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The lingering stench: airing Stalin's archives

by [Gary Saul Morson](#)

On *Inside the Stalin Archives* by Jonathan Brent.

As he wanders through the streets of St. Petersburg contemplating murder, the hero of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* notices "that special Petersburg stench" which seems to be everywhere. Somehow, that stench constitutes the atmosphere in which lethal and repulsive ideas arise.

When Jonathan Brent arrived in Moscow, he detected the same stench. It was 1992, just after the fall of the Soviet Union, and Brent seized a unique opportunity that, if not for him, would doubtless have been missed. He came to negotiate a deal to publish sensitive and secret documents from the Central Party Archives. But despite the new openness, the old Russian smell, or spirit—the Russian word *dukh* *dukh* means both—persisted. Brent noticed "the smell of Moscow—flat, unwashed, sour—an accumulation of fifty years without sunlight or cleansing breeze, as if inhering in the things themselves." ...

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