

# Archivists killed for political reasons

Antoon De Baets

---

This essay offers an overview of archivists who were killed for political reasons through the ages. After determining the criteria for inclusion, sixteen such political murders of archivists are briefly discussed. These cases were distributed over six regimes in seven countries. The following clusters can be distinguished: archivists who perished during Stalin's Great Purge, those who died in Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Poland; those killed under Communist regimes after Stalin (USSR, Romania, Afghanistan), and those murdered in 'the South' (Algeria, Iraq). Although the set of sixteen cases is too small to identify proper patterns, an attempt is made to point to some striking similarities. In seven cases, the motives for the killings were mainly political; in another seven, religion played a major role, either because the killers did not tolerate religion or did not accept a secularist perspective. In two cases, ethnic-religious identity was the main motive. More than once, motives were mixed. Four out of the sixteen archivists were killed for reasons partly related to their archival work: David Riazanov (USSR), Károly Borbáth (Romania), and Zelig Kalmanovitch and Emanuel Ringelblum (Nazi-occupied Poland). Riazanov was accused of 'wrecking activities on the historical front,' a stigma that never left him. Borbáth's care for the archives of his political-religious community was intolerable in Ceaușescu's atheist state. Kalmanovitch and Ringelblum saw the collection of archives about life in the ghetto as a political and even existential duty. Killing the recordkeepers did not always prevent their legacy from spreading. This essay is a tribute to that legacy.

*Who, except archive rats, does not understand that a party and its leaders must be tested primarily by their deeds and not merely by their declarations?*

Part of Joseph Stalin's attack against historian A. G. Slutsky at the end of October 1931 after Slutsky suggested that Lenin had not been a real Bolshevik before 1914.<sup>1</sup>

*We alarmed the world with detailed information about the greatest crime in history, and we are continuing our archival activity.*

Emanuel Ringelblum, letter to YIVO in New York, 1 March 1944  
(nine days before he was murdered).<sup>2</sup>

---

Antoon De Baets is professor of history, ethics and human rights at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. His works, more than 160, include the book *Responsible History* (New York 2009). He is completing *History's Blank Spots: Censorship of Views on the Past around the World (1945–Present)*. A full curriculum vitae is at <http://www.concernedhistorians.org/va/cv.pdf>

1 STALIN Joseph, 'Some Questions Concerning the History of Bolshevism: Letter to the Editorial Board of the Magazine "Proletarskaya Revolutsia"' in *Works*, vol. 13, *July 1930–January 1934* (Moscow, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1955), p.99. For background, see John BARBER, *Soviet Historians in Crisis, 1928–1932* (London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1981), pp. 126–136. All websites mentioned in this essay were last consulted on 20 December 2014. The author acknowledges the support of NWO (The Netherlands Organisation of Scientific Research) for facilitating this study.

2 KASSOW Samuel D., *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* [alternative subtitle: *Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto*] (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2007), p.386.

Writing history becomes fatal when rulers or others who fear unwelcome representations of the past decide to kill the writers as the quickest way to silence their words. Keeping records is part of the activity of writing history in the broad sense. Archivists engaged in actively collecting and making accessible historical data provide the raw material for these unwelcome representations of the past and, in so doing, run risks and sometimes pay the price. Although many archivists have been persecuted in world history,<sup>3</sup> few have been so to their deaths. The present essay is about this extreme group.

## Inclusion criteria

Over the years, this author has built a database of history producers who became victims of political murder throughout history. ‘History producers’ are all those involved in the collection, creation or transmission of history, including archivists. The killings investigated comprised political murders in the strict sense — that is, extra-legal, summary and arbitrary executions — but also judicial executions for political reasons, sudden deaths in prisons or camps, and suicides due to severe political pressure. Although all these types of deaths are subsumed here under the heading of ‘political murders’ for the sake of rhetorical simplicity, the crucial distinctions between them will not be neglected. Deaths for non-political motives were excluded: the history producers were killed because they were members either of the category of history producers, or of the more general category of intellectuals or academics, or of the category of journalists, human rights defenders or political activists, or, finally, because they were members of a national, racial, ethnic or religious group.<sup>4</sup> These categories already reveal that history producers who were killed for political reasons were not always so for reasons related to history: indeed, most were not. Among the 392 cases of history producers thus collected, sixteen were archivists. Table 1 gives an overview of these cases.<sup>5</sup>

Before reviewing the cases, I must emphasize that as much as I strongly condemn the killing of archivists, I do not necessarily share the latter’s views and beliefs, historical or otherwise.

