

# The Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (HPSSS)



This remarkable online source provides transcripts of several hundred interviews in which ordinary Soviet citizens describe their experiences of the Stalin regime

It has never been easy to find English translations of good primary sources for the study of the Stalin era. The USSR was a profoundly secretive state. Before the opening of the archives in 1991, there didn't seem to be much to work with. A trickle of new document collections has been released since then, but one of the best and biggest collections has been around much longer, and strangely has almost been forgotten.

## What is HPSSS?

<https://hcl.harvard.edu:8001/collections/hpsss/index.html>

The Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (Google 'HPSSS') contains detailed transcripts of interviews with over 350 Soviet citizens who found themselves in American, British and French zones of occupation after the Second World War. The Nazis had transported thousands to Germany during the war to work as slave labour. After the war, the Allies sent many back, but with the beginning of the Cold War, they quickly grasped the value of better understanding the way the Soviet system worked by interviewing this broad cross-section of Soviet citizens. And so the Harvard Project was born.

Several significant books were published on the basis of the findings, including *The Soviet Citizen* (1959) and *How the Soviet System Works* (1956), both by Alex Inkeles and Raymond Bauer. However, the interviews themselves remained hidden away in the Harvard University Archives until about 10 years ago when they were digitised and subsequently made available online.



Forced labourers at a gulag (labour-camp) in Siberia, Soviet Union, during the 1930s

Since then, all the texts of the interviews with these hundreds of ordinary Soviet citizens, with immediate and direct experience of the Stalin regime, have been accessible for free on the Harvard website. It is an amazing source for teaching and learning about the Stalin era.

## How to work with HPSSS

The texts are keyword searchable from the index page of the site. If, for example, you're interested in collectivisation, you could type in 'kulak' (400 results) or 'kolkhoz' (2,010 results). For those interested in political repression, try 'NKVD' (3,455 results) or 'arrest' (1,092 results). Use your imagination!

My students at the University of Leeds have used the source to explore responses to Soviet propaganda, alcoholism and petty crime, attitudes to high politics, and many more topics. Whatever keywords you use, the site delivers results in a list that shows a short excerpt from the interview where that word or phrase appeared and key details about the interviewee, like age, occupation, gender and where they're from.



Russian famine in the 1930s: grain hidden by peasants, recovered by kolkhoz workers

This can provide some interesting food for thought. Who was more likely to have positive feelings about the regime — those from urban areas or rural areas? The older or younger? Those with more or less education? Keener students can also look at the questions the interviewers asked and think about the psychology of the Soviet refugee. Are there reasons why the questions might build in a bias, and the respondent might not want to be completely candid?

But nothing beats just wading in and reading the interviews themselves. 'Schedule A interviews' cover the individual's life history, aspects of his or her experiences and attitudes toward a range of topics. All the refugees were given the same set of questions, like 'What sources of information did you use to understand what was happening in the USSR?', 'How did you react to the announcement of the Nazi-Soviet Pact?', 'Were any of your friends or family members subject to arrest by the NKVD?' Responses can differ dramatically or be remarkably similar, but they are rarely dull, and excellent for provoking discussion in the classroom.

'Schedule B interviews' were more in-depth explorations of particular themes, including the economy, family, government, nationalities, education and the Second World War. They don't lend themselves to comparison, but the detail of the answers can be immensely revealing.

The index page of the site has much more detail on the history and content of the interview project, and very useful guides to help you navigate your way through it, but whether you want to carefully plan a research project, or throw yourself straight into keyword searches, HPSSS deserves to be brought out from its current obscurity.

Dr James Harris is senior lecturer in modern European history at the University of Leeds. He has edited *Anatomy of Terror: Political Violence Under Stalin*, Oxford University Press (2013), and co-edited *Stalin: A New History*, Cambridge University Press (2005). He is also an editor of [www.thehistoryfaculty.org/](http://www.thehistoryfaculty.org/), which gathers lectures and podcasts for schools and universities on a wide range of historical topics.



Independent farmers and their children queue to apply to join the local kolkhoz (collective farm) in 1930