

Playing with Marked Cards, or Using Documents as a Tool for Historical Manipulation: the Case of Russian 'Archive Websites'

Prof. Andrzej Zawistowski

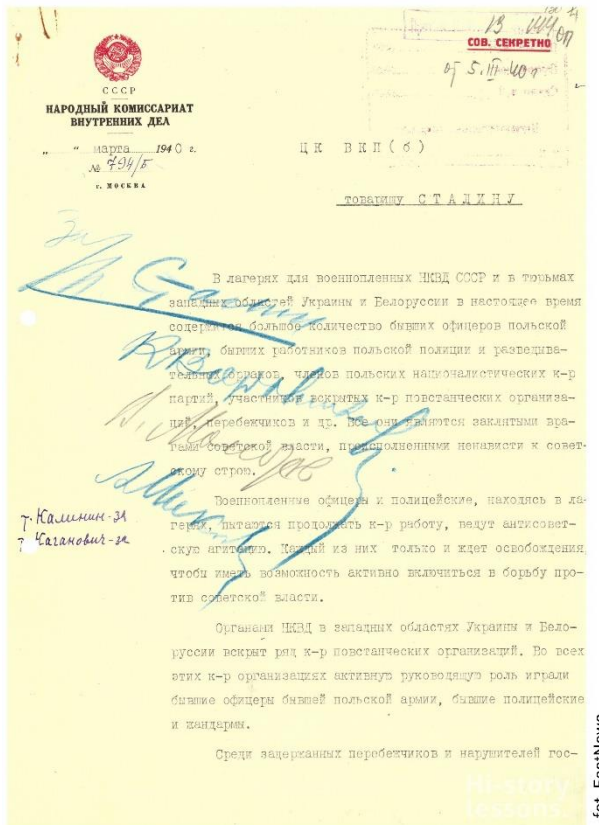
Can genuine archival documents be used to manipulate our knowledge of the past? Of course, only three steps suffice: restrict historians' access to archives, select sources according to a desired premise and make sure your message reaches a wide audience, especially non-historians.

There is truth in archives

The document in question is only three and a half pages long. It contains about 450 words. For 50 years, it was among the most closely guarded documents in one of the most militarily powerful countries of the 20th century, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Why were these several pages of yellowed paper so guarded? Because this was the decision under which more than 20,000 Poles were sentenced to death in March 1940; this murder has gone down in history as the Katyn massacre. The killing was carried out in secret, but in 1943 the Germans found some of the murdered people's bodies. The Soviets denied having committed the crime. They claimed that it was a German provocation to break up the anti-Hitler coalition. Although all indications pointed towards Moscow, that version was upheld. There was no convincing evidence, it was argued. It was not until the collapse of the Soviet Union that the Soviets first confessed to that crime (1990). Two years later Moscow handed a copy of the secret document in question over to the Poles. Since then, no one has been able to question the truth.

It seemed that the collapse of the 'empire of evil', as US President Ronald Reagan called the Soviet Union, would open the old Soviet archives to researchers and that contemporary history would no longer be a secret. After all, the Russians were the

greatest victims of that totalitarian regime. It turned out that the archive thaw did not last long. For Russia, the totalitarian Soviet Union became part of the historical legacy legitimizing those currently in power. In politics, history became a weapon. That is why access to the most important archival sources was restricted.



A 1940 document addressed to Comrade Stalin (and featuring his signature, among others), mentioning the application of the highest punishment for Polish officers. The page is part of the 'Special File No. 1' containing documents transferred by Russia to Poland in 1992.

A war over a war

However, the doors to the most important Soviet archives were not sealed. New documents are occasionally brought out of their collections. This is a controlled process serving strictly defined political purposes. An example of this are the websites containing documents relating to the Second World War, a fundamental subject area for Russian historical policy. It is founded on the understanding that the Red Army brought freedom to Europe in 1944–45. It is to that which the Europeans owe their liberation from the Third Reich and their post-war economic prosperity. Today's Europe does not appreciate this fact and is ungrateful. The Poles, among others,

are to blame. It is they who keep recalling the [Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact](#), the Katyn Massacre and post-war totalitarianism.

Russia's response to such voices was not to deny charges against Stalin and his policy. **Instead, a completely different path was chosen. The decision was made to prove that Soviet policy was nothing unusual and that other nations could also be accused of historical sins.** Such a narrative, for example, highlights the importance of the agreement struck between Great Britain and France with Germany and Italy in Munich. It stresses the fact that Poland snatched Zaolzie (Těšín) from Czechoslovakia. It is deemed aggravating that Poland and Germany were linked by a non-aggression treaty from 1934. The above examples are intended to overshadow the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, which is presented as Stalin's trickery to postpone German aggression against the USSR. Later, a time came for the 'Red Army's liberation mission'. This narrative leaves no doubt: it was the Red Army that brought freedom to Europe. Freedom for which the people of Europe should be grateful.

