

INSIDE THE STALIN ARCHIVES

Discovering the New Russia

by Jonathan Brent

Reviewed by Orlando Figes

In 1991, during the last days of the Soviet Union, I was working in the Military History Archive in Moscow. The archive complex was in a crumbling state. There were broken windows and stray cats on the staircase to the reading room. The desk-lamps had no light bulbs and there was no heating because of power shortages. Half the archivists had left because of poor pay. In the courtyard of the complex stood, surreally, a Soviet army tank. The director told me he had bought it very cheaply as an attraction: it was part of his 'business plan' for the archive. Last year I returned to the archive. The buildings were not much improved, and the staff were just as rude as I remembered them from Soviet days. The tank had gone, but in its place was a "*shestyorka*", a Mercedes S-600, the standard car of the minor oligarchs, all brand new with tinted glass. I was told that it belonged to one of the archive's directors.

The collapse of the Soviet regime gave the heads of Russia's archives new commercial opportunities. In the first chaotic years of the Yeltsin government, when they were allowed to run their archives as their personal fiefdoms, there was money to be made from the journalists and publishers who flocked to Moscow (and very rarely to St Petersburg) in search of secrets and sensations from the vaults. There were tales of publishers buying up exclusive rights to the archives, of deals being made to reserve parts of the archives for certain Western researchers,ⁱ and even rumours that precious documents were being sold.ⁱⁱ

For scholars too there were real gains. Intellectually, the end of Communism was a liberation for historians. They could travel to Russia, work in the archives freely, think and publish what they liked, without fear of retribution from the Soviet authorities.

To understand this liberation, one has to appreciate what it was like to work in the Soviet archives as a foreigner. From 1984 to 1987, I worked in the Central State Archive of the October Revolution (TsGAOR), now the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) for my first book, on the peasantry in the Russian Revolution and the Civil War. There were no more than a handful of foreign historians working in the

archive at that time. We had no access to the catalogues or *opisi* (it was only in 1987 that the *opisi* began to be made available) so the only information we could get about the contents of the archive had to be obtained from the footnotes of Soviet publications (the system worked on the principle of preserving everything but admitting the existence of only those materials cleared for publication by Soviet historians). All our requests for documents were vetted by a woman from the KGB. As foreigners we had to work in a separate reading room, without access to the canteen, so that we would not come into contact with Soviet historians or archivists, who might help us with our work. There was just one flaw in the system: the reading room for Soviet researchers shared a toilet with the room for foreigners. In those days I was a smoker, so I'd go there frequently and get chatting with Soviet historians and archivists, who liked my Western cigarettes and were happy to find out for me the numbers of the files I needed for my work.

Jonathan Brent is the editorial director of Yale University Press. In January 1992, he arrived in Moscow for the first time in his life, and with the help of a young American scholar called Jeffery Burds, a graduate of Yale, went about the business of trying to persuade the heads of Russia's most important central archives to do business with him. Brent's plan was to publish a series of volumes of selected documents from the newly opened Soviet archives, employing American scholars and Russian archivists as editors - a project that became the *Annals of Communism*, in which so far twenty volumes have been published (and another ten are in preparation) on various themes in Soviet history. In the first part of his engaging and well-written memoir *Inside the Stalin Archives* Brent tells the story of the project's genesis. With an eye for telling detail, he conjures up the Moscow of the early 1990s, a time when the Russians were struggling to recover from the loss of the old certainties following the collapse of the Soviet system and adapt to a market-based economy. On his first visit to the former Party Archive, Brent notices 'a small glass vase of fresh violets' [41] at the feet of a statue of Lenin; on a later visit he notices that these have been replaced by plastic flowers; and then the flowers disappear.

