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REPATRIATION OF THE BAKHMETEFF ARCHIVE: RUSSIAN DREAMS AND AMERICAN REALITY

SINCE THE EARLY 1990s, the Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture at Columbia University, like many other Russian émigré archives all over the world, has become a critical resource in the process of rewriting twentieth-century Russian history. Now and then, references to the Bakhmeteff's holdings have appeared in Russian archival publications. Regrettably, some of these publications contain alarming instances of Russian demands for the "repatriation" of the Bakhmeteff Archive's holdings. A major factor behind this trend is an official government program to retrieve archival Rossica at any price; but it also is due in part to the archival gold rush in search of "sensational" discoveries, as well as a simple lack of information.

It is not my intention to criticize my Russian colleagues for being uninformed as to the status of Russian émigré archival collections. For many years and for well-known reasons, Russians have been denied access to émigré primary sources. Therefore, the only information they could possibly obtain came from articles published in Russian émigré newspapers and magazines, which were often one-sided and unreliable. Furthermore, even this limited information was available only to those who had been granted access to "Spetskhrany," or Divisions of Special Storage, which remained closed to regular researchers. Some of the "chosen few" who were permitted to read the émigré publications then created the myth that Boris Bakhmeteff had bequeathed the archive he established at Columbia to a future free and democratic Russia. Ironically, the identities of the originators of such myths are impossible to determine because one of the "chosen" inevitably quotes another, who refers to a third, who quotes the first, and so on. Some time ago, I tried to break this vicious circle but was unable to get beyond the names of three people: Andrei Popov, Evgenii Petrov, and Piotr Bazanov, all Russian archivists who specialize in the subject of Rossica abroad. However,

the most common and widespread mistake is to confuse the Bakhmeteff Archive with the Boris Alexandrovich Bakhmeteff Papers.

The Boris Alexandrovich Bakhmeteff Papers is a collection of the personal papers of Boris Bakhmeteff (1880–1951), a Russian ambassador to the United States, engineer, and businessman. Although it represents less than three percent of the Bakhmeteff Archive's holdings, this large collection of approximately 34,000 items (45 linear feet) includes departmental reports of the American Embassy of the Russian Provisional Government from 1917 through the 1920s, extensive subject files on the Humanities Fund and Russian Civil War, Sergei Prokopovich's Economic Reports on the U.S.S.R. from 1923 to 1928, and voluminous personal correspondence.

The Bakhmeteff Archive is a well-known depository of Russian and East European émigré materials in the United States, operating as part of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML) at Columbia University. The RBML has preserved and made accessible its distinctive resources, which include more than 3,000 separate archival collections and 500,000 rare books, as well as photographs, three-dimensional objects, and ephemera illustrating 5,000 years of recorded history.

The Bakhmeteff Archive, which, prior to 1973, was called the Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture, was created in 1951 as a center for the systematic collection and preservation of materials pertaining to Russian and East European émigré history and culture. The materials were to be made available as a source for objective and scholarly research, and used appropriately. The archive usually acquired materials as gifts and either retained ownership or accepted the materials on deposit. In some instances, however, the archive paid for material or otherwise compensated a donor. Original funding for the archive was secured by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Subsequently, the archive was included in the budget of the Columbia University Russian Institute and received a substantial part of its operating budget from the Humanities fund, which had been founded by Boris Bakhmeteff.

Several important factors in the establishment of the Bakhmeteff Archive included the onset of the Cold War; the need for trained professionals in the field of Russian history, which resulted in the establishment of the Columbia University Center for Russian and East European Studies; and the influx of new Russian immigrants coming from Europe

to the East Coast. However, the main stimulus was the presence of a group of enthusiastic people in the United States, gathered in the right place at the right time.

By March 1948, when a proposal to establish the archive was presented to the provost and vice president of Columbia University, Grayson Kirk, Columbia University Library had already acquired several important related collections. Three albums from the Vereshchagina Family, purchased at an auction in Germany, contained original drawings and verse by Mikhail Lermontov (1814–1841). A collection of correspondence between Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) and his American translators was already owned by the library, as well as the papers of Grigorii Aleksinskii (1879–1967), a prerevolutionary Russian Social Democrat who later opposed the Bolsheviks and emigrated to France, and the papers of the famous Russian diplomat Baron George Frédéric Charles Staal (1824–1907). Negotiations were already under way for the acquisition of the papers of General Denikin (1872–1947).

Many people were involved in transactions with financial institutions, and discussions were held with potential donors of manuscript and document collections. Professor Geroid Robinson, director of the Center for Russian and East European Studies, and Professor Philip Mosely of the Department of Political Science, took on the task of persuading the university administration of the need to create an archive for these and related materials. Professor Mikhail Karpovich of Harvard and the historian Boris Nicolaevsky were responsible for the intellectual aspects of the project, Professor Boris Bakhmeteff from the Columbia School of Engineering handled the financial matters, and Lev Magerovskii, a former curator of the Russian émigré serials at the Russian Historical Archive in Prague,¹ was in charge of acquisitions.

