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Problems of Archive Volunteerism in Russia and Development Prospects

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Abstract: The author identifies the specifics of archive volunteerism in the Russian Federation. They reveal and explain including the existing problems in relations between archives and volunteers have been caused by both the lack of a regulatory framework for archive volunteerism and the specifics of the work of archive institutions; the article outlines possible ways to solve them. The author analyzes the current state of archive volunteerism in the Russian Federation based on the results of a survey of federal and state archives of the Russian Federation subjects, municipal archives, as well as the regulatory legal framework for this area of volunteerism. They give an analysis of the attitude of archives at three levels to the use of volunteer labor in the work of archival institutions. They identified the main areas of activity of archival institutions, which already involve volunteers, and the number of volunteers that archives need to work offline and then online using crowdsourcing IT platforms. The author explains why these particular areas of activity require the involvement of volunteers. There are considered reasons hindering the development of archive volunteerism and they outlined the ways to solve a number of identified problems and possible prospects for interaction between archives and volunteers. The author comes to the conclusion that the implementation of interrelated activities within the framework of a single concept for maintaining archive volunteerism will help bring this area of volunteerism to a level where it can provide real assistance to archives and become attractive to volunteers.

Keywords: archives, archival volunteering, archival document, information system, volunteer project, digitalization of archives

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Проблемы архивного волонтерства в России и перспективы развития

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Аннотация: Определяется специфика архивного волонтерства, выявляются и объясняются существующие проблемы во взаимоотношении архивов и волонтеров, вызванные как отсутствием нормативно-правовой базы архивного волонтерства, так и спецификой работы архивных учреждений, наметить возможные пути их решения. Проанализировано современное состояние архивного волонтерства в РФ на основе результатов анкетирования федеральных, государственных архивов субъектов РФ, муниципальных архивов, а также нормативной правовой базы данного направления добровольческой деятельности. Дан анализ отношения архивов трех различных уровней к вопросу об использовании волонтерского труда в работе архивных учреждений. Выявлены основные направления деятельности архивных учреждений, по которым уже привлекаются волонтеры, численность волонтеров, в которых нуждаются архивы для работы как *of line*, так и *on line* с использованием краудсорсинговых ИТ-платформ. Объяснено, почему именно эти направления деятельности нуждаются в привлечении труда волонтеров. Рассмотрены причины, препятствующие развитию архивного волонтерства, намечены пути решения ряда выявленных проблем и возможные перспективы взаимодействия архивов и волонтеров. Автор приходит к выводу, что реализация взаимосвязанных мероприятий в рамках единой концепции поддержания архивного волонтерства поможет вывести это направление добровольческой деятельности на тот уровень, когда оно сможет оказать реальную помощь архивам и станет привлекательным для самих волонтеров.

Ключевые слова: архивный документ, информационная система, волонтерский проект, цифровизация архивов

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Introduction

Relevance. The global community considers volunteering as an integral part of its societal structure, and this is confirmed by the national legislation of most European and CIS countries, which have adopted specific laws regulating the legal status of volunteers. The Russian Federation is no exception. The volunteer movement in the Russian Federation is regulated by federal laws, government decrees, and regulations of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation. The primary regulatory legal act governing the volunteer movement in Russia is Federal Law № 135-FZ of August 11, 1995 “On Charitable Activities and Volunteering.”¹ Since the volunteer movement in Russia is developing on an industry-specific basis, there have been adopted specialized laws

¹ “O blagotvoritel’noi deiatel’nosti i dobrovol’chestve (volonterstve): federal’nyi zakon ot 11.08.1995 № 135-FZ [On charitable activities and volunteerism (volunteering): Federal Law of August 11, 1995 No. 135-FZ],” *Zakonodatel’svo Rossii*, accessed August, 10, 2025, <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?-searchres=&bpas=cd00000&intelsearch=%D4%E5%E4%E5%F0%E0%EB%FC%ED%FB%E9+%E7%E0%EA%EE%ED+%EE%F2+11.08.1995+N+135-%D4%C7+&sort=-1>

for a number of volunteer areas, establishing the specifics of volunteers' participation in implementing relevant activities. However, the archival sector in the Russian Federation currently lacks industry-specific regulations for volunteering, which significantly hinders the development of archive volunteering in particular.

