COMMENT

Russian History without Russia: Archive Encounters in an Era of Restricted Access

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Abstract

This comment is the personal reflection of an early career historian on the challenges of working on Russian history during a time of geopolitical change and declining access. As libraries and archives in the Russian Federation become increasingly difficult to use following the invasion of Ukraine, early-career and younger historians are being forced to adopt remote or indirect methods of research due to formal and informal barriers. I reflect on some of the ethical, practical and epistemological dilemmas of conducting historical investigations at a distance, drawing chiefly on my own experiences working on the tsarist secret police during the First World War. I argue that this is not a return to Cold War constraints, but a new era that demands fresh strategies and a redefinition of expertise.

Keywords: Imperial Russia; secret police; Russian state archives; Ukraine war; remote historical research

In 2024, I submitted my Ph.D. in Russian history without ever having set foot in a Russian archive. My experience spared me what I perceived would have been a rite of passage: navigating Russian bureaucracy and intimidating reading rooms, cultivating relationships with archivists and sifting through seemingly endless files. In the early stages of 2022, I had contacted the Russian state archive and began preparing my visa application. However, by the time I was ready to attempt archival work, these challenges had shifted with the Putin regime's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This invasion was a continuation of the conflict that began in 2014 with the Russian takeover of Crimea. Eight years later, some commentators speculated that the Russian army would defeat Ukrainian forces within mere days; instead, the conflict has morphed into a grinding land war, which has demonstrated the familiar characteristics of trench warfare, civilian displacement and urban devastation, as well as the frighteningly modern reality of drone combat. The conflict has also produced devastating human, environmental and geopolitical consequences, with the ripples of the fighting being felt around the world.

The impact of war on research

It has also presented dilemmas to historians working on all aspects of Russian and Soviet history who have had to confront a lack of access, or in the case of Ukraine, even the physical destruction of libraries and archives. As of 2025, while many research repositories in Russia remain technically 'open' (there are apparently no legal restrictions preventing foreigners from working in the archives), in reality, researchers face severe difficulties obtaining visas, as well as general administrative obstacles. There are also ethical concerns about engaging with Russia while its military continues to devastate Ukrainian territory and drive civilians from their homes. This combination of factors means that access to the archives has become a theoretical proposition for scholars from the UK, the United States and the EU, forcing many to consider changing their research focus and to grapple with writing Russian history without Russia at the centre.

Archival holdings are being reclassified as state secrets, which continues trends from before the war. In 2016, for instance, the Russian government rejected petitions to open KGB archives due to 'continued relevance' to the present day, instructing these records to remain classified until 2044. The same year, the Federal Archive Agency, Rosarkhiv, was transferred from the supervision of the Ministry of Culture to the Presidential Administration, meaning its head reported directly to Vladimir Putin. This demonstrated the state's desire for control over access to historical knowledge, as well as the slide towards greater secrecy even before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[1] Also in 2016, Sergei Mironenko, Director of the State Archive since 1992, was dismissed from his post, possibly on the back of his opposition to Soviet Second World War myths still being propagated by the Russian state. Meanwhile, more sensitive historical documents, particularly concerning the darker aspects of the Stalin period, have allegedly been relocated outside Moscow to prevent unsanctioned or accidental access.[2] Further restrictions in 2025 require foreigners to obtain special permission in advance, though they still are likely to face delay or denial.

Meanwhile, opportunities for cooperation and collaboration between Western academics and Russian academics have decreased, as the latter are monitored for their connections with foreigners, and overall academic freedom has declined.[3] On the Russian side, restrictions have been placed on institutional connections, while in the West, scholars and research bodies have faced moral pressures to cut ties with Russia entirely. As the Putin regime's historical delusions concerning a greater Russia (and the artificiality of Ukraine) have grown, its desire to control access to historical knowledge and its reproduction has increased apace. All of this suggests historians are in for some lean years of uncertain and inconsistent exposure to material from the centre, and

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[1]Alexei Golubev, 'Digitising Archives in Russia: Epistemic Sovereignty and Its Challenges in the Digital Age', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital Russian Studies*, ed. Daria Gritsenko, Mariëlle Wijermars, M. V. Kopotev and Mikhail Kopotev (Cham, 2021), 353–4.

[2]See Hiroaki Kuromiya, 'Russia's Undue Influence on Western Scholars and Scholarship', https://idfi.ge/en/russia%E2%80%99s_undue_influence_on_western_scholars_and_scholarship (accessed 26 Jun. 2025).

