What difference has the opening (and closing) of archives after 1991 made to the historiography of the Cold War?

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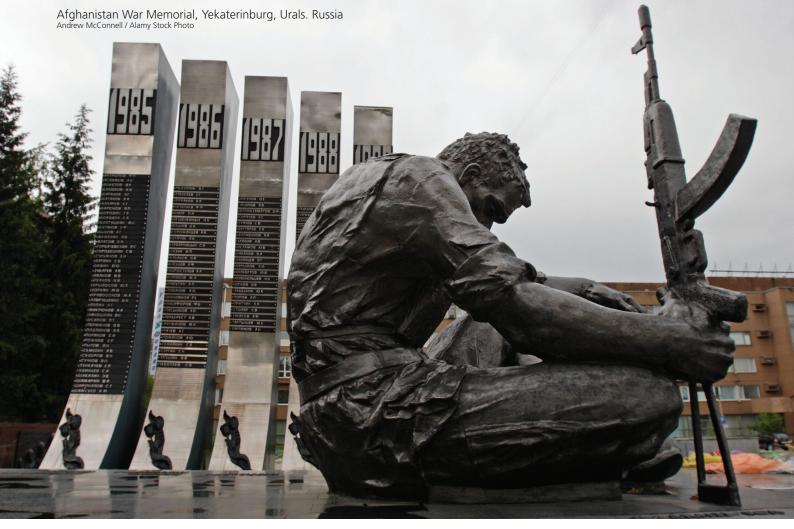

Banner of Stalin at the Komsomol's World Youth
Festival in Budapest 24 August 1949

Prior to the East European revolutions of 1989, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, commentators outside the region were largely reliant on printed material collected by specialist research libraries, informal arrangements with contacts 'behind the iron curtain', information that could be gleaned from visits to the region, and the testimonies and research of those who had defected to the West. Historiographies produced from within the socialist bloc were frequently shaped by the Party line. It is important not to overemphasise the level of top-down vulgarisation of the historical profession in the Soviet sphere: historians across the Eastern bloc conducted archival research and published their findings, and engaged in critical professional dialogues within their fields. In the Soviet Union, particularly after Stalin's death, and the thaw following Khrushchev's secret speech of 1956, there was genuine critical engagement about historical narratives in parts of the region. But such work was rarely translated and distributed to Anglophone audiences.

The fall of Communism led to an unprecedented opening up of state archival records. Often, the archives themselves were one of the first state assets seized as part of the revolutions: citizens were fully aware of the importance they had, and the political reckonings that were to come in response to the opening of their contents. Access to, and management of, these collections remains a politically contentious issue in many countries. In some, including Russia and Hungary, archives across a range of topics, which had previously been opened up in the 1990s, have become harder to access in recent years. For the Czech Republic and the former East Germany, openness and reflection on the historical experience of the twentieth century have been framed as a contemporary democratic right, and even an obligation for contemporary society. Declassification and the availability of physical and human resources for managing archives varies significantly in different localities, and there remain many difficulties with reconstructing aspects of the historical record – but the decades since the fall of communism have seen a veritable flourishing of scholarship, produced both inside and outside of the region, and some considerable reconsiderations of previous historical narratives about Communism during the Cold War.

Hidden scarcity

Historian of the Cold War Odd Arne Westad has claimed that one of the biggest surprises to face scholars of the Soviet Union was the real degree of scarcity and underdevelopment in the economy, technology and infrastructure.[1] While the USSR postured on the international stage, records show that, in private, the 'knife edge' on which the stability of the regime seemed to rest was a source of great worry to Stalin. While later leaders were not so prone to existential anxieties, sources show that by the 1970s military capacity – in terms of equipment and human resources – was much weaker than was imagined abroad. Armed intervention had been one of the main tools for maintaining power in the face of revolution and reform in Eastern Europe in 1956, with uprisings in Hungary and Poland, and again in 1968 after the Prague Spring. The inability to sustain this level of intervention goes some way to explain the sudden – and quite unexpected – collapse of power in 1989. The failure of the war in Afghanistan has also been cited as the culmination of long-term decline, which tipped the balance towards the Soviet Union's disintegration subsequently in 1991.

