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VOICES BEYOND THE URALS

The discovery of a central state archive*

IN THE SMALL SIBERIAN TOWN OF IALUTOROVSK, cars are used to giving roaming livestock the right of way. There is, however, more to this place than meets the eye. For those who study the history and culture of Russia and the Soviet Union, there is a vast treasure there — unmarked, nondescript, tucked away on the edge of town and hidden behind a tall concrete wall and barbed wire fence — and its contents have been almost entirely unexplored. The largest employer in Ialutorovsk is the Center for Preservation of a Reserve Record (Tsentr khraneniia strakhovogo fonda or TsKhSF), a compound 44,100 square meters (the size of nearly nine football fields), containing five buildings and a variety of archival materials dating from the seventeenth century. The Center contains originals from the most important state archives in Russia and the former Soviet Union, documents as well as photographs, sound recordings, and films. The following is an attempt to call attention to this unknown archive and its vast diversity of holdings which have been nearly untouched for over 30 years.

If during World War II the Soviet government learned the value of protecting state resources beyond the Urals, in the post-war era it determined that such protection should be accorded to archival materials as well. The Center for Preservation of a Reserve Record was built as a safe storage for microfilms of important archival records as well as original sources. Its holdings include original material from at least nine central state archives in Moscow, including the files of the TASS Telegraph Agency 1940-1961, the USSR Ministry for the Construction

* I am deeply grateful to Tatiana Pavlova who made this discovery possible when she gave me permission in 1992 to work in what had been a closed archive. My sincere appreciation to the generous and knowledgeable archivists and director of the Center for Preservation of a Reserve Record, Nelli Vakulenko. I feel a special debt to Sergei, Nastia and Sasha Dubinskii who facilitated my research in Ialutorovsk in innumerable ways and made Siberia in the winter the warmest place for me.

of Military and Naval Factories, and sound recordings of Stalin's speeches. The first plans for the microfilming project were drafted in 1954, the construction of the complex and the microfilming of selected documents from central and regional archives began in 1961, and the building of the Center was completed in 1972.

This unique Siberian warehouse is directly subordinate to the Russian Archival Administration (*Rosarkhiv*) in Moscow and in order to work there, a letter of permission must be obtained from *Rosarkhiv* that specifically identifies those collections of files (*fondy*) that the researcher needs to see in Ialutorovsk. Then one needs to make the journey to this town which is situated about 77 kilometers southeast of Tiumen'. No foreign or Russian researcher had ever worked there before I made my first visit in 1992, and the very few who have traveled there since have entered the grounds for only hours or days. I have made four visits there for a total of over five months, but I was only recently given access to material on the archive's extensive collection.

As the director and archivists are quick to point out, this compound was not built as an archive and was never intended to accommodate researchers. Rather, it was constructed and operated as a closed warehouse for microfilms and selected original government records. Given the general secrecy surrounding the Center's existence and its exact contents, the archivists are themselves largely unaware of its holdings. For example, their registers (*opisi*) of microfilms are merely a list of the *fondy*, organizational acronyms and corresponding file (*delo*) numbers and do not include dates or descriptions of the contents of each *delo*. An archivist or researcher would have to actually scan the microfilms themselves to see what is there. The same holds true for the sound recordings and documentary films, as the secrecy of the archive meant that archivists were never given listening devices or projectors. Hopefully, this situation will change once more people become aware of the Center's existence and financial support for its maintenance improves.

A closed warehouse and its contents

The Center stores a variety of material, but its holdings can be basically described under two broad headings — original sources and microfilms. The Center's primary and unique function is the maintenance and storage of microfilms or backup copies (*strakhovye fondy*) of important archival documents from both the Tsarist and Soviet periods.¹ Microfilms were made of selected materials from the collections of approximately twenty five archives of the Soviet Union, central archives in Moscow as well as regional (*krai* and *oblast'*) archives. Microfilms include materials from the *fondy* of Tsarist ministers, the NKVD, and the Worker-Peasant Inspectorate or *Rabkrin*. Do these microfilms which fill the largest building

1. Not all of the *strakhovye fondy* are microfilms, but apparently they also include valuable or secret original material concerning the Nuremberg trials, such cultural giants as Pushkin and Tolstoi, and the design and construction of the Lenin mausoleum.

on the archive's grounds all have corresponding originals in either central or regional Russian archives? The archivists I spoke to insist that they do, but one cannot know for sure. If there were occasional "cleanings" (*chistki*) in the central and regional archives, then the microfilms in Ialutorovsk may provide the only view of some important state transactions.

In addition to the microfilms, the Center stores original collections of files, printed material, sound recordings and films which were moved to this remote site from their original storage in various central state archives in Moscow. Since access to archival records began to improve in the late 1980s, a few collections from this warehouse were moved back to Moscow and some are slated for removal. However, the process of returning these collections to their original archives is an expensive one and clearly not a priority for a state archival administration which is trying to cope with a shortage of resources.

Sources from the central state archives in Moscow

The Center contains a vast collection of original material that used to be stored in nine central state archives in Moscow, but was later assigned to storage beyond the Urals. The original sources in the Center are documents as well as motion pictures and photographs (*kinofotodokumenty*), and sound recordings (*zvukozapisi*) such as radio broadcasts and recordings of official speeches and conferences. The Center's original sound recordings are only for the period prior to Stalin's death in 1953 and include recordings of cultural conferences and occasions when the dictator awarded medals to Heroes of the Soviet Union. However, there is no way to confirm the exact contents of the sound recordings as the Center has never been allocated a listening device for these records. There are also original documentary films (*kinozhurnaly*) from the regions (*krai*) of Kuibyshev, Western Siberia, North Caucasus and Rostov on Don, that date from 1942 and concern such subjects as everyday life and the experience of war. Yet, again, the Center never owned a film projector and thus cannot be sure about the precise contents and condition of these reels. These films and sound recordings are apparently from three archives: the Central State Archive for Scientific and Technical Documentation (TsGANTD), the Central State Archive of Motion Pictures and Photographs (TsGAKFD), and the Central State Archive of Sound Recordings (TsGAZ).