## Stalin’s Great Purge

As far as is known, two archivists were killed during Stalin’s Great Purge of 1937–1938. The first was David Riazanov. Because of his Marxist political activities, Riazanov spent most of his time in prison or exile between 1900 and the spring of 1917. From 1907 he studied the history of Marxism and the First International (1864–1876) and, to that end, consulted

3 For a survey, see Antoon DE BAETS, ‘Archives’ in Derek JONES, ed., *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia* (London and Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), pp. 76–82.

4 Two other relevant categories—enforced disappearance and post-imprisonment death as a direct result of ill-treatment—were not applicable here. For further discussion, see Antoon DE BAETS, ‘Political Murders of Historians (1945–2014)’ in Stefan BERGER, ed., *Historians as Engaged Intellectuals* (New York and Oxford, Berghahn, forthcoming 2015).

5 Not included were (1) Jaroslav Simsov (no life dates), who died of typhus in Dachau concentration camp (reason: it is not certain that he was an archivist); (2) Sofia Kotsyna (1873–[after 1940]), a historian, librarian and archivist from Białystok, Poland (reason: it is not certain whether she died in the Holocaust; (see <http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn37313>); (3) Jiří Fiedler (1935–2014), who documented the local heritage and history of Jews in Czech lands (reason: it is not certain that the murder was political).

Table 1 Archivists killed for political reasons

Country	Archivist	Life dates	Reasons of death
<b>Stalin's Great Purge</b>			
USSR	David Riazanov	1870–1938	Shot in prison for involvement in 'right-opportunist Trotskyist organization'; charged six years previously with 'wrecking activities on the historical front.'
	Arvid Drezen	1900–1938	Executed in prison after charge of counter-revolutionary activities.
<b>Nazi Germany and occupied countries</b>			
Nazi Germany	Fritz Gerlich	1883–1934	Shot in Dachau concentration camp, Germany, during the Night of the Long Knives.
	Friedrich von Rabenau	1884–1945	Shot in Flossenbürg concentration camp, Germany, after the attempt on Hitler's life.
Nazi-occupied Poland	Józef Siemieński	1882–1941	Killed in Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp, Poland.
	Emanuel Ringelblum	1900–1944	Shot as Jew by the Gestapo in Pawiak prison, Warsaw ghetto.
	Zelig Kalmanovitch	1881–1944	Died as Jew in Vaivara concentration camp, Estonia.
<b>Communist regimes after Stalin</b>			
Afghanistan	Mohammad Azam	?–1978/1979	Killed in prison in Nejrab, east Afghanistan, after accusation of Muslim Brotherhood membership.
	Gholam Sakhi	?–1979	Killed in prison in Qala-i-Shada, Kabul, after accusation of Muslim Brotherhood membership.
	Jomah Gol	?–1979	Killed in prison in Khair Kot, Paktia, after accusation of being a <i>mujaheddin</i> supporter.
Romania	Károly Borbáth	1931–1980	Murdered in Aiud, Transylvania, for preserving religious archives of the Hungarian minority.
USSR	Vasyl Stus	1938–1985	Died during hunger strike in Perm-36 special-regime labour camp, Russia, after charges of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda.
<b>The South</b>			
Algeria	Khaled Aboulkacem	[1966]–1996	Shot in Algiers by Islamist gunmen for working with newspaper critical of Islamists.
Iraq	Akil Sarhan	?–2006	Shot in Baghdad as intellectual by unknown gunmen during the civil war.
	Ali Salih	?–2006	Shot in Baghdad as intellectual during the civil war.
	Ahmed Salih	?–2006	Shot in Baghdad as intellectual during the civil war.

*Note:* For the cases of Gustav Pirchan, Ludwig Bittner and Edmund Glaise von Horstenau, see text.

*Source:* Compiled by the author.

the archives of the British Museum in London and those of the German Social-Democratic Party in Berlin. The latter archives included the papers of Marx and Engels, which he edited and published. Later, he became a close associate of Leon Trotsky. Upon his return to Russia, he joined the Bolshevik Party although his reformist perspective made him critical of any radical policy measures; he considered himself a Marxist but not a Bolshevik or Menshevik. He headed the new State Archive Administration and helped found the Marx-Engels Institute in 1921, which he directed until 1931. In this capacity, he published the collected works of Marx and Engels (the MEGA or Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe). An Academician since 1929, Riazanov was known for his erudite and detached scholarship. Unwilling to adapt the institute's line to the whims of the day, he hired Mensheviks and other 'heretics', including Trotsky (expelled from the Party in 1927) himself. Once, Lenin jokingly said that the USSR was 'a dictatorship mitigated by Riazanov.' But Stalin did not appreciate his barbed tongue and independence of mind.