[3]See Academic Freedom Index 2024 at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU), and the V-Dem Institute, https://academic-freedom-index.net/ (accessed 26 Jun. 2025).

upcoming graduate students must reorient their research questions to accommodate the source material that they *can* access.

Given the difficulties, scholars have turned to the countries that were once part of the Russian Empire or Soviet Union. Archives and libraries in the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Baltic states, Moldova, Poland and Finland offer ways to offset the restrictions, while also providing sanctuary for many anti-war Russians. For historians, these developments present opportunities to challenge the dominance of Russian culture in post-Soviet contexts and facilitate interpretations of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union that are not mediated through a Moscow-centric lens.[4] These tendencies in scholarship were already underway and have only gained further momentum following the 2022 invasion. However, although less systematic, access can be laden with obstacles in some of these former Soviet republics, just as in Russia itself. In Georgia, for instance, KGB and Communist Party records have been relocated to remote locations, and researchers must pay large fees for copies of documents.[5] The current circumstances highlight the often close relationship between the archive and state power.

The research situation in Belarus is equally difficult in the current climate, as Alexander Lukashenko's regime takes its lead from Russia. Researchers must operate within a framework of declining press freedom and political repression; in one case, the publication of archival documents has been designated as 'extremist' activity.[6] This stands in contrast to developments in Ukraine, where archival transparency concerning the Soviet period was legally mandated in 2015 and declassified secret police documents offered a 'back door' into the social, political and cultural landscape of the entire Soviet Union.[7]

However, the war has fundamentally transformed the situation in Ukraine. Digitisation projects have become more urgent due to the physical safety of collections and the need to preserve this level of availability for future generations. The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) has made the preservation of Soviet era secret police files a priority, recognising their long-term historical and political value.[8] This is not just an issue of preservation, but one of maintaining the possibility of Ukraine's right to voice its own historical experience as distinct from Moscow's narrative.

In retrospect, the period after 1991, the so-called 'archival revolution', appears to have been a golden age offering unprecedented archival openness to both scholars and the general public. Joint projects involving international funding and the cooperation of Russian archival agencies with the Council of Europe, the Library of Congress and Open Society (now banned in Russia) were developed. Of course, access was not always

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[4]For example, Olena Palko, 'Away from Russia? History Writing before, during, and after the War', *Revolutionary Russia*, 36 (2023), 141–2.

[5]See Sarah Slye, 'Creeping Authoritarianism in Higher Education and Research in Georgia: What A Difference A War Makes?', in *Revolutionary Russia*, 36 (2023), 185–209.

[6]See '4 Years of Repression in Belarus in General and in the Cultural Sector: Trends from June 2020–June 2024', https://penbelarus.org/en/2024/07/22/4-years-of-repression-in-belarus-in-general-and-in-the-cultural-sector-in-particular-2020-june-2024 (accessed 26 Jun. 2025).

[7]'Archival Insights and the Secret Police', *Kritika Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 23 (2022), 451–5.

[8]*Ibid.*, 454.

so simple and might easily be romanticised, but in light of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and its consequences for research, it was certainly easier.

While there have been many reflective pieces exploring what the end of access means for historical research from scholars with a great deal of experience,[9] this piece considers what it means to write Russian history without setting foot in archives in Russia. I am therefore approaching this from the specificities of my own research interests and early career stage. Prior to beginning a Ph.D. in 2020, my only experience of archives was a single day spent in the Leeds Russia Archive in service of my Master's dissertation, examining material relating to the British community in Russia from 1914 to 1922.

Indirect access

By 2022, I was a doctoral student at the University of Exeter, hoping to undertake archival work in Moscow, with little idea of what that would actually involve. My project focused on the tsarist secret police (the Okhrana) and its role in the First World War and the build-up to the February Revolution of 1917. This was a political police force (rather than a criminal one) established in the wake of the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 by the revolutionary terror group, the People's Will. While previous works had chosen to spotlight the institutional structures of the Okhrana and its battle with the revolutionary terrorists, my project became a study of the demands of war on a pre-existing political police system.