There were rival Western publishers who would perhaps pay more for sensational material from the archives. But the affable American was guided well by Burds and his friends in the Russian scholarly community who advised Brent to emphasize his scholarly intentions and show respect for the Russians. 'Don't come on like a conquering hero; don't be a smug American; don't look down on them because their system failed and ours triumphed.' [24] Sitting down for his first meeting with the archivists, Brent did something he had been trained to do by Burds: he opened a fresh packet of Winston cigarettes, offered them across the negotiating table, and accepted the counter-offer of a packet of Russian cigarettes as a gesture of respect. And then Brent made a naïve speech about how he had 'grown up under the sign of the cold war' and had lived in fear of nuclear attack; how he had also grown up listening to his 'father's records of the Red Army Chorus and had marched around our apartment to their glorious melodies'; how he had thought that 'people who could sing such songs...could not possibly be my enemy'; and how he had now come to Moscow 'with the hope that we could negotiate in good faith and reach an understanding that would enrich both sides of the table.' [47]

I may have gone on too long, but I wished to make clear that for me this was not simply a business deal: it was a quest for understanding an enigma that was not a set of academic or political questions but the context of my life experience and that of my generation of Americans. [47-8]

Brent assumed that the answers to his quest could be found in the archives.

One can only wonder what the heads of Russia's archives made of such a speech, but what persuaded them to do business with Brent was relatively straightforward: the promise that as editors of the published volumes they would be paid royalties in dollars on equal terms with the Americans. Once it became clear that they would make some money for themselves - and that the researchers of their archives would be paid as well - they readily revealed the riches of their archives and negotiated contracts for their publication in America. Brent's initial list of subjects (the Great Terror, the Church and the Revolution, the Comintern and the repressions of the 1930s) was soon supplemented by other volumes on the Russian Revolution, the last diary of the Empress Alexandra, the murder of the Romanov family, and Soviet espionage in the USA. There was not much that Brent was not prepared to buy.

What remained unclear was whether Yale would have exclusive publishing rights outside Russia, as he insisted it should have (in fact, there are lots of cases of the Russian archives selling the same documents to several publishers); whether there would be a Russian publication of all the documents (and, if so, who would pay for it); and whether other researchers, from Russia or abroad, would be allowed to make use of the archives while they were being prepared for publication by the American academics selected as editors by Yale (there were plenty of complaints by scholars on this score). Brent recognized

that it was vital the books be available in Russian for Russian readers; otherwise, was it not some form of plunder? Otherwise, how would this knowledge penetrate Russian society? And without this knowledge, how could a new society begin to be constructed. [131]

This was an important admission to make because at the time there was a widely publicized protest by Russian nationalists and Communists about the 'theft' of Russia's archives by foreigners accused of wanting to blacken Soviet history by focusing attention on its darkest spots. As Brent explains, a potential problem was avoided by negotiating subsidies for the Russian publication of the volumes in the Yale series, leaving it to the individual archives to decide what documents to add or take away from each volume, though so far only fourteen of the twenty volumes in the Yale series have been published in Russia.

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The *Annals of Communism* is an admirable enterprise. Some of the most important revelations from the former Soviet archives have been published for the first time in the Yale series.ⁱⁱⁱ Many of the volumes have successfully combined the publication of new materials with original analysis.^{iv} But others have been less successful, either because the documents themselves are relatively insignificant,^v or because they are not helped by jargon-ridden academic commentaries.^{vi}

In the second half of *Inside the Stalin Archives* Brent gives a summary of some of the books in the *Annals of Communism* series (though without giving any details of their authors or even a list of the titles in a bibliography). The series, we are

told, will culminate in the publication of several volumes of documents from Stalin's personal files in the former Central Party Archive (now the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History). In his final chapter Brent has some interesting reflections on what Stalin's notes in the margins of the books in his private library tells us about the mind-set of the dictator:

As I looked at page after page of Stalin's corrections, annotations, and commentary [check finished book], I realized that while he professed a worldview set radically against metaphysics and Kantian idealism, Stalin was an idealist in the sense that he believed completely in the primacy of ideas. This is represents [check finished book] a radical, if almost invisible, reorientation and revision of Marx's philosophy and is the key to understanding Stalin's threat to 'mercilessly destroy anyone who, by his deeds or his thoughts - yes, by his thoughts - threatens the unity of the socialist state.' [301]

