

MEMORY OF NATIONS

Democratic Transition Guide

[The Georgian Experience]



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AUTHORS

LEVAN AVALISHVILI

Historian and Programs Director and Co-founder of the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), Tbilisi. Researcher of Soviet Studies and author of several research papers on Soviet history.

DAVID JISHKARIANI

Historian and Co-Founder, Member of the Board, and Researcher of the Soviet Past Research Laboratory (SovLab), Tbilisi. Visiting Lecturer at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Caucasus University, Tbilisi.

IRAKLI KHVADAGIANI

Historian, Researcher and Member of the Board of the Soviet Past Research Laboratory (SovLab), Tbilisi. Author of a number of publications on Soviet totalitarian past in Georgia.

GIORGI KLDIASHVILI

Historian, Founding Member, and Executive Director of the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), Tbilisi. Professional Archive Researcher working in the history archives of Georgia and abroad.

GHIA NODIA

Professor of Politics, and Director of the International School of Caucasus Studies in Ilia State University, Tbilisi. Founder and Chairman of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD), an independent public policy think tank in Tbilisi. Former Minister for Education and Science of Georgia (2008).

ANTON VACHARADZE

Historian, Archives and Soviet Studies Direction Head at the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), Tbilisi. Lecturer at the Caucasus University, Tbilisi. Former Director of the Central Historical Archive at the National Archives of Georgia (2012-2017).

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REGIME ARCHIVES

ANTON VACHARADZE

INTRODUCTION

Access to the Soviet archives and archival documents remains a contentious topic among many post-Soviet countries. The transition to democracy, de-sovietisation and rethinking of the Soviet past proceeded at a different pace and took various paths in the former Soviet republics. These differences determined state policies toward archives. In many countries, Soviet era documents remain classified, and archives are not accessible to scholars and historians; other countries, only partially. On a legislative level Georgia, together with the Baltic States, may seem like a good example of a post-Soviet country with an open, available, and accessible Soviet archive for researchers and visitors. However, on a practical level, there are problems in transparency and free access that some researchers have faced during their work at the reading rooms of the National Archive.

During the 70 years of the Soviet rule, history was used as an ideological weapon devoid of any real facts; truth was full of falsifications, misinterpretations, communist postulates and clichés. The only space where communists were truthful and honest was with “Secret” and “Top Secret” documents that Soviet bureaucrats circulated among the top level of government and ruling elite. Without archival work, no genuine and accurate scientific and historical research is possible regarding the Soviet era.

Modern day progressive society has agreed that totalitarian regimes, with its political repressions and prosecutions, must not be repeated. In order to ensure this core value, a crucial task and necessity is a proper analysis and study of history. In particular, the study of archival documents, which are often the only accurate sources of information about the tragic events of the past. The democratization of the intelligence agencies and polices can't occur properly if they continue to guard the archives containing information on mass human rights violations and continue to use the same methods of their predecessors. It is possible to construct new state institutes, including, breaking off the continuity chain with the organs of the retaliatory body, which had implemented the repressive actions. Open access to the archives of the totalitarian intelligence agencies, not only gives the chance to restore the violated rights, but also shows that information on all crimes will become known to the public, sooner or later. In order to avoid repeating the totalitarian practices of the past, it is important to inform society how the repressive modes had worked.

Only a full opening of the archives of the intelligence and security agencies can give answers, both to private matters of citizens, as well questions that have enormous value for the entire society. It is impossible to have a valid written history of the 20th century of any former Soviet country without studying these archives. The issue is also important in regards to freedom of information, as access to such documents is one of the components of an open government, especially in post-Soviet states, where openness should start from the archives. Moreover, the issue is relevant in terms of transitional justice as well. Soviet repressions remain one of the main traumatic points in the collective memory of post-Soviet countries. Publishing authentic documented data

on the repressed, as well as the individual stories, will support the process of the rehabilitation of the victims, deliver the truth to the families of the victims, and help restore justice and promote reconciliation within the entire society.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DEFAULT SITUATION

The most important communist secret service archive in Georgian SSR was the archive of the Georgian territorial organ of the Committee for the State Security (KGB) in Tbilisi.

