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Preserving History in the Russian State Historical Archive

Relocation Concerns Led to Digitalization Solution



In 2006, the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) in St. Petersburg was in the midst of planning one of the largest archive relocations ever endeavored. In addition to the normal concerns encountered in a move of such large proportion, RGIA was faced with the critical task of securing the archive's collection of over 7.5 million items.

RGIA's new location in St. Petersburg

RGIA holds the major records of high-level and central state institutions and agencies of the Russian Empire from the nineteenth century to 1917 (except the records of the Army, Navy, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Further consolidation of earlier archives brought additional records and documents of pre-revolutionary social organizations, institutions, and many prominent individuals.

The archive's collection, dating from the 19th century to 1917, was organized in files, each file containing hundreds of source documents. For each file there was one, single paper-based catalog document, many of which were hand-written and barely legible. The loss of even one of these catalog documents in the relocation could render scores of archived items useless as they could no longer be reorganized into the collection.

In order to avoid this logistical nightmare, the RGIA archivists came to the decision to digitalize all of the catalog documents while the new RGIA building was still under construction. An Invitation of Tenders was made and the contract finally awarded to the company ProSoft, a member of the Electronic Archive Corporation. Prosoft's many years of experience in scanning mass volumes of documents

as well as their proven handling of delicate, valuable documents was one selling point. But it was their offer to complete the task of digitalizing 2.5 million catalog documents within six months, the shortest possible processing time for this very high volume, which led to Prosoft's winning the contract.

Specialists from Prosoft first examined the documents to determine the size, legibility and condition of the catalogs to determine the specific technical require-

ments for the project. The result was five networked book scanners and workstations, placed directly in the RGIA Reading Room. RGIA archivists simply handed over the catalogs for scanning and did a final check to ensure that the catalogs were complete after digitalization.

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Five ELAR PLANSCAN* planetary scanners were implemented, enabling safe scanning of the originals from above, without pressure on the documents by a glass plate.



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* ELAR PLANSCAN is an OEM brand-name in Russia for the Bookeye® bookscanner.



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