With modern society's ever-growing need for information, the digitization of archives in Russia has lagging far behind. Archives are gradually converting scientific reference materials (guides, archive reference books, and indexes) into electronic form². Digitization of archival documents is also underway. This process is slow and depends largely on the archives' technical capabilities and staffing level. In turn, the inaccessibility of information on archive websites leads to overcrowded reading rooms of archives, which have limited space, and an increase in the number of subject requests to the archives, a situation which thereby increases the workload of archivists. Volunteers that can provide real assistance to archives in addressing these and other issues; this fact is recognized by a significant part of the archive community.

Western Europe, Scandinavia, and the United States, where archive volunteering emerged as early as the 1950s, have considerable experience in organizing volunteer movement in the archive field. Since 2007, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) responsible for the preservation and management of federal archives and records, and has developed detailed procedures for involving, organizing, and supporting volunteers in archives³. These procedures can be studied and applied in the development of relevant national documents. It would also be useful to study inclusive practices of the United States and the United Kingdom in archive volunteering, including the organization of crowdsourcing projects.

Elaboration of the problem. Archive volunteering in the Russian Federation is now just emerging, as evidenced by the limited number of studies in Russian historiography devoted to international⁴ and, to some extent, domestic experience of archive volunteering primarily examining individual regional archives⁵ or within the general direction of cultural volunteering⁶. However, these studies have not addressed the existing problems of archive volunteering and the challenges faced by archives planning to involve volunteers.

Western historiography on this issue is significantly more diverse, but for the purpose of this study, the most informative studies are those that provide overviews. General overviews of the legal framework for the volunteer movement include

² M.A. Mamontova, "Toward the publication in Omsk of a handbook on prisoners of war of the First World War, 1914–1918," *Herald of an Archivist*, no. 2 (2025): 596–602, <https://doi.org/10.28995/2073-0101-2025-2-596-602>

³ National Archives and Records Administration, <https://www.archives.gov/files/about/policies/nara-1606.pdf>

⁴ N.N. Gorlova, L.I. Starovoitova, "Modern foreign experience of volunteer management in cultural institutions," *Culture and Education*, no. 1 (2020): 82–90, <https://doi.org/10.24411/2310-1679-2020-10110>

⁵ N.N. Gorlova, D.G. Makovetskaya, *Sbornik volonterskikh praktik v sfere kul'tury* [Collection of volunteer practices in the field of culture] (Moscow: Ministerstvo kul'tury Rossiiskoi Federatsii Publ., 2019); N.N. Gorlova, "Archival volunteering in the preservation of the memory of the past," *Otechestvennye Arkhivy*, no. 1 (2024): 36–42.

⁶ A.Yu. Gusarova, "At the archivists of Chuvashia." *Otechestvennye Arkhivy*, no. 6 (2022): 133; V.M. Komarov-Rasputin, "Archival volunteering: from the experience of the state archive of the Khanty-Mansiysk autonomous okrug – Yugra," *Herald of VNIIDAD*, no. 4 (2023): 93–99; M.N. Panteleychuk, "Organizing the volunteer activities in the state archives of the Novgorod region," *Herald of VNIIDAD*, no. 4 (2023): 100–107; L.Yu. Tyunterova, "Archival volunteering in the activities of the state historical archive of the Chuvash Republic," *Otechestvennye Arkhivy*, no. 6 (2023): 31–34.

K. Hadzi-Miceva's study "Comparative Analysis of the European Legal Systems and Practices Regarding Volunteering" and their review "Volunteering Legislation: Examples of European Countries," which presents three models for the development of volunteering in terms of legal frameworks⁷. The work of Stefan T. Güntert, Theo Wehner, and Harald A. Mieg entitled "Organizational, Motivational and Cultural Contexts of Volunteering is also on the subject. The European View" is devoted to the issues of organizing volunteer activities, motivating volunteers, and creating a unique psychosocial portrait of a volunteer⁸.

Of particular interest are the studies based on surveys of both archivists and volunteers conducted in various countries. These studies provide insight into aspects of volunteering abroad, practices of using volunteer labor and the problems related to it. An example is the results of the 2014 survey conducted by the Archives and Records Association (ARA) in the UK to examine volunteer practices. The questions asked focused on the types of work volunteers are permitted to do in archives, their motivations, and the benefits archives receive from volunteering. This survey followed the 2009 research of the National Archives Council (NAC), which was used in the report "Volunteering in Archives." The purpose of these surveys was to improve volunteering practices in the archive sector by expanding the range of volunteering opportunities, identifying areas of best practices in volunteering, and identifying existing challenges in the field⁹.