One of the tools for promoting this version of recent history has been special websites with thematic choices of archival documents. Often, such documents are advertised as exceptional, unknown and previously unpublished. This is not always true. However, these words are meant to convince recipients that they are being given secret knowledge, until now only reserved for a few.

Real documents – a false image

It is a common belief that a false reality is created with false documents. Of course, this does occur, but not as a rule. Preparing a document is more difficult than using authentic files. However, is it possible to create a false image using real documents? Of course. A few fairly simple conditions suffice. It is necessary to formulate a premise that one seeks to prove. Archival documents must be selected in such a way to fully support it. If there is a source in the files that contradicts the premise, it must be dismissed. Documents should be organized to impose a way of thinking on readers, rather than requiring painstaking analysis. The presentation of such a selection of documents should be accompanied by a brief commentary highlighting its uniqueness. The reader should be convinced that a chamber with the holy grail of

knowledge has been opened up, until now hidden from the profane. In this setup historians cannot obtain published documents. Access to such publications is primarily directed at those who have never set foot in an archive anyway.

Following this philosophy, **many online presentations of Soviet documents relating to the years 1938–45 have been produced in recent years.** They can be divided into two groups. The first one is broader and deals with all the issues relating to the wartime period and the role played by the 'Red Army's liberation mission' mentioned above. The other category of Russian 'documentation pages' concerns specific subjects, such as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the 1944 Bug River crossing by the Red Army and the occupation of Warsaw by the Red Army in January 1945. They are published when there is a peak of interest in a given topic. This was the case, for example, in February 2015, when, several days before Poland's National Day of Remembrance of Cursed Soldiers, the Russian Federal Archives Agency published documents on the attitude of the Polish Home Army towards the Red Army occupying Polish territory (<http://archives.ru/library/poland-1944-1945/catalogue.shtml>). The documents were prepared in such a way as to prove that the Poles acted against the Red Army, thereby benefitting the Germans. This premise was absurd. After all, the Home Army never ceased to fight the Germans throughout the occupation. In recent years, the Russian Ministry of Defence has been active in creating 'documentation websites' such as this. The ministry operates the difficult-to-access Central Archive, keeping its tens of thousands of documents concerning Poland out of the historians' reach.

Browsing through these websites, you will come across tools for manipulating history. Sometimes they are sophisticated and in other cases more obviously typical propaganda. **I have singled out three basic interrelated levels of such manipulation. Of course, more can be found.** This division quite clearly shows the intent of anonymous authors of online publications.

1. Manipulation by title

The ['1941-1945 Victory'](#) portal was created by the Federal Archives Agency. It features sound recordings, films and photographs showing this victory. The title of the site, however, makes you wonder. After all, the Second World War began in 1939 and not 1941. The explanation is simple, as 1941 marks the start of the Great Patriotic War. This is the name of the conflict in Russia, which began with the German aggression against the USSR in June 1941. This chronology overshadows German-Soviet military cooperation in September 1939. Fabricated information on the period 1939–41 can be found on the portal, but it is hidden in the 'On the Eve' tab. Of course, someone can say that the portal only tells the story of the German-Soviet conflict. However, there are also tabs called 'Liberation of Poland,' 'Liberation of Austria' or even 'Liberation of Northern Norway', namely events relating to the entire [Second World War](#).



‘С Днём Победы’ (Russian: Happy Victory Day). A banner on the fence of a café in Volgograd area, 2018. In the centre are the dates of the Great Patriotic War (1941–45), a Patriotic War Order as well as St George's yellow-black ribbon.

Sometimes, however, website titles are not so sophisticated. The already mentioned publication about the Home Army was entitled 'How the armed Polish underground "helped" the Red Army defeat Nazi Germany in 1944–45'. It is a clear suggestion that the Soviets could not count on any help from the Poles.

Perhaps the most interesting trick, however, is found on the website '[A fragile peace on the eve of war: the 80th anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact](#)'. The title suggests that the reader here will find documents relating to the pact in question. Nothing could be further from the truth. It does not even include the text of the agreement itself! Instead, there are documents suggesting a threat to the USSR from Poland, Finland and the Baltic States, as well as reports of the enthusiastic reception of the Red Army in territories of the Second Polish Republic occupied by the Red Army in September 1939.

The website 'A fragile peace on the eve of war: on the 80th anniversary of the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact' [accessed 7 April 2021]. Available on <http://pakt1939.mil.ru/>



↑ 'A fragile peace on the eve of war: the 80th anniversary of the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact' – an anniversary website featuring a selection of author-commented documents.