In addition to the films and sound recordings, the Center contains vast collections of files which were once stored in one of the following six central state archives in Moscow: the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Russian State Economics Archive (RGAE), the Central State Archive of the Navy (TsGAVMF), the Central State Military History Archive (TsGVIA), the Central State Historical Archive (TsGIA), and the Central State Archive of the Soviet Army (TsGASA). Below is a brief and preliminary inventory of various *fondy* that are currently stored in the Ialutorovsk archive, however the estimates concerning the number of files are probably conservative. My own experience indicates that the

number of files listed in the archivists' register understates the quantity of material actually present.

Half of the archives that have part of their original collections in Ialutorovsk are military archives, and their Siberian holdings largely concern military administration and the military judiciary. Many of the documents from the Central State Archive of the Navy relate to the economic administration of the navy and are probably in the form of vast registers concerning accounts, payment divisions, uniforms, etc. There is also material on the admiralty, the Black Sea Fleet 1823-1857, and girls schools for the daughters of those in the lower ranks of the navy 1827-1884. Sources from the Central State Military History Archive include over 27,000 files on the Armenian expedition of the chancellery of the military staff (*kollegiia*) 1719-1812, f. 4; over 28,000 files of the chancellery of the military staff command (*Prikaznoi stol kantseliarii voennoi kollegii*) 1724-1812, f. 17; and a collection of over 700 files of originals of the highest commands and circulars (*vysochaishie podlinnye prikazy i tsirkulaty*) 1796-1915, f. 406. Also from this archive is an extensive card catalog (*kartoteka*) with information on everyone who was wounded or killed during the First World War.

The actual number of documents from the Central State Archive of the Soviet Army are fewer than from any other archive, and the Ialutorovsk collection contains material that appears to concern primarily the Civil War period. There are records on the army administration (*upravlenie armii*) at all fronts — Northern Siberian, Southern, Northern, North Caucasus, Western, Eastern. The largest collection of files from this archive is over seventy files from the administration (*upravlenie delami*) of the Revolutionary Military Soviet of the Republic.

Documents from the Central State Historical Archive include the collections of various departments of the Imperial Senate from the late eighteenth century to the collapse of tsarism. For example, the Ialutorovsk archive contains over 2,600 files of the general meetings of Senate departments 1796-1917, f. 1330; 5,500 files of the Senate First Department 1797-1917, f. 1341; over 2,000 files of the Senate Third Department 1799-1917, f. 1343; and over 900 files of the Senate Second Department on the peasantry 1882-1917, f. 1344. The Center also contains a vast collection of legal cases from the Imperial period, such as over 5,400 files of the Senate Fifth Department on criminal matters 1834-1899, f. 1345; over 8,000 files of the Senate Department on appeals of criminal cases (*Ugolovnyi kassatsionnyi departament senata*), f. 1363; and over 2,500 files of the Senate Department on appeals of civil cases (*Grazhdanskii kassatsionnyi departament senata*) 1856-1917, f. 1364.

Of all the central state archives that have a part of their holdings in Ialutorovsk, the Russian State Economics Archive has the largest collection in this remote storage. Its material beyond the Urals mainly concerns the USSR's natural resources, such as geological resources, the production of metals, coal, natural gas, oil, but is also related to the production of heavy machinery and agricultural goods. Like the materials in the military archives, these too appear largely technical in nature. Specifically, there are nearly 13,000 files of the USSR Ministry for Coal

Production, f. 8225; over 10,000 files of the USSR Geological Fund, f. 9091; over 7,837 files of the USSR Commissariat and Ministry for Heavy Machinery, f. 8243; over 4,400 files of the State Committee for Material and Technical Supply of the USSR Economy under the USSR Council of Ministers, f. 8258; over 3,100 files of the State Committee for Construction under the USSR Council of Ministers, f. 339; over 4,300 files from the USSR Commissariat and Ministry for Light Industry, f. 7604; over 2,400 files from the All-Union Consortium (*Vsesoiuznoe ob"edinenie*) for Trade with the Countries of the East, f. 4040; over 2,100 files on the production of precious metals like gold and platinum, f. 8153; over 7,800 files from the USSR Ministry for Oil Production (*neftenaia promyshlennost'*), f. 8627; over 1,800 files from the USSR Ministry for the Construction of Military and Naval Factories, f. 8720; and over 300 files of the USSR People's Commissariat for Weapons Industry (*Narodnyi komissariat oboronnoi promyshlennosti SSSR*), f. 7515. There are also photographs of Soviet stores in the 1940s and 1950s that were taken for the Ministry of Trade.

Documents from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) appear to be largely legal in nature or in the form of personal case files. For example, the GARF collection in Ialutorovsk includes various local court, procuracy and police records, plus over 3,800 files of the Russian-Ukrainian-Polish Joint NKVD Commission for Repatriation, f. 8358; over 17,000 files of the High Appeals Commission (*Vysshaia attestatsionnaia komissiiia*) of the USSR Ministry of Higher Education, f. 9506; over 11,000 files of the Amnesty Commission (*Otdel chastnoi amnistii*) of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), f. 3917; over 12,000 files of the TASS Telegraph Agency 1940-1961, f. 4459; and over 100,000 files of the VTsIK Central Electoral Commission, f. 5248.²

It appears that this collection of original sources and microfilms was established in Ialutorovsk for two principal reasons. First, storage in a remote area beyond the Urals apparently offered adequate protection for documents concerning such important matters as the Soviet Union's military, natural resources, and industrial production. Also, the files stored in Ialutorovsk tend to be exceptionally large, and since they were probably also infrequently accessed, it probably seemed most efficient to keep them in remote storage. For example, most of the GARF holdings in the Center appear to be what archivists describe as mass sources (*massovye istochniki*), that is, records or files of individual cases that were reviewed by various governmental commissions or courts.