The results of the nationwide web survey in Australia are summarized in the article "Volunteers in Australian Archives" by Australian researchers A. Villiers, N. Laurent, and Ch. Stueven. Approximately half of Australia's archival institutions and the volunteers working in them participated in the survey, which allowed the determination of the composition of: the volunteer movement participants, their educational level, motivations, and archival institutions' attitude toward volunteers. The authors conclude that in Australia there is no comprehensive understanding of volunteering in the archival sector¹⁰.

One of the most recent studies was conducted by the Nordic Centre of Heritage Learning and Creativity AB (NCK) located in Sweden on the basis of a survey of archival institutions in 2024. The aim of the project "Volunteering at Archives – a mapping of volunteer management at archives in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden" was to examine the extent to which archives in Scandinavian countries including Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland, interact with volunteers, their attitudes toward volunteer work, and the training of archive volunteers. The paper presents four different national volunteer management systems in terms of organizing interactions between archival institutions at various levels and volunteers. They provide examples of

⁷ K. Hadzi-Miceva, "Comparative Analysis of the European Legal Systems and Practices Regarding Volunteering," *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law* 9, no. 3 (2007): 245–280; "Zakonodatel'stvo o volonterskoj deiatel'nosti na primere stran Evropy [Legislation on volunteering using the example of European countries]," LiveJournal, accessed, August, 10, 2025, <https://menta-kill.livejournal.com/190478.html>

⁸ S.T. Güntert, *Organizational, Motivational and Cultural Contexts of Volunteering. The European View*, accessed, August, 10, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92817-9>

⁹ Volunteering in Archives 2014, accessed, August, 10, 2025, https://www.voluntarysectorarchives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Volunteering_in_Archives_in_2014_Final.pdf

¹⁰ A. Villiers, N. Laurent, Ch. Stueven, "Volunteers in Australian archives," *Archives and Manuscripts*, July 45 (2017): 1–18.

volunteer work in each national system¹¹. Overall, the existing historiography of this issue shows that archive volunteering in different countries faces similar challenges. The experience gained during the existence of archive volunteering abroad requires studying and analyzing for its further application in the Russian Federation.

The purpose of the study is to identify the most common problems in the interaction between archival institutions and volunteers, to point out unresolved issues, and outline solutions for mutually beneficial collaboration between archives and volunteers, as well as the development of archive volunteering as a form of volunteering in the Russian Federation.

The source base of the study is Russian regulatory and legal acts, including federal legislation on volunteering and legal acts governing the activities of state and municipal archives. This study is based on questionnaires received from 14 federal, 119 state archives of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation, and 166 municipal archives on the issues of archives' interaction with volunteers and volunteer organizations. It also includes interviews with representatives of archival institutions at various levels in several regions, including Irkutsk, Lipetsk, Nizhny Novgorod, Rostov, Sakhalin, and Sverdlovsk Oblasts, the Chuvash Republic, Yakutia, the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, and some others.

Archive volunteering nowadays

While permeating various spheres of modern Russian society, volunteering also began to be practiced in the archive sector. However, the work of Russian archives is associated with certain specific activities that should be taken into account when organizing archive volunteering. First and foremost, it should be remembered that documents stored in archives are part of the Archival Fund of the Russian Federation and are of great material and cultural value. At the same time, information in archival documents may contain not only state, official, or commercial secrets, but, to a greater extent, information about individuals – their work activities, military service, personal correspondence, private health information, information of judicial secrecy, information on adoption, and other data, the disclosure of which could cause harm to them. A citizen's right to privacy, personal and family secrets, and the protection of their honor and good name are constitutional rights and are protected by Russian law¹².