How exactly the sequence of events leading to Riazanov's execution started is not clear. In the run-up to the so-called Menshevik Trial of March 1931, one of his former research associates, Isaak Rubin, confessed under torture that Riazanov had supposedly hidden Menshevik documents in his institute. According to others, Riazanov was falsely accused of concealing one of Marx's letters. Be that as it may, in February 1931 he was dismissed and expelled from the Party. Charged with 'being an agent of counter-revolutionary Menshevism' and 'wrecking activities on the historical front', he was arrested and deported. For six years he worked at a university library in his place of exile, Saratov. Meanwhile, the Marx-Engels Institute was purged and merged with the Lenin Institute. In 1937 Riazanov was arrested again, this time on charges of 'membership of a right-opportunist Trotskyist organization.' His Jewish background did not seem to have played an important role. On 21 January 1938, the Military Collegium of the USSR Supreme Court issued a death sentence against him and he was shot the same day. Neither in 1931 or in 1938 did Riazanov confess any guilt. He was rehabilitated legally in 1958 and politically in 1989.<sup>6</sup> Like Riazanov, Arvid Drezin had been an active participant in the October 1917 Revolution. Information about him is scarce. He was a Latvian archivist and dean of the history department of Leningrad University. He was arrested in 1937 on charges of counter-revolutionary activities and executed in 1938.<sup>7</sup>

## Nazi Germany and occupied countries

The Nazis took the lives of five archivists. Two of them were staunch opponents of Hitler. Historian and archivist Fritz Gerlich worked at the Bavarian National Archives. Over the years, he changed his conservative political views into liberal ones and eventually became

6 Website about Riazanov: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/riazanov/index.htm> (this is unreliable for the story of his last years); Barber, *Soviet Historians*, pp. 121–122, 140; Richard B. DAY & Daniel GAIDO, eds., *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 67–70; Joseph WIECZYNSKI, ed., *The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History* (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press), vol. 31 (1983), pp. 85–87.

7 Denis KOZLOV, 'Athens and apocalypse: Writing history in Soviet Russia' in Axel SCHNEIDER & Daniel WOOLF, eds., *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. 5, *1945 to Present* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p.376; Viktor PANEIAKH, 'The Political Police and the study of history in the USSR' in Marsha SIEFERT, ed., *Extending the Borders of Russian History: Essays in Honor of Alfred J. Rieber* (Budapest and New York, Central European University Press, 2003), p.310.

an outspoken opponent of Nazism, including as the chief editor of the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* from 1920 until 1928. Then he returned to the Bavarian National Archives, while writing from 1932 in his influential weekly *Der Gerade Weg* (The Straight Path) against all forms of political extremism, particularly Nazism. When Hitler came to power in January 1933, the publication was attacked and Gerlich taken into detention and tortured. On 30 June 1934, the Nazis killed at least eighty opponents during a purge that became known as the Night of the Long Knives. Gerlich was brought to Dachau concentration camp that night and killed. His body was burned and the ashes were probably buried anonymously in a Dachau cemetery.<sup>8</sup>

Friedrich von Rabenau was a career soldier from 1903 until 1942. In 1936 he was given the assignment to establish the first central archive of the German army in Potsdam. Inspired by Christian convictions, he became opposed to Nazism and retired early with the rank of general in 1942. In the aftermath of the failed plot to kill Hitler on 20 July 1944, which many high-ranking military were involved in, von Rabenau, though not one of the conspirators, was arrested. On or around 10 April 1945, he was shot in Flossenbürg concentration camp on orders of Himmler, without charge or trial.<sup>9</sup>

The other archivists lived in Poland when it was invaded by the Nazis in September 1939. Józef Siemiński, a legal historian who directed the Main Archive of Old Documents, AGAD (1920–1939), fought to rescue the records from fire during the siege of Warsaw. A Polish patriot, he was arrested by the Gestapo and murdered in the concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1941.<sup>10</sup> The two remaining archivists were killed because of their Jewish identity. Zelig Kalmanovitch was a translator, historian and archivist who in 1929 became a director of the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (YIVO; Institute for Jewish Research) in Vilna (Vilnius), then part of Poland. When he was confined to the ghetto of Vilna, he kept a secret diary in Hebrew which became an important source for documenting daily life there. Upon liquidation of the ghetto in September 1943, he was sent to Vaivara concentration camp in Estonia, where he died the following winter.<sup>11</sup>

Initially, Emanuel Ringelblum was not an archivist but a nationally well-known historian. After the occupation of Poland, he began keeping a diary and documenting the fate of the persecuted Jews. In October–November 1940, he went one crucial step further than the others when establishing a clandestine group to chronicle life in the ghetto of Nazi-occupied Warsaw. The group was code-named Oyneg Shabes in Yiddish ('sabbath delight') because it usually met on Saturday afternoons. Ringelblum's intention was to compile an archive that would form the basis for later generations to reconstruct the history of the Jews from their own perspective. Some of the collected information was sent to the Polish underground, which smuggled it out of the country. Most documents, however, were put in about twenty milk cans and metal boxes and concealed in the cellars of Warsaw houses. After the uprising

8 Website about Gerlich (in German): <http://www.gerlich.com>; 'Fritz Gerlich,' *Wikipedia* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fritz\\_Gerlich](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fritz_Gerlich)).

