

Preserving the Petrov Affair documents

This article is based on a talk given by Maggie Shapley at Old Parliament House on 9 March 2005 in conjunction with the exhibition 'The Petrov Affair'.

In May 1984 I was a relatively junior archivist at the National Archives – in fact I was on maternity leave and my now 21-year-old daughter, Kate, was just a few months old – when I was asked if I was interested in taking on the work of bringing the Petrov records into the Archives' custody. This might sound like it would be a quick job – sending a truck around to collect a few boxes – but there was more to it than that.

There were in fact two distinct groups of records – one group held in Canberra and the other in Melbourne. The Canberra records were held at the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C): the Administrative Arrangements Orders which are published in the Commonwealth Gazette set out the functions and legislation which each department is responsible for. The Royal Commissions Act is the responsibility of PM&C and so you would expect that department to have the records of Royal Commissions – and in this case the records of the Royal Commission on Espionage which was set up to investigate the evidence of espionage brought with the Petrovs when they defected in 1954.

The Melbourne records were held by Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) which was at the time located there and these were ASIO's own records about the Petrovs, the Royal Commission and witnesses who appeared before the Royal Commission.

For an archivist interested in the provenance of records – who created them and why – one of the first tasks was establishing whether what purported to be the records of the Royal Commission were *in fact* the records of the Royal Commission. This is usually fairly straightforward to establish: normally the records are located in the agency which created them and you can talk to staff about them, but with a defunct agency the staff are no longer there. But this is not a situation where documents are likely to be misrepresented – such as where private diaries of a famous person might be offered for sale to the highest bidder – although it is in your mind: is everything as you expect it to be? – as you undertake your first survey of the records.

I was also conscious of the need to preserve whatever 'original order' was apparent, keeping the records in the system in which they were created rather than reorganising them. I knew already that particular documents were significant, such as the infamous Document J, and was concerned that the context of documents may not have been preserved.

Before setting eyes on the records I read everything I could which was already on the public record: Hansard, the public version of the Report of the Royal Commission, the Petrovs' own book *Empire of Fear*, Michael Bialoguski's book *The Petrov Story*, Michael Thwaites' *Truth Will Out: ASIO and the Petrovs* and Nicholas Whitlam and John Stubbs book *Nest of Traitors: The Petrov Affair*. I should note here that all these books were published before 1984 so before the official records had been released – so even books written by ASIO insiders such as Bialoguski and Thwaites did not have the whole story. On the other hand, *The Petrov Affair: Politics and Espionage* by Robert Manne which was published in 1987 makes full use of the records of the Royal Commission and of ASIO records on the Petrovs and others. Any history book written within the 30-year 'closed period' will not rely on the official government records and will not be as comprehensive as a result.

The beginning of any 'arrangement and description' job is a survey – looking through the records, not reading all the records but looking for indications of provenance and 'original order': what's printed or written on the file covers, different formats such as files and index cards and notebooks, different systems of file numbers, whose signature blocks appear on the outgoing letters, whose initials are added to comments in the margins. You soon come to recognise the handwriting of the major players and to recognise their positions and personalities from the records.

So that was my first task with the Royal Commission records which were held in two security (B-class) four-drawer filing cabinets in the Edmund Barton Building in Canberra. Every day a PM&C officer would open the combination locks on the two cabinets before I could start work. Both Cabinets were jam-packed so one of my first tasks was identifying printed material which was already published which didn't need to be held in the security cabinets so that I could take it out and create some room to actually go through the other material.

The contents were as expected for a Royal Commission: a run of administrative files were the largest group of records, there were two series of exhibits, registers and various indexes to the exhibits, volumes of newspaper cuttings, and copies of the report and other reference material. The records were all in order – being held in secure cabinets they had not been moved about or disorganised.

Most of the files of the Royal Commission were about administrative arrangements for the running of the Royal Commission: organising hearings, exhibits and witnesses. One series of exhibits consisted of the documents that Petrov brought with him on his defection – controlled by letters A to J. Documents A to G were in Russian and in code, but these became very familiar to me because they were many copies of them in the files.