Despite the fact that Lev Magerovskii had started acquiring some archival materials long before the official status of the archive was approved, the majority of the collections were added during the mid- and late 1950s after Lev Florianovich was appointed as the first Bakhmeteff curator. During the twenty-six years of his curatorship, the archive became

1. The *Russkii Zagranichnyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv* was the first Russian émigré repository of archival material. Founded in Prague in 1922, it functioned under the auspices of the Czech government until 1945. At the present time, its former holdings are divided among several Russian archives. See *Fondy Russkogo Zagranichnogo istoricheskogo arkhiva v Prage: mezbarkhivnyi putevoditel'* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1999).

the second largest depository, after the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, of Russian and Eastern European émigré holdings existing outside their countries of origins. Today, it has more than 990 processed collections with more than one and a half million individual items. But sadly, the Bakhmeteff archive also is the prime target of present-day Russian “restitutional” efforts.

My first encounter with the issue of the so-called repatriation of the Bakhmeteff Archive occurred at the Sixth World Congress on Central and East European Studies held in 2000 in Tampere, Finland, where I chaired a panel on Russian literary archives. I had just recently been appointed as curator of the Bakhmeteff Archive. During a discussion of my presentation, an American colleague asked my opinion on a very “hot” and controversial topic—the “repatriation” of the Bakhmeteff Archive. My response was that in the first place, “repatriation” was an inaccurate term in this case because the vast majority of materials in the Bakhmeteff archives were created outside Russian boundaries, never belonged to Russia, and therefore could not be “returned.” Beyond that fact, today’s technology permits us to reunite archival materials in a digital format rather than having to move the dispersed collections physically. To my relief, my response was met with great enthusiasm and Sergei Mironenko, director of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) who participated in this discussion, was very supportive of the idea of using modern technology to digitize manuscript and document collections.

My second encounter with the same issue, however, was less friendly. In February 2002, I received a telephone call from Liudmila Anatol’evna Antonova, a Russian cultural attaché in Washington. She literally ordered me to pack up several of the Bakhmeteff’s collections and send them to Russia at once. The collections in question were the Semenovskii Regiment Papers and the Izmailovskii Regiment Papers, each of which related to the history of these regiments and to the activities of the émigré regimental associations. The third collection she demanded was the Imperial Corps of Pages Papers. I promised to check into the provenance for each of these collections and get back to her as soon as possible. Fortunately, I knew there would be no problem in identifying the provenance because, according to American archival standards, all collections such as those contained in the Bakhmeteff Archive have appropriate administrative folders that record the deed of gift and the donor’s agreement or the seller’s warranty, along with the appropriate administrative correspondence.

In the case of the Imperial Corps of Pages Papers, no claims could be made to these archival materials because they were neither on deposit nor donated with the intent to return them in the future to a free Russia. They had been purchased outright, and all the necessary legal documentation was in place. For the two regimental deposits, documentation from the administrative folders proved that both collections were indeed deposited in the Bakhmeteff Archive. The custodians of the Izmailovskii Regiment Papers expressed their wish in the deposit agreement to return the papers to a free and truly democratic Russia, with the following stipulations: first, the new and democratic Russia must be in control, at the time of transfer, of all the territories contained within the pre-1917 boundaries; second, two representatives of the Izmailovskii Regiment Association (or its successor)—one from France and one from the United States of America—must approve the transfer; and finally, only the president of Columbia University had the right to determine whether Russia had actually become free and democratic. The Bakhmeteff Administrative Committee, which oversees the Bakhmeteff Archive's activities, faxed a copy of the deposit agreement to the Russian Embassy asking the cultural attaché to submit her claims in writing. There has been no further communication with the Russian Embassy on this subject.

The next attempt at "reclaiming" one of these collections was made in the spring of 2002 by Irina Chavchavadze, director of the Presidential Programs of the Russian Cultural Foundation. While visiting the Bakhmeteff Archive, she presented a letter from Mr. Elie Traskin, who claimed to be the last and sole representative of the Izmailovskii Regiment Association in France. In the letter, he stated that "according to paragraph nine of the deposit agreement, the Izmailovskii Regiment Collection has to be returned to a free democratic Russia." He also indicated that in June 2001 he had presented the rest of the Izmailovskii Regiment Papers and other historic artifacts, which he had kept in his house, to the Russian Cultural Foundation. I later learned that his father, Captain Il'ya Traskin, was treasurer of the Izmailovskii Regiment Association and that following his death, the association's correspondence and records remained in the Traskin household, leading Elie Traskin to believe that he was now the sole keeper and representative of the Izmailovskii Regiment Association. In this capacity, Mr. Traskin authorized Ms. Chavchavadze to go to New York and act on his behalf in negotiating the return of the Izmailovskii Regiment Papers. However, I reminded Ms. Chavchavadze that the terms of the deposit

agreement required consultation with both the American and the French representatives of the Izmailovskii Regiment Association. Only after consultation with them, as well as with the Bakhmeteff Administrative Committee and the president of Columbia University, could the transfer of the papers be discussed. I also asked her to submit all claims in writing, either in Russian or in English. There has been no further communication with the Russian Cultural Foundation on this subject.