Stalin's personal archive was opened on the initiative of Alexander Yakovlev, the Party's last propaganda chief and the main intellectual force behind Mikhail Gorbachev's reform programme, who after 1991 championed the cause of victims of repression and campaigned for a moral reckoning with the crimes of Soviet history. Until his death in 2005, Yakovlev was the chairman of the International Foundation of Democracy, established by President Boris Yeltsin in 1996, which has so far published no less than 88 volumes of documents from the Soviet archives in its outstanding series *Rossiiia. XX vek (Russia. The XX Century)*. This represents by far the largest and most important series of published documents in Russia, although there are several smaller projects that have also brought to the attention of a Russian academic readership damning new material from the archives on the repressions of the Stalin years.^{vii} Some of the volumes in the Yakovlev series have been published with the help of Western institutions, including the Hoover Institution and the Yale Press, which gave subsidies for three volumes and initiated others before parting company with the Russian venture, whose publications were deemed too specialist for Yale's Western readership.

Unfortunately, Brent does not discuss the impact of these Russian publications on the public debate about Stalinism in Russia, although it was evidently part of his

mission (as it was of Yakovlev's) to help Russian society democratize itself by a better understanding of its recent history.

These were very much the goals of Russian democrats in the 1990s, when organizations like Memorial, a human rights and historical research centre representing millions of victims of repression, were at the height of their authority and often represented in the public media and TV discussions about the repressions of the Stalin period. It was widely assumed that, if Russia was to become a democracy, if it was to renounce the authoritarian habits of its Soviet past, there had to be a genuine cultural and moral reform of the nation which could only start with an unflinching recognition of the crimes committed in its name during the Stalinist era. In the 1990s this was understood as an act of national repentance, an exorcism of the past, in which it was tacitly recognized that the whole of society had been collectively responsible for the murderous policies of its leaders. As the Russian historian Miikhail Gefter wrote, it was no good blaming everything on Stalin, when the real power and lasting legacy of his reign of terror was 'in the Stalinism that entered into all of us.'^{viii}

Many Russians felt uncomfortable about being confronted with these inconvenient truths about their past. They preferred not to think about the past at all, to live their normal lives and think about the future rather than to dwell on what they or their parents might have done to survive the Stalin years: the moral compromises they had made; the people they had lost, forgotten or renounced; the questions they had never asked. This, after all, was how people had been forced to live in the Soviet Union, without ever really questioning themselves, the people around them, or those in power over them, and these habits of conformity continued to affect the way they lived after 1991.

Others were resentful about being told they should be ashamed about their country's history. They had been brought up on the Soviet myths: the liberating power of the October Revolution, the great advances of the Five Year Plans, the victory against Hitler in 1945, Soviet achievements in culture, science and technology. Why should they feel guilty about what had happened under Stalin? He had made mistakes, but he had won the war and made the Soviet Union a great power in the world. Why should they tolerate the 'blackening' of their history by foreigners? These were the sentiments of Russian 'patriots', and they are the core of the nationalism that underpins the regime of Vladimir Putin.

From the start, Putin understood the importance of historical rhetoric for his nationalist politics, particularly if it played to the popular nostalgia for the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union was felt as a humiliation by most Russians. In a matter of a few months they lost everything - an empire, an ideology, an economic system that had given them security, superpower status, national pride and an identity forged from Soviet history. Within months of the Soviet collapse, the Russians had fallen into poverty and hunger and become dependent on relief from the West, which lectured them about democracy and human rights. Everything that happened in the 1990s - the hyperinflation, the loss of people's savings and security, the rampant corruption and criminality, the robber-oligarchs and the drunken president - was a source of national shame. This was the soil in which nostalgia for the Soviet Union grew. Polls in the year that Putin came to power showed that three-quarters of the Russian population regretted the breakup of the USSR and wanted Russia to expand in size, incorporating 'Russian' territories that had been lost, such as the Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Putin quickly built up his own historical mythology, combining the Soviet myths (stripped of their Communist packaging) with statist elements from the Russian Empire before 1917. His regime was connected to and sanctioned by a long historical continuum - a 'Russian tradition' of strong state power - going back to the founder of the Empire and Putin's native city, Peter the Great. Through this mythology Putin fostered the idea that Russia's own traditions of authoritarian rule are morally the equal of democratic Western traditions, and that Russia will follow its own path of 'sovereign democracy', without lectures from the West. Indeed his supporters often say that Russians value a strong state, economic growth and security more than the liberal concepts of human rights or democracy, which have no roots in Russian history.