The primary regulatory legal acts governing archival activities are Federal Law № 125-FZ of October 22, 2004, "On Archiving in the Russian Federation"¹³ and the "Rules for the Management of Storage, Acquisition, Accounting, and Use of Documents of the Archival Fund of the Russian Federation and Other Archival Documents

¹¹ Wollentz G., Kuhlefeldt H., Eriksson-Bergström S. et al. Volunteering at Archives – a mapping of volunteer management at archives in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. – The Nordic Centre of Heritage Learning and Creativity AB (NCK), Sweden. – January 2024, accessed, August, 12, 2025, https://nckkultur.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Volunteering-at-archives-Report_final.pdf

¹² "Konstitutsii Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Constitution of the Russian Federation],” Ofitsial'nyi internet-portal pravovoi informatsii, accessed August, 10, 2025, <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?searchres=&bpas=c-d00000&intelsearch=%CA%EE%ED%F1%F2%E8%F2%F3%F6%E8%E8+%D0%EE%F1%F1%E8%E9%F1%EA%EE%E9+%D4%E5%E4%E5%F0%E0%F6%E8%E8+%&sort=-1>

¹³ "Ob arkhivnom dele v Rossiiskoi Federatsii: federal'nyi zakon ot 22 oktyabrya 2004 g. № 125-FZ [On archival affairs in the Russian Federation: Federal Law of October 22, 2004 No. 125-FZ],” Ofitsial'nyi internet-portal pravovoi informatsii, accessed August, 10, 2025, <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102089077>

in State and Municipal Archives, Museums and Libraries, and Organizations of the Russian Academy of Sciences” (hereinafter referred to as the Rules)¹⁴. The “Rules” were developed in accordance with Federal Law No. 125 and contain general provisions governing the activities of archives at all levels. However, neither Federal Law No. 125 nor the Rules currently regulating the activities of archival institutions address issues of archive interaction with volunteers and volunteer organizations, the permissible degree of their involvement in archival work, or the forms of such work. This prevents archives from legally involving volunteers in the work with documents.

Currently, there is no unified vertical management structure for archives in the Russian Federation. According to the Regulations on the Federal Archival Agency¹⁵, the Federal Archival Agency of Russia manages only federal state archives; for other archives, the Federal Archival Agency of Russia provides only methodological guidance. In turn, state archives in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation are subordinate to local governments, mostly to archival committees or ministries of archives of the region, as well as to ministries of culture or ministries of culture and archives, and in some regions to the department of justice, civil registry office, and the administrative department of the region. Municipal archives are subordinate to local governments. Departmental archives, the document contents of which are not always fully known, are managed by their respective departments¹⁶. In addition to official archives, there are also personal and family archives and private collections, whose documents may also be of historical value¹⁷. For these documents to be included in the archival fund, they are to be transferred to the state archives, but first they are to be appropriately processed and described; volunteers can greatly assist in this.

The varied subordination of archives and lack of a common legal document for the archival sector that would outline the basic principles governing volunteer work in archives has led to the adoption of local regulations in several regions of the Russian Federation. However, in the absence of a unified strategy for developing archive volunteering, these regulations are of general character and lack specific provisions regarding the areas and types of work that volunteers can perform in archives, time limits for archivists supervising their work, etc¹⁸. Furthermore, it is not determined which docu-

¹⁴ “Pravila organizatsii khraneniia, komplektovaniia, ucheta i ispol’zovaniia dokumentov Arkhivnogo fonda Rossiiskoi Federatsii i drugikh arkhivnykh dokumentov v gosudarstvennykh i munitsipal’nykh arkhivakh, muzeiakh i bibliotekakh, nauchnykh organizatsiakh: utv. prikazom Federal’nogo arkhivnogo agentstva ot 2 marta 2020 g. № 24 [Rules for organizing the storage, acquisition, accounting, and use of documents of the Archival Fund of the Russian Federation and other archival documents in state and municipal archives, museums and libraries, and scientific organizations: approved by order of the Federal Archival Agency dated March 2, 2020, No. 24],” *Ofitsial’nyi internet-portal pravovoi informatsii*, accessed, August, 10, 2025, <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102737255>

¹⁵ “Polozhenie o Federal’nom arkhivnom agentstve: Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 22 iyunia 2016 g. № 293 [Regulations on the Federal Archival Agency: Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of June 22, 2016 No. 293],” *Federal’noe arkhivnoe agentstvo*, accessed, August, 10, 2025, <https://archives.gov.ru/documents/position/pologenie-rosarchive.shtml>

¹⁶ I.S. Solovenko, “On the issue of the source base for the history of digitalization of enterprises of the fuel and energy complex of Russia (the turn of the 20th–21st centuries),” *Tomsk State University Journal of History*, no. 93 (2025): 86–93, <https://doi.org/10.17223/19988613/93/11>