According to official information of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) of Georgia, the history of the KGB archive follows: in March of 1921, according to a resolution passed by the Presidium of the Special Emergency Committee, or “Cheka”, the registration archive department was formed. Its task was to gather and preserve incriminating materials about numerous “enemies” and “dangerous elements” of the state that the Cheka had identified. Thirty staff units were selected for the registration archive department.

Between 1921 and 1992, 230,000 archival files were created. In the beginning of the 1990's the files were stored in the cellar of the 10th department of the Committee for State Security (KGB) of the former Georgian SSR. In 1990, mass anti-Soviet demonstrations took place in the center of Tbilisi, on Rustaveli Avenue right next to the MIA-KGB building. The demonstrators broke into the building and tried to seize the secret documents. The guards quickly dispersed the protesters. Shortly thereafter, the former KGB's central building caught fire in the Tbilisi Civil War of 1991–1992. As a result, 210,000 archival files were destroyed – about 80 % of the entire collection. The Documents that survived were soggy; most of them suffered water damage from the efforts to put out the fire. War and fire affected MIA archives and a large portion of the collection was destroyed as well. The remaining archival files from the former archives (approximately 20,000 units), most of them in poor condition, were provisionally stored in the cellar of the building of the state Archive. The files suffered even more damage from being stored in the cellar, and their rescue became an urgent matter.¹

Naturally, one can suppose that the complete content and capacity of this archive will remain unclear and the actual number of documents may differ from the official number. In general, this archive is subject to speculations and mystifications. According to the alleged witnesses and participants of the process: some of the important documents from the archive were transferred to a special KGB depository in Smolensk, Russia. A group of Georgian KGB employees escorted the documents, probably in order to sort and then to destroy them. The above sources claim they were the documents about intelligence developments, accounts and reports.² Some of the documents that were not destroyed,

1 The Archival Bulletin, N1, 2008, 6–8.

2 Documentary “Lost History” [*Dakarguli Istoria*], 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vYIBOxhBj4>

were sent back, but the condition and legal environment of the remaining part of the documents in the Smolensk archive are unclear. Since 2003, there have been talks about the return of the documents (originals or scanned), but without any consequences. After the 2008 war, Georgia broke diplomatic relations with Russia and the archival institutions no longer have any contact.

Besides the KGB archives, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia is also a repository of the archive of Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Georgian SSR: a resolution passed by the presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Georgia on June 24, 1922, created the *IstPart Commission* (Commission on Party History). *IstPart's* primary mission was to collect, academically process and publish materials on the history of Georgia's Communist organs. In late 1929, under the instructions of the Lenin Institute, the Party History Institute established the Party Archive. On the basis of a resolution passed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia on February 23, 1932, the Historical-Revolutionary and Scientific-Research Institute of Stalin was formed in Tbilisi. In June 1934, the Institute became a branch of the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute of the All-Union Central Committee of the Communist Party, and later, the two merged completely. The *IstPart* archive, as well as the documents from the Central Committee local divisions, was transferred there. Between 1933 and 1937, the so-called IMELI (*IstPart Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute*) building was constructed on Rustaveli Avenue, Tbilisi, where the Party Archive was placed, and where it functioned until 2007.

The predecessor of the modern National Archives of Georgia was established in April 23, 1920, according to the law "About the establishment of Republic's Central Scientific Archive", issued by the Democratic Republic of Georgia. On July 1, 1921 the Revolutionary Committee of Georgia issued a decree "About the reorganization of the Archival Affair". After this, the archival field of the Georgian SSR was ruled according to Soviet legislation almost for seven decades.³ After Georgia regained independence, the National Archives was a subdivision of the Ministry of the Justice. The 29th December, 2006 law, "On the National Archival Fund and the national Archives" was adopted and the National Archives gained the status of a legal entity of public law, still supervised by the Ministry of Justice.⁴ During the Soviet Era, the predecessor of the National Archives had secret materials that were regulated differently and annually only a few people with the permission of the higher Party and KGB organs were granted access to the reading room of the secret materials.⁵ Lack of a suitable finding aid was an obstacle for getting the necessary document too: many titles in the finding aid, books and catalogues, were censored and hidden because of their not very "desired" historical background.⁶ Today the National Archives of Georgia doesn't contain any secret documents, and all their records are available for everyone, if it does not contradict with the state law on personally identifiable information.

