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The Testimony of the Russian Consul in Koenigsberg Zinovii M. Polyanovsky about His Stay in German Captivity (1914-15)

Abstract

The article brings into circulation the investigatory records of the “Extraordinary Commission for Inquiry into Violations of Laws and Customs of War by the Austro-Hungarian and German Forces” concerning German captivity of the former Russian consul in Koenigsberg Zinovii Mikhailovich Polyanovsky. With the outbreak of World War I, many Russian citizens who did not have time to leave Germany and Austria-Hungary were detained by local authorities on suspicion of espionage. Z. M. Polyanovsky, as a Russian diplomat, was their primary goal: he

was detained on the very first day of the war. German authorities agreed to release Z. M. Polyanovsky only in exchange for their consul in Kovno, Baron G. M. von Lerchenfeld. Initially, the Russian General Staff strongly opposed letting go of a man who knew about the internal state of the Kovno fortress, but after losing Kovno agreed to do the exchange. Z. M. Polyanovsky returned to Petrograd in early October 1915, his arrival attracted the attention of the Petrograd press, and in December 1915 he was invited to the Extraordinary Investigation Commission to testify. The case of Z. M. Polyanovsky is noteworthy for several reasons. Firstly, it was quite rare for its time: most of the interned Russian tourists and diplomats were released by the end of 1914. The remaining ones were especially valuable prisoners, whom the Germans and Austrians agreed to release only with an equivalent exchange. Secondly, a rare example of documented evidence on the life of Russian subjects in Germany at the beginning of the war has been found: the bulk of such evidence was published in the press and in various propaganda brochures. Thirdly, bringing in and interrogation of Z. M. Polyanovsky demonstrates the mechanism of work of the Extraordinary Investigation Commission: obtaining information on the witness of war crimes from the press, searching for him with the help of the police, and inviting to interrogation. Finally, the investigatory records are one of the few documentary sources on