

A Background Guide to Working with the HPSSS Online  
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The Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System Online (HPSSS Online) is a digitized collection of several hundred transcripts of interviews conducted with Soviet refugees during the early years of the Cold War. A unique source for the study of the USSR from 1917 through the late 1940s, it boasts vast amounts of one-of-a-kind data on Soviet political, economic, social, cultural and military history. Compiled in English and organized according to a rigorous social science framework, the HPSSS Online offers unparalleled depth and breadth in its wide-ranging inquiry into Soviet society.

Originally a component of a larger study commissioned by the US Air Force, the typed transcripts of the HPSSS interviews were the focus of intensive research for much of the 1950s. In the years since, access limitations and poor indexing have hampered scholarly use of this material; age-related degradation of the transcripts themselves has recently complicated things further. It is for this reason that between 2005 and 2007, the HPSSS Online was created thanks to funding from Harvard University's Library Digital Initiative (LDI). In consultation with Professors Terry Martin and David Brandenberger, and with librarians of the Fung Library and the Slavic Division of Widener Library, staff of the Preservation and Imaging Department of Widener Library processed and digitized all the HPSSS interview transcripts and manuals, and incorporated them into the present web-based resource. In addition to providing images of the transcripts, HPSSS Online allows a full-text search of the interviews, making this valuable set of materials available to students and scholars worldwide for the first time.

### Background

The origins of the HPSSS date to the late 1940s, when Harvard University's nascent Russian Research Center (RRC), today known as the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies contracted with the US Air Force to conduct an exhaustive study of the USSR.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to

<sup>1</sup> Secured by RRC director Clyde Kluckhohn, the HPSSS was financed by the Human Resources Research Institute, an Air Force intelligence agency based at Maxwell Field, Alabama. According to Contract 33(038)-12909, signed in June 1950 and renewed biannually until January 1954, the center was to study Soviet society concentrating on its defense capabilities. Research was to focus on party and state administration, the military, economy, education, health care and nationality policy; other topics included family life, partisan activities during WWII and popular reactions to the German occupation. The independently-minded HPSSS team repeatedly expanded this agenda, ultimately spending over \$900,000.

other speculative and anecdotal early studies of the US's Cold War rival, the HPSSS aimed to create a sophisticated model of Soviet society by combining the latest advances in social science research with an ambitious series of interviews involving hundreds of former Soviet citizens displaced by WWII. Developed by sociologist Alex Inkeles and social psychologist Raymond Bauer, the HPSSS also benefited from the expertise of other project associates including Joseph Berliner, John Getzels, Ivan London, Sidney Harcave, Marc Fried, Kent Geiger and John Orton. Still other specialists, such as Merle Fainsod and Paul Friedrich, made substantial contributions as well.<sup>2</sup> As a loose group, these social scientists aspired to test and refine early theoretical work on totalitarian societies empirically through the use of detailed questionnaires, highly-structured interviews and quantitative and qualitative data analysis.<sup>3</sup>

Between September 1950 and May 1951, the HPSSS team and its auxiliary staff, working with the Munich-based Institute for the Study of the USSR, conducted 694 interviews in West Germany (276 general "sociological" interviews known as Series A, and 418 targeted "anthropological" interviews known as Series B). Further interviewing in New York brought the grand total to 764 interviews (329 A-Series interviews and 435 B-Series interviews). Nearly ten thousand written questionnaires were also solicited. Project participants were recruited from among ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians and other former Soviets—mostly former POWs, *Ostarbeiter* laborers and Nazi collaborators who had managed to avoid repatriation to the USSR at the end of the war. Interview notes were transcribed onto ditto-masters for duplication in West Germany and New York, and then sent along with the questionnaires to the Russian Research Center at Harvard. There, the transcripts were analyzed, coded and then bound into volumes or filed by subject heading; there too, the accompanying questionnaires were summarized, tabulated and then discarded.

By mid-1951, ditto-master copies of the 764 Series A and Series B interviews had been bound into two sets of reference volumes, the first running 37 tomes in length and the second 24. After elementary indexing, these sets were deposited in Harvard College Library (HCL); microfilm

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed treatment of the project's background, sampling technique and methodology, see Alex Inkeles and Raymond A. Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen: Daily Life in a Totalitarian Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 3-64.