9 'The Murder of General Friedrich von Rabenau: When, where and how did it happen?' (2007, <http://cryptocellar.org/Rabenau>); 'Totenliste' in *Historische Zeitschrift*, 169 (1949), p.452; 'Friedrich von Rabenau,' *Wikipedia* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich\\_von\\_Rabenau](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_von_Rabenau)).

10 KASSOW, *Who Will Write Our History*, pp. 66–67; 'Józef Siemiński,' *Wikipedia* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Józef\\_Siemiński](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Józef_Siemiński)).

11 'Kalmanovitch, Zelig' in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* ([http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Kalmanovitch\\_Zelig](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Kalmanovitch_Zelig)); Kalmanovitch, Zelig, *Jewish Virtual Library* ([http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsources/judaica/ejud\\_0002\\_0011\\_o\\_10651.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsources/judaica/ejud_0002_0011_o_10651.html)).

in the ghetto in April-May 1943, which would result in the liquidation of the ghetto, OyNEG Shabes ceased to exist. Of the approximately fifty to sixty individuals involved in the project in one way or another, only three survived. After the ghetto was destroyed, Ringelblum himself was deported to Trawniki concentration camp, near Lublin, but escaped and went into hiding. He was eventually seized, tortured and shot together with his wife and son by the Gestapo in Pawiak prison, located in the Warsaw ghetto, around 10 March 1944.<sup>12</sup> Much of the archive was recovered in 1946 and 1950.<sup>13</sup>

Ringelblum's mentor, Ignacy Schiper, supported the OyNEG Shabes initiative but participated in it only marginally.<sup>14</sup> He was eventually imprisoned in Majdanek concentration camp in Eastern Poland. In the days before he was killed in early July 1943, Schiper expressed himself in a very pessimistic way about the value of collecting records. If the records were destroyed, he told a fellow inmate, history would be written by the victors and the version of the Jews would not be heard but forgotten. If they were not destroyed and if a Jewish version of events would be written, nobody would believe it because it would reveal so much suffering that those who survived would be profoundly ashamed of having done nothing. Ringelblum was more optimistic; he firmly believed in the lasting power of evidence.<sup>15</sup>

Like Kalmanovitch and Ringelblum, many other Jews kept diaries and collected sources in ghettos and camps, thereby fulfilling the function of community archivists.<sup>16</sup> The Polish-Jewish librarian Herman Kruk (1897–1944), for example, kept a chronicle about life in the ghetto of Vilnius and the Estonian concentration camps of Klooga and Lagedi during World War II. He was executed on 18 September 1944, one day before the liberation of Lagedi camp.<sup>17</sup> The paradigmatic example of this indomitable urge to document Jewish life for future generations was historian Simon Dubnov (1860–1941). From 1891, he had appealed to all Jews to collect records to document their history. Dubnov himself was a double exile from the USSR (in 1922) and Nazi Germany (in 1933). In the weeks before his death in December 1941, while he lived in the ghetto of Riga, Latvia, his library was seized and he was obliged to hide his manuscripts. Cut off from his daily work, he began chronicling life in the ghetto. His notebooks were smuggled out to some friends in the city.<sup>18</sup> During one of the roundups in the

12 Website about Ringelblum and OyNEG Shabes: <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/ringelblum> (note misspelled name); KASSOW, *Who Will Write Our History*, passim. See also Israel Gutman, ed., *Emanuel Ringelblum: The Man and the Historian* (Jerusalem, Yad Vashem Publications, 2006).

13 When in the 1950s Alfred Sloane wanted to edit and translate Ringelblum's diary, he was obliged to use a censored and pro-Communist text published by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw because he was not given access to the original diary in Warsaw nor to the copy kept by Josef Kermish, the archivist of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. The censored edition was published without crucial passages in which Ringelblum had mentioned the Sobibor death camp and asked why the Jews went like sheep to the slaughter. Ten years later, Kermish inserted the missing fragments on special yellow pages in a volume of *Yad Vashem Studies*. See Raul HILBERG, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 1996), pp. 176–178.

14 'Schiper, Ignacy' in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* ([http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Schiper\\_Ignacy](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Schiper_Ignacy)). Another of Ringelblum's sources of inspiration, the historian Majer Balaban, died of a heart attack in the Warsaw ghetto.