Afghanistan War Memorial, Yekaterinburg, Urals. Russia
Andrew McConnell / Alamy Stock Photo

The role of ideology in the Soviet sphere

In the early years of the Cold War, much western historiography attributed all Soviet policy to ideological dogma, denying the possibility of rational decision-making. Ideology certainly did play a role in this period: documents show that, for example, Stalin's support of intervention in Korea in 1950 was mobilised by a desire to bolster his standing as a vanguard of revolution on the world stage, particularly in light of the rising status of communist China. By contrast, by the regime's final decade, western analysts were sceptical that ideology might have played any role at an international policy level, assuming instead that decisions were driven predominantly by the desire for economic and territorial gain and defensive security concerns. The emergence of substantial archival evidence to the contrary surprised many. The Brezhnev period, in contrast with the zealous ideological dogma of Stalinism, has often been considered to be one of cynical stagnation, when the leadership protected the interests of their own elite, without any longer holding true to a collective, socialist ideal. Nevertheless, the argument for continuing to support the Communist regime in Afghanistan in 1978–80, in spite of significant cost and lack of trust in the Kabul leadership, rested precisely on the need to defend 'the revolution' in principle, even when this appeared to be strategically unwise.[2]

As well as questions about ideology, the fall of Soviet Communism allowed historians to comb the archives to gain insight into the social, cultural and intellectual life of citizens, and the ambitious plans at various stages to build, and regenerate, the socialist project. Here, too, the role of ideology seemed to be stronger than previously assumed. In particular, a wealth of letters and autobiographical material written by workers themselves came to be unearthed. Historians such as Jochen Hellbeck and Stephen Kotkin have examined questions about 'Soviet subjectivity': how did citizens identify with the regime and its values? How did they articulate their relationship

towards it in the course of everyday life, and how did this shape the way they wrote about themselves? Such documents indicated that people did express specifically Soviet – not merely Russian – identities. At Magnitogorsk, a city in the Urals planned from scratch around iron and steel production and engineered to be a model Soviet society, workers engaged in what Kotkin calls 'speaking Bolshevik'. They narrated their life stories in the language and priorities of the state and, by doing so, they were able to advance their personal interests and participate fully in the collective. While dissent and cynicism were also obviously facets of the experience of many living behind the 'iron curtain', primary sources have shown that we should not underestimate the degree to which many citizens were convinced by the socialist project and were, in some part, committed to building it.[3]

After 1956 in the USSR and Eastern Europe

Since the turn of the twenty-first century more substantial research has been carried out on the history of the post-Stalinist period through to 'late socialism', across Russia and Eastern Europe. These histories encompass ever-wider areas of life: from high politics and planning, to aspects of everyday life from material design and consumption to television and print culture, through to health, science and intellectual life. For the Soviet Union, careful attention has been paid to understanding the complexities of 'The Thaw' period. Khrushchev's Secret Speech of 1956, which criticized the excesses of Stalin's 'cult of personality', led to the decarceration of thousands of political prisoners. Rather than purely a process of 'destalinisation', and a hiatus in the use of the gulag and show trials as a means of crushing dissent, a new generation of scholars has argued that the period of Khrushchev's leadership should be best seen as part of a re-launching of the Soviet project, which had its roots in the aftermath of the Second World War. Rather than simply a 'thaw', there was a complex process of reckoning

Armed civilians during the Romanian Revolution of 1989. The revolution was the only violent overthrow of a Communist state in the Warsaw Pact.
The National Museum of Romanian History (MNIR)

Baltic Way, a peaceful political demonstration on 23 August 1989, dedicated to liberating the Baltic Republics from the Soviet Union. Approximately two million people formed a human chain spanning 675.5 kilometres (419.7 miles) across the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

with the Stalinist past, a re-engagement with ideology and the fundamental goals of the socialist project at home, and their articulation internationally.[4]

In the fields of science, medicine and intellectual life historians have begun to challenge the very idea of an 'iron curtain'. While travel was indeed restricted, and correspondence heavily monitored, international networks and non-governmental bodies such as the World Health Organisation did allow for co-operation and exchange of ideas. Evidence of more informal connections across East and West, through individual contacts or underground and dissident groups, also goes a long way towards challenging the idea of isolation and 'backwardness' in the region during the Cold War, as well as emerging scholarship demonstrating aid and collaboration between the Second World with what is sometimes called 'the global south'. Scarcity of resources was a continual problem throughout the period, but East European and Soviet professionals made key interventions on the world stage.[5]

As well as broader social and cultural developments over the long-duree, the archives have given a more detailed picture of key flashpoints in the history of Cold War Eastern Europe.