<sup>3</sup> Particularly influential was theoretical work by Hannah Arendt, Carl Friedrich, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jacob Talmon and Merle Fainsod; another strain of influence can be traced to the emerging school of economic modernization theory headed by Alexander Gerschenkron and others.

copies were delivered to the US Air Force.<sup>4</sup> At the same time that these master sets were being compiled and microfilmed, a huge filing system at the RRC was developed to categorize HPSSS data under dozens of subject headings and subheadings. Ultimately, this filing system, containing several hundred thousand individual pages from the interviews that had been manually coded and categorized, grew to over 100 file drawers in size.<sup>5</sup>

Using these elaborate subject files and the questionnaire data, the Inkeles-Bauer team published at least 50 articles and books between 1952 and 1960.<sup>6</sup> But as this burst of productivity waned, few subsequent scholars found it possible to harness the HPSSS materials as effectively. Reasons for this varied. Basic access to the master interview volumes and the filing system was limited; the filing system itself was arcane, clumsy and difficult to use; and the volume of material was great enough to confound anyone wishing to use it systematically. Even basic work with the project required weeks of investment, due to the HPSSS's rudimentary indexing system.

Efforts were made between the 1980s and 1990s to improve the situation by commissioning a new inventory, encouraging a primitive computer coding of the project and underwriting the production of another microfilm copy of the 61 master volumes.<sup>7</sup> Only recently, however, has computerized information technology become advanced enough to allow for the HPSSS to be affordably digitized and incorporated into an online web-based resource.

#### Prospects and Methodological Limitations

It is hard to exaggerate the uniqueness and usefulness of the HPSSS to studies of the USSR between its founding in 1917 through the late 1940s.<sup>8</sup> Similar surveys are not to be found anywhere in the former Soviet archives or official publications, due to the USSR's lack of interest in sociological polling, its defensive approach to information management and its obsession with

<sup>4</sup> *Project HRRRI* (Cambridge, Mass. and Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Harvard University Russian Research Center; Human Resources Research Institute (U.S.); Air Force Personnel and Training Research Center (U.S.); Officer Education Research Laboratory, 1952), 110 microfilm reels.

<sup>5</sup> Although not all of these materials have survived, over 90 boxes remain intact in HCL's off-site depository.

<sup>6</sup> For a summary list, see Inkeles and Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen*, 464-467.

<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, *Materials for the Project on the Soviet Social System* (unpublished manuscript guide, August 1980), 35 pp.; *Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System, 1950-1951: Life History Interview Recodes* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1990-91); *HPSSS* (Harvard College Library Imaging Services, 2000), 19 microfilm reels.

<sup>8</sup> For the HPSSS team's claim that their materials were also relevant to the study of the Soviet 1950s and 1960s, see Inkeles and Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen*, 6-7.

state security. And although material resembling the HPSSS interviews may be found in the émigré press and in the archives of western security services and universities, these collections are much smaller, more narrowly-defined and selective.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, as important as it is, the HPSSS should not be assumed to offer an absolutely representative portrait of Soviet society before the late 1940s. A number of issues relating to the HPSSS's respondent sample, interview methodology, original transcription process and re-keying (for purposes of keyword searching of the text in the digital facsimiles), should be kept in mind as scholars harness data from the project.

### Respondent Sample

In its effort to circulate questionnaires and conduct interviews with former Soviet citizens in West Germany between 1950 and 1951, the HPSSS team found it difficult to find volunteers on its own. Lacking contacts within the closely-knit Soviet refugee communities living in displaced-person camps and private housing throughout West Germany and Austria, the team was forced to rely on modest financial inducements, newspaper advertising, middlemen within the various communities and brokers supplied by the Institute for the Study of the USSR.<sup>10</sup>

Although the HPSSS team spent a lot of time constructing their respondent pool from the interview candidates provided by these various recruitment conduits, its sample was nevertheless only a partial reflection of Soviet society in the early postwar period (for a detailed demographic overview of the group, see *A Schedule Face Sheet Data Book*).<sup>11</sup>

Chief among concerns regarding the sample was its assumed tendency to be more anti-communist than mainstream Soviet society. 232 of the 331 former Soviets interviewed (70%) were refugees who had evaded repatriation to the USSR in the wake of the war; the rest were defectors who

<sup>9</sup> The HPSSS team noted on their interviewee face-sheets when project subjects had already been interviewed by US, British, French and Turkish intelligence agencies. Stanford's Hoover Institution contains interview transcripts with postwar Soviet refugees such as the J. K. Zawodny file; Columbia's Bakhmetieff archive has similar collections.