¹⁷ I.V. Sabennikova, “Personal Archives and Their Transformation in Digital Era,” *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 21, no. 2 (2022): 251–257, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2022-21-2-251-257>

¹⁸ “Prikaz Sluzhby po delam arkhivov Khanty-Mansiiskogo avtonomnogo okruga – Iugry ot 10.04.2024 № 28-Pr-39 «Ob utverzhdenii Plana meropriiatii (dorozhnoy karty) po realizatsii dobrovol’cheskoi (volonter-skoy) deiatel’nosti v sfere arkhivnogo dela na territorii Khanty-Mansiyskogo avtonomnogo okruga – Iugry

ments regulate the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of both interacting parties – the archive and the volunteer who is allowed to work with archival documents.

The desire to understand what in fact is archival volunteering, archives' attitude toward it, as well as the need to establish legitimate interaction between archives, volunteers, and volunteer organizations, thereby facilitating the systematic development of this area of volunteer activity, inspired a research project conducted by the All-Russian Archival Science and Records Management Research Institute (VNIIDAD) in 2025¹⁹. As part of this project, a survey was conducted among 14 federal, 119 state archives of constituent entities of the Russian Federation, and 166 municipal archives to clarify the current situation. The analysis of the questionnaires and direct communication with archivists representing archival institutions at various levels revealed that a very small percentage of archives at all levels currently collaborate with volunteers. Thus, the analysis of the questionnaires received from federal archives reveals that only four federal archives (the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RGADA), and the Russian State Archive (RGA) in Samara) have experience with archive volunteering. The remaining ones, which lack such experience, were roughly evenly divided on the expediency of involving volunteers in archival work. 30 of the 119 surveyed state archives in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation have experience in archival volunteering, including the state archives of: Arkhangelsk, Rostov, Sakhalin, Sverdlovsk, and Ulyanovsk Oblasts, the Chuvash Republic, the Khanty-Mansi and Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrugs, and others. A quarter of the archives, have no such experience, but do plan to involve volunteers in the future. Half of the surveyed state archives do not plan to involve volunteers. Of the 166 questionnaires received from the municipal archives, only 20 contained information about archive volunteering. Among them are the archival departments of the administration of: the Kovdorsky municipal district of the Murmansk Oblast, the Suzunsky district of the Novosibirsk Oblast and the Berezovsky district of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, the municipal archive of the city of Surgut, etc.

Participants and main areas of archive volunteering in the Russian Federation

Direct communication with archivists revealed that it is students from specialized universities with whose administrations the archive have already established some form of ties are also the archives that primarily invite as archive volunteers. For

na 2024 g.» [Order of the Archival Service of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug – Yugra dated April 10, 2024 No. 28-Pr-39 “On approval of the Action Plan (roadmap) for the implementation of volunteer activities in the field of archival affairs in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug – Yugra for 2024”], Federal’noe arkhivnoe agentstvo, accessed, August, 10, 2025, <https://archivesl.admhmao.ru/dokumenty/prik/10074767/>; “Polozhenie o dobrovol’cheskoi (volonterskoi) deiatel’nosti v OGKU «Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Irkutskoi oblasti» i ego filialakh [Regulations on volunteer activities in the State Archives of the Irkutsk Region and its branches],” accessed August, 10, 2025, <https://гаио.рф/upload/iblock/146/dcdsjw27ksda2licc80v2v9og5z6f-be8.pdf>; “Ob utverzhenii Kontseptsii razvitiia dobrovol’cheskoi (volonterskoi) deiatel’nosti v Arkhangel’skoi oblasti na 2019–2024 gody i plana ee realizatsii na 2019–2024 gody [On approval of the Concept for the Development of Volunteer Activities in the Arkhangelsk Region for 2019–2024 and the plan for its implementation for 2019–2024],” Elektronnyi fond pravovykh i normativno-tehnicheskikh dokumentov, accessed August, 10, 2025, <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/462641297>

¹⁹ Topic 1.3 of the VNIIDAD R&D Plan “Archival volunteering and crowdsourcing archival projects – Russian and foreign experience”.

example, a university is a source of archive acquisitions, or an archive employee teaches at the university. In some cases, university professors work in the archive's reading room as researchers. If a researcher is interested in faster access to the reference apparatus (search means) by converting inventories of a particular collection into electronic form, they can become a volunteer. There are also cases of employees of local history museums volunteering in the archives, who provide their materials (documents and photographs) for creating archival online exhibitions on the history of a region or city; of additional interest is the case of involving former government officials (city party committee employees) registered with the archive as archival volunteers to annotate photo documents (identifying faces in photographs).