Some of the researchers noted, that in order to restrict access to documents the archives tend to find loopholes in current legislation. One such loophole is the concept of "personal information". The National Archive network refer to the Law on the National Archives and Archive Fund, which prohibits third parties accessing documents containing "personal information" without the consent of the person or his/her heirs before the expiration of the 75-year period from their issuing. Referring to this clause, the archive arbitrary blocks all information after 1943,

often making it difficult to access materials from earlier years as well. The law does not consider that the legal concept of "personal information" implies any information that allows identifying the person (including the name and surname). As a rule, that part of the information that requires special control is often called "sensitive" or "personal", as it covers information about the private life, finances and health of an individual. The law does not consider these differences in terms and concepts, and blocks access to all information about all persons, regardless of who the person is – an individual or a civil servant. The situation is even aggravated by the indifferent attitude of the supreme authority towards the problems of collective memory, Soviet totalitarianism legacy and problems in the archival space.⁷

DESCRIPTION OF THE TRANSITION AND CURRENT STATUS

To preserve the remaining part of the KGB Archive from the repeated danger of fire, in April and May of 1995 the governing body of the Ministry of State Security provided space for the materials in the so-called "Moduli" scientific technical center. Preparation work for accommodating the archive materials was carried out in this emergency situation. After the "Rose Revolution" in 2003, attention to the KGB archives in Georgia increased again. As mentioned in the official statement of MIA, after 2004, the conditions of the archive depository started to improve. The merging of the Archive Department with the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 2005, and the combining of the archival materials was especially important. After this, the restoration and systematization of the documents began according to the archival rules and regulations. As it was stated in the "Archival Bulletin", the MIA official magazine, one of the priorities conducted by the Archive Department of the MIA, is searching for key information, and providing certificates for persons, who were subject to unjustified repression. These certificates help in getting court decisions, which assign the victims or their heirs some small pensions and other benefits.⁸

In 2002, the future winning politicians raised the issue of lustration in their pre-election promises and wanted to implement the so-called "10 steps to freedom" – a project offered by several NGO's, but later, when they got into the Government, they quit all discussions about the issue. Their decision, not to develop the idea, was later criticized several times by the Georgian media.⁹ After time, discussions about the issue faded away from Georgian discourse, and no wider discussions took place, only few mentions in media. After the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, the authorities began a new policy in the field of collective

3 See National Archives of Georgia, "Historical Background of National Archives of Georgia", <http://archives.gov.ge/en/history>

4 Law "On the National Archival Fund and the National Archives", Date of issue: 29. 12. 2006, <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/22420>

5 Interview with the Deputy Director of the Central Historical Archive, Ketevan Kobiashvili, 2015.

6 Anton Vacharadze, "Problems of Archival Descriptions in Post-Soviet Countries", Case study according to the Central Historical Archive of Georgia, International Conference Proceedings, Radenci, 2016, 46.

7 Irakli Khvadagiani, "Guide-book – Open Access to the KGB Archives in the Eastern Partnership ('Georgia')", Kyiv, 2017, 29.

8 The Archival Bulletin, N1, 2008, 8–10.

9 See Tea Gularidze, "Deficienes of ruling Party were visable from day one", in *Civil.ge*, 28 February, 2004, http://www.civil.ge/geo/_print.php?id=6139

memory; the Soviet past, terror, and political repressions became a central issue for this project. The authorities decided to restructure and modernize the former Georgian SSR KGB archive. Resolution no. 150, passed by the President of Georgia on April 5, 2007, moved the collection to the KGB Archive Administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia.¹⁰

Noteworthy documents still preserved in the KGB Archive include those on the 1922–1924 Anti-Soviet uprising, the Civil War, the dissident movement, the events of March 9, 1956 in Tbilisi, the so-called “Mingrelian Case” and many others. After the inventory and digitalization of the KGB Archive, it became possible to tell the actual number of documents. According to the official guide-book issued by the archive management, the situation is as follows:

Fonds no. 1 Normative acts – consists of 1,134 the former “Top Secret”, “Secret” and “Non-Secret” volumes, which range in date from 1920 to 1990 (excluding normative acts from 1921). The following themes appear in the acts: personnel; operations against espionage, “hooliganism”, robbery, speculation, smuggling and hard drinking; secret services; transportation; weapons storage and security; internal affairs; internal discipline; the implementation of orders and resolutions; cases brought before the military tribunal; confiscations and requisitions; border security; censorship in state and private theatres; travel abroad; diplomatic property and mail; courier service; secret business correspondence; published journals; employment; association with foreigners; activities of the State Political Directorate (GPU); issuance of credit; secret correspondence; application reviews; prisoners statistics; issuance of diplomatic and transit visas; the organization of sport institutions; concentration/labour camps; rules against photographing/filming military units; military service law; literature storage and security; the rights of consulate representatives; regulation of sanitary inspections; sale of horses; storage of special construction materials; regulations concerning arrival and departure of foreigners to/from the USSR; dactylography (fingerprinting) of criminals; rules concerning human filtration; keeping of state secrets; operations execution; etc.

Fonds no. 6 Criminal Cases – The Archive of the State Security Committee of the Georgian SSR (KGB Archive) combines criminal cases of the Special Committee (Cheka), State Political Directorate (GPU), Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU), People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), State Security Committee (KGB) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). These documents range in date from 1919 to 1989. The Archive holds 20,000 criminal cases, most of which are of persons tried under the articles on political crimes: Article 58-10 (anti-Soviet agitation/propaganda) and 58-11 (organizing anti-Soviet activities). The remaining cases are of persons tried under the articles on treason, espionage, terrorist acts, border violation, smuggling, illegal currency operations, drawing up illegal files, organizing mass disturbances, speculation and ordinary crimes under various articles of the criminal code.

These fonds also hold the criminal cases of the 9th and 11th Red Army in pre-Soviet Georgia. These unique cases include photographs, documents and personal correspondence. This fond also contains exclusive materials about the 1924 Anti-Soviet Uprising. These materials (4,100 cases) are dispersed throughout the files from 1925 up to 1927.

Fonds no. 6 contains 4,180 criminal cases of the 1937–1938 Great Purge.

Fonds no. 6 also includes criminal cases from the World War II and after (1939–1950). These cases were built on the basis of Article 58-1 (treason), and those convicted were sentenced to 25 years in prison. Family members of the “traitors” were also tried.

From the later decades, cases of note include those of the 1970s dissident movement in Georgia and Helsinki Group, and the twenty-two volume Hijackers Case (no. 8309) of the 1980s.

Fonds no. 8 Meeting Protocols – combines protocols of the board, presidium, special advisory and so-called “Troika” of the Special Committee (Cheka), State Political Directorate (GPU), Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU), People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). This fonds consists of 491 cases created between 1921 and 1955.

Fonds no. 9 Filtration Materials – this fond collects state checking and filtration control materials from 1946–1951. After World War II, many combatants were checked and sent to the so called “Filtration Camps”, where they were subject to forced labour. They were charged with cooperation with the German Army.

A considerable part of this 45,000-case fonds was destroyed during the 1991–1992 Tbilisi Civil War. Only 1,300 cases remain.

Fonds no. 12 Executions – holds documents concerning death-penalty sentences from the Special Committee (Cheka), State Political Directorate (GPU) People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) between 1921 and 1952. This fonds consists of 92 cases; 16,693 persons were executed.

Fonds no. 13 Special Exiles – this fonds collects the “Echelon Lists” of exiled persons and cases of “special exile” from 1941 to 1951.

The “Echelon Lists” provide the following information: number of family members exiled; names of adult exiles; number of underage persons; echelon numbers and railcars used for transport. People sent to exile from Georgian SSR included émigrés, so called “traitors of homeland and people”, former prisoners of the German army (prisoners of the WW II and civilians deported to Germany for forced labour), citizens and families suspected of cooperating with the Turkish secret services, and people of Greek, Iranian, Turkish, German, Kurdish and Armenian, Assyrian nationality / ethnicity. Minors and disabled people were also subject to exile.

On the basis of Resolution no. 744, passed by the USSR Defense Committee on October 8th, 1941, all ethnic Germans were sent to exile.

On the basis of Resolution no. 6279, passed by the USSR Defense Committee on July 31st, 1944, Meskhetian Turks, Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Iezids, Khemshil Armenians,¹¹ Adjarans, Lazs, Iranians and Turks were re-settled.

On the basis of Resolution no. 2214-856, passed by the USSR Council of Ministers on May 29th, 1949, Armenian, Greek, Assyrian and Turkish families were exiled from Georgia.