<sup>10</sup> For a scathing exposé of this CIA-funded think tank, see Charles T. O'Connell, *The Munich Institute for the Study of the USSR: Origins and Social Composition*, no. 808, *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Center for Russian and East European Studies, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Rather than attempt to create a "representative" cross-section sample of the Soviet population, the HPSSS team focused on recruiting informants who would correspond to key population categories. See Inkeles and Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen*, 21-25.

came west during the subsequent Soviet occupation of eastern Europe. Roughly 265 of the 331 surveyed (80%) had either experienced arrest while in the USSR or had family members who had been arrested. Only 65 of 331 (24%) admitted to having been members of the party or its youth league, the komsomol. But despite such damning statistics, many of those interviewed espoused socialist sympathies in regard to economic and social issues and only a small minority professed to views that could be described as thoroughly anti-Soviet.

Ethnically, 309 of the 331 interviewees (93%) were Russians, Ukrainians or Belorussians. Although these ethnic groups outnumbered non-Slavic groups in the USSR as well, the Slavic respondents in the HPSSS sample outnumbered their former non-Slavic countrymen by a far greater proportion than they did in Soviet society. This Slavic preponderance is most problematic when looking at issues concerning the non-Slavs. Not only were most of the HPSSS's non-Slavic respondents at least somewhat Russified (something clear from their ability to communicate with interviewers in vernacular Russian), but their low overall numbers left many non-Slavic Soviet peoples either minimally represented or entirely absent from the HPSSS sample.

Demographically, the sample was dominated by working-age people and left young and old under-represented. Men outnumbered women by about three times (246 to 85) and city- and town-dwellers outnumbered villagers by almost as much (230 to 101). Occupationally, respondents varied from intellectuals to collective farm workers, but favored literate, urban professionals over rural populations with limited educational background.

#### Interview Methodology

The HPSSS interviews were organized according to a social science methodology that was considered state-of-the-art in the early 1950s. It was premised on neo-liberal assumptions about individual and group identity and a belief that people are fundamentally rational actors and generally capable of critical, independent analysis of their surroundings. Although fashionable in the 1950s, these assumptions about individual subjectivity today seem more applicable to citizens of western liberal societies than to those of authoritarian, illiberal regimes like the USSR.

The HPSSS team also subscribed to a rather crude set of assumptions about modernization theory that tended to conflate the idea of technical, legal, social and cultural progress with westernization. Recent scholarship on development now concedes that there is no single "correct" modernization paradigm and judges the Soviet experience considerably less harshly. The HPSSS team's

assumptions about modernization also occasionally imbued project interviewers with patronizing notions about Soviet governance (a “despotism,” “us versus them”) and underdevelopment (“primitive,” “backward”) reminiscent of the colonialist syndrome of Orientalism.

Respondents involved in the HPSSS were guaranteed anonymity in exchange for what was assumed to be greater candor during the interviews. HPSSS administrators reasoned quite rightly that their subjects would be more open and forthright if they did not need to fear for the safety of family, friends and loved ones still in the USSR. An elaborate double-blind system of recruiting was therefore devised to ensure that no one on the HPSSS team ever came to know the interview subjects by name. Basic demographic, occupational and life history information was collected from the participants, but this was categorized by identification number rather than by name or other more revealing personal markers. For this reason, it is impossible today to either identify the project participants or independently verify the details or reliability of their stories.

The interview process itself typically paired ex-Soviet subjects with western-educated academics or graduate students. Some interviewers appear to have spoken Russian quite fluently and perhaps had a limited knowledge of Ukrainian; others appear to have had a more halting grasp on these languages. Regardless, all HPSSS interviewers interacted with their subjects in a highly structured manner, following one of a number of detailed interview scripts that grouped dozens of questions and follow-up probes under major headings such as family, education, social communication and attitudes toward government, ideology, work and philosophy of life. Although reference is frequently made to these questions in the interview session transcripts, a complete record of the various A-Series interview questions is found only in Appendix C of the *Manual for Use with A-Schedule Materials*. A complete record of B-Series interview questions does not appear to have survived.

#### Transcription Process

The policy guaranteeing anonymity described above extended to the interviews themselves, where HPSSS policy prohibited the creation of any live audio record of the subjects’ testimony. Instead, interviewers were to take notes in shorthand during their sessions and periodically interrupt their discussions in order to leave the room and quickly narrate the course and content of the ongoing interview into a primitive recording device called an audiograph.<sup>12</sup> Evidence of the

<sup>12</sup> Probably the Gray Audiograph, a device that recorded dictation onto small blue vinyl records.

haste with which the recordings were made can be found in the interview transcriptions, which often contain English commentary studded with foreign terms, the literal translation of foreign metaphors and occasionally phrases or entire sentences constructed according to foreign grammatical or syntactical rules. Some interviewers likely conducted their discussions in Russian or Ukrainian and jotted notes to themselves in that language before translating these notes into English in front of the audiograph; others seem to have conducted the interviews in a foreign vernacular but taken notes in English and then merely dictated them into the recording device. Regardless of the language of the shorthand notes, however, the audiograph narration was always conducted in English, as the German secretarial staff hired to convert the recordings into typed transcriptions in Munich did not speak Slavic languages.