My research investigated state security's understanding of an array of challenges that characterised the wartime period, such as espionage, spy mania, rumours, food supply, army loyalty, imperial collapse, jurisdictional wrangling with military intelligence and the declining legitimacy of the Romanov monarchy. I focused particularly on the twin cities of Moscow and Petrograd, where the two key Okhrana bureaus (known as Security Sections) were located. Beyond this, I also considered other areas of the Russian Empire, chiefly through the records of regional gendarmerie departments (the gendarmerie was a paramilitary force with a close relationship to the political police). I was chiefly interested in how the regime understood threats that no longer came from familiar enemies, such as the revolutionary socialist parties, but were symptoms of the wider war.

As with many historians of late Imperial Russia, the archives were always going to be a significant resource, and since starting the Ph.D., I had been looking forward to the travel that accessing them would entail. My project required exploring documents chiefly contained within the main Russian state archive, known as GARF (Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiskoi Federatsii). With what the Russian government has framed as a 'special military operation' underway, I realised in discussion with my Ph.D. supervisors that I would have to find different ways of approaching my research.

Russian history has never been entirely contained within Russian borders. Non-specialists may not be aware of the vast range of materials which are available for Russian historians outside Russia. Extensive diasporic collections can be found in the United States, as well as materials from the central Russian archives, although these

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[9]See for example, the special issue of *Revolutionary Russia*, 36 (2023) and 'Coping with Disaster: History and Historians in the Wake of War', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 24 (2023), 239–43.

collections are not always complete. The International Institute for Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam also contains a rich reserve of sources, especially convenient for UK-based historians. Another option already mentioned is mining the materials of the former provinces of the Russian Empire. Finland, for instance, which was a part of the empire until 1917 (as the Grand Duchy of Finland), offers many insights through the collections of Helsinki's Slavonic library, which houses newspaper runs and many imperial maps. This is only a sketch of what might be accessed without ever travelling to Russia itself. Due to the nature of my research, I only made use of some of these resources as my topic offered some structural advantages.

Although researching a secret police force seemed unpromising in an already restricted environment, the history of the Okhrana was always a contested topic. Intelligence organisations are secretive by nature and their reputations prone to exaggeration and mythologisation by both outsiders and insiders; their records are usually considered too important to be declassified or end up being destroyed for political reasons. In February 1917, for instance, Okhrana documents were burned on the street as a symbolic victory against the hated tsarist regime, sometimes with the participation of former secret agents who wanted to ensure their history of service was also obliterated. These factors can cause competing narratives to arise, shaped by limited knowledge and political prejudice. Compared to working on more readily available newspapers, my project was likely to be more challenging in some ways, but there were still many resources available.

To circumvent my cancelled archival work in Russia, I spent several months on a multi-archival trip in the United States. This had always been part of my research plan, but it took on a larger role in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war. The United States offers the best set of sources outside of Russia thanks to its émigré communities and strategic acquisitions of Russian collections. The most important of these for my Ph.D. was the records of the foreign office of the Okhrana (Zagranichnaia Agentura).

To monitor the diffusion of the revolutionary movement across western Europe, the tsarist secret police established a Paris office in 1883. In 1924, Boris Maklakov, the Provisional Government's ambassador to France, brought with him to the United States a vast collection of documents from the Paris office of the Okhrana. Maklakov dispatched sixteen crates, each weighing over 200 kg, to the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, which was founded in 1919 by Herbert Hoover and initially conceived to preserve materials related to the First World War. However, the documents remained sealed in storage. Conscious that his actions could risk the wrath of the Soviet government and its new intelligence arms, Maklakov agreed with the Hoover Institution that the documents should not become public until after his death. This duly occurred in 1957, and as a result, 200 boxes of Okhrana material were then accessible to scholars. The CIA examined the files with an eye on what they could reveal about continuities in Russian security culture – specifically, what insights they could give into the Soviet Union in the context of the Cold War. Using the files, American intelligence officials published six articles in the CIA's classified journal *Studies in Intelligence* between 1965 and 1967.[10] These articles were later declassified in the 1990s, but

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[10]Ben Fisher (ed.), *Okhrana: The Paris Operations of the Russian Imperial Police* (Washington, DC, 1997).

provided only a limited retelling of Okhrana operations shaped by Cold War geopolitical logic.

