

WHAT CAN BE DONE WITH DOCUMENTS

Maksim Hanukai

Inside the Stalin Archives: Discovering the New Russia

Jonathan Brent

(New York: Atlas & Co., 2008), 304 pages.


In January 1992, Jonathan Brent, a newly appointed editor at Yale University Press, touched down at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport carrying ample supplies of Jack Daniel's whiskey, salami, biscuits, chocolates in the shape of the Statue of Liberty, and cartons of Winston cigarettes. There he was met by Jeffrey Burds, a burly historian who would help him secure publishing contracts with several Soviet archives for the *Annals of Communism* project at Yale. "Jeff's energy was hectic, explosive, and filled with urgency, as if at any moment the tragic and beautiful events unfolding in this country would blaze into an epiphany,"¹ Brent writes of his guide. In the days and years that followed, Brent himself would discover the "tragic and beautiful" nature of the new Russia, recording his impressions of the many trips he would take to the country in his gripping memoir.

Inside the Stalin Archives is an engaging mix of first-hand observations, history, and cultural analysis written in the breathless prose of a Saul Bellow or a Philip Roth (whose blurb appears on the book's dust jacket). The Russia portrayed in Brent's memoir is a country stuck in a period of "twilight," learning and trying to forge a new direction, but repeatedly stumbling under the weight of its own history. Part of the problem, Brent suggests, is that Russia was never completely de-sovietized, instead succumbing to a widespread effort to "normalize" the Soviet past. Busts of Lenin still watch over the hallways of the Central Party Archive, while FSB (formerly, KGB) agents continue to spy on foreigners and citizens alike—partly out of habit, partly to show that they are still around. Most disturbing of all, however, is the lingering presence of Joseph Stalin, whose image can be found on boxes of chocolates sold at Moscow's airports and who continues to be remembered favorably by more than half of all Russians. In both the memoir, and in the twenty plus volumes of the Yale project that he oversees, Brent asks: *How can this be?*

The book's memoir form allows Brent to approach this central question from multiple angles. Its 21 chapters touch on everything from the "secret" death of Isaac Babel to the recent re-emergence of Russian nationalism and fascism. The haunting final chapter describes Brent's visit to Stalin's personal archive. "I had not realized what an avid and comprehensive reader Stalin was," he observes after examining the manuscripts and books in Stalin's library.² What impressed Brent

most was the logic and clarity of Stalin's thoughts, as seen not only in his studious annotations of Lenin's works, but also in his scrupulous attention to details of style and rhetorical effect. Driven by the utter certitude in the *idea* of historical materialism, Stalin made millions fall victim to its mesmerizing power. After a conversation with one of the masterminds of Gorbachev's *glasnost*, Alexander Yakovlev, Brent realizes that only the detailed exposition of Stalinist mechanisms and structures by means of carefully annotated collections of historical documents can help Russians confront this troubled legacy and provide a basis for the "moral awakening" of the country.

Much of the memoir is dedicated to fascinating descriptions of the negotiating process that helped launch the Yale project. Among Brent's most amusing recollections are those of ritual exchanges of whiskey and cigarettes that preceded agreements. Years of Communist rule had left Russians unschooled in the world of business, forcing them to rely on *znakomstvo* ("acquaintance") rather than laws and contracts. The words "contract" and "royalties" struck Brent's Russian counterparts like magic charms, provoking both interest and confusion. At the conclusion of one session, Brent was told that a contract he had hastily drafted during the meeting was "already part of the archive." Subsequent trips would teach Brent how easily legalities could be brushed aside in contemporary Russia. As one head of an archive informed him after signing a contract, "If I don't want to work with you, it's nothing but a piece of paper."

Brent's most effective rhetorical weapon, however, is his virtuoso skill as a portrait painter. The memoir contains wonderful character sketches of the people he met on his trips: his dowdy hostess Mariana, who pesters him about the value of her silverware; the gnomish Khrustalyov, a Gogolian "little man" who had worked all his life in utter obscurity collecting documents about the last days of the Romanovs; and the shiftily FSB bureaucrats Brent visits at the Lubyanka ("the tallest building in Moscow because you could see Siberia from its basement"). Less "typical" are Brent's portraits of the Russian historians and archivists, many of whom would go on to co-author books for his project. These portraits, and the book on the whole, are charged with sincerity, intellectual and moral honesty, and stylistic energy, making the book an engaging read for anyone interested in the history and legacy of the Soviet Union. 

NOTES

¹ Jonathan Brent, *Inside the Stalin Archives: Discovering the New Russia* (New York: Atlas & Co., 2008), 22.

² *Ibid.*, 300.