Documents A to F were photographic copies of typed documents with annotations, these in turn were photographed by ASIO officers and further photographic prints were made. There were additional series of literal translations and interpretations of exhibits A to G (ie decoded and translated into English), and even mock-up volumes of facsimile reproductions, as there was an intention to publish the original documents at one stage.

After the anticipation of reading documents H & J, the only documents Petrov brought that were in English, I was disappointed – many of the people named were unfamiliar to me – so Document J didn't live up to its promise of 'a farrago of facts, falsities and filth'. The Commission kept meticulous records of every copy made of these documents: not rivetting reading but an insight into the security which surrounded its operations.

The task of documenting the records then begins: identifying the distinct series – the administrative files, exhibits, registers etc – each one of which is given a number, describing the contents of the series and its physical attributes, then listing every file or volume within the series using the original file numbers given by the Royal Commission (or where there are none imposing a single number system). This process is for both intellectual and physical control. It is at this stage that you do get to read the files – not every word, but enough to ensure that the title on the file cover adequately reflects the contents of that file. The series information and the item identifications that I prepared in 1984 are now on the RecordSearch database on the National Archives website at naa.gov.au.

Records such as those of the Royal Commission are created with a particular purpose in mind – the efficient running of the Royal Commission – and so when the Commissioners barred Evatt from the Commission, the staff of the Royal Commission probably cursed the influx of protest mail: letters, telegrams and petitions from unions and other concerned citizens.

In fact the staff appear not to have replied to any of this mail, but for us these are some of the most interesting files the Royal Commission produced. Here is a microcosm of public opinion about the Petrov affair. These files demonstrate the research value of the Commission's records, which is additional to their value as a record of the government's action in response to the Petrovs' defection.

At the same time that I documented each item to be transferred, a colleague Jimmy Stewart followed behind me reading each item to assess its suitability for public release.

The Archives Act had been proclaimed on 6 June 1984 formalising the 30-year rule and the categories of exemptions: material could be withheld from public access after 30 years on various grounds such as damage to national security

or international relations, breach of confidence or unreasonable disclosure of personal affairs.

The Royal Commission operated from May 1954 till August 1955: under the 30-year rule the 1954 records would be due for release on 1 January 1985 and the 1955 records on 1 January 1986. Rather than release the records in two batches (and identify which records would be released in the each batch) it was decided that an accelerated release would be done. Another factor in this decision was that the documents Petrov had brought with him were dated 1949 to 1953 and were already technically eligible for public access had any member of the public requested them.

Various material was flagged which might be withheld under the exemption categories for consultation with the relevant agencies. In the end, very little was withheld from the Royal Commission records and nothing from Documents H and J which contained many unsubstantiated allegations.

Federal Cabinet considered possible exemptions from the release and as was reported to me at the time, a senior Archives officer was waiting outside the Cabinet room in case called on for advice, when Mick Young, a Minister in the Hawke government, emerged from the Cabinet room saying 'the sex stays in!' as he passed through the anteroom. In other words, the allegations of adultery and other sexual behaviour made in the documents would be released to the public.

The work on the Royal Commission records indicated that ASIO would also hold many relevant records in Melbourne and these would also need to be surveyed and documented so that they could be released with the Royal Commission records.

It was only in June 1984 that ASIO records became available for public access under legislation (ASIO is exempt from the Freedom of Information Act), so my visit there represented the beginning of the now regular dealings between the Archives and the organisation: on the one hand, the Archives with a culture of public access to records and on the other, ASIO which had never before been required to release records.

But as with the Royal Commission records, before ASIO records could come into the Archives the records needed to be surveyed and the series registered. So I set about the task as I had done many times before in other departments – asking Registry staff about their systems and then looking at the records themselves to gather the information I needed. This presented a few issues which needed to be resolved.

