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‘There Is No Alms to Live by, Everyone as Poor as the Next.’ The Activities of the Tsesarevich's Special Committee in the Context of the ‘All-Russian Ruin’ of 1891-1892

Abstract

The famine of 1891-1892, known in the modern Russian historiography as the ‘all-Russian ruin’ of early 1890s, on the one hand, revealed the shortcomings of the state food policy, the carelessness of the gubernia authorities and local self-government bodies, the imperfection of principles underlying the food system, and on the other hand, caused an unprecedented rise of social forces, which translated into unprecedented activity of the Russian charity. At the head of all the charitable assistance was the Special Committee, chaired by the Heir Tsesarevich. Its purpose was to create conditions for unity of action of all charitable institutions. In the various

gubernias most affected by the crops failure, the Committee consistently provided assistance: purchased food, funded seeding of the fields, fodder, handicrafts and public works, assistance to burned-out peasants, and medical assistance. In these spending activities, private parties from nobility took an active part; their active participation in the assistance to the famine victims provided a significant support to the government combating the consequences of the crop failure and the famine of 1891-1892. Free public canteens (stolovayas) were organized everywhere, home industry was organized for women and children. Public need rallied both nobility and peasants in a common struggle against the famine. But afterward, hopes for class unity were disappointed. This was largely due to the Russian peasant mentality with its belief in a free ‘tsar’s ration’ and landlords’ duty to feed them. Generally speaking, the Special Committee achieved its goal. The food campaign of 1891-1892 became a people's struggle with want and famine.

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Keywords

Historical source, archival document, Special Committee, famine, charity, donations.

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