Among the most exciting new archival sources that have become available since the opening of the Soviet archives are these *massovye istochniki*. The case files of individual citizens – concerning amnesty, the reinstatement of voting rights, repatriation, access to higher education – provide unique insight into the ways in which ordinary citizens interacted with state officials. Moreover, mass sources such

2. The Ialutorovsk archive might also still contain over 18,000 files from the All-Union Society for Assisting the Victims of Intervention (*Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo sodeistviia zertvam interventsii*), f. 7628, but an ambiguous notation in the archivists' register of *fondy* makes this unclear.

as these allow historians to hear voices that are seldom heard in archives. Personal records and individual case files, like all sources, challenge the researcher in particular ways, and one of the greatest challenges in working with these files is their sheer volume. Just in the Ialutorovsk archive, they number in the hundreds of thousands. For the year 1930 alone, the record of the VTsIK Electoral Commission includes over 15,027 personal case files.³

Working with a mass source

I worked with a number of mass sources, but none more extensively than the case files and individual petitions of the *lishentsy* or the disenfranchised, in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴ *Lishentsy* were people assigned to a number of outcast categories, including: 1) servitors of a religious cult; 2) former tsarist policemen and other officials; 3) traders, middlemen, property-owners; those who use hired labor or live off unearned income; 4) dependent family members of the above groups; 5) persons sentenced by a court to deprivation of rights;⁵ 6) administrative exiles and deportees and; 7) the mentally ill.⁶ *Lishentsy* were denied not simply voting rights, but a broad range of rights, such as the right to employment and a pension, and they were also vulnerable, in various periods, to criminal sanction and deportation. In 1930, one noted Soviet legal scholar wrote that “To deprive one of voting rights in our case means excluding that person from social-political life.”⁷

3. Komissia po delam chastnoi amnistii pri VTsIK, f. 3917; Tsentral'naia izbiratel'naia komissia pri Prezidiume VTsIK, f. 5248. In the Moscow City Archive (TsGA g. Moskvy), a project is now underway to cope with thousands of case files from the Soviet disenfranchised which are seldom, if ever, used and occupy so many shelves in the archive. In the interest of saving precious archival space and computerizing the system of record keeping at TsGA g. Moskvy, a number of bright and ambitious archivists have initiated a project whose goal is to computerize key data from these files. This project will certainly make it easier for researchers to use such *massovye istochniki*, for each *lishentsy* case will have its own indexed computer file. The question that remains open is – will the originals be destroyed or moved to remote storage at the completion of the project?

4. On the Soviet disenfranchised, see A.I. Dobkin, “Lishentsy,” in *Zven'ia. Istoricheskii al'manakh* (Moscow, 1992) 2 : 600-631; Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Ascribing class: The construction of social identity in Soviet Russia,” *Journal of Modern History*, 65 (1993): 745-770; Elise Kimberling, “Civil rights and social policy in Soviet Russia, 1918-1936,” *Russian Review*, 41 (1982): 24-46.

5. According to the Criminal Code of the RSFSR, an individual convicted of a crime and sentenced by a court to *porazhenie v politicheskikh pravakh* or deprivation of rights lost voting rights as well as all other rights deprived *lishentsy*. “Deprivation of rights” and “loss of voting rights” carried the same consequences, for the latter included the loss of all other rights associated with *porazhenie prav*. See the 1925 RSFSR Criminal Code, article 40 and the 1935 RSFSR Criminal Code, article 52.

6. The principal pieces of legislation that established *lishentsy* categories were the RSFSR Constitutions of 1918 and 1925, and the VTsIK “Instructions on Elections to the Soviets,” published in three editions (1926, 1930, 1934) and continuously amended.

7. N. Lagovier, *Perevybory sovetrov i revoliutsionnaia zakonnost'* (Moscow, 1930): 38. The various restrictions imposed on *lishentsy* are also described in P.G. Volodarskii and P.V. Terekhov, *Izbratel'noe pravo i revoliutsionnaia zakonnost'* (Moscow, 1930): 47.

In the first two decades of Soviet power, *lishentsy* made personal appeals to central and local authorities – from administrative organs to party officials to control commission and the secret police seeking the reinstatement of rights. Their individual petitions can be found in almost every central and local archive in the former Soviet Union. Petitions from the disenfranchised are scattered in the files of various institutions and authorities, such as the newspaper *Krest'ianskaia gazeta* (RGAE, f. 396, op. 2, 3), the Secret Department of the Party Central Committee (Russian Center for Preservation and Study of Documents of Modern History or RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 85), the Party Control Commission (RTsKhIDNI, f. 613), the personal file of M.I. Kalinin (RTsKhIDNI, f. 78, op. 1), the VTsIK Amnesty Commission (TsKhSF, f. 3917), and the file of the All-Russian Worker-Peasant Inspectorate or *Rabkrin* (GARF A, f. 406). However, the petitions in these locations seldom come in a personal dossier with other information on the petitioner's case, so one cannot always discern the official judgment or response to the letter.