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The rehabilitation of Stalin is the most disturbing element of Putin's historical rhetoric - and the most powerful, for it taps into a deep Russian yearning for a 'strong leader'. According to a survey in 2005, 42 per cent of the Russian people, and 60% of those over sixty years of age, wanted the return of a 'leader like Stalin'.^{ix}

The point is not that the regime has denied Stalin's crimes (Putin has made several speeches acknowledging the victims of the Great Terror of 1937-38) but that it

has argued for the need to balance them against Stalin's achievements as the builder of the country's 'glorious Soviet past.' It is part of the regime's broader struggle to impose its historical mythology, its 'patriotic' narrative of Soviet history, on the nation's historical consciousness and to suppress or push to the margins of this consciousness the collective memory of the Stalinist repressions, - perhaps so that people would not draw from it to question the return of authoritarian rule.

At a national conference of high-school teachers in Moscow, in June 2007, Putin complained about the 'mess and confusion' which he perceived in the teaching of Soviet history and called for 'common standards' to be introduced in Russian schools.^x The following discussion then took place:

A conference participant: In 1990-1991 we disarmed ideologically. [We adopted] a very uncertain, abstract ideology of human values.... It is as if we were back in school, or even kindergarten. We were told [by the West]: you have rejected communism and are building democracy, and we will judge when and how you have done....

Putin: Your remark about someone who assumes the posture of teacher and begins to lecture us is of course absolutely correct. But I would like to add that this, undoubtedly, is also an instrument of influencing our country. This is a tried and true trick. If someone from the outside is getting ready to grade us, this means that he arrogates the right to manage [us] and is keen to continue to do so.

Participant: In the past two decades, our youth have been subjected to a torrent of the most diverse information about our historical past. This information [contains] different conceptual approaches, interpretations, or value judgments, and even chronologies. In such circumstances, the teacher is likely to ...

Putin (interrupting): Oh, they will write, all right. You see, many textbooks are written by those who are paid in foreign grants. And naturally they are dancing the polka ordered by those who pay them. Do you understand? And unfortunately [such textbooks] find their way to schools and colleges.

In his concluding speech to the history teachers, Putin said:

As to some problematic pages in our history, yes, we have had them. But what state hasn't? And we've had fewer of such pages than some other [states]. And ours were not as horrible as those of some others. Yes, we have had some terrible pages: let us remember the events beginning in 1937, let us not forget about them. But other countries have had no less, and even more. In any case, we did not pour chemicals over thousands of kilometers or drop on a small country seven times more bombs than during the entire World War II, as it was in Vietnam, for instance. Nor did we have other black pages, such as Nazism, for instance. All sorts of things happen in the history of every state. And we cannot allow ourselves to be saddled with guilt...^{xi}

Four days after the conference, the Duma passed a law empowering the Ministry of Education to decide which textbooks should be published and which should be used in Russian schools.

The textbook clearly favoured by the government was heavily promoted at the conference. On the cover of *The Modern History of Russia, 1945-2006: A Teacher's Handbook*^{xii} there is the name of one author, Alexander Filippov, the deputy director of a foreign policy think-tank closely connected to the presidential administration. But one of the chapters turned out to be written by the 31-year-old Kremlin propagandist and editor-in-chief of www.kremlin.org, Pavel Danilin, a man without a history degree or experience of teaching anything. In an interview Danilin was quoted as saying that 'our goal is to make the first textbook in which Russian history will appear not as a depressing sequence of misfortunes and mistakes but as something to instill pride in one's country. This is precisely how teachers must teach history and not smear the Motherland with mud.' In his Kremlin blog Danilin served a warning to any history teachers who may be unhappy about the imposition of this positive message that they would be made to

teach children by those books that you will be given and in the way that is needed by Russia...It is impossible to let some Russophobe shit-stinker

(govniuk), or just any amoral type, teach Russian history. It is necessary to clear the filth, and if it does not work, then clear it by force.^{xiii}

