

Formation of Archival Service in the Republic of Belarus

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In 1991 Belarus has received the status of the independent State. Being the BSSR legal successor, the Republic of Belarus has inherited not only the archival funds stored in the archives operating in the territory of this former Soviet republic, but also the structure of regulatory bodies of archival branch, as well as the basic principles and the technique of the organization of archival work. At the same time, after disintegration of the USSR the Belarusian archivists have faced a number of problems in their professional activities, which had to be urgently solved. In the end of the XX century the most important problems that Belarusian archivists had to resolve were: formation of the national archival legislation; formation of the national archival legislation; creation of the system of bodies and establishments of the State Archival Service of the Republic of Belarus; construction of archival facilities as the principal condition of preservation of archive documents; scientific and methodological support of archival sphere; training of the archival staff. The article reveals the approaches to solution of these professional problems in Belarus though the problems still exist in the early XXI century.

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Nel 1991 la Bielorussia ha acquisito lo status di nazione indipendente. Essendo l'erede legale della Repubblica Socialista Sovietica di Bielorussia, la Repubblica di Bielorussia ha ereditato non solo i fondi archivistici conservati negli archivi operanti nel territorio dell'ex repubblica sovietica, ma anche la struttura degli uffici preposti all'amministrazione

1. INTRODUCTION

The Declaration of Sovereignty of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), one of the former republics of the Soviet Union, was adopted on July 27th, 1990. After the denouncement of the 1922 Treaty on the formation of the USSR, Belarus has received the status of the independent State both de jure and de facto.

Being the BSSR legal successor, the Republic of Belarus has inherited not only the archival funds stored in the archives operating in the territory of this former Soviet republic, but also the structure of regulatory bodies of archival branch, as well as the basic principles and the technique of the organization of archival work. At the same time, after disintegration of the USSR the Belarusian archivists have faced a number of problems in their professional activities, which had to be urgently solved.

2. FORMATION OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVAL LEGISLATION

One of the major tasks of the Belarusian archivists in the first years of the country's sovereignty became the formation of the national archival legislation.

The complexity of its fulfilment was in the fact that there had never been any archival law in the USSR and, accordingly, in Belarus as its part. Activity of archival bodies and establishments had been regulated by the acts of the Government having the validity inferior to that of the law. Such approach could be justified in the Soviet times in the conditions of exclusively state ownership of organizations and enterprises or State-controlled collective and public organizations. In such situation the property right to the archival documents could only belong to the State. Accordingly, the basic principles of archival development in Belarus were proclaimed in the beginning of the 20-ies of the twentieth century: the centralization of archival activities providing for the central state regulatory body, as well as the formation in the republic of a unified state archival fund as the com-

ponent of the State Archival Fund of the USSR.

As far back as on the 12th September, 1922 the Resolution of the BSSR Central Executive Committee named *Regulations on the Central Archive of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Byelorussia* was adopted. According to it all archives of government bodies and any documentary stores were liquidated as departmental institutions, while the documents stored there were included in the State Archival Fund of Belarus «represented by the Central Archive of Belarus». The documents of both former institutions of the Russian Empire and the establishments operated in the territory of Belarus from February, 1917 till July, 1920 ought to be also transferred to the state storage.

In 1927 the Resolutions of the Central Executive Committee and the BSSR Government were adopted, which have approved *The Regulations on the Unified State Archival Fund of the BSSR* (on May 28th) and *The Regulations on the Central Archival Department of the BSSR and Its Bodies* (on December 8th). The concept of the BSSR State Archival Fund meant the whole amount of the archival documents stored in the territory of the republic.

In 1941 the concept of the State Archival Fund of the BSSR has been abolished de jure. On March 29th, 1941 the Government of the USSR adopted *The Regulations on the State Archival Fund of the USSR*, according to which the unified All-Union State Archival Fund was formed, which was stored in the central, republican and local archives.

Thus, since 1941 all the archival documents stored in the territory of Belarus have been considered as a sole property of the Soviet Union. New versions of the Regulations on the State Archival Fund of the USSR adopted in 1958 and 1980 just detailed the initial document, leaving its basic provisions intact.