15 KASSOW, *Who Will Write Our History*, p.210.

16 KASSOW, *Who Will Write Our History*, 7, pp. 210–212.

17 'Herman Kruk', *Wikipedia* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herman\\_Kruk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herman_Kruk)).

18 WIECZYNSKI, ed., *Modern Encyclopedia*, vol. 10 (1979), pp. 22–24; Herbert A. STRAUSS and Werner RÖDER, eds., *International Biographical Dictionary of Central European Emigrés 1933–1945*, vol. 2 (Munich, Saur,

ghetto, a Gestapo officer murdered him. According to some, that officer was Johann Siebert, a former student of his.<sup>19</sup> Later, Dubnov's daughter heard the rumour that her father repeatedly exclaimed in the minutes before his death: 'People, do not forget. Speak of this, people; record it all.'<sup>20</sup> These last words, an appeal to memory and duty, passed from mouth to mouth. Undoubtedly, Dubnov could have said them, but whether he really uttered them in the dark and tragic moments just before his death will remain uncertain forever.<sup>21</sup>

## A note on collaboration

At the other end of the political spectrum, some archivists died as a result of their collaborationist activities on behalf of the Nazis. As supporters of the perpetrators rather than the victims, they do not feature in the Table. As persons falling within our definition, however, they are briefly recalled here. The case of the Czechoslovak Gustav Pirchan (1881–1945) was the most tragic. Pirchan was an archivist from 1907 to 1933 and director of the Association for the History of the Germans in Bohemia (the Sudeten Germans) from 1917 to 1940. He became a professor of medieval history at the German University of Prague in 1933, all the while continuing his good relationships with the archival world. Known for his *Völkisch* (racial-nationalist) opinions, he was politically moderate nevertheless. He continued to work in Prague during the war under the Nazi-established Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Arrested after defeat in May 1945 and detained in Pankrác prison, he died the next September in the former Theresienstadt concentration camp.<sup>22</sup>

Two Austrian archivists committed suicide after their collaboration with the Nazi regime. The first was archivist and historian Ludwig Bittner (1877–1945), who worked in leading positions at the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv (Archive of House, Court and State) in Vienna. A tireless and dedicated archivist but also an ardent anti-Semitic Nazi collaborator, he became a member of the Reich Institute for History of the New Germany and director of the Reichsarchiv Wien (Imperial Archives of Vienna) in 1941. Meanwhile, he did research into the war guilt issue concerning World War I and had Serbian foreign ministry archives transferred to Vienna for that purpose. He also encouraged anti-Semitic research. On 2 April 1945, with the end of the war in sight, he committed suicide together with his wife.<sup>23</sup> After

1983), pp. 228–229.

19 Ilya EHRENBURG & Vasily GROSSMAN, *The Black Book: The Ruthless Murder of Jews by German-Fascist Invaders Throughout the Temporarily-Occupied Regions of the Soviet Union and in the Death Camps of Poland During the War of 1941–1945* (New York, Holocaust Library, 1981), pp. 310–311.

20 Sophie DUBNOV-ERLICH, *The Life and Work of S. M. Dubnov: Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish History* (originally 1950; Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 245–247 (quote on p.247).

21 See also Antoon DE BAETS, 'Resistance to the censorship of historical thought in the twentieth century' in Solvi SOGNER, ed., *Making Sense of Global History: The 19th International Congress of Historical Sciences, Oslo 2000, Commemorative Volume* (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 2001), p. 389 [also available via <http://www.oslo2000.uio.no/program/papers/m3c/m3c-baets.pdf>].

22 'Dritte Totenliste' in *Historische Zeitschrift*, 170 (1950), p. 227; Stefan LEHR, 'Gustav Pirchan (1881–1945): Ein Prager Historiker zwischen Deutschen und Tschechen' in Karel HRUZA, ed., *Österreichische Historiker: Lebensläufe und Karrieren 1900–1945*, vol. 2 (Vienna, Böhlau, 2012), pp. 329–331, 359.

23 JUST Thomas, 'Ludwig Bittner (1877–1945): Ein politischer Archivar' in HRUZA Karel, ed., *Österreichische Historiker, 1900–1945: Lebensläufe und Karrieren in Österreich, Deutschland und der Tschechoslowakei*, vol. 1 (Vienna, Böhlau, 2008), pp. 283–284, 304–305.

defeat, the Nazi-friendly staff at the Reichsarchiv, renamed Österreichische Staatsarchiv (Austrian State Archives), was purged.<sup>24</sup>