There is no ongoing effort to recruit volunteers, either by federal or state entities of the Russian Federation or by municipal archives. The experience of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug – Yugra is an exception. There the Archives Service, as the executive body, develops an annual consolidated action plan to promote volunteering in the Okrug's archival work. As a result, the Okrug's archives have implemented projects such as “Characters of Newspaper Articles” (searching for information about veterans of the Great Patriotic War), “Yugra Archival Dictation” (promoting history through archival documents), and “Feats of Yugra Residents” (collecting documents about war veterans).

A unified approach to training archive volunteers for archival work has not yet been developed. Typically, archives that recruit volunteers may offer introductory lectures on the main areas of the archive's work, the contents of the archive's documents, and the particular work for which volunteers are involved. Most often, this is an hour-long introductory lecture. Involving volunteers for online work, for example, through the automated information system (AIS) “Velikiye Opisi” frees archives not only from searching for and selecting volunteers, registering them for archival work, and monitoring compliance with numerous regulations, such as fire safety, document preservation, and so on, but also from the need for training. Training is reduced to compiling and posting instructions in the AIS for performing a particular type of work (for example, converting an archive's search means into a machine-readable format, indexing and transcribing handwritten texts, etc.).

When organizing archive volunteering, the responsibility of supervising and monitoring volunteers typically falls on the specialized archive department, where volunteers work. As a result, archivists find themselves in the role of volunteers as well, in addition to their main duties, identifying and selecting documents for volunteers to work with, while supervising and monitoring their work. They are often forced to work overtime (after work and on weekends) for free.

An example is the “It is a monument” project of the Ulyanovsk Oblast State Archive. The project's goal was to draw attention to the crumbling noble estate. The volunteers were high school and university students, and in fact, the archivists also participated in the project after working hours for free. The archivists identified and selected documents from the archive's collections, scanned them, prepared the history reference; the volunteers took photographs of the estate in its current state, and filmed a three-minute video of an impromptu costume ball amid the ruins. This video, along with photographs of the crumbling building, was sent to a higher authority. The example shows that the main burden of the project implementation fell on the archive staff

(identifying, selecting, copying, compiling archival information, training volunteers, weekend trips out of town), who acted as volunteer archivists.

Archives traditionally have four main areas of activity: acquiring new documents, ensuring document preservation and accounting, organizing search means on the composition and contents of archival documents, and utilizing archival documents (fulfilling requests, publishing and exhibition activities, and informational events). The comparison of the responses of archives that involved archive volunteers to the questions “In which areas of archive activity do volunteers participate?” and “In which areas of activity has volunteering brought the greatest benefit to the archive?” provides insight into the areas in which archivists consider volunteer work to be most effective.

According to the state archives, the greatest benefit is in the area of use (archive promotion, exhibitions, informational events, etc.) and in the area of search means (indexing of file titles²⁰, manual entry of information from traditional reference books into the database, and, less commonly, compiling geographical, name, and subject indexes, and assisting with document converting). In the area of preservation, volunteers typically handle the moving of documents and storage media, dust removal, digitization, and other tasks. Archivists assess volunteers’ contributions to the acquisition and preservation as moderately useful. Accounting remains the least productive area of volunteer activity and is limited to converting existing accounting documents into machine-readable format. It is volunteers involved in archival projects through volunteer organizations, such as the all-Russian volunteer platform Dobro.ru or the AIS “Velikiye Opisi” and ArkhivNO that are the most effective in improving the archives’ search methods.

13 of the 119 state archives surveyed in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation and 4 of the 166 municipal archives conduct long-term (over a year) volunteer projects as organizers or co-organizers. The main focus of these projects is archive digitization, preserving the memory of the Great Patriotic War, and local history. Archival digitization projects include document digitization and the creation of electronic collections, electronic databases and card indexes, document search optimization, and the verification of digitized materials. The projects to preserve the memory of the Great Patriotic War include the study of frontline letters and documents, the creation of databases on war veterans, and patriotic education of young people. Local history projects focus on the study of: regional history, preserving the memory of local heroes, genealogy, and the promotion of cultural heritage.