After declaration of sovereignty of Belarus and the reforms leading to withdrawal of the state monopoly in economic, social and political sphere the monopoly of the State on the right of possession, use and disposal of archival documents has also been broken. The need of development of the national archival law for regulation of the changed relations became obvious.

First of all it was necessary for Belarus archivists to implement a new term instead of the term «the State Archival Fund» used for decades. It had to cover by its contents the whole collection of the archive documents having scientific and historical value, irrespective of their origin and the property rights implied by it. The new term has been fixed in the name of the archival law adopted on October 6th, 1994 *On the National Archival Fund and the Archives in the Republic of Belarus*.

According to the law the National Archival Fund (hereafter NAF) shall consist of the governmental and non-governmental sections. NAF governmental section comprises the documents created before declaration of sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus, the documents stored in the archives of state organizations, and also the documents stored in the archives of the privatized enterprises if they were formed before privatization. NAF non-governmental section covers the archival funds and documents being the property of the

archivistica, così come i principi e le tecniche basilari dell'organizzazione del lavoro archivistico. Al tempo stesso, dopo la dissoluzione dell'URSS gli archivisti bielorusi all'interno delle loro attività professionali si sono trovati di fronte una serie di problematiche da dovere essere risolte con urgenza. Alla fine del XX secolo i problemi più importanti da risolvere per gli archivisti bielorusi riguardavano: l'elaborazione di una legislazione archivistica nazionale, la creazione di un sistema amministrativo e di un Sistema Archivistico Nazionale della Repubblica di Bielorussia, la costruzione di attrezzature archivistiche come condizione principale per la conservazione dei documenti d'archivio, le basi metodologiche e scientifiche nel campo archivistico, la formazione del personale archivistico. L'articolo espone gli approcci alla soluzione di questi problemi professionali in Bielorussia, nonostante la loro persistenza ancora agli inizi del XXI secolo.

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V letu 1991 je Belorusija postala neodvisna država. Da bi bila lahko legalna naslednica nekdanje Rusije, Belorusija ni podedovala samo arhivskih fondov iz nekdanje sovjetske republike, temveč tudi strukturo urejevanja v arhivski stroki, poleg tega pa še zakonodajo in celotno arhivsko tehniko. Beloruski arhivisti so se po odcepitvi od ZSSR srečali s kopicco problemov, ki so se nanašali tudi na strokovne probleme, ki bi morali biti hitro rešeni. Ti problemi, ki so nastali na koncu 20. stoletja, so bili naslednji: oblikovanje nacionalne arhivske zakonodaje, določitev arhivskih teles in vzpostavitev državne arhivske službe, konstruiranje arhivskih tehničnih vprašanj, ki se nanašajo na hrambo arhivske dokumentacije, znanstveno in metodološko podporo in zaščito v arhivski stroki in izobraževanje arhivistov. V pričujočem prispevku so zato prikazani nekateri postopki, kako so se te problemi reševali, čeprav je treba reči, da se vse ni dalo naenkrat rešiti in bodo nekatera vprašanja ostala odprta tudi v 21. stoletju.

enterprises, institutions and organizations of the private, collective and mixed forms of ownership, the property and physical persons, public associations from the moment of their registration in due order.

Absence of the experience required, formation of a new civil legislation in the country have demanded the revision of some provisions of the law. In 1996 *The Regulation on the National Archival Fund of the Republic of Belarus*, partially filling gaps in the law, was approved by Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus, and a new version of Law *On the National Archival Fund and Archives in the Republic of Belarus* was adopted in 1999.

Please, note that today there is again need for the revision of the national law on archives. It is necessary to specify professional archival terminology used in the law, the structure of NAF documents. The issues of the status of the state archives, interrelations of the State Archival Service with non-governmental institutions, etc. require a more precise legislative wording.

3. CREATION OF THE SYSTEM OF BODIES AND ESTABLISHMENTS OF THE STATE ARCHIVAL SERVICE OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

The formation of the system of bodies and establishments of the State Archival Service of the Republic of Belarus was started by the above mentioned resolution of the Central Executive Committee of BSSR dated September 12th, 1922, according to which the Central Archive of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Byelorussia was founded. This archive has not only provided the storage of archival documents, but has also fulfilled the regulatory functions of a state body in the archival branch of the republic.