Nevertheless, in my case, the fact that wartime circulars from Moscow and St Petersburg (renamed Petrograd in 1914) reached the Paris office of the Okhrana provided me with a window into state security's priorities during the First World War — not from inside the Russian archive, but from its own bureaucratic diaspora. These records, available on microfilm, were invaluable to my project and offered a direct connection to the centre. Reading these documents gave me a sense of the institutional culture of the Okhrana over a longer period, as well as insight into the topics it was interested in. Some of the Paris Office's records have also been digitised – part of the Okhrana's 'card index' can currently be accessed online.[11] This was a method for tracking subversive individuals (e.g. revolutionary socialists, anarchists and students) and classifying their party or social group affiliation. In future, further digitisation may obviate the need for an in-person visit to explore this particular collection; however, this will probably be a lengthy process.

Beyond the official Okhrana records available at Hoover are vast collections on war, revolution, peace-making and anti-communist movements. A particular physical collection I spent time looking at was that of intelligence officer and historian Edward Ellis Smith. After serving the CIA in Moscow in the late 1950s, he made the jump to academic history, authoring a book on the young Joseph Stalin and producing a bibliographical guide to published documents on the Okhrana in 1967.[12] Of special interest to me were interviews and recollections that Ellis Smith compiled from two former middle-ranking Okhrana bureaucrats, Nikolai Vesselago and Viktor Russiian. Both of these resources provided interesting glimpses into the mythical reputation of the Okhrana and the personal lives of secret police officials. This collection remains a useful one for anyone interested in tsarist and Soviet state security and intelligence history.

My experience of the Hoover Institution was very positive. I booked my space in the reading room and ordered materials over a month before arriving in California. My topic also benefited from its focus on elite figures at the apex of Imperial Russian society, most of whom, in their post-1917 exile, left records, papers and memoirs, a luxury not always afforded to those working on social histories. For myself, ministers with no connection to state security could provide insights into high politics and the workings of the wartime tsarist government, adding a fuller perspective to my work.

Indeed, beyond the aforementioned resources of the Hoover Institution, I was also able to make use of the Bakhmeteff archive at Columbia University, New York, which bears the name of Boris Bakhmeteff, the last ambassador of Russia's Provisional Government to the United States. At the time of visiting in April 2022, desk space was limited due to COVID-19 and its attendant social distancing policies. Despite some difficulties, I was able to consult the papers of tsarist officials such as Pavel Ignatiev, Petr Bark and Sergei Kryzhanovskii, all of which added to my source base. I also spent two days at Yale University's Special Collections, which was very easy to arrange, to consult the papers of one former secret policeman, Alexander Spiridovich. Here, I examined a selection of boxes (out of a total of twenty-seven) containing scrapbooks, memoir

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[11]'Okhrana Records', Hoover Institution Library and Archives, https://digitalcollections.hoover.org/objects/54048/okhrana-records (accessed 26 Jun. 2025).

[12]Edward Ellis Smith, *The Okhrana: The Russian Department of Police: A Bibliography* (Stanford, 1967).

drafts, newspaper clippings, lectures and even doodles all produced by a prolific 'historian' of the political police and revolutionary movement. Spiridovich wrote histories of the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) party and memoirs based on his service as head of Nicholas II's personal security and experience during the First World War. While some of this was accessible in published form already, the papers, translations and research notes included materials I had not seen before. As with most of these visits, the archival experience mainly consisted of taking photos (or scans), leaving detailed reading until a later date. Photographing tends to be the norm, especially when facing financial and time constraints; the priority with such visits is getting through the material rather than immersing yourself in it. The benefit of taking photos is the speed with which you can amass your own collection of documents and the ability to return to them later in the writing process, or even reuse sources in a later project.

Despite the challenges I faced, I greatly valued the opportunity to work in physical archives in the United States. Without this experience, my encounter with Russian archives (and archives in general) would have been entirely second-hand and lacking the sensory dimension that others often recount. It is common for historians not just to write about their subject and its sources, but also the physical environment in which they find them. This has even spawned memoirs that focus on just that, such as Sheila Fitzpatrick's *Spy in the Archives*, which tracks her experience of a year and a half in Cold War Moscow, supported by the British Council. Her recollections covering visits during the period 1967–70 mention briefings from MI6, being subjected to constant surveillance and wrangling over archival access with Soviet officialdom.[13] In this era, scholars did not have full independence to use the archives (when they were given access); they informed Soviet authorities of their topic and requests for material would be approved or denied based on official foreknowledge of that topic. This allowed the authorities to control access and confine research to a narrow focus. According to one historian, the main long-term achievement of the 'archival revolution' following the collapse of the Soviet Union was the removal of this mechanism of control so that researchers could set their own research agenda and order material freely from finding aids.[14]

By contrast, post-2022 researchers from outside Russia lack this freedom. They might not be branded spies or 'bourgeois falsifiers' by Soviet academics, or have to negotiate a battle of wits with archivists, but they are denied entry by visa refusals, denied permission to access the archives and face the reclassification of documents. This is not to say that the challenges of one era were greater than those of another, but rather that they were different in nature and impact.

