seems to be the GFAs entire collection. Chernaiev's diary, one of the treasures of the GFA's collection, has also been published.

Nor is it true that there has been no interest in these documents in the West, a point Ms. Berlinski raises apparently to show that we are all in danger of slipping into communism. On the contrary, many of them have been not only utilized by scholars but translated and published in English, particularly by the Cold War International History Project and the National Security Archive. This includes the supposed shockingly revelatory memcon of Gorbachev's meeting with Thatcher that the Times acquired from Mr. Stroilov – you can read the NSA's translation [here](#). The Chernaiev diary is up on the NSA site as well; NSA staff have been translating the entries year by year.

But let's assume for a moment that Stroilov did steal a batch of fascinating documents otherwise unavailable to researchers. Would this be a reason for historians to celebrate? Absolutely not. Working in Russian archives is challenging and often frustrating; documents are either not made available to researchers; all too often, documents that were once available are withdrawn. One reason is that a truly open archival culture has not taken hold; another is that there is still suspicion of researchers using the materials for embarrassing revelations about the past, which could in turn cause problems for the archivist responsible. On top of that, there is a deep-seeded paranoia about the documents being stolen by researchers who will sell them abroad. And yet an enormous amount has indeed become available, and the fields of Soviet/Russian history and Cold War history have been transformed as a result. Mr. Stroilov's theft of the documents is not only objectively wrong(it is theft, after all), it plays on all the fears and insecurities of Russian officials and archivists. At a time when Russia has a president who has spoken in favour of archival access, Mr. Stroilov's act will only serve to support the arguments of those who want to keep the archive closed.

See also the excellent response [here](#) and by Ron Radosh at [pajamasmedia](#). Note Radosh's conclusion: "The only scandal is why City Journal, one of the most important and distinguished journals in the United States, printed such a weak and misleading article that is far below its usual quality." I would disagree with the part about City Journal being among the most

important journals in the United States, but I don't see why any serious publication would print an article whose author clearly did absolutely no background work, and used a story about the theft of archival documents to push an ideological agenda.

On another note, my colleague Svetlana Savranskaya informs me that she and Sergei Radchenko (until recently of the LSE, now at University of Nottingham) wrote a response to the Times back in September; their letter was never published. I will post the letter here later...

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