On the basis of Resolution no. 4893-21136, passed by the USSR Council of Ministers on November 29th, 1951, Georgians

¹⁰ Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, “MIA Archive. History”, <http://police.ge/en/useful-information/mia-archive?sub=428>

¹¹ *Meskhetian Turks and Khemshil Armenians* – Sunni Muslim population of Georgian and Armenian ethnicity from Meskhet-Javakheti and Adjara region of Georgia.

(primarily from the Adjara region), Azerbaijanis (primarily relatives of émigrés) and former prisoners of war and their families were sent to exile.

Fonds no. 14 Missing in Action – This fond collects lists of those missing in action, captured or killed during World War II. There are 105 volumes, preserving information on 120,000 persons. Each volume deals with approximately 1,200–1,800 individuals.

These lists include valuable information including soldiers' military ranks, the names of persons injured, captured or killed, and the whereabouts of the deceased.

Example: Grigol Grigorevich Avalishvili, date of birth – 1902; place of birth – Poti region; summoned by the Poti Regional Commissariat; title – Red Army Soldier; position – rifleman; military unit – 800th Rifle Regiment; mobilized – 5. 7. 1941; cause of death – died of injuries; location of grave – Orel Oblast, Dolgorukov Region, village of Stepanovka.

These documents are preserved in Podolsk, Russian Federation and MIA archives preserve its copies.

Fonds no. 21 Rehabilitations – Lists of people rehabilitated by the Supreme Court Board of Criminal Cases: The Prosecutor's Office of the Georgian SSR issued rehabilitation notices for citizens oppressed by the state political administration and the NKVD.

On January 16th, 1989, the USSR Supreme Council passed a resolution declaring all repressed persons rehabilitated.

The 60-volume fonds provides information on approximately 18,000 victims of repression.

These fonds also hold the lists of those rehabilitated by the Supreme Court Board of Criminal Cases. These lists were transferred from the National Archive.

Between 1955 and 1960, victims of politically-motivated repressions by Soviet authorities were rehabilitated by the Supreme Court Council of the Georgian SSR.

There are six volumes and 10,768 rehabilitations.¹²

The Archive of the Communist Party of Georgian SSR is one of the biggest archives in Georgia, preserving about 8,300 fonds, currently preserved at the MIA Archive. Archival fonds and materials are crucial to the study of the Party history, as well as the history of the Young Communist League (Komsomol). In recent years, interest in the Archive has grown daily and many important projects have been accomplished. An electronic database was created, interesting new data was found and made accessible to society. And over 8,000 photos were digitized. Documentary films, TV programs, publications in newspapers and magazines have incorporated Archive materials. Both Georgian and foreign researchers visit the Archive frequently, and the bilingual magazine *Archival Bulletin* is published on the basis of its holdings.¹³

The National Archives of Georgia is the largest holder of archival materials in the country. It is significant, not only for the local population, but for scholars worldwide, who study the history of Caucasus, Russian Empire, the First Democratic Republic of Georgia, the Establishment of Bolshevik State, the Georgian Soviet Republic, and the Period of transition from Soviet State to Democracy. The Archives registers about 1000 researchers a year, more than 100 of which are from foreign countries.

As I have mentioned, the MIA and the National Archives of Georgia do not keep classified and secret materials. The law "On the National Archival Fund and the National Archives"¹⁴ oversees the openness of the materials of the national archival fonds,

according to the principles declared in the "Law of Georgia on Personal Data Protection";¹⁵ except those materials containing state secret documents, documents that contain personally identifiable information, criminal trial materials, and in some cases, if 75 years from its creation haven't passed, or in other legislative cases that do not extend to it.