The most revealing mass source on the Soviet disenfranchised are personal dossiers which contain *lishentsy* petitions as well as notes describing the case and the official decision whether to reinstate rights. These dossiers make it possible to shift the focus in a study of disenfranchisement from the development of the policy to the details of its implementation and use, and the various responses of its victims. The files of *lishentsy* who petitioned for the reinstatement of rights contain notes on the decision whether or not to reinstate rights, a questionnaire (*anketa*) with personal information on the disenfranchised person, at least one petition addressed to the Central Electoral Commission and often other petitions that had been rejected by the local electoral commissions. The letters to authority usually include autobiographies, information on how the person was disenfranchised and their life and work since disenfranchisement. Thus dossiers can shed light on a variety of issues, such as the local patterns of classifying enemies (who was most vulnerable to classification and why), the disputes or circumstances that resulted in disenfranchisement, the everyday life experiences of those who were labeled *lishentsy*, the ways in which individuals interacted with state officials, and how they manipulated Bolshevik language and fashioned an identity.

These case files can be found in a few locations. The appeals of those classified under the category of former police and tsarist officials are stored in the file of the VTsIK Commission on the Preliminary Review of Complaints and Petitions for the Reinstatement of Citizenship Rights (GARF, f. 5404). *Lishentsy* case files can also be found in local archives, such as the Moscow City Archive (TsGA g. Moskv). The largest single collection of *lishentsy* dossiers, however, is located in the Center for Preservation of a Reserve Record in Ialutorovsk. This collection is the principal source for *lishentsy* petitions and central policymaking concerning the disenfranchised. The Center's file of the All-Russian Central Electoral Commission (f. 5248) contains protocols and correspondence of the commission as well as over 100,000 individual dossiers of the disenfranchised from over 100 locations throughout Russia who petitioned local and central officials for the reinstatement of their rights.

How can a researcher review these documents if he or she is not prepared to live in Ialutorovsk for many months, if not years? Clearly, some random sampling method is required. In order to begin an analysis of over one hundred thousand *lishentsy* personal case files for the reinstatement of rights, I relied on a simple sampling method. With the patience and generous assistance of the Center's archivists (who supported my "objective and scientific approach"), I selected .05% of the records stored for each year, 1926 to 1936, without reference to the size of the file, the last name of the individual or any other marker that might have revealed a bias. Depending on the number of cases stored for any particular year, I simply pulled every, say, twelfth file (but never the first or the last in a given year). In this way, I compiled a data base of 500 records from these *lishentsy* case files and petitions and felt fairly confident that these files were in some way representative of the 100,000. Although I cannot pretend to know the contents of those files that were not selected, a systematic random sample does offer a reasonable and reliable view of the broader picture.

For each case file, I noted the following personal information on the petitioner and his or her case: name, gender, date of birth, place, *lishentsy* classification, date deprived of rights, VTsIK decision on rehabilitation and date, lower-level administrative decisions on rehabilitation and dates. I also recorded the petitioner's nationality in those rare cases when it was given and tried to assess whether or not the petitioner wrote his or her own petition. Finally and most importantly, I transcribed the complete text of at least one petition from each case file. These petitions had various addressees, but roughly half were addressed to the Central Electoral Commission. Of the remainder, most were addressed to a local electoral commission, but petitions in the sample are also addressed to Stalin, the VTsIK chairman M.I. Kalinin, the military leader K.E. Voroshilov, Lenin's wife N.K. Krupskaja, and institutions such as the VTsIK Amnesty Commission, the complaints bureau of the Commissariat of Justice (*Narkomiust*), and the Commissariat of Finance (*Narkomfin*). All of the petitions that were addressed to local authorities had been rejected by that body, while the petitions addressed to the Central Electoral Commission were largely accepted. Therefore, the sample includes narratives which both failed and succeeded in helping the petitioner reacquire rights.⁸

The sample of 500 case files revealed a few general characteristics. First, the Central Electoral Commission decided to reinstate rights in all but 34 of the 500 cases even though local electoral commissions had earlier rejected these petitioners. Of the 34, nine were denied and in the remaining 25 cases there was no decision. Of those cases approved by the center, 8% were rejected in an earlier VTsIK decision but were re-petitioned. Thus, in over 93% of all cases sampled the petitioner's request for the reinstatement of rights was approved by VTsIK (and

8. In calling *lishentsy* petitions "narratives" I accept Lawrence Stone's working definition of narrative as "the organization of material in chronologically sequential order and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story." See Lawrence Stone, "The revival of narrative: reflections on a new old history," *Past and Present*, 85 (1979): 3.

85% were approved at VTsIK's first review of the case).⁹ The petitions in this sample were overwhelmingly successful not because the Central Electoral Commission approved the vast majority of appeals. This was not the case. From 1927 to 1936, the Central Electoral Commission consistently approved roughly half of the cases it reviewed, with the greatest fluctuations in 1928 when it approved only a quarter of petitions and in 1936 when it approved over 70%.¹⁰

In the case of the Ialutorovsk sample, the rate of approval reflects the fact that the sample is derived from cases in the Central Electoral Commission's file. The policy at the time was to store all approved complaints and petitions in the VTsIK archive. Those that had been rejected, together with the VTsIK protocol concerning rejection, were passed down the hierarchy to the local soviet executive committee which had disenfranchised the petitioner. This explains why those dossiers in the Central Electoral Commission file were overwhelmingly those of successful petitioners. Successful petitions are particularly revealing because they were persuasive, that is, they worked with central authorities.¹¹ Thus the narrative styles not only reveal the tendencies of writers but the preferences of the petitions' readers as well.

Second, in over 82% of the cases sampled, men petitioned individually, while only 14% of the petitions were from women, and another 3% were from couples. Regions that reported the highest number of petitioners in the sample were the cities of Moscow and Leningrad, the Moscow, Leningrad and Western *oblasti*, and the Western Siberia *krai*, although many petitioners came from the Ivanovo Industrial *oblast'* and the Central Black Earth *oblast'* as well. Half of the petitions were from *lishentsy* living in these regions, but the rest came from the over 100 other regions represented in the sample.