One thing I would normally do would be to record the first and last items in a series – so in a name index take note that the first entry might be Aarons and

the last Zachariah, or the first file number allocated and the last one. So this presented a problem in that ASIO were reluctant to reveal any of the names in the index or to release their file numbers to the public. This is on the grounds that over time, if file numbers were released, the nature of ASIO's interest in a particular person might be apparent just from the file number.

But for records to come to the Archives we needed to use a file number to identify them, and it was at this time that we set up a system of imposing a number – a single number for each file which is transferred from ASIO to the Archives. This system still operates – while the public can't peruse the ASIO name index, any member of the public can put forward a list of people that they are interested in and ASIO staff look up the name index and transfer records over 30 years old. There are two main series of ASIO files: personal files and subject files and at last count over 3,600 personal files and 2,400 subject files have come to the Archives.

It was also at this time that we put in place arrangements for deleting or expunging any exempt information from ASIO files: because file numbers and names of sources are routinely exempted this can affect every folio on a file. So we instituted a system which has had some refinements over the years but basically means that the original file stays in ASIO's custody and a complete copy is transferred to the Archives with exempt information removed.

The first files to be transferred to the Archives were the Petrovs' own files, and those of Bialoguski and witnesses to the Royal Commission, as well as ASIO's administrative records relating to Operation Cabin 12: arrangements for the Petrovs' defection and safety. As you would expect from an intelligence agency, ASIO are thorough recordkeepers and everything relating to Operation Cabin 12 is recorded.

Also on this visit some other Petrov-related records were identified. A series of gramophone discs of recordings of conversations between ASIO officer Richards and Petrov before he defected, conversations between Petrov and Bialoguski, and Richard's debriefing of Petrov after the defection. These were recorded on what we would now call a 'primitive recording device' and then re-recorded onto disk. Another component of this series was a series of recordings of parliamentary proceedings relating to the Petrov case. In fact the recording of parliamentary proceedings was illegal at the time, but the evidence that they were recorded is there.

Back in Canberra, another file came to light: the Prime Minister's office file on the Petrov affair. This had been held by Geoffrey Yeend, Secretary to PM&C, for safekeeping and appears to have passed from AS Brown, Secretary at the time of the defection, to John Bunting, and then to Yeend. Much of the file concerns the Christmas party that was held by the Royal Commission staff in 1954.

The Commissioners were invited and had dropped in to thank staff (at great personal inconvenience as it happened because the Bar Association dinner was on the same night) and were leaving as ASIO staff arrived with the Petrovs. This social contact between the Commissioners and witnesses to the Commission was not appropriate and the incident was taken very seriously by the Prime Minister's office. The Secretary to the Commission was asked by the Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department to answer a series of questions, which he answered, classifying the document as Top Secret.

Meanwhile, Eddie Ward, a Labor Member of Parliament, had heard about the party and was asking whether it was at government expense and whether guests were ferried about by Commonwealth vehicles. Even though Prime Minister Menzies clearly knew the answers to Ward's questions from the Secretary's report he equally clearly had no intention of replying to him. So Ward pursued Menzies over the next few weeks, sending telegrams to the Tennis Association Courts at White City and the Melbourne Cricket Ground where Menzies was attending sporting events. Menzies then left for overseas and left Artie Fadden as acting Prime Minister to deal with the flood of telegrams. Ward finally gave up in April 1955.

In September 1984 the Petrov records were released to the public and as anticipated there was much press interest. Journalists queued up to receive photocopied packs of the 'in camera' transcript of proceedings, the previously secret annexure to the Report of the Royal Commission, Documents H & J, and Cabinet submissions and decisions relating to the Petrov case.

While the records of the Royal Commission on Espionage and of ASIO reveal a great deal about the particular case of the Petrovs' defection, they also reveal other facets of life in Australia in the mid-1950s. There is a file in the Royal Commission's records which contains a draft list of the people that the Royal Commission proposed to send a copy of their report to. One can only imagine how Princess Margaret might have reacted, if she had received a parcel all the way from Australia and found that all it contained was a copy of the report of the Royal Commission on Espionage. I do hope that someone crossed her off the list!