The second archivist was Edmund Glaise von Horstenau (1882–1946), a leading military historian who directed the Vienna Kriegsarchiv (the war archive, after 1945 also incorporated into the Austrian State Archives) from 1925 to 1938. Gradually evolving from a monarchist to a Nazi in the 1930s, he also embarked on a parallel political career. He became a colonel and interior minister. In the days preceding the *Anschluss* (annexation) to Nazi Germany in March 1938, he was Vice-Chancellor of Austria. In April 1941 he was appointed as German Plenipotentiary General in Ustasha, Croatia. He opposed the atrocities committed by the Ustaschas until he was shoved aside in 1944. Glaise von Horstenau was eventually captured by the Americans in Salzburg on 5 May 1945. He wrote his memoirs in prison. Later he was summoned to the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg to testify in defense of Austria's leading Nazi politician, Arthur Seyss-Inquart. Depressed and with the prospect of prosecution in Austria, he poisoned himself in the Langwasser camp near Nuremberg on 20 July 1946. The day before his suicide, he had given a lecture before an audience of young Waffen-SS inmates about the Habsburg monarchy and how it could inspire Europe's future.<sup>25</sup>

## Communist regimes after Stalin

Communist regimes after Stalin also lashed out at archivists. In the five following cases, the motives for the murders corresponded to the central ideological tenets of the regime; in the first case, the motive was related to nationalism, in the last three, to religion, and in the second case, to both.

The first case regarded a Ukrainian dissident, Vasyl Stus. He was a young poet with a history degree who worked at the State Historical Archives of Ukraine in Kiev. In September 1965, he participated in a public protest against the arrests of members of the Ukrainian intelligentsia. Promptly dismissed, he became a human rights activist and faced thirteen years of imprisonment and labour camp in total on charges of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. During his prison terms, hundreds of his poems (many of them written in prison itself) and translations of poems were confiscated and destroyed. After publication of some of this work in the West, and especially after Heinrich Böll nominated him for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1985, the pressure against him intensified. In late August 1985, Stus was thrown into an isolation cell where in protest he declared a hunger strike "to the end." He died in the night between 3 and 4 September 1985 and was buried in an unmarked grave in the cemetery of the Perm-36 special-regime labour camp. He was rehabilitated in stages. In 1990, his remains were reburied in Kiev. In April 1991, the All-Ukrainian Memorial Society, founded in 1988, was named in his honour. In 1993, Stus was posthumously awarded the Taras Shevchenko State Prize for Literature.<sup>26</sup>

24 The cases of librarians Hugo Andres Krüss (1879–1945), in Berlin, and Paul Heigl (1887–1945; trained as an archivist), in Vienna, both ending in suicide, were comparable to Bittner's.

25 BERNATH Mathias & von SCHROEDER Felix, eds., *Biographisches Lexicon zur Geschichte Südeuropas*, vol. 2 (Munich, Oldenburg 1976), pp. 55–56; BROUCEK Peter, ed., *Ein General im Zwielicht: Die Erinnerungen Edmund Glaises von Horstenau*, vol. 3 (Vienna, Böhlau, 1988), pp. 51–58.

26 COYNASH Halya, 'When silence is a crime (About Vasyl Stus)', *Human Rights in Ukraine: Information Website of the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group* (22 February 2009; <http://khp.org/en/index>).

In Romania, Károly Borbáth, the director of the library of Bethlen in Aiud, Transylvania, was found murdered in unexplained circumstances in 1980. He was a medievalist who voluntarily worked over several years to sort out the archival collection of the Reformed Church archdeaconry at Aiud, dating from the late eighteenth century and devoted to the religious life of the Hungarian minority in Romania. He was harassed by the security police and finally killed because any attention to the contents of the archives was unwelcome to a government that was both atheist and nationalist. The archives appear to have survived.<sup>27</sup>

On a recently discovered death list of prisoners killed by the Interrogation Department of the Afghan State Security Service, AGSA, under the Communist regimes ruling Afghanistan between 1978 and 1979, before the Soviet invasion, the names of three archivists appeared. Mohammad Azam, head of archive of the Department of Justice in Nejrab, east Afghanistan, was accused of being an 'ikhvani' (a member of the Muslim Brotherhood) and died in 1978 or 1979. Gholam Sakhi, an employee at the archive in Qala-i-Shada, Kabul, was also accused of being an 'ikhvani'; he was killed on 6 February 1979. Jomah Gol was an employee at the Record Office Archive of Khair Kot, Paktika province. He was called an 'ashrar,' meaning a 'villain,' a term used by the regime for alleged supporters of the *mujaheddin* – Muslims who struggled in the path of God. He was killed on 7 March 1979.<sup>28</sup>

## The South

This last section is called 'the South' for want of a better name. No cases were reported for Latin-America or Africa south of the Sahara, which does not imply that no such cases existed in these regions. Moreover, the three Afghan cases, now grouped in the category of Communist regimes, could have been placed also in the present cluster.