The first use of force in this ideological battle came on 4 December 2008 when a group of masked men from the Investigative Committee of the Russian General Prosecutor's Office forced their way with police truncheons into the St Petersburg offices of Memorial, which for twenty years has pioneered the research of Stalinist repressions in the Soviet Union. After a search the men confiscated hard-drives containing the entire archive of Memorial in St Petersburg: databases containing biographical information on more than 50,000 victims of repression; details about burial sites in the Petersburg area; family archives, memoirs, letters, sound recordings and transcripts of interviews, photographs and other documents about the history of the Gulag and the Soviet Terror from 1917 to the 1960s (including the materials I collected with Memorial in St Petersburg for my book *The Whisperers*). Among the confiscated items was the entire collection of materials in the 'Virtual Gulag Museum' (www.gulagmuseum.org), a much-needed initiative to rescue precious artefacts, photographs and documents from more than a hundred small exhibits under threat across Russia (a country where there is just one substantial museum of the Gulag, Perm-36, in the Urals).^{xiv}

There is no mistaking the intended message of the raid, though various theories and rumours have been circulating, as one might expect. The raid took place on the eve of a large international conference in Moscow on 'The History of Stalinism: Results and Problems of Study' - the first conference on such a scale - organized by the Commissioner of Human Rights for the Russian Federation, the Yeltsin Foundation, the State Archive of the Russian Federation, the Institute for Scientific Information for the Social Sciences, the publisher Rosspen (which has published many of the document collections from the Stalin archives), and the Memorial Society. Meanwhile, there were two articles attacking Memorial in the December special issue of *Russkii Zhurnal* (*Russian Journal*) 'On the Politics of Memory,' clearly published to coincide with the opening of the Moscow Conference (where it was distributed among the delegates). The articles were clearly intended to signal the beginning of an ideological struggle against Memorial and other 'anti-patriotic elements' that had tried to 'weaken Russia' by burdening it with a sense of

guilt over its own history. 'Russia has ceased to be the sovereign of its own historical memory, which is now in danger of being taken over by foreign inventions,' wrote Gleb Pavlovskii, the journal's editor, in one of the attacks on Memorial, an article entitled 'Bad with Memory - Bad with Politics.'^{xv} *Russkii Zhurnal* is closely aligned to the Kremlin's thinking on foreign policy and ideology. Pavlovskii is a presidential adviser.^{xvi} Danilin is a frequent writer for the magazine.

Whatever the intentions of this worrying campaign, it is unrealistic for the current regime in Russia to attempt to alter the historical record of Stalin's crimes. The opening of the archives, the publication of its documents by international initiatives like the *Annals of Communism*, and the work of organizations like Memorial have made that impossible, and although the archives have begun to close again in recent years, they cannot return to the way they worked in Soviet days. However, as long as the regime continues to suppress the collective memory of repression, and seeks to replace it with its 'patriotic' myth of the Soviet past in schools and universities, there is little hope of Russia coming to terms with its Stalinist inheritance, or becoming a genuine democracy, at peace with its neighbours and the world. For the moment, all the West can do is show support for Russian institutions trying to preserve the memory of repression in the Soviet Union. This year, for the third time in the three years, the Memorial Society has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Perhaps it is time for it to win.

ⁱ The best-known case involved Allen Weinstein, who at that time was President of the Center for Democracy with close ties to the Republicans. For his book *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America - The Stalin Era* (New York: Random House, 1999; reviewed in the NYR on May 11, 2000) his publisher was reported to have paid a group of retired KGB officials a substantial sum (Weinstein talked of \$100,000) for 'exclusive' access to the relevant KGB documents (Jon Wiener, 'The Archives and Allen Weinstein', *The Nation*, April 29, 2004). This was a clear violation of the code of ethics of the International Council on Archives, which calls for 'the widest possible' access to documents. Despite protests by many scholarly organizations, including the Society of American Archivists and the Organization of American Historians, Weinstein was appointed the Ninth Archivist of the United States in 2005. He resigned from the post on health grounds in December 2008.