The separation of functions of the state archives and archival regulatory bodies in the republic occurred in 1927. This year the Central Archival Department of the BSSR, a central state archival regulatory body, was founded. Its branches have been opened in all districts (later regions) of the republic. The network of the central and regional state archives has simultaneously been organized. This approach to the organization of archival sphere in Belarus was used up to the declaration of its sovereignty. Only the names and the status of regulatory bodies, the titles and the network of the state archives, as well as their subordination were subject to changes (in 1922-1938 the State Archival Service of Belarus reported to the Central Executive Committee of the BSSR, in 1938-1960 to the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (the Ministry of Internal Affairs) of the BSSR, in 1960-1991 to the Council of Ministers of the BSSR).

By the end of 1991 in Belarus the regulation of the archival sphere was effected by the Main Archival Department at the Council of Ministers and archival departments of regional executive committees, and the network of the state archival institutions included 6 central archives, 6 regional archives, with 16

branches, and also a specialized laboratory for preservation of archival documents.

After disintegration of the USSR Belarusian archivists had to solve the following problem: to retain or reform radically the existing system of the State Archival Service. It has been decided to preserve the principle of centralization of management of archival branch, to keep the operating structure with some reorganization. The main efforts of the Belarusian archivists in this period have been directed to the development of a network of archival establishments, the increase of the status and prestige of the State Archival Service.

The first step in the fulfilment of these tasks was transformation of the Main Archival Department into the Committee on Archives and Records Management with its subordination in 1992-1995 to the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus, and in 1995-1997 to the President of the Republic of Belarus. In 1997 the State Committee on Archives and Records Management of the Republic of Belarus was formed, which has received the status of the ministry, and its Chairman became a member of the Council of Ministers. Such representation of the head of archival service in the government of a country is probably a unique case in the world history.

Having achieved the increased status of the State Archival Service, the Belarusian archivists could start the resolution of the essential problems of development of an archival network:

Three central archives were granted the status of “national archives”;

Branches of the state regional archives were transformed into the zonal state archives, being independent legal entities;

Pursuant to the resolution of the Government in 1998 the network of district and city archives was created, the main task of which is preservation of documents on personnel of liquidated non-state organizations;

Following the resolution of the Government in 1998 a specialized archive for storage of electronic documents, the Belarusian Scientific and Research Centre of Electronic Documents (BeNITsED) was founded.

Within the period considered the network of the state archives has been essentially expanded by way of transfer to the system of the State Archival Service of the archives of the Communist Party of Byelorussia, an integral part of the CPSU. By Resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus № 489 dated December 29th, 1991 *On the Transfer of the CPB-CPSU Property to the Republican and Administrative-and-territorial (Municipal) Ownership* the archival documents were transferred to the State, and the Party archives were handed over under the jurisdiction of the State Archival Service.

Please, note, that CPB-CPSU had an independent archival service not accountable to the State and its archival bodies. By the

end of 1991 its structure comprised the Central Party Archive founded in 1928 and 6 Party archives of Party Regional Committees.

There was no unified approach to the integration of party archives in the system of the State Archival Service. The Central Party Archive was liquidated, and the archival documents stored there were transferred to the National Archive of the Republic of Belarus. Similarly the party archives of corresponding Regional Party Committees were handed over to the state archives of the Minsk, Brest and Vitebsk Regions. In three regions (Grodno, Mogilev, and Gomel) the state archives of public associations were formed on the basis of former Party archives, the main function of which was named the storage of the documents created in the activity of political parties and other public organizations.

Thus, by the end of the XX century the system of the State archival service included:

- The national archival regulatory body;
- archival regulatory bodies in the regions and Minsk City;
- 6 central state archives, including specialized archives of audiovisual documents, literature and art, scientific and technical documents, 2 historical archives;
- 25 regional state archives, including 3 archives of public associations;
- 125 district and city archives (formation of the network of these archives has been completed in the early XXI century);
- 2 scientific and research centres and 2 laboratories specializing on preservation of archive documents.

Belarusian archivists have obviously achieved substantial success in the sphere of archival construction in the last decade of the XX century. For example, the personnel of archival branch has more than doubled within the period specified.