According to its official magazine, the Georgian MIA Archive Administration's web site is a perfect model of how the information can be accessed by anyone. Georgia, along with the Baltic States, was a pioneer in opening the archive of special-services. That was a result of the authority's political will. The web site of the Archive Administration was highly praised, as there should be many official documents and data available, which are still secret in neighboring countries. That web site can be, according to the magazine, a model for other countries.¹⁶ However, in criticism of the version that the official magazine offers, we can simply compare the web site with role-model archives, and we'll see that the search tool of the MIA archives web page isn't a successful example of digitization and transparency, and has a minimal degree of digital access.¹⁷ The same may be said of the website of the National Archives: the website is multilingual, with better design, but also has a minimal degree of digital access and more relevant for PR/marketing issues than towards researcher's needs.¹⁸

Also, some questions have emerged about the Archives and some problems are still unresolved. These questions were indicated in the analytical report "Open Access to the KGB Archives in the Eastern Partnership" issued in Kyiv in 2017:

- 1/ What has happened to personal records and personal files of the employees of repressive organs? Whether the archive and the file cabinet of the secret KGB officers were preserved or were burnt?
- 2/ What has happened to the KGB district departments of the Georgian SSR archives?
- 3/ Where is the archive and documentation of the frontier and internal troops?

In the process of writing this article, the author addressed these questions to MIA Archives' officials and received the following answers:

- 1/ The major parts of the records were burnt during the events. The officials suppose that one copy of every created document was sent to Moscow because this was the common practice. After independence, some officials continued to work in Security Service of Georgia and restored their own documents via service record books. Also, according to state law, increased social benefits and pension were provided for officials, who

12 Archive of the State Security Committee of the Georgian SSR, http://archive.security.gov.ge/security_fond.html

13 Ministry of Internal Affairs, "MIA Archive. History", <http://police.ge/en/useful-information/mia-archive?sub=428>

14 Law "On the National Archival Fund and the National Archives", Date of issue: 29. 12. 2006, <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/22420>

15 Law of Georgia on Personal Data Protection, Date of issue: 28. 12. 2011, <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/1561437>

16 The Archival Bulletin, N5, 2009, 112–114.

17 See The Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, <http://archive.security.gov.ge/>

18 See National Archives of Georgia, <http://archives.gov.ge/en/home>

19 Law "On Social Security of Persons Transferred to the Reserve from Military Bodies, Internal Affairs Bodies and the Special State Protection Service, and Their Family Members", Date of issue: 16. 10. 1996.

worked for the Security Service¹⁹ and because of this some of people requested and received the relevant notices from Moscow.

- 2/ All the materials from the district departments of the KGB were sent to Tbilisi for centralized registration and record keeping.
- 3/ These files are not kept in the MIA Archives. They suppose, that these materials were under supervision of the administration of the border district of South Caucasus, and thus were fully under the supervision of Moscow.

The other major problem is that although there is law that regulates the basic principles of archive business and archival institutions – already mentioned “On the National Archival Fund and the National Archives”; the MIA and other state archives, except for the National Archives, led by their own regulations, establish separate regulations or charters of internal order. Therefore, different archives have different working conditions and there is no unified strategy of physically storing documents, keeping records, processing search queries, and the usage of documents on scientific issues. Since 2009, there were no incidents of refusal to provide documents from the MIA archive. Internal order and prices of services are regulated by separate rules:

- 1/ The Decree of the President of Georgia No. 494 from 6. 9. 2011 “On the creation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Archives” defines the functions and structure of the archives and its offices;
- 2/ The Decree of the Government of Georgia No. 428 from 16. 10. 2012 “On payment for services provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs Archives”.

Both Georgian and foreign citizens are allowed to access the documents – the law does not provide any restrictions on the basis of nationality. But it also does not give any privileges to scientists, students, etc. Even individuals, who are the subjects of the records themselves, or their heirs, do not have any advantages in accessing documents. They pay very high prices to copy documents that relate personally to them or their family members. Usually the archive issues copies with “watermarks”, which according to scholars, practically excludes the full use of the “product”.²⁰

Currently the MIA Academy Archives is moving to a new building, which gives hope for better working conditions with the documents. Before moving the MIA Archives to a new building, the first MIA Academy Archives department (MIA-KGB Archive) was located in the State Security building, and the second department (Communist Party of Georgian SSR archive) was stored in former communications office building. Working conditions in the reading room are rather uncomfortable. There is not enough space, the hall is located next to the working rooms, and there are no stationary computers or the Internet.

LESSONS LEARNT

The fire in the KGB Archives, the wars and overall chaos in Georgia in the 90’s, strongly influenced the public’s attention to the comprehension of the Soviet past. There has been several wars in the country and there was no initiatives or discussions about the archives and the sensitive problems of Soviet history.