While the Afghans were killed for their religious sympathies, the following case is about an Algerian archivist who was killed because he was associated with secularism. On 13 January 1996, suspected Islamist gunmen attacked Khaled Aboulkacem, an archivist and researcher at *L'Indépendant* newspaper, as he left his office in Algiers. The newspaper had published several editorials condemning the Islamist extremists during the 'dirty war', the internal conflict between the military regime and Islamist fundamentalists (1992–2000), estimated to have claimed between 100,000 and 200,000 lives. A colleague of Aboulkacem was wounded during the attack.<sup>29</sup>

During the sectarian violence which unleashed a civil war in Iraq in 2006–2007, at least three archivists were hit, all in late 2006. Two of them belonged to the Iraqi National Library and Archives (INLA). On 20 November 2006, Ali Salih, a staff member responsible for the INLA website, was assassinated by four men when he left his car in a busy street in Baghdad. According to INLA director Saad Eskander, the assassins of Ali Salih were probably members of one of the militias that had penetrated the security forces. Salih was survived by a wife

<http://www.inla.gov.iq/index.php?id=1235467336>); *Index on Censorship*, 1972, no. 1, 87; 1972, nos. 3–4, 123; 1973, no. 1, x; 1976, no. 2, 88; 1977, no. 3, 71; 1977, no. 4, 13–14; 1979, no. 1, 64; 1980, no. 5, 68; 1981, no. 1, 78; 1985, no. 6, 60; 2010, no. 4, 146.

<sup>27</sup> RADY Martyn, 'Transylvanian libraries and archives in contemporary Romania' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 12, no. 2 (1991), pp. 125–126; 'Károly Borbáth' in *El Vikipedio, la libera enciklopedio* [Esperanto] ([http://eo.wikipedia.org/wiki/Károly\\_Borbáth](http://eo.wikipedia.org/wiki/Károly_Borbáth)).

<sup>28</sup> 'Afghanistan Death Lists,' (<https://www.om.nl/onderwerpen/internationale/afghanistan-death>).

<sup>29</sup> *Index on Censorship*, 1996, no. 2, 80; 1997, no. 2, 79.

and two young sons. On 24 December 2006, another INLA collaborator, Ahmed Salih, was murdered by a death squad in his own house.<sup>30</sup> The third case followed a similar pattern. On 29 December 2006, unknown gunmen attacked a car with twelve persons on Haifa Street in the Al-Karkh district of Baghdad. Akil Sarhan, a journalist working in the archives department of sports television channel al-Riyadia, was one of those killed.<sup>31</sup> Although it is difficult to identify with some precision motives for the first two murders (and far less so for the third), intolerance of scholarship and learning, including about the pre-Islamic era, seems part of a plausible explanation. Inspired by religious bigotry, such intolerance led to the targeting of members of the intellectual class, including these three victims.<sup>32</sup>

## Patterns

Before looking for patterns, we should briefly enumerate some of the problems related to the search for relevant cases of political murder. There were many gaps in the data; cases may have escaped this author's attention for a variety of reasons, above all the fact that a good share of political murders happened in secret. In addition, the distinction between archivists and source-oriented historians, for one, was sometimes hard to make: Riazanov, Drezen, Siemieński, Ringelblum and others were not only productive as archivists, but also as historians. Conversely, with their lifelong dedication to source collection, historians such as Dubnow or Schiper almost qualify as archivists. On the other hand, there may be one or two false positives on the list of sixteen – persons who on closer scrutiny cannot be called archivists. For example, in the scarce information about Aboulkacem, he was called an archivist in one report and a researcher in another. And, to name two other cases, did Ali and Ahmed Salih work in the library or archives branch of the Iraqi National Library and Archives? As these examples show – as do those of Riazanov (during his exile), Borbáth and Kruk – the line between librarians and archivists was often a thin one. Eliminating false positives would reduce the list, but if we were to add the archivists who died after their collaboration with the Nazis, it would again increase.

Apparently, no political murders of archivists took place before 1938. They all took place between 1938 and 2006, spanning nearly seven decades. This temporal limitation is odd because the database contains 49 cases of history producers who were killed for political reasons between the beginning of time and 1900. I consider the absence of archivists among the victims of political murder before 1900 a near-impossibility; either the cases were not detected or the professions attached to the 49 cases that were identified did not cover the

30 'Diary of Saad Eskander, Director of the Iraq National Library and Archive: 10–16 November, 2006' ([www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20100427133418/http://www.bl.uk/iraqdiary/iraqdiary11.html](http://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20100427133418/http://www.bl.uk/iraqdiary/iraqdiary11.html)); idem, 'December 2006' ([www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20100427133414/http://www.bl.uk/iraqdiary/iraqdiary12.html](http://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20100427133414/http://www.bl.uk/iraqdiary/iraqdiary12.html)). Apart from the archivists mentioned in the text, two other INLA employees (the first a computer specialist, the second a guard) and three of the drivers working with INLA were also murdered. They were not included here.