Aside from the opportunity to actually look at documents, on-site research offers a sense of place and time that might now be absent from the academic process. Although I visited Russia in 2019 and made Russian friends, this was before I began my Ph.D. and was primarily for tourist purposes. As such, my archival experience lacked the social and cultural immersion normally associated with research as a form of travel. It also ensured there would be no serendipity in the archives, no accidental encounters

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[13]Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'A Spy in the Archives', *London Review of Books*, 32 (2010), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v32/n23/sheila-fitzpatrick/a-spy-in-the-archives (accessed 26 Jun. 2025).

[14]Peter Holquist, 'A Tocquevillean "Archival Revolution": Archival Change in the Longue Durée' *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 51 (2003), 77.

with material that might cause me to rethink the topic or take it in a completely different direction. My research immersion took place in the United States, navigating the legacy of Imperial Russia from Stanford and New York rather than Moscow and St Petersburg. This reversal left me reflecting on the fact that I am not a historian of the United States, but I have come to know Russian history and Russia (to a considerable extent) through its displaced documents rather than through its own institutions. To an extent, my research was, therefore, filtered through US archival norms such as classifications, ordering systems and priorities rather than through the structures of the Russian archives. My work was shaped by the type of material that survived outside Russia due to diasporic activity, Cold War politics, and the interests of Western institutions.

Most graduate students and early career researchers might now have to reckon with writing about Russian history without travelling there at all. While it is easy to be envious of historians who were graduate students during the archival gold rush of the 1990s, in my experience, there were a few strategies which helped me get around the problem of access without radically reshaping the focus of my Ph.D. proposal. One such strategy was drawing on research support services. I worked with the School of Russian and Asian Studies (SRAS),[15] a US-based organisation founded in 1996. Similar services exist, some of which also offer translation support, assistance with archival navigation and help with visas. SRAS is a fee-based organisation run by a team with direct experience of living and working in Russia and many countries of the former Soviet Union. It is not tied to the US government. It does, however, work with US universities as it offers study abroad programmes in addition to research support.

Through SRAS, I was put in contact with a research assistant in Russia. I sent a brief detailing the types of documents (and topics) that I was interested in, and the research assistant then carried out the archival work, sending back photographs of documents. In my case, the research assistant was very well versed in the structure of the archives, providing an 'on the ground' familiarity. However, while using research support has been an invaluable option for some scholars, it raised three dilemmas: one practical, one intellectual and one ethical. As a self-funded Ph.D. student, the first of these was personal and very straightforward – I was limited by what I could afford; as such, I only requested a relatively small selection of documents.

Secondly, with little direct familiarity with the archives myself, and as a graduate student desperately trying to develop a project, I did not have a clear idea of what I was looking for beyond the headings provided on online finding aids. Understanding the logic behind archival organisation was important, even from a distance. Russian state archives are organised according to the *fond–opis'–delo* system: a fond is the full record group associated with a particular institutional body or individual (e.g. fond 102 The Department of Police or fond 826 Vladimir Dzhunkovskii); fonds are divided into *opisi* (pl.), which organise individual files by topic or chronological position. Finally, the *dela* are the individual files which historians normally request to consult. For me, understanding this was not only a practical consideration, but also a matter of reconstructing what the archive might look like imaginatively. Even for someone working at

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a distance, the production of historical knowledge is still shaped by the classificatory logic of Russian institutions. The archive's organisation and constitution structure how we see the past in important ways.

Relying on digital finding aids presented issues, especially as some entries could have opaque titles like 'various matters', which seemed like a gamble for someone who needed to prioritise their selection. These considerations meant I had to rely on archival references (*fond–opis'–delo*) provided in secondary works to pass on to my research support contact in Russia. Inevitably, this began to shape my own work around what had been previously written, at least in terms of source selection. Although my research questions were different from existing works, I had to balance financial considerations with accessing material I already knew would have some value to me. In the current climate, then, early career scholars can be affected more severely in some ways compared to established historians, who have built up a trove of material over the years, are already familiar with the structure of the archives, or have the personal/institutional funding to make better use of research support services.

