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Ogurenko, Egor V.

First President of Russia B. N. Yeltsin Ural Federal University, Sverdlovsk Region, Russian
Federation

Secret Archives in the Periphery in the 1920s–60s: A Case-Study of the State Archive of the
Sverdlovsk Region

Abstract

This article discusses the problem of information culture in the Soviet society on the example of development of classified documents storage in state archives from late 1930s to mid-1960s. After sociopolitical transformations of 1917–20, archival documents became a political (informational) resource due to “mobilization” atmosphere in society and government circles. It was the political police authorities who were most interested in unrestricted access to the documents of the Unified State Archive Fond (GAF). The system of secret archives evolved in 1924 as a form of monopolization of information sphere. The activity of regional secret archives was aimed at preservation, registration, and use of restricted access documents. Materials containing data on personal composition and activities of pre-revolutionary and some Soviet state institutions were classified. Using the activities of the secret fonds department of the State Archive of the Sverdlovsk Region (GASO) as example, the author analyzes the entire spectrum of work of regional secret archives: organization, material and technical support, areas of work, and staffing. An important aspect of the secret archives’ activities were “operational and Chekist activities”: preparation of reference and information documents for the regional bodies of the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU) and, later, the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). Operative and security work of massive proportions began in 1938, when all state archives became part of the NKVD, reaching its peak during the Great Patriotic War (1941–45). During the same period, an attempt was made to request more complex information documents from regional archival bodies. In the post-war period, work with secret documents continued until 1956, when the process of declassification of the GAF documents was officially initiated. Secret fonds departments of state archives continued to inform the special services until their abolition in 1965. The secret storage in the Sverdlovsk Region existed until 1988, when the last secret fonds were declassified. The author concludes that longevity of this specific form of work with such a small part of retrospective documentation was dictated by the peculiarities of the Soviet society development. This research is based on materials from the State Archives of Sverdlovsk Region.

Keywords

Historical sources, archives of the Urals, State Archive of the Sverdlovsk Region, NKVD, MVD, political section, secret archives.

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About the authors

Ogurenko Egor Vladimirovich, postgraduate student, First President of Russia B. N. Yeltsin Ural Federal University, Ural Humanitarian Institute, department of document science, archival science, and history of public administration, Yekaterinburg, Russian Federation, +7-904-384-44-85, y.ogurenko@gmail.com

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