The emergence of a detailed set of notes taken by Vladimir Malin, the head of the Soviet Communist Party's Central Committee General Department, has allowed historians to reconstruct a detailed day-to-day account of the Polish uprisings and Hungarian Revolution of 1956. These largely corroborate Khrushchev's own memoir accounts, but also detail the Soviet leadership's underestimation of the severity of the rebellions, and popular support for them, until they were well developed. Sources also show that the invasion of Hungary was detrimental to Soviet relations with the developing world, especially India, with whom Khrushchev had been fostering closer ties in the 1950s.[6] A similar level of detail has been made possible in the case of the high-level political decision-making surrounding the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, which brought an end to the Prague Spring reforms. Cold War-era accounts focused on political science models of bureaucratic jostling for power, assuming that coalition interest-groups had gained influence within the Soviet Politburo. Archive sources reveal that Brezhnev himself had more individual power than originally countenanced, and that issues around interpersonal trust between the Czechoslovak and Soviet leadership were a key factor in the ultimate decision to invade.[7] While more literature is emerging on the experiences of citizens during the Hungarian Revolution and the Prague Spring, both events are still awaiting comprehensive treatment in terms of their cultural and intellectual history.

Security Services Archives and State Surveillance

In many East European countries the extensive archives of the secret police and state security services have been made available, including individual surveillance files, documents about informers, and in some cases interrogation transcripts and details of, for example, the coercive use of drugs such as amphetamines to encourage subjects to talk. These files are sometimes controversial. Collaboration with the security services is understandably seen in extremely negative terms in contemporary politics, sometimes to the extent of excluding implicated individuals from holding public office. However, historians, and individuals themselves, have been careful to point out the difficult circumstances in which people were sometimes coerced or blackmailed into informing – and were sometimes not even aware that they were doing so. The recent high profile case of the Bulgarian philosopher Julia Kristeva, who went into exile in Paris, demonstrates the complexities of such choices, as her family remained under threat in Bulgaria.[8] Western scholars have also illuminated the contents of these archives: Timothy Garton Ash, a British observer of dissent and the 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe was one of the first to write about the contents of his own East German Stasi file, uncovering their surveillance techniques and the use of informers.[9] Most recently, the American scholar of Romanian socialism Katherine Verdery has written extensively about her fascination and alarm at the content of her Securitate file, which documented her life in Romania as a student and researcher in incredible depth, down to its most intimate details.[10]

These sources have been used by historians to reflect upon the degree to which state power was reliant upon the information gathered by the security services, and the level of threat experienced by ordinary citizens who were aware of surveillance, or whose dissident or non-conformist activities might result in detention or interrogation. They also betray the sheer scale of the endeavour, and the economic and human resources required to maintain such a system. But it is important also to note that declassified CIA documents similarly testify to extensive surveillance on the other side of the Cold War divide. There is still an imbalance between East

Archived documents stored in the Stasi records agency in Berlin, Germany
dpa picture alliance / Alamy Stock Photo

and West in terms of availability of the historical record, leaving historians unable to fully compare the security service activities of the opposing powers.

Digital Archive Resources

Finally, recent digitization projects have led to a wide variety of sources being made available online. These offer access to a rich array of research materials, and providing an invaluable teaching resource. 'Socialism Realised' (www.socialismrealised.eu/) guides the reader through a contextualised catalogue of sources on everyday life from 1948-1989, using the Czechoslovak example, arranged according to themes of 'ideology', 'personal story', 'oppression' and 'memory'. The University of Loughborough's 'Screening Socialism' project (www.lboro.ac.uk/subjects/communication-media/research/research-projects/screening-socialism/) examines the place of state socialist television comparatively across the Eastern Bloc, with video clips and essays on the USSR, GDR, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia – including accounts from oral histories about memories of television in everyday life. 'Soviet Visuals' collects images of art, design, architecture, and fashion from the USSR, offering an insight into the material culture and aesthetic style of the Communist world (https://sovietvisuals.com/).

For political history, the Woodrow Wilson Centre's excellent digital archive includes digitised English translations of sources on the Hungarian and Polish uprisings of 1956, the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Solidarity in Poland (https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collections).

The relatively short period of time since the fall of Communism ensures that even with restrictions on access worsening in some parts of the region, as other archives are catalogued and digitised, and new generations of historians delve into their contents, the historiography of Communism and the Cold War will continue to be a dynamic and contested field for many years to come.

Further Reading

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