2. Manipulation by content

This is the most common way of manipulating the message. It is used by each of the analysed websites. After all, that is why they were created. The basic method of manipulation is, of course, the careful selection of documents in order to prove a desired premise.

On the above-mentioned website 'A fragile peace ...', the reader will find only four documents concerning Poland and the Munich Conference. The portal address

pact1939.mil.ru gives the impression that the pact of 1939 was concluded by Great Britain, France, Poland and Germany. The Russian reader will not learn from it that owing to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact the USSR attacked Finland, annexed Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, seized part of Romania and, together with Germany, aggressively attacked Poland.

Sometimes, documents prepared by the Poles are used in affirmation of this premise. On the website ['The liberation of Poland; the price of victory'](#), you can see, for example, a telegram from the president of the Union of Polish Patriots, Wanda Wasilewska, recognizing the Soviet Union for its efforts in regaining Poland's freedom. Authors of the website, however, 'forgot' to add that Wasilewska was the wife of a Soviet diplomat. The union she headed was created at Stalin's order to take control of Poland. Elsewhere, the commander of the 1st Polish Corps, General Zygmunt Berling, thanked Stalin for agreeing to create a Polish army. Again, the reader will have the impression that this is a sincere expression of gratitude by a Polish general. However, if you look through books, including Russian ones, you soon learn that earlier he was a deserter from the Polish Army. While Poles living in the USSR did flock to join the army he created, they did not come to the Soviet Union voluntarily, but were deported there from Soviet-occupied Poland.



fot. EastNews

↑ Joseph Stalin and the Polish delegation (including Bolesław Bierut and Edward Osóbka-Morawski). Standing third from the right is Wanda Wasilewska, president of the Union of Polish Patriots. Moscow, April 1945.

A more interesting trick appears on a portal called ['Warsaw on Fire'](#) created on the anniversary of the occupation of the Polish capital by the Red Army in January 1945. Among documents proving the gratitude of Poles for the liberation of the city is a letter to Stalin from 'Major-General Julian Skokowski'. For those unfamiliar with the convoluted course of history, the message is unequivocal: the Polish general expressed his gratitude to the commander of the Red Army. Who will bother to check who Skokowski was? Indeed, he was an officer in the pre-war Polish Army. During the German occupation, he became involved in the underground, although it is difficult to ascertain his ideological convictions. He started out in the right-wing Lizard Union and ended up in the left-wing Polish People's Army. At the end of July 1944, he attempted to take over the Warsaw underground through self-proclaimed lies about the Home Army command's escape from the capital. He took part in the Warsaw Uprising, but during its course subordinated himself to the State National Council created by the communists. In this context, the fact that Skokowski never held the rank of major-general is a minor matter.

A tool very often used to manipulate a message is the principle of social proof.

Published documents relieve a reader from independent thought by promoting the views of others. These are, for example, accounts of universal joy when the Red Army entered Polish territory in 1939 and again in 1944. Any attitudes undermining this desired image are omitted or marginalized.

3. Manipulation by chronology

On the website 'The liberation of Poland ...' attention is drawn to the chronology of published sources. The documents and commentary leave the readers in no doubt that the Red Army began its liberation mission in July 1944 by crossing the Bug River. In that way, critical aspects of history have been omitted. It was in fact six months earlier that the Red Army had crossed a line that up until 17 September 1939 had been the border between the USSR and the Second Polish Republic. During the following months, it occupied areas that, according to international law, were part of Poland. The Soviets pacified the Home Army operating in these territories, which, as part of Operation Storm, supported the Red Army in its fight against the Germans. In that

way, Vilnius, for example, was liberated, but it is not considered a Polish city by the website's authors. Although the Soviets forced the authorities of post-war Poland to recognize Bug River as the border, this officially occurred only in August 1945.

Another way of manipulating the chronology is to disrupt the order in which the documents were created. On the website 'A fragile peace ...' are initial reports of joyful rallies that welcomed the Red Army in occupied Polish territory after 17 September 1939. It is only later, however, that documents from 1937 and 1938 appear. This arrangement suggests to the reader the positive effect of the Soviet-German agreement right from the start.

The above examples are only a few that show how the authors of Russian websites manipulate the historical message. I have left out dozens of other examples that can be identified and discussed in a historical context. However, the question remains: what is all this for? The answer has already been provided. Archives are a weapon in today's international relations' political battlefield. As long as there is freedom of speech, the fight against such propaganda is possible in areas of science, education and journalism. The tools for this are completely different from those used in what has been described above.

Translation: Mikołaj Sekrecki

Copyediting & Proofreading: Caroline Brooke Johnson