ARCHIVAL RESEARCH IN THE
USSR: A PRACTICAL GUIDE
FOR SOCIAL HISTORIANS*

In a brilliant series of lectures later published under the title of What is History?, E. H. Carr ascribed to the historian enormous power and control over the selection, classification, and use of "facts" to, in a manner of speaking, "make history." He stated: "The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context." 1 When Carr made this statement at Cambridge University in 1961, however, he clearly did not and could not have had in mind those "facts" which nowadays Western historians can occasionally cull from Soviet archives, for in the case of data derived from Soviet archives, the contemporary Western historian quickly loses his nineteenth-century unbound-Promethean powers of historical creation and finds himself subject to the forces of the less rational twentieth century and other more mundane considerations of state and politics.

Soviet archives present something of an obstacle course to Western historians. Preparation for research in Soviet archives, as well as access to and actual work in the archives, is, in general, a difficult undertaking for the Western historian whose research topic falls into the

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Soviet period and, in particular, the Stalin years. These were years fraught with intense struggle, and they remain an object of sensitivity and often high secrecy in the Soviet Union. Soviet authorities are reluctant to grant "bourgeois" historians access to archival material from those years given the sensitivity of the historical issues, the unfortunately enduring legacy of Cold War historiography, and the vagaries of East-West political relations. As a consequence, archival access is highly restricted and working conditions in Soviet archives are often of a tenuous nature.

Yet despite a plethora of persisting problems, there has been a marked, although relative, improvement in the last decade. An increasing number of Western scholars have received archival access for work on postrevolutionary topics and a handful among them have had access to materials on the 1930s, or, more precisely, the First Five-Year-Plan Period. Western historians of Soviet Russia can no longer simply dismiss the prospect of archival research in the USSR. Archives, as a major primary source of social history, must be given due consideration as Western scholars consider research strategies and project plans for work in the Soviet Union. Although there is no guarantee of access, Western historians must consider archival research seriously and, to borrow a phrase from a different context, "be prepared" for any and all eventualities.

Given that necessity, the object of this article is to offer some practical guidelines on the use of Soviet archives with an emphasis on pre-archival preparation.

2. It should be noted that scholars working on the prerevolutionary period often face problems similar to those of scholars working on the postrevolutionary period. This is most notably the case in regard to the problem of viewing the opis' and the selection of documents within the archives.

3. Western scholars working on postrevolutionary topics and particularly topics on the First Five-Year-Plan period have had the most success in obtaining access to the central government archives, TsGAOR SSSR (Central State Archive of the October Revolution, Higher Organs of State Government and Organs of State Administration of the USSR) and TsGANK SSSR (Central State Archive of the Economy of the USSR). To date, the archives of the Communist Party remain closed to Western scholars.