However, even if that institutional funding is forthcoming, some may choose not to use it; a third factor is the ethical conundrum about engaging with Russia at all. Using research support services may place Russians in dangerous or precarious situations, which adds legal and moral complexities. At a time when Russian higher education is under pressure from state oversight and the archives themselves are enlisted in publishing documents that support Putin's view of history, it would seem inappropriate to use them. For Putin, there is a single 'correct' view of the past which Russian institutions are obliged to uphold. Meanwhile, universities in the UK are often cautious about research support services, especially if institutional funding is at stake, but practices remain inconsistent. Some scholars work through long-standing personal connections, while others receive informal materials from contacts still in Russia. The ethical terrain is grey, and there does not appear to be a formal consensus, at least among UK institutions.

The future looks precarious for organisations offering archival support as the environment in Russia becomes increasingly hostile to Western educational and cultural initiatives. This makes it difficult for organisations like SRAS to maintain a physical presence in Russia. SRAS appears already to be pivoting to engage more closely with different regions, offering Russian-language programmes in the Baltic states, the Caucasus and Central Asia. This feeds into the larger trend of engaging with Russia and its language, culture and history from the outside. Despite these dilemmas, my experience of research support services was positive because they provided me with a core of documents, which was very important in a field that prizes the archive as a marker of serious, original research.

For many modern historians, 'going to the archive' is considered a 'foundational and paradigmatic' activity,[16] especially for younger scholars seeking to establish their credibility. My indirect access caused me to reflect on how much weight is given even just to the appearance of Russian archival references in scholarly works, regardless of the information involved. Even on a subconscious level, their prominence in citations not only evidences the information but also attests to the physical presence of

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[16]Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002), x.

the historian in the archive, which, in turn, confers legitimacy on their research and its methodology. For the generation that experienced the 'halcyon days' of openness of the 1990s, the state archive in Moscow was the key marker of scholarship. For my generation, developing research in a very different climate, it is more likely to be one of several markers of scholarly rigour as we explore it remotely and selectively rather than in person.

On a more practical level, although some handwritten documents were difficult to read, I gained some very interesting sources through research support, and I believe my Ph.D. was stronger as a result of having a core sample from the state archive. For me, the most important of these sources were police reports, typically marked 'top secret', concerning the 'moods' of the masses. The beauty of police reports is in the variety of topics that come up within them. Although they can reflect preconceived ideas about what was important, they also cut across all sorts of subjects from fantastical rumours to high politics, to events on the street, to ethnic tensions, espionage and international relations. Having access to archived police reports, as well as published ones, helped me to get a sense of how these versions compared. Even a small archival selection can make a substantive difference, but this was not the only material I acquired from the state archives.

Fellow academics also shared material with me, obtained from the state archive before 2022, but again, this raised the issue of working from someone else's selection. A lack of access brings a natural tension between being forced to rely on others and trying to produce research which is as original as possible. This is an issue faced by any historian of any period who uses researchers; yet, without this additional material, I would probably have produced a weaker Ph.D. Had I conducted research in the Russian state archive independently, for better or worse, my dissertation would likely have developed differently, in both structure and source base. I may have encountered materials which forced me to rethink assumptions and ask different questions, which may, in turn, have caused me to structure my writing differently. In addition to these second-hand forms of access, I also turned to the opportunities offered by the online world.

Digital access

Historians of Russia and the Soviet Union are familiar with the challenges associated with a restrictive research landscape, and it is tempting to see the current geopolitical moment as a return to such conditions. Before the opening of the archives, scholars relied on material outside Russia, in addition to what archival material they were allowed to access. However, present-day restrictions, while posing problems, do not mark a return to the scholarly environment of the Cold War.[17] This is due, at least in large part, to technological change as digitisation projects and electronic libraries now provide substantial quantities of material (including from archives) on a wide range of topics. This is further complemented by decades-worth of scholarship and publications that have asked new questions, as well as the publication of archival materials. Many of these developments are irreversible. There are also useful remote

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[17]George Gilbert, 'Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Its Impact on Scholarly Research', *Revolutionary Russia*, 36 (2023), 159–60.

research platforms, such as the Electronic Library of Historical Documents,[18] which offers digitised archival materials that can be accessed via searchable databases. Russia is increasing its digitisation activities, and while some documents can only be found behind paywalls and subscription services, many are freely available. Digital access is not just compensating for restrictions but changing the way research is done.