By far the largest category of *lishentsy* among the sample were former traders (*torgovtsy*), who comprised nearly 40% of all cases. Yet other classifications include those who lived off unearned income (21%), used hired labor (15.4%), dependent on a *lishenets* (9%), former police (6%), religious servitor (5%), and former White Army officers (3%). The age of petitioners varies widely, yet most were born between 1870 and 1900. Most petitioners were disenfranchised between 1926 and 1931, yet did not begin writing until after 1930. More than half (54%) of the petitions in the sample were written by *lishentsy* themselves, while over a third

9. GARF, f. 3316, op. 25, d. 1027, l. 4.

10. GARF, f. 1235, op. 141, d. 585, l. 86; GARF, f. 1235, op. 76, d. 20, l. 9; GARF, f. 1235, op. 76, d. 126, ll. 1-30; GARF, f. 1235, op. 111, d. 10, ll. 1, 4, 29, 43; TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 2, d. 4, l. 1.

11. The petitions in the sample have a number of addressees. Roughly half were addressed to the Central Electoral Commission and the other half to regional electoral commissions (at the *oblast'*, *krai* or *raion* level). Those petitions that were addressed to local officials appear in the dossiers precisely because they were rejected and sent up the hierarchy, as was the procedure. Therefore, the Central Electoral Commission reviewed petitions that were addressed to local officials and rejected by them, yet decided to accept the petitioner's appeal nonetheless.

(36%) appear to have been written by a scribe.¹² Ten percent of the petitions were typed, making it difficult to confidently determine authorship. However, the language of these typed petitions was generally more formal, the sentences more stylized. In addition, references to the laws were much more frequent in these petitions than in the handwritten ones, which suggests that they were composed by a scribe, a Soviet official, or a so-called “underground lawyer.”¹³ To summarize, the 500-case sample is comprised of cases in which the largest group of supplicants were male traders who wrote their own petitions and whose case for rehabilitation was approved by the Central Electoral Commission.

The voices of society’s marginals

The petition for rehabilitation can be characterized as a “public transcript,” largely shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful, ritualistic and stereotyped.¹⁴ Yet while these letters cannot be read without critical reflection, their limitations as texts do not diminish their potential value to historians. Despite the acute sense of writing for a powerful audience, the disenfranchised demonstrate in their petitions a degree of creative agency, for they offer a range of testimony in their own defense. Petitioners confessed their guilt, vehemently denied the charges against them, and admitted their act while denying it involved malicious intent or deserved such a severe punishment. Some of them confidently asserted a reformed Soviet self, while others accused their neighbors of wrongdoing, and mourned their misfortune in the form of a lament. An analysis of numerous *lishentsy* petitions reveals variation in styles of appeal and demonstrates that there was more than one right way to address Soviet power.

12. To determine whether letters were mediated either by a hired scribe or a literate relative, I first looked to see whether the signature on the petition matched the text. If it did, I assumed the disenfranchised person wrote himself unless handwriting elsewhere (in the file’s other petitions or on a questionnaire) was inconsistent. When the text and signature of one petition was consistent but failed to match others in the same file, I took this as evidence that scribes sometimes signed for their clients. All in all, if the signature matched the text of a petition *and* if this handwriting was consistent with other petitions or signatures in the file, I recorded the petition as written by the person in question. If inconsistencies were apparent, as when the signature did not match the writing in the text, I recorded the petition as not written by the disenfranchised person. If I had no way of judging the authorship of a petition, as in the case of typed petitions, I made note of this uncertainty as well.

13. The underground lawyers (*podpol’nye advokaty*) composed legal documents for peasants and were condemned by Soviet officials as litigious and ignorant. One letter from an exasperated official alerted the public to the large presence of “generally illiterate” underground lawyers in the countryside: “...they write such nonsense (*chush*) in their statements and complaints that they make a reader’s head spin.” *Krest’ianskii iurist*, 11 (1929): 12-13. On the underground lawyer in Russia, see Eugene Huskey, *Russian lawyers and the Soviet state* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); V.M. Kuritsyn, *Perekhod k NEPu i revoliutsionnaia zakonnost’* (Moscow, 1972).

14. James C. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

By analyzing the various narrative styles in *lishentsy* letters to authority, historians can improve their understanding of popular legal values, state-society relations, and the self-fashioning of Soviet citizens. For example, letters for the reinstatement of rights demonstrate the petitioners' understanding of what constituted political loyalty, culpability, responsibility and innocence in the early Stalin period. These petitions contain various forms of explanation and excuse, and each implies a particular relationship between the state and the citizen. The ways in which *lishentsy* describe themselves, their personal histories, and the reasons why they deserve the full rights of citizenship expose the various forms of self-fashioning which were practiced and also officially condoned. Simply, there is much that can be learned from examining the ways in which individuals made their case before Soviet officials.

Herein, I focus on three issues that these dossiers help historians to illuminate and that concern the relationship between Soviet subjects and Soviet power: 1) To what extent did people rely on official formulas and styles when they addressed powerful officials and made a plea for rights? 2) What forms of appeal were most commonly used and was there any change over time in the use of these various forms? 3) How do petitioners fashion themselves before Soviet officials? For these three questions, *lishentsy* petitions for the reinstatement of rights offer striking and unexpected answers.