Only in late 90’s, and the beginning of 2000’s, did public initiatives about lustration, rehabilitation of victims of Soviet repressions, rethinking the Soviet past and the Red terror, start to

emerge. Even with the new era, and westernization of the country, these questions still remain.

After the Ministry of Internal Affairs Archives was reformed and opened in the late 2000s, the issue of transparency and access to the data became significant, and since then, the Archive and the authorities have always stressed that the Archive be absolutely transparent and provides modern services. Transparency of the MIA Archives is important and, besides the scholars, who work on various topics, the organization itself publishes a scientific popular magazine – *The Archival Bulletin*,²¹ as well as its online version. The topics in the magazine respond to Soviet repressions, the Soviet regime and the overall crimes committed by the state security apparatus.

During the 1990s, there was only one organization from civil society in Georgia – the Georgian “Memorial”, which tried to unite the members of repressed families, systematize information about the victims, collect family archives and disseminate information among general public by publishing them online. The organization still exists, but does not actively work anymore, and the online archive is not available. The Georgian society “Memorial” started one of the public initiatives about KGB Archive materials. It was engaged in the systematization of archival data regarding repressed persons, who were shot in the Georgian SSR in 1924 and 1937–1938. The Georgian society “Memorial” published this data in its own newspaper, but due to lack of resources and other reasons, the process soon stopped.

Since 2010, the non-governmental organization “Soviet Past Research Laboratory – SovLab” has carried out a number of researches and educational projects in the archives aimed at understanding the Soviet past: “Topography of Red Terror” – a historical and educational tour; a map with stories of the sites, places, houses of the old cities and of the people living there. In 2011–2012, the publications “Topography of Red Terror – Old Tbilisi”, “Comprehension of the Soviet Past – a Collection of Discussions”, “Lost History – the Memory of Repressed Women”, were issued. Two documentaries were also produced: “Great Soviet Terror – People’s Stories”, “Stories Told Live – the Memory of Repressed Women”. Within the framework of this project, exhibitions were organized in various cities of Georgia. That same year, the organization launched the “Public Archive” project (archive.ge) – it is an open web-archive that collects oral stories and digitized versions of unique historical documents – personal archives of Georgian citizens (including those documents that are stored in the families of the repressed persons). In 2013–2017, the organization carried out such projects as: “Memorial Collection of the Constituent Assembly of the Democratic Republic of Georgia”, “Project on the Identification of Places of Mass Executions in 1920–1940s Years in Tbilisi, Telavi and Gori”, “History of the Political Red Cross of Georgia” and “History of the Local Governments Reform in the First Republic of Georgia in 1918”.²² In addition, “SovLab” initiated a draft bill that implies a possibility for the researcher to access the archives’ reading hall with his / her own camera and inadmissibility of interpretation of the Law

20 Irakli Khvadagiani, “Guide-book - Open Access to the KGB Archives in the Eastern Partnership (‘Georgia’); Kyiv, 2017, 29.

21 See The Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, “The Archival Bulletin”, http://archive.security.gov.ge/archival_bulletin.html

22 Irakli Khvadagiani, “Guide-book – Open Access to the KGB Archives in the Eastern Partnership (‘Georgia’); Kyiv, 2017, 31–32.

on Personal Data by an archive towards its benefit. This draft bill, being introduced by two members of the Parliament minority, is still in the pending process.²³