Volunteer projects initiated by archives typically span several areas of archives’ work. Projects often intertwine activities related to the acquisition, compilation, and improvement of archives’ search means and the use of archival documents, such as exhibitions, informational events, etc.

Archives’ need for volunteers

The number of volunteers that archives consider appropriate to involve varies from 1 to 20, largely determined by an archive’s organizational capacity and the number of full-time staff. Involving a larger number of volunteers is possible through the use of an information system that allows for remote interaction with volunteers, primarily for the purpose of converting the archive’s digitized reference apparatus (search

²⁰ Indexing is the assignment of metadata that allows one to quickly classify, sort, and search for information in an archive without viewing the document.

means) into machine-readable format for posting on an archive's website for wider use. These volunteers work with scanned copies of inventories or documents provided through online platforms without access to the original archival documents. Often, the archives provide open-access archival documents in machine-readable format for the most sought after by users – parish registers, census records, and other documentary sources containing genealogical information. This is due to the current high demand for genealogy²¹. Genealogy is also expanding in terms of contents; in addition to reconstructing family trees and constructing genealogical charts, genealogy increasingly deals with comprehensive regional and local research using online resources. In order to relieve some of their burden, archives are interested in converting documents containing genealogical information into electronic format. Genealogical researchers, experienced in using documents can participate in archival projects as volunteers.

One of the most successful crowdsourcing projects of this kind is the online project “Your Genealogy” initiated by the Astrakhan Oblast State Archive. Video tutorials and instructions for indexing genealogical documents prepared by the archive are available for volunteers on the project portal. It is expected that 29,000 items (approximately 2 million electronic copies) of the Astrakhan Oblast State Archive will become available to users, allowing them to search for their ancestors.

When implementing projects involving archive volunteers, archives most often use the federal all-Russian volunteer platform *Dobro.ru*. They publish information about archive volunteer projects and accrue volunteer hours to volunteers who register on the platform, which serves as a motivating factor for volunteers to participate in archival projects.

Crowdsourcing projects can be initiated not only by archives, but also by public associations or even individual researchers having necessary funding. For example, the “My History” project was initiated by the All-Russian public movement “Volunteers of Victory” in collaboration with the Russian State University for the Humanities²². In this project volunteers assist citizens in finding the information they need in archives, participate in various events on genealogical issues, and provide consultations on making a family tree. At the Main Archival Administration of Moscow archivists hold seminars for volunteers – on making a family tree, seeking information using search means of an archive, and working with genealogical sources²³. State archives from the Altai Krai, Tver, Tula, Omsk²⁴, Orenburg, Yaroslavl, and other oblasts participated in the project. In 2024, the “My History” online platform was launched, and the Historical Memory Center was established to coordinate activities on this project²⁵. The platform allows conducting consultations with experts (including archivists) on: making a family tree,

²¹ I.V. Sabennikova, “Theory of O.M. Medushevskaya’s cognitive history: precise knowledge in humanities and professional choice of academic community,” *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 23, no. 2 (2024): 244–252, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2024-23-2-244-252>

²² Ofitsial’nyi sait Vserossiiskogo dvizheniia «Volontery pobedy» [Official website of the All-Russian movement “Volunteers of Victory”], accessed August, 10, 2025, <https://волонтерыпобеды.рф/directions/my-story>

²³ Ofitsial’nyi sait Glavnogo arkhivnogo upravleniia g. Moskvy [Official website of the Main Archival Administration of Moscow], accessed August, 10, 2025, <https://cgamos.ru/events/e32023/>

²⁴ “Volontery pomogut omicham uznat’ svoiu rodoslovnuiu [Volunteers will help Omsk residents discover their family tree.],” 12. Omskoe oblastnoe televidenie, accessed August, 10, 2025, <https://12-kanal.ru/news/27395/?ysclid=m9v82255mt43704966>

²⁵ “Zapusk platformy “Moia istoriia” daet shans sozdat’ istoriiu roda [The launch of the “My History” platform provides an opportunity to create a family history],” Rossiiskaia gazeta, accessed August, 10, 2025, <https://rg.ru/2024/04/08/semjnoe-drevo-onlajn.html>

creating archival collections of personal photographs, listening to online lectures and podcasts on genealogy, and provides access to teaching materials for educational institutions to organize memory lessons. Currently, 73 regions of the Russian Federation are involved in the “My History” project.