Despite of significant progress Belarusian archivists face a number of problems of further development of the system of the State Archival Service at the present stage. The principal one is liquidation of independence of the archival regulatory body in the country in 2006 and its integration into the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Belarus. The issue of the status of district and city archives has not yet been resolved: they were originally formed as archives on personnel; later, however, they were actually transformed into archives for storage of all the documents of liquidated non-state organisations. BelNITsED also encounters serious problems in formation of its archive of electronic documents because of an uncertain status of the electronic document and the problems of its long-term preservation.

4. CONSTRUCTION OF ARCHIVAL FACILITIES IS THE PRINCIPAL CONDITION OF PRESERVATION OF ARCHIVE DOCUMENTS

One of the major guidelines of preservation of archive documents is the provision of archives with buildings and premises corresponding to the established requirements.

For a long time the Belarusian state archives had no specialized buildings specially constructed for storage of archive documents. As of January 1st, 1946 there were 19 buildings and premises at the disposal of the state archives for storage of documents of the Republican Archival Fund, basically former cultic buildings (churches, synagogues, etc). For example, the Polotsk State Regional Archive located in the Sofia Cathedral, the Central State Historical Archive of the BSSR in the Mogilev Catholic church. While technical design and technological mode of buildings of the majority of archives corresponded to the standards of storage of documents, the temperature, relative air humidity, and other conditions of storage of documents, as a rule, did not meet these standards. In this connection the archives carried out mass drying of files in summertime, especially those stored in stacks.

Such situation made the BSSR Government adopt on July 14th, 1949 Resolution *On Measures for Ordering Documentary Materials* of BSSR SAF. By the end of 1950-ies the work on preservation of documents in state archives has been raised up to a quite satisfactory level. This was promoted by the construction of the republican storehouses of microphotographic documents in 1957-1959, the laboratory on restoration and microphotocopying of the most valuable stock-keeping units, the laboratories in the Central State Historical Archive of the BSSR and its branch, in a number of regional state archives.

The measures taken, however, were insufficient. 15 out of 28 state archives resided in the adapted premises (mainly former churches and monasteries), and the storehouses of four out of six central archives were overloaded. For this reason other resolutions of the BSSR Government aimed at improvement of storage conditions of archive documents were adopted in 1970 and 1975.

In the second half of 1980-ies the situation began to change for the better. Within this period specialized buildings for the Central State Archive of Audiovisual Documents (1986), the Central State Archive of October Revolution and Socialist Construction (now National Archive of the Republic of Belarus, 1991), state archives in Gomel (1984), Mogilev and Pinsk (1986), Mozyr (1990) have been constructed. In total the state archives have received six new buildings in 1984-1990, apart from construction and modernisation of some storehouses.

In the first years of Belarusian sovereignty the problem of provision of the state archives with buildings and premises has remained acute. Its solution was complicated by an adverse financial situation in the country in the period of economic reforms. Despite this Belarusian archivists managed to complete the con-

struction of buildings of the state archives in Grodno (1993), Novogrudok (1995), and Kobrin (1997) started in the end of 1980-ies.

Further on the decision was taken to focus on modernisation (adaptation) for archives of other available objects, in connection with the lack of sufficient financial resources for construction of specialized buildings. This activity especially boosted in the early new century, after discussion of this issue at the national meeting in the Council of Ministers. As a result the storage conditions of documents in the state archives in Brest, Orsha, Glubokoe, Zhlobin, Rechitsa, Lida, Borisov, Molodechno, Krichev have been improved or will be improved in the near future. The scope of the work done and the results achieved in the last 5-7 years testify to a certain building Renaissance in the archival branch.

Other problems which Belarusian archivists face in preservation of documents at the present stage are traditional: preservation of the documents created on the acid-based paper (especially documents of partisan movement in the period of the Second World War), creation of the security fund and the user fund for the most valuable NAF documents on microfilm and electronic media, etc.

5. SCIENTIFIC AND METHODOLOGICAL SUPPORT OF ARCHIVAL SPHERE IN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

In the first years of Belarusian sovereignty archival institutions used in its practical activities the research and development of Soviet times elaborated by the All-Union Scientific and Research Institute of Documentation and Archival Science (VNIIDAD), the only branch scientific and research centre in the USSR. These R&D were of high quality and quite satisfied Belarusian archivists for a long time. However, the social and economic changes in the country, formation of the national legislation, transition to the new forms of relations with the largest Russian scientific centres have raised an urgent issue of development of domestic Belarusian regulatory and procedural database, conducting of large-scale scientific research in the sphere of record management and archival science.