31 International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), *Journalism Put to the Sword in 2006: The IFJ Report on Journalists and Media Staff Killed* (Brussels, IFJ, 2007; [ifj-safety.org/assets/docs/036/061/bb56224-820a53d.pdf](http://ifj-safety.org/assets/docs/036/061/bb56224-820a53d.pdf)), p. 44.

32 For a description of the situation at Iraqi universities in 2003–2007, see GUSTERSON Hugh, 'An Education in occupation' in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (<http://thebulletin.org/education-occupation>), 2 February 2012). Gusterson wrote: '[T]he principled commitment of many in university communities to cosmopolitanism and interfaith tolerance made the universities themselves targets for sectarian extremists and fundamentalists.'

archival aspect explicitly. If we compare the number of archivists to the estimated total number of history producers killed for political reasons between 1900 and 2014, the former constitute a subgroup of sixteen in a population of 343 (4.7%).

It can be concluded that in all probability the total of sixteen seriously underestimates the real numbers. In view of that basic shortcoming, any patterns signaled here should be seen as mere documented conjecture. The sixteen cases were distributed over six regimes in seven countries spread over several continents. If we juxtapose the pre-1945 and post-1945 periods, the former gathers seven cases and the latter nine, making the 1938–1945 period the most lethal one. Only four of the sixteen archivists were killed after 1989, all of them in the South. When we take the Communist regimes together, they top the list with seven casualties (the USSR took the lives of three of them, as did Afghanistan). Next come Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Poland with five casualties, and post-Saddam Iraq with three. All archivists were male. Of those whose age was known, the oldest was Riazanov (68 years), the youngest Aboulkacem (30 years).

All the killings, save the four most recent ones (in Algeria and Iraq), were the work of state agents. Given the small numbers, however, it cannot be determined whether a trend seen for the totality of history producers - namely that the political deaths of history producers were almost exclusively the result of state action before 1989 and mainly of non-state action after 1989 - is also applicable to the subset of archivists.

Many of the sixteen archivists were well-known national figures, among them Riazanov, Siemieński, Ringelblum and Kalmanovitch, and if we also include the collaborators, Pirchan, Bittner and Glaise von Horstenau. Most of the others seem to have been unknown outside their local context. Riazanov, Glaise von Horstenau and Stus had gained a reputation abroad, although the latter two not for their archival work. A few, like Ringelblum, von Rabenau and Stus, became more famous after rather than during their lives. Only in the Ringelblum case was this related to his archival initiatives, which received much posthumous admiration.

In seven cases, the motives for the killings were mainly political: Riazanov and Drezen were killed for deviating from the Stalinist line, Gerlich and von Rabenau for their militant opposition to Nazism, Siemieński for his Polish patriotism, Stus for his Ukrainian nationalism and Borbáth for his Transylvanian and Hungarian perspective. In another seven cases, religion played a major role: Azam, Sakhi and Gol sympathized with radical Muslim doctrines, while in contrast Aboulkacem died because of his perceived association with secularism. The deaths in Iraq were probably due in large part to religious intolerance of scholarship and learning. In two cases, ethnic-religious identity was the main motive: it meant death for the Jews Kalmanovitch and Ringelblum. More than once, motives were mixed. Stus's literary work and human rights activities converged with his political views and cannot be overlooked; Borbáth's fate was sealed due to the combination of activities for his church and for the Hungarian minority in Romania. And the political engagement of Ringelblum played a role on top of his Jewish identity.

Four out of the sixteen archivists were killed for reasons partly related to their archival work: Riazanov, Borbáth, Kalmanovitch and Ringelblum. This figure (25%), though drawn from a small sample, corresponds to proportions found for history producers in general. In another study, I estimated that the deaths of 30 out of 124 history producers killed for political reasons after 1945 (24.2%) had some substantial relationship to their historical

output.<sup>33</sup> Returning to the four archivists, Riazanov was spuriously charged with ‘wrecking activities on the historical front,’ a stigma that never left this leading archivist who paid for his unwillingness to compromise with his life. Borbáth’s care for the archives of his political-religious community was intolerable in Ceaușescu’s atheist state. In the best of Jewish traditions, Kalmanovitch and Ringelblum saw the collection and preservation of archives and the ceaseless documentation of the destruction of their people as a weapon of political struggle. They even perceived it as an *existential* duty: safeguarding the story of Jewish persecution for future generations from an insider perspective was itself a matter of life and death. Killing the record keepers or history producers, though, did not always prevent their legacy from spreading. This essay is intended as a tribute to that legacy.

---

33 DE BAETS, ‘Political murders of historians.’