At the same time, it remains important to consider where such documents originate, why they were chosen for digitisation and what might have been excluded, especially with initiatives that partly emanate from the Russian state. The online world is not immune to state control. In July 2025, the Russian government introduced new regulations on Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), which enable users to bypass state-imposed restrictions on foreign websites. This is significant because in place of popular and independent sites, the Russian state promotes alternatives with 'approved' versions of historical events.[19] Russia's promotion of a separate online sphere will also make even digital collaborations between researchers in Russia and the West increasingly complicated. While Western researchers might see VPNs as a convenient workaround, their use may cause Russians to face legal consequences. The age of digital access carries the risk of becoming a mechanism of authoritarian power, where historical narratives are shaped through the selective availability of sources.

Questions of selection and access also shaped my approach to other resources. As a 'digital associate' of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's summer research laboratory, I was able to submit online requests for books, memoirs and articles which were scanned to me by the Slavic Reference Service. This was much more convenient than waiting for interlibrary loans or travelling to bigger libraries within the UK. The availability of material online stands in stark contrast to the real limitations in Russia itself and shows that while opportunities to work directly with Russian repositories diminish, other aspects of the research process have become much more streamlined. Documentary collections such as Red Archive (Krasnyi Arkhiv), Red Utopia (Krasnaia Letopis), the Past (Byloe) and others are mostly available online as universities subscribe to digitisation projects like East View.[20] Though the print versions of these collections can often be accessed in research libraries, online availability reduces barriers and makes the research process more efficient. These are not just temporary solutions but an indication of bigger changes in how historical research is carried out.

I certainly benefited from such materials, which offered easy access to published secret police reports and insights into the politics of the First World War. Of course, I had to keep in mind why certain documents were published in the first place. Being able to cross-reference published reports with the archival material I did have, as well as memoirs, helped me to find firmer footing when writing up my Ph.D. Combining an array of different source materials aided in establishing a more rounded picture.

In the current environment, historians must negotiate the practical, intellectual and ethical dilemmas presented by the shifting geopolitical climate, some of which

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[18]Electronic Library of Historical Documents, https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/1-glavnaya (accessed 26 Jun. 2025).

[19]'Disrupted, Throttled, and Blocked State Censorship, Control, and Increasing Isolation of Internet Users in Russia', Human Rights Watch, https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/07/30/disrupted-throttled-and-blocked-state-censorship-control-and-increasing-isolation (accessed 11 Sept. 2025).

[20]East View, https://www.eastview.com/resources/journals/krasnyi-arkhiv/ (accessed 26 Jun. 2025).

can be more acute for younger scholars. Declining accessibility of archives may mean a generation trained on inherited material, digital resources, peripheral archives and émigré collections. Where earlier scholars might have spent months in Moscow, St Petersburg or regional archives, today's early career researchers may never travel to Russia at all. This raises the possibility of a generational divide in Russian history, where 'expertise' may be defined by whether or not you were lucky enough to conduct in-person archival research before restrictions increased from 2014 onwards.

However, this may not be a terrible thing if analytical skills are sharpened by negotiating archival absences and scholars are forced to align their questions more precisely with what sources they can access. Constraints might even produce tighter and more thought-provoking scholarship that is not saddled with the weight of hundreds of archival references. My experience shows that a great deal of resources can be explored outside Russia, and remote strategies can be fruitful. New perspectives may also be gained by focusing on aspects of Russian imperial rule from non-Russian archives, investigating questions of race and nationality, as well as exploring comparative, international and world history questions. In my view, the current circumstances especially emphasise the enduring importance of military, diplomatic and imperial topics and the need to interpret the broad sweep of Russian history for a wider audience.

Meeting the challenges outlined in this article will require creativity, resourcefulness and strategic decisions to compensate for deficiencies in access and a reconsideration of what constitutes expertise within the field. It will also entail a wider recognition and understanding of the challenges by publishers, peer reviewers and hiring panels, especially if younger scholars are unable to forge a career on the same basis as those who enjoyed relatively open archival access. As such, some early career historians may no longer neatly fit into the image of a 'traditional' academic with a well-defined specialism as we explore a more diverse range of sources. If we are looking at further years of stymied access, then the field needs to evolve institutionally as well as methodically, to redefine how scholarly rigour and expertise are evaluated.