For this purpose the Belarus Research Centre of Record Management and Retroinformation, later transformed into the Belarusian Scientific and Research Institute of Documentation and Archival Science (BelNIIDAD) was founded in December, 1991. The following BelNIIDAD primary objectives have been named:

- Development of theoretical problems of record management, archival science, archaeography and source studies;
- Conducting theoretical and applied research in the field of document management;
- Development of scientific principles and methodology of acquisition, value appraisal, and preservation of archive documents.

Please, note that the absence in Belarus of experience of independent scientific research in the field of record management and

archival science was the reason that in the first years the capabilities of the institute have not fully corresponded to the needs of the archival branch: both the topics and the quality of the R&D needed perfection. Moreover, as the time has shown, foundation of BelNIIDAD was a far-sighted step. Eventually the institute has been staffed with the qualified personnel having good theoretical background and substantial practical experience. The institute fulfilled more than 50 scientific topics, by the results of which a number of regulatory acts and methodological manuals for archivists and document managers have been compiled. Among them were such basic documents as the rules of work of the state archives and archives of the organizations, lists of documents with the indication of its storage periods, instructions on record keeping, etc.

In the late XX century Belarusian archivists had to face one more challenge: massive implementation of new information technologies in the management and processing of documents, appearance of an electronic document. The Belarusian Scientific and Research Centre of Electronic Documents (BelNITsED) was founded in 1998 by the resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus to solve these new tasks. It combines the functions of an R&D institution and a state archive of electronic documents. Among the primary objectives of the centre are archival storage of electronic documents, automation of the state archives activity, and development of the relevant methodological support.

Despite certain success the primary goals of scientific institutions of Belarus at the present stage shall be creation of a national scientific school of archival science and record management, formation of respective scientific traditions. The issues of coordination of scientific activity of BelNIIDAD and BelNITsED have to be solved, since separation of traditional and electronic techniques of document processing is practically impossible today.

6. TRAINING OF THE ARCHIVAL STAFF

Staffing of the state archives with the personnel having a higher archival education was one of the toughest problems during many decades. In the Soviet times the training of archivists was performed outside Belarus, mainly in the Moscow State Historic and Archival Institute. In such situation the number of heads and experts with the higher historic and archival education in the state archives in the 1970-ies – early 1990-ies steadily reduced. The acute personnel issue had just been partially solved by advanced vocational training seminars held in each archive, short-term training courses at the Main Archival Department. After disintegration of the USSR the supply of experts from Moscow to the Belarusian archives has stopped at all.

In this connection the creation of the system of professional training of historians-archivists with higher education in Belarus became one of priority tasks of the State Archival Service. In 1992 Speciality Historic and Archival Science was opened at the Historical Department of the Belarusian State University. Since 1998 15

university graduates have been placed annually in the state archives of the country.

The increased attention, which the archival service has started to pay to document management in the late XX century, also required training of professional staff dealing with the documents. In 2001 at the initiative of the State Archival Service Speciality Record Management and Information Support of Management was opened at the Historical Department of the Belarusian State University. The graduates trained in this speciality are placed not only in the state archival institutions, but also in the state bodies, other organizations being the sources of acquisition of the state archives.

Close cooperation between the university and archival establishments in the sphere of professional training has been maintained: the basic subjects on archival science and record management, especially in the first years, were developed and read to students by directors and the most qualified experts of the state archives, BelNIIDAD, other archival establishments.

In the late XX century Belarusian archivists also managed to solve the issue of training of the archival staff of the highest scientific qualification. This was promoted by securing in the archival law of the country of the status of the state archives as scientific organizations. In the last year of the XX century a postgraduate course was opened at BelNIIDAD, in which preparation of theses in candidacy for a degree in archival science and allied trades is performed.

Certainly, training of a sufficient quantity of qualified personnel for archival service is a complicated process planned for several years ahead. While solving this problem the archivists face a lot of difficulties among which I have to name not always logical educational reforms effected at present, lack of training and methodological manuals, necessity of selection of qualified training personnel, etc.

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