Since 2009, the NGO Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) launched several ideas with cooperation with the MIA Archives and the National Archives of Georgia. IDFI has valuable experience in collecting, analyzing, digitalizing and publishing archival documents. From 2011–2013, the organization was engaged in the launching of an electronic database of documents related to the events of March 9, 1956 – the massacre of citizens in Tbilisi during a demonstration, by Soviet Militia and troops. The next big project implemented with the MIA Archives was “Stalin Lists from Georgia”. In this database, information about more than 3.600 persons convicted during so-called Great Terror in 1937–1938 was digitized and put online. IDFI has a rich experience of hosting international conferences on archives. IDFI hosted several international conferences in Georgia, in cooperation with the MIA Archive, the National Security Archive at the George Washington University, and the US and International Society “Memorial”. The international conferences are aimed at establishing professional links between high specialist scholars, archivists, archive openness advocates across the post-Soviet space, sharing their experiences working in Soviet Archives, developing archival research, and dealing with state bureaucratic obstacles to information access. For several years, the IDFI has been advocating ideas of openness of archives in political and public circles. One of the steps was advocating for openness of the archives and advocating to the Ministry of Justice of Georgia, and the National Archives of Georgia, to abolish fees for getting original archival document, or digital copies in the reading room. In the framework of the Open Government Partnership (OGP), the IDFI advocated for the digitization of the catalogue of documents of the former KGB Archive of Georgia. The OGP committee positively assessed these novelties and the government officials always note the positive effort towards overall openness of the archives and freedom of information in general. In November 2017, the IDFI launched the project – “Enhancing Openness of State Archives in Former Soviet Republics”. The overarching goal of the project is to ensure the openness of Soviet archives in the post-Soviet era, and to create a network of scholars/NGOs in the post-Soviet era to work on issues of Soviet Archive openness.²⁴ On April 27–28, 2018, the IDFI hosted an international conference titled: Enhancing the Openness of State Archives. The event enabled more than 30 archivists (including directors of state archives, researchers, civil society representatives) from over 20 countries to share their experiences on the accessibility of archival documents to the public.²⁵

Many of these initiatives were supported by the Georgian archives and the organizations were granted free access to the archives. For the creation of the “Stalin’s Lists from Georgia” Project, the MIA Archive gave all the necessary data to the IDFI (several thousands scanned records) to analyse, process, and input into the Archive’s database. The National Parliament Library of Georgia put the database on its website;²⁶ it is now available online. IDFI started litigation proceedings against the National Archives because the institution didn’t provide publicly available information IDFI asked. Sovlab also started similar process because of the misinterpretation of the law about personally identified information. The results of the processes will be clear in the nearest future.

Public initiatives with the support of public institutions are priceless in the overall openness of archives, and have a primary impact on the promotion of archival openness and archival research. Archival openness and research can have a substantial impact on the transition in any post-soviet state. Georgia’s example, and the work done by the IDFI on openness of the KGB Archive, publishing archival catalogs of documents, as well as international research projects on Soviet Studies implemented in Georgia can be taken as one of the best practices, whereby certain type of documents are accessible to any interested individual. Such efforts not only promote openness on matters of the past, but of the present as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is necessary to keep the fonds and documents of the regime archives physically safe: compromising the security and relying only on bureaucracy functionaries is inadmissible. There must be frequent social control mechanisms over archives, especially during the period of transition. Unfortunately, Georgia couldn’t avoid the tragic turnover of the situation during the period of transition and the majority of the archives were destroyed. Allegedly copies of the documents fell into the hands of the successor of the USSR, the Russian Federation, and according to today’s political conjuncture couldn’t be transferred to Georgia in near future.

Concerning the few archival materials that survived: the official standpoint of the MIA Archive is that there are no files that researchers cannot see. Since society cannot independently audit the archive’s repository and does not even undertake such attempts, no one can officially question this statement. The society has to trust the MIA Archive fonds inventory posted on the Archive website. We can clearly say that there is no publicly announced information request that the MIA Archive has rejected to access the records from its fonds.

Also, many independent scholars stress that a fee for using the archival materials, e.g. making copies, is very expensive. The IDFI thinks that allowing researchers to use their own cameras in the reading halls of the archives might solve this problem. But up to this day, neither the National Archives, nor the MIA Archives have made this option available.

For future development, revision and digitalization of documents preserved in the Russian KGB Archives is the most important issue for the Georgian society, but as of now, this task is impossible due to the lack of diplomatic relations between the countries and inaccessibility of the KGB Archive in Smolensk, Russia. Without these archives, there will always be controversy about the activity and history of the Soviet state retaliatory institutions. But this mission seems impossible for now, at least from the year 2018, and because of this, many questions in Georgian society will still remain unanswered.

23 See Soviet Past Research Laboratory, <http://sovlab.ge/en>

24 See “Enhancing Openness of State Archives in Former Soviet Republics, project of the IDFI Georgia”, https://idfi.ge/en/archival_studies_post_soviet_space

25 See “Access to State Archives Discussed by International Researchers in Georgia”, 1 May 2018, https://idfi.ge/en/access_to_state_archives_discussed_by_international_researchers_in_georgia

26 See “Stalins’ lists from Georgia”, 26 March 2018, <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/gwdict/index.php?a=index&d=26>

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