An example of a crowdsourcing project initiated by an individual researcher is the “Archive Volunteer” project, implemented by T.V. Maksimova (co-founder of the Interregional Public Organization “Archival Watch”) in the Moscow region. The project has published eight reference books on the Zvenigorod and Podolsk uyezds of the Moscow Governorate, as well as the consolidated directory “Reference Apparatus of Russian Archives. Monitoring 2020”²⁶ for those interested in historical geography, local history, and family genealogy. Another example of a crowdsourcing project created independently, without the participation of volunteer associations, is Mikhail Bolonichev’s “Military commissariat” project in the Nizhny Novgorod Oblast²⁷. By the beginning of 2025, the project had digitized, indexed, and systematized archival materials on veterans of the Great Patriotic War in 17 of the 20 districts of the Nizhny Novgorod Oblast, and over a thousand military commissariats’ files of 1918–1947 are available for public access at <https://bolonichev.ru/voenkomat/>.

The survey revealed that involving volunteers in archive work is hampered by: a lack of regulatory and methodological support for this new field of activity, a lack of volunteers’ professional training, the difficulty of ensuring the preservation of documents (responsibility for which lies on archivists), the probability of making errors in indexing and describing by volunteers, and the risk of their uncontrolled copying of documents and unofficial posting online or other illegal use, as well as the unauthorized dissemination of restricted information.

Other factors noted by archives as limiting the development of archive volunteering include resource constraints, such as lack of time and staff to organize volunteer work (particularly in municipal archives), lack of space for them in an archive, and funding issues. Of significance are also technical difficulties: archives lack an information system for volunteers to work online on archives’ projects. One should also mention the short-term nature and instability of work of volunteers, for whom this type of work is not their primary focus and not particularly attractive.

When volunteers are involved in the work in archives, archivists, in addition to their employment duties, are responsible for selecting and controlling volunteers, conducting health and safety training, training them for work with archival documents, and overseeing the use of equipment (for example, when volunteers are involved in scanning archival documents). Volunteer training, making instructions, and writing training materials to familiarize volunteers with archival document handling procedures also remain the responsibility of full-time archival staff. These activities are currently not considered in archival staff time standards²⁸ or included in payroll. Therefore, archives currently lack incentives to develop them.

²⁶ Proekt «Arkhivnyi volonter» [The Archive Volunteer Project], Dobro.rf, accessed, August, 10, 2025, <https://dobro.ru/project/10009401>

²⁷ See the website “Mikhail Bolonichev”, accessed August, 10, 2025, <https://bolonichev.ru>

²⁸ “Tipovye normy vremeni i vyrabotki na raboty (uslugi), vypolnyaemye (okazyvaemye) gosudarstvennymi i munitsipal’nymi arkhivami [Standard time and output standards for work (services) performed (provided) by state and municipal archives],” Federal’noe arkhivnoe agentstvo, accessed August, 10, 2025, <https://archives.gov.ru/documents/other/2022-typovye-normy-vremeni.shtml>

Conclusion

Despite the existing difficulties, archive volunteering in the Russian Federation is not only possible, but it already exists and is continuing to develop. There are people willing to work as archive volunteers; initiative volunteering projects are being implemented. In addition, several regional archives have launched archive volunteering programs, the “Velikiye Opisi” and “ArkhivNO” automated information systems, and the all-Russian volunteer platform “Dobro.ru” are currently operating. The analysis of the materials sent by the archives and an overview of archivists’ work in developing and implementing existing volunteer projects also demonstrate that archive volunteering certainly has potential. However, for the successful development of archive volunteering in the Russian Federation, coordination of this area of volunteer activity at both the federal and regional levels is essential. A set of interconnected measures, including: the creation of a regulatory and methodological framework for archive volunteering, planning volunteer activities in archives at all levels, organizing appropriate funding for archive activities in this area, providing subsidies and grants for the development of innovative projects for the digitization of archival heritage, and creating a nationwide platform for hosting crowdsourcing projects on archive volunteering will make it possible to bring archive volunteering to a qualitatively new level. Implementing these measures within a unified concept will provide tangible assistance to archives.

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