Locating voice

Despite the rules governing public speech in the Stalin period, there are a number of reasons why a researcher can confront these narratives with a certain degree of confidence that they reflect the voice of *lishentsy*. First, the variety of petition narratives demonstrates that *lishentsy* exercised some creative agency when they composed their testimonies. People made choices about how (and whether) to appropriate certain language and symbols and in what context, and the fact that such choices were made accounts for the diversity and range of these narratives. Moreover, while scribes often mediated life stories and included particular formulas for address, they largely used these devices to provide only a frame for a story which was narrated by the person making the appeal. This is why the presence of mediators and scribes does not necessarily diminish the voice of the petitioner. Life stories were largely individualized; only at moments did they reflect generic components.

In addition, those who composed letters for *lishentsy* were not always educated professionals who could advise on "the right things to say," for such assistance was costly. It appears that when *lishentsy* sought help they more frequently turned to a literate relative to transcribe their appeals. For example, one woman closed her narrative with the following: "I ask that you excuse me for the poor handwriting; my granddaughter wrote from my dictation."¹⁵ Because granddaughters and other

15. TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 9, d. 11165, ll. 14-15 (Saratov, 1930).

relatives wrote for some *lishentsy*, many petitions that were not composed by the signatory do not reflect the hand of a scribe either. They are neither stylized nor embellished, but read as mere transcriptions.

Moreover, if one considers that the purpose of petitioning was to have rights reinstated, discursive embellishments and formulas were not necessarily an improvement over a petitioner's own clumsy words. Since the official *lishentsy* portrait was of someone powerful and crafty, it was not advantageous to appear too polished. The less stylized the testimony, the more inarticulate the petitioner, the more authentic, true or sincere his or her testimony appeared.¹⁶ The presentation of an inarticulate self helped the petitioner to make a claim of innocence or to deny charges that he or she was privileged in any way.¹⁷ *Lishentsy* often tried to present themselves as modest and without means through petitions that lacked an elegant legal style. For example, one man wrote:

“I don't even have the means to hire a jurist who would be able to beautifully draft my whole biography, so I must, of course, write myself. Perhaps I don't put everything in quite the right way (*ne tak vse eto izlogaiu* [sic]), but what can I do?”¹⁸

The task of discerning a petitioner's voice is complicated by the presence of a powerful audience that dictated certain formulas as well as the scribes who helped to reproduce them. Still, there is enough variation in *lishentsy* letters to suggest that the petitioner did not merely seek to faithfully reproduce an official grand narrative, but to construct his or her own.

Narrative styles

One of the most striking features of these petitions is the fact that a range of testimony is offered and very few *lishentsy* flatly deny or confess their transgressions before Soviet power. *Lishentsy* were almost never party members and they spoke differently before Soviet power and in answer to accusations of wrongdoing. It was rare for *lishentsy* to acknowledge wrongdoing, and one seldom encounters a confessional

16. Svetlana Boym describes how “truth is the antithesis of rhetoric”: “In Dostoevsky's novels, tongue-tied characters devoid of rhetorical and oratorical skills often appear as spokesmen for the authorial Russian truth. This includes Kirilov from *The devils* and Count Myshkin from *The idiot*. Such inarticulateness and social clumsiness are read as true and sincere.” See Svetlana Boym, *Common places: Mythologies of everyday life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994): 99-101.

17. Even those who were literate were condemned for assuming the role of someone illiterate in order to present themselves as innocents or persons with low social status. For example, a man charged with killing a Red Army soldier with his truck was condemned in the press: “He is completely ‘literate’ [...] but in court acts like a simpleton, an illiterate, ‘dark man.’” See the court report from a Moscow *oblast'* newspaper, “Vrag proletarskoi distsipliny,” *Podol'skii rabochii*, 2 Apr. 1934.

18. TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 9, d. 10966, l. 12 (Western *oblast'*, 1931).

narrative in their petitions. Statements such as “I acknowledge my mistake in trading,” hardly ever appeared in the sample narratives.¹⁹ When confessions of guilt or “sin” and a plea for forgiveness or mercy did occur, they were usually quite stylized and found in letters written by a scribe.²⁰ The following sentence from the petition of a Greek trader clearly reveals the hand of a scribe:

“My temporary departure from the laboring path (which I once again follow) and the intense worries because of this departure have atoned for my mistake, for which I repent (*iskuplili moi u oshibku v kotoroi raskaivaius*).”²¹

While confessions of guilt before Soviet power and the desire to atone for one’s sins can be found in some *lishentsy* petitions, they most frequently occur in letters from the 1920s and by either former White Army officers or former servitors of the church. This seems to suggest that the confessional style has prerevolutionary roots. The following 1935 petition from a former officer of the White Army was written in a language that was common for those of his classification.

“I have been working all this time, with complete awareness of my former guilt before the Soviet government and laboring people. I have made and make every effort to expiate my guilt [...].”²²

Moreover, in only 13% of the sample petitions do *lishentsy* flatly deny the charges against them. Denials were as rare as confession and when they do appear, they often include the assertion that the petitioner was denounced or that an obvious mistake was made. One man classified as a former landlord insisted: “Not only was I never such a thing, but I never had any property anywhere.”²³ In most appeals, *lishentsy* do not acknowledge that they behaved improperly, nor do they confess their guilt.²⁴

19. TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 7, d. 6214, l. 22 (Moscow *oblast*’, 1930).

20. TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 5, d. 110, l. 2: “I await from you, comrade Kalinin, mercy (*milost*)” (Smolensk *gubernia*, 1929); TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 7, d. 13814, l. 8: “I have atoned for my sin” (Ivanovo Industrial *oblast*’, 1930); TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 9, d. 7185, l. 11: “I ask of you, [grant] me great mercy.”; TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 9, d. 9175, ll. 29-30: “I acknowledge my guilt” (Leningrad *oblast*’, 1931).

21. TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 7, d. 2414, l. 8 (Leningrad, 1929).

22. TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 17, d. 405, ll. 13-14 (Rostov on Don, 1935).

23. TsGA g. Moskvyy, f. 3118, op. 1, d. 33, l. 2 (Moscow, 1934).

24. There are styles and strategies of argumentation in *lishentsy* petitions which can also be detected in letters, for example, from persons making appeals for amnesty or victims of party purges requesting reinstatement. Here, however, *lishentsy* testimony is unique. In the other cases, some acknowledgment or confession of wrongdoing was typical. To explore this comparison, see GARF, f. 7521, op. 2 (cases from the TsIK Amnesty Commission); RTsKhIDNI, f. 78, op. 1 (letters to Kalinin on amnesty); RTsKhIDNI, f. 613, op. 3 (letters to the Party Control Commission).

Rather, the disenfranchised admit to the charges made against them, but refuse to accept the fact of any wrongdoing.²⁵

A confession of wrongdoing or a categorical denial of the charges each occurs much less frequently in *lishentsy* petitions than a challenge, a lament, or the assertion of a reformed Soviet self. The vast majority of *lishentsy* petitions reveals a range of narrative strategies which falls between the extremes of denial and confession. I classified this range into five broad categories, but most of the petitions in the sample include more than one of the following: 1) an accusation against another who was responsible for the petitioner's classification; 2) an excuse that the activity was performed accidentally and temporarily and does not reflect the petitioner's true occupation or inclinations; 3) a lament that the petitioner is pitiful, desperate, ignorant and deserving of the reader's sympathy; 4) a claim of wrongful classification (one is only a petty trader, not really a dependent, etc.); 5) the presentation of a Soviet self, which involved boasts of loyalty, service and work achievements.

Moreover, an analysis of these various narrative strategies over time reveals few changes in the petitioners' style of appeal and in the official readers' narrative preferences from 1926 to 1936. Surprisingly, the language that *lishentsy* used when addressing high-level Soviet authorities and the language that resonated with these officials reveals a striking degree of consistency. While the number of petitions that employ each narrative strategy varies over time, the five arguments are offered and accepted at a fairly constant rate in the course of nearly a decade. This consistency in the kinds of narratives offered and accepted is especially striking when one considers the transformations of the period, the ways in which socialist construction shaped the political culture, glorified human agency and the power of the will, and made socially-useful labor the key expression of one's personal identity and political loyalty. Despite these features of Stalinist culture, officials in Moscow consistently found other arguments for the reinstatement of rights compelling and persuasive, including the pitiful lament. The dramatic changes of the decade, the severe dislocation and disruption of socialist construction, had little effect on the way in which *lishentsy* framed authority and presented themselves. The Central Electoral Commission did not show more favor in the course of the 1920s and 1930s towards petitions in which the writer asserted a Soviet self.

25. On the discursive strategies employed by violators of labor discipline, see Lewis H. Siegelbaum, "Defining and ignoring labor discipline in the early Soviet period: The comrades-disciplinary courts, 1918-1922," *Slavic Review*, 51 (1992): 705-731. There are interesting similarities and differences in the testimonies of these workers and *lishentsy*. For example, Siegelbaum notes that defendants did not contest the definitions and sentences applied by the courts, while *lishentsy* most certainly did. On the other hand, both groups tended to admit their actions while at the same time argue they were compelled by circumstances to behave as they did. In this way, they were not "guilty" and deserved to be exonerated.

The outcast's self-fashioning

Historians are accustomed to the voices of Stalin's subjects that present an idealized image of a proletarian self. In the 1920s and 1930s, people tried to acquire a proletarian identity and present a self-image that conformed with Bolshevik ideals about the model worker and citizen. It is not surprising that petitioning *lishentsy* do the same and include such statements in their petitions as: "I was in the Red Army and always stood on the side of strengthening the worker-peasant government [...] I consider myself completely loyal to Soviet Power."²⁶ This image of an empowered Soviet self, of a disciplined and orderly proletarian worker who is loyal to Soviet power and engaged in socialist construction is familiar and reflects the Bolshevik's desire to create this kind of new Soviet man.²⁷ Yet petitions from *lishentsy* reveal that the forms of acceptable self-presentation were broader than one might expect.

A number of other self-presentations can be detected in the Stalin period and they challenge historians to consider the variety of citizen selves which were possible in the early Stalin years.²⁸ At least two self-images emerge in *lishentsy* petitions that are sharply distinct from that of the empowered proletarian worker. First, one encounters the image of a manipulated self. The campaign to identify enemies and saboteurs prompted individuals to describe themselves as persecuted by manipulators, incompetents and personal enemies. In an effort to clear their name, people framed themselves as disempowered victims and contrasted themselves to others whom they believed manipulated them. The condition that shaped their identity was their formative experience of having been victimized by enemies, unfairly attacked by ignorant brutes and saboteurs. Rather than their socialist achievements, this experience formed the basic building blocks of their identity.

Those petitioning for the reinstatement of rights do not have to denounce others in order to re-acquire rights, but they are motivated to do so because they need a counter-image to sharpen or enhance the image of oneself as a disempowered victim. People who were disenfranchised often made comparisons and counter-examples to sharpen or enhance their self-portraits; their self-presentations were often formed in opposition to or against depictions of an other. For example, one man offered the following description of an unknowing self against a crafty and exploitative other: "Kukshchrov [...] exploited me in every way [...]. Because of him I served time in jail [...]. Because of my illiteracy and lack of consciousness (*nesoznatel'nost'*) I suffered on account of someone else's business (*za chuzhoc delo*) [...]."²⁹

26. TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 9, d. 12956, ll. 18-19 (Leningrad *oblast'*, 1931).

27. On the fashioning of a Soviet self as a model worker, see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic mountain: Stalinism as a civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Lewis Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the politics of productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

28. For another discussion of the range of citizen selves which were fashioned under Stalin, see my "Portrait of a con artist as a Soviet man," *Slavic Review*, 57, 4 (Winter, 1998): 774-790.

29. TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 10, d. 5943, ll. 4-5 (Udmurtsk AO, 1932).

Moreover, some petitioners presented not a proletarian self or a manipulated self, but a pitiful self – someone who suffers tremendously because of illness, unemployment or death in the family. The lamenting or suffering self is sharply distinct from the New Soviet Man, the builder of a new world.³⁰ Indeed, implicit in the lament is the notion that one is essentially a tragic figure caught within a perpetual cycle of misfortune, and not a favorite of world history. The petitioners who made particular use of the lament were women. They often described themselves as “a sick orphan and widow,”³¹ dark, incapable,³² but “taught by the bitter experience of life.”³³ The forms of self-presentation that emerge in *lishentsy* petitions strongly suggest that Soviet subjects shaped their identities not only according to Bolshevik prescriptions and instructions, but in response to their own experiences of victimization and misfortune.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the vast and significant holdings of a Siberian warehouse which was once highly secret, and the contents of one of its largest collection of files, the dossiers of people who were disenfranchised in the 1920s and 1930s. Petitions from the disenfranchised reveal an unexpected variety of narrative styles, a remarkable consistency in the forms of appeal and argument over the course of a tumultuous decade, and the presence of various citizen selves. They make it possible for historians to examine citizen responses to oppression — from open defiance, to denunciation and participation in the mechanism of terror; from the presentation of an empowered proletarian self to the indignant assertion of a manipulated self and the sentimental rendering of a pitiful lament. Moreover, *lishentsy* case files, combined with declassified VTsIK materials concerning the policy of disenfranchisement and its implementation, allow for the treatment of previously unexplored issues, such as how political membership was contested and constructed in the new Soviet state, discourses of the weak and avenues of grievance under a repressive regime, the role of victims in a system of terror, and the role of rehabilitation in the formation of Soviet citizens.

Yet while much can be learned from this newly opened Siberian treasure and its enormous collection of state records, I conclude with a few requisite words of caution. The Center for Preservation of a Reserve Record has a rich collection, but Ialutorovsk is a small town of about 30,000 people, buses travel very irregularly and

30. I explore this issue further in my “The ritual lament: A narrative of appeal in the 1920s and 1930s,” in a special issue of the journal *Russian History/Histoire russe* on letters to Soviet authorities (Spring-Summer 1997): 117-129.

31. TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 7, d. 11814, l. 27 (Yalta, not available).

32. TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 14, d. 13290, l. 17 (Leningrad *oblast'*, 1935); TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 17, d. 5, ll. 5-6 (Ivanovo Industrial *oblast'*, 1936).

33. TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 7, d. 13614, l. 6 (Arkhangel'sk, not available).

slowly between it and Tiumen, housing is in short supply and telephones function very poorly. It is unfortunate that the Center's rich holdings are in a kind of Siberian exile because the logistics of working in Ialutorovsk discourage researchers who would need to reside there many weeks in order to adequately study a mass source.

Moreover, individual cases and petitions are limited as sources and historians should note what these dossiers cannot tell us. First, detailed information on the reasoning or judgment of the Soviet officials who read these petitions is paltry at best. Seldom do officials scribble more than a brief phrase indicating why they chose to reinstate the petitioner's rights. One should also be careful about exaggerating the persuasive power of the *lishentsy* narratives, as often decisions about whether or not to reinstate rights were made rather arbitrarily and with little reference to the content of the petitioner's argument or the circumstances of his or her case. In addition, the dossiers of *lishentsy* in the *fond* of the Central Electoral Commission represent some categories of *lishentsy* (e.g. traders and people living off unearned income) much more than others (e.g. priests, kulaks and criminals), so certain groups of outcasts, especially those who were managed by the secret police, are highly under-represented among the files of the VTsIK Electoral Commission. Finally, the existence of one hundred thousand case files with multiple petitions should give the impression that officials were burdened by the volume of letters, but not that most *lishentsy* petitioned for the reinstatement of rights.³⁴ In fact, this is not true. Apparently, only a small minority of *lishentsy* actually sought to re-enter Soviet society by formally petitioning for rights, while many tried to conceal a damaging identity and discreetly forge a new one.³⁵ Thus like any other source, the dossiers are not autonomous. Unless they are used in conjunction with other material on the disenfranchised, one risks asserting — prematurely and without sufficient evidence — that a peculiar archival collection (although vast and diverse) is representative of a broader population.

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34. Soviet officials constantly complained that they were being burdened by huge quantities of *lishentsy* petitions. Even as late as 1935, the Tiazhin *raion* of the Western Siberia *krai* reported that nearly half of the topics discussed at the meetings of the soviet executive committee concerned complaints and petitions from *lishentsy*. "Iz sibirskoi provintsii," *Vlast' soveto*v, 24 (1935): 36.

35. For example, in the 1927-1928 campaign there were over two million people formally registered as disenfranchised, but only roughly 22,000 petitions had been filed with the Central Electoral Commission in that period. See GARF, f. 1235, op. 106, d. 519, l. 305; TsKhSF, f. 5248, op. 1, d. 23, l. 43. The largest number of petitions reviewed was over 36,000 in 1932, yet while this figure is striking, it is still far below the number of people disenfranchised. See GARF, f. 1235, op. 76, d. 126. On acquiring a new proletarian identity, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The problem of class identity in NEP society," in Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowich, Richard Stites, eds, *Russia in the era of NEP* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991): 26-27.