



DECODING THE PAST: THE 'MYTH' OF THE SOVIET ARCHIVES AND THE CYPRUS ISSUE

Argyrios Tasoulas

One of the most intriguing research enigmas of the post-Cold War era is the possibility to acquire access to declassified Soviet archival materials. This problem has not been investigated and answered adequately due to a series of complexities related to the Russian language, ignorance of Russian mentality, misleading information and even erroneous judgements by certain scholars.

Indisputably, it is not feasible to analyse and interpret the motives of state actors without having prior knowledge of their archival collections. Moreover, the absence of research treatments devoted to one of the two main denominators of the Cold War, the Soviet Union, remains problematic. Certainly, the situation is not totally grim, as some collections of Soviet materials had been periodically published under the auspices of the former Soviet Foreign Ministry. Still, despite their unquestionable significance, they mainly consist of official statements by the Soviet government or joint communiques.

This brings us to the thorny issue of Cyprus. The academic community is cognisant of the fact that there are big gaps vis-à-vis the Cyprus issue. As might be expected, Soviet archival materials can indeed shed light on questions related to the history of the island, the Soviet positions on the Cyprus issue and judgements regarding the foreign policies of other governments concerned.

Unfortunately, even articles published recently in well-respected journals do not make extensive use of new archival material from the many archival collections of Moscow (not to mention the whole country), thus 'recycling', or even highlighting, the 'myth' of the classification of Soviet documents.

However, are Soviet archives truly inaccessible? During the last three years, we tried to answer this thorny issue through our research proposal that led to a dissertation submitted to the relevant committee of the Department of Theory and History of International Relations at the Peoples' Friendship University of

Russia. The project title is 'The Cyprus issue in the foreign policy of the Soviet Union 1953–1974'. (in Russian).

This work is based on primary research in two prominent Russian archives, both located in Moscow, which preserve documents on Soviet foreign policy and international relations. These are the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (AVP RF) and the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI), where the archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union are stored.

The dissertation discusses the historical aspects of the Cyprus question as well as the tactics of the Soviet Union regarding this particular international issue. We meticulously examined the main hallmarks of the USSR's foreign policy vis-à-vis the Cyprus issue under the prism of its international behaviour during the Cold War. The thesis touches upon Soviet diplomacy not only during the Cypriot struggle for self-determination in the mid-50s' but also during the major Cyprus crises of 1964, 1967 and 1974.

Most of the studied documents are records of conversations between Soviet diplomats and Cypriot politicians and diplomats (as well as Greek and Turkish diplomats - another interesting topic for discussion); various thematic notes; reports by Soviet intelligence (KGB and GRU), addressed to the Council of Ministers of the USSR; notes signed by the director-general of the Fifth European Department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Sergei Timofeevich Astavin (who would go on to serve as ambassador to the Republic of Cyprus from 1973 to 1986); annual political reports by the Soviet ambassadors in Greece and Cyprus. Of interest are also declassified legislative documents, mainly the resolutions of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU about the Cyprus issue, as well as the personal Archive of Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev.

A comprehensive analysis of the Cyprus issue in the foreign policy of the USSR, allowed us to conclude that the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1974 paid great attention to the developments in and around Cyprus. The reasons behind the Soviet decision-making were related to the political and geopolitical understanding of the international system and the balance of power during the Cold War. Consequently, all current theories and estimations that the Soviet Union treated the Cyprus question as a 'secondary' issue, are strongly influenced by the 'myth' (and the aftermath of that 'myth'). In other words, the fact that several researchers believed that Soviet archives in their entirety were classified raised a barrier that formerly prevented a thorough study of the topic.

According to our opinion, only the tip of the iceberg has been touched, considering the fact that numerous Soviet archival documents on the Cyprus issue and bilateral relations with Greece and Turkey as well as the personal Archive of the Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko are still inaccessible to researchers. Still, several research questions on the Cyprus issue and Soviet foreign policy were answered adequately.

Admittedly, this dissertation was carried out largely on account of pure love and passion for history. Concomitantly, access to the declassified materials provided us with additional sheer motivation. However, the challenges were numerous. We did not face only financial hurdles, but even scepticism that this project was unrealistic, a conjecture linked precisely with the existing myth that 'the archives are classified'; or, due to inaccurate information that 'archival materials are not given to non-Russians'. It should be underlined though that researchers in certain Russian archives must surpass several restrictions, and the declassification of new documents in certain cases is proceeding rather slowly.

Consequently, the perpetuation of the 'myth' is fuelled by two main factors; objective drawbacks of the Russian archival storage system; but also disillusionment by researchers due to misunderstandings related to this system. In addition, lack of funding is counterproductive for debunking the 'myth', as well as for historiography and international relations.

Everyone loves myths. However, this one does not provide any positive political outcomes. Extensive knowledge of the history of one's political interlocutors not only provides the potential for a politico-psychological outline, but also further cultivates the development of tactical executions that allows for a more focused approach on bilateral issues. The fact that historical arguments are constantly being used in politics and public policy should be also highlighted. The conscientious historian should therefore provide a reliable guide and a solid analysis based on undisrupted research.

There is, however, the almost-constant danger of drawing inadequate conclusions regarding the Soviet Union. This in turn leads to insufficient judgments regarding Russia. Certainly, it can be argued that Russia is not exactly the single party-state the USSR was. However, it is also an oversimplification to support that the world's largest country drastically changed its political line of thought, especially taking into consideration the country's federal structure, or the elite's security thinking, which has been influenced by historical experience. Hence, answers to multiple essential questions can be given by extensive use of fascinating declassified Soviet foreign policy archives.

In a multidimensional, globalised political environment, the Eastern Mediterranean still occupies a special place in international relations. It is no secret that Russia pursues no less interesting a foreign policy to this geographical region than its predecessor. Accordingly, achieving power through information is more relevant than ever. But in regards to history and Soviet archival materials, it would be a mistake to assume that this treasure would be soon reachable by technological means for reasons which cannot possibly be analysed in-depth here. To put it simply, the ink of the Soviet documents still waits for proficient human eyes.