Insofar as neither the original shorthand session notes nor the audiograph recordings were preserved, only the interview transcripts survive to the present day. These transcripts, hurriedly typed on ditto-master sheets to provide for easy duplication, were intended for internal HPSSS use rather than publication. As such, they consist of essentially uncorrected narrative, littered with clumsy translations (e.g., "golod" being rendered as "hunger"), misunderstandings ("vmesto" appearing as "with" rather than "instead of"), misspellings ("misterious") and typographical errors ("Katuzov"). Terminological inconsistencies are also commonplace, the expression "political officers" being rendered correctly as "politruki" but also incorrectly as "politboitsy" (and even more incorrectly as "poliboitsy"). Finally, although some effort seems to have been made to have the HPSSS transliteration of Cyrillic follow a modified version of the system favored by the Library of Congress, multiple styles are used side-by-side in the HPSSS transcripts. This affects both the rendering of important terms (e.g., ezhovshchina, ezhovschina, ezhovshina, yezhovshchina, yezhovschina, yezhovshina) and the spelling of proper nouns (e.g., Dostoevsky, Dostoevski, Dostoeivsky, Dostoyevsky, Dostoyevski).

A product of circumstance as well as ethical, technological and bureaucratic necessity, this transcription process produced a set of materials that is challenging to interpret correctly. And although the HPSSS's unusual way of establishing rapport with its subjects ultimately did yield a

veritable treasure trove of information about Soviet society, it did so at the cost of failing to preserve a precise record of the way in which its informants expressed their revelations.<sup>13</sup>

### Digitization

The documents which form the core of the HPSSS Online are digital facsimiles of the original ditto-master transcripts and as such retain their uncorrected narrative, awkward translations, misunderstandings, inconsistencies and typographical errors. Each image is paired with a full-text document created by re-keying the text as perceived in the digital image.

These full-text documents are extremely important to the HPSSS Online resource, as they allow the transcripts to be surveyed by a computerized search engine. That said, they also contribute an additional category of errors due to their misidentification of blurred, faded or irregularly shaped characters from the ditto-master transcripts. At times, these problems with the transcripts date back to their hurried composition between 1950-1951. Also at fault, however, is the overall condition of some of the transcripts, due to the fading of their aniline ink and the darkening of their acidic paper. When the re-keying technician could not identify blurry or irregularly shaped letters in the digital images, s/he typed in "[[illegible]]" in their full-text complements. But other sorts of errors have crept into the full-text documents as well, resulting in ordinary words being misspelled ("skould") and terms and names being distorted ("Kolsheviks", "Iarovlavski"). Along with the other inherent flaws in the HPSSS transcripts described above, these errors in the full-text version of the project inevitably limit the accuracy of the resource's full-text search function.

### Conclusions

As problematic as the HPSSS interview transcripts may be, they remain an invaluable resource for investigations of the political, economic, military, social and cultural history of the USSR from its founding through the late 1940s. Limitations related to the project and its web resource essentially amount to two key caveats. First, the text should not be considered a literal translation of the testimony of survey participants. Second, the web resource's full-text search function, as useful as it is, should not be assumed to be literally "full-text" in its coverage. Distortions in the original transcripts and re-keying in the digitization project mean that word searches conducted within the HPSSS Online cannot be guaranteed to automatically deliver all mentions of a given

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that other primary sources that purport to contain authentic testimony from the period—letters, diaries, secret police reports, etc.—are also unreliable as literal recordings of reported speech.

term. A thorough search for permutations, synonyms, related terms, obvious misspellings and alternative transliterations will increase the accuracy of such searches, but even these precautions will never produce an absolutely complete listing of search results.

Other concerns associated with the HPSSS—the hearsay of its participants and other distortions caused by the project’s sample, its methodology, its interviewers and its clerical staff—are problems that affect many sorts of primary sources. Historians’ answer to such limitations is additional research, in this case, probably consisting of a broad and meticulous reading of the HPSSS as well as the triangulation of information gleaned from the resource against other sorts of primary and secondary sources. Such disciplined and exacting work will confirm again and again the invaluable nature of the HPSSS to students and scholars worldwide.