ⁱⁱ Several times in my recent researches in the Military History Archive I was told by staff that documents containing the Tsar's signature had been lost.

iii See, for example, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov*, edited by Lars T. Lih, Oleg V. Naumov and Oleg V. Khlevniuk, translated from the Russian by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, foreword by Robert C. Tucker (New Haven: Yale, 1995) [reviewed in the NYR, March 6, 1997]; *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, edited by Ivo Banac, translated from the German by Jane T. Hedges, from the Russian by Timothy D. Sergay and from the Bulgarian by Irina Faion (New Haven: Yale, 2003); *The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov*, edited and annotated by Joshua Rubenstein and Alexander Gribanov, Introduction by Joshua Rubenstein, translations by Ella Shmulevich, Efrem Yankelevich, and Alla Zeide (New Haven: Yale, 2005) [reviewed in the NYR on October 20, 2005].

iv J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror. Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939*, translations by Benjamin Sher (New Haven: Yale, 1999); William J. Chase, *Enemies Within the Gates? The Comintern and Stalinist Repression, 1934-1939*, translations by Vadim A. Staklo (New Haven: Yale, 2001); Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko with Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov, *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917-1953*, translations by Marian Schwartz (New Haven, Yale: 2007).

v *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive*, edited by Richard Pipes with the assistance of David Brandenberger, translations by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New Haven: Yale, 1996) [reviewed in the NYR, March 6, 1997].

vi *Stalinism as a Way of Life*, edited by Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei K. Sokolov, documents compiled by Ludmila Kosheleva, translations by Thomas Hoisington and Steven Shabad (New Haven: Yale, 2000) [reviewed in the NYR, 28 November 2001].

vii For example, the series 'Documents of Soviet History' (*Dokumenty sovetskoi istorii*) established by the late Franco Venturi and published by Rosspen (Moscow), or the five-volume series of documents on collectivization, *Tragediia sovetskoi derevni: kollektivizatsiia i raskulachivanie. Dookumenty i materialy v 5 tomakh 1927-1939*, edited by the late Viktor P. Danilov, Roberta Manning and Lynne Viola (Moscow: Rosspen, 1999-2006), which will be published in three volumes in the *Annals of Communism*.

viii Mikhail Gefter, 'V predchuvstvii proshlogo,' *Vek XX n mir*, 1990, no. 9, p. 29.

ix *Moscow News*, March 4, 2005.

x What he had in mind had been signalled at a meeting with historians in November 2003 when Putin said that textbooks should 'cultivate a sense of pride in Russia's history, a sense of pride in the country, especially in young people.' Shortly before his speech on that occasion, the Ministry of Education had withdrawn approval from Igor Dolutsky's *Otechestvennaia istoriia XX veka dlia 10-11-x klassov* [National History of the 20th Century for Years 10 and 11] which had sold more than half a million copies in multiple editions since 1994 and served as a textbook in high-schools throughout Russia. Dolutsky's textbook was a model of Western pedagogical standards: it used archival documents and presented different views at the end of each chapter. But it drew comparisons between the Stalinist and Nazi systems of repression and invited students to discuss whether Russia had become a democracy after 1991. Such provocative questions had prompted the Ministry's ban, with one official quoted as saying that the textbook 'encourages contempt for our past and for the Russian people.'

xi Cited from the translation in the excellent article by Leon Aron in 'The Problematic Pages' of *The New Republic*, September 24, 2008.

^{xii} Alexander Filippov, *Boveishaia istoriia Rossii, 1945-2006: Kniga dlia uchitel'ia* (Moscow: 2007).

^{xiii} Both quotations cited by Leon Aron in the article above.

^{xiv} See my letter on the raid in the NYR, January 15, 2009. To update readers on the latest situation: on 20 January 2009, an appeal against the raid (which was carried out with a number of illegal irregularities) was upheld by the Dzerzhinsky Regional Court, which ordered the return of all the confiscated materials to Memorial; on 24 February, this decision was overturned by the City Court of St Petersburg after an appeal by the Procuracy of St Petersburg. At the time of writing (26 February - [revise as necessary] the confiscated archive remains in the hands of the police.

^{xv} Gleb Pavlovskii, 'Plokho s pamiat'iu - plokho s politikoi', *Russkii zhurnal*, December 2008.

^{xvi} In 2005, he was accused by the Ukrainian authorities of organizing the poisoning of the Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, an accusation Pavlovskii has denied.