Soon after my meeting with Ms. Chavchavadze, I went to Paris to survey a potential donation. While there, I decided to introduce myself to Mr. Traskin. During our meeting, I realized that although the remaining archival material of the Izmailovskii Regiment Association was in his possession, as a result of the inheritance from his father, he did not have the credentials to represent the association. After further investigation, I learned that the real representative of the Izmailovskii Regiment Association in Paris was the Committee of the Imperial Guard Regiments. Its members were already aware that Mr. Traskin had donated the Izmailovskii Regiment Association Archive to the Russian Cultural Foundation and were unhappy because, according to them, he had no legal right to this material and was not authorized to represent the Izmailovskii Regiment Association. I was informed that the Committee of the Imperial Guard Regiment would undertake further investigation into this matter and that, in the meantime, the Bakhmeteff Archive at Columbia University was to be the legal custodian of the Izmailovskii Regiment Papers.

These two relatively recent cases vividly illustrate the current Russian attitude regarding the retrieval of Rossica abroad and the “repatriation” of what it views as lost Russian treasures. The incidents also exemplify the situation that libraries face when challenged as to the ownership of materials in their collections. These legal issues became a key topic at an open session of the Committee on Copyright and Other Legal Matters (CLM) at the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) meeting in Glasgow in August 2002. Speakers from the U.S., Russia, and Denmark concluded that, “although a legal framework is essential, the complex issues surrounding the best means of preserving valuable items and ensuring effective access to them cannot always be decided by the law.”²

2. Report of the CLMmeeting, IFLA General Conference, Glasgow, 2002. See <http://www.ifla.org/III/clm/pl/glas02.htm>.

In my opinion, this statement is a logistic prerequisite for the following question: “Do we really need a library-based international body to adjudicate disagreements that involve library collections?”³ I believe the answer is no. The CLM has found the issues related to repatriation to be so complex that in six years it has not yet developed a workable policy to deal with them. Any new international body created to deal with such issues would have to begin all over again, eventually running into the same problems.

I propose, instead, another solution, one that has been implemented successfully by both Danish and Icelandic scholars. Using the Internet, they recently virtually reunited more than 3,000 dispersed medieval manuscripts and documents originally from Iceland that had come to Denmark in the early eighteenth century. “The solution of the highly complicated and politicized issue of the return of Icelandic manuscripts was radically ‘modern’—creation of a common computerized catalog of a virtually reunited Arnarnaglean Collection,”⁴ which was funded in part by a European Union project known under the acronym, MASTER (Manuscript Access through Standards for Electronic Records). The project proposed using a cataloging standard in XML for the online description of medieval and renaissance manuscripts, and provided some funding for the cataloging. It serves to demonstrate how uniform and standardized cataloging can provide access to a collection that is physically held in more than one place, and even across international boundaries.

Another model for providing access to a collection that is dispersed across multiple locations involves both metadata and imaging, applying a common standard across collections. This is the Digital Scriptorium project, which began in 1996 under a grant from the Mellon Foundation and continues today after having received several additional grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Metadata is encoded according to a DTD in XML that shares many of the same characteristics with the MASTER DTD (the two projects having worked hand-in-hand during much of their early development).⁵ Images created for the Digital Scriptorium project also derive from one of two procedures: direct digi-


3. James G. Neal, “Background to the Repatriation of Cultural Materials,” IFLA; General Conference, Glasgow, 19 August 2002.

4. Ivan Boserup, “The Manuscript and the Internet: Digital Repatriation of Cultural Heritage,” IFLA General Conference, Buenos Aires, 22–27 August 2004.

5. See <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Scriptorium/index.html>.

tal capture or scanning from a film intermediary. Currently, this project has approximately thirty participating institutions, including some that are very small and others that are far larger, such as the Houghton Library at Harvard University. The goal of the Digital Scriptorium project is to unite scattered resources from many institutions into an international tool for teaching and scholarly research.


I understand that digitization is not a solution that can be applied universally. Nevertheless, I propose to begin a similar international digital project, whose goal will be to resolve the complex legal issues of physical “repatriation” of the Izmailovskii Regiment Papers and unite dispersed archives through virtual reality. Such a project can lead to advances in scholarship because the disputed collection will be available on the Internet without regard to where in the world the various parts are physically located. When the materials can be made available universally, “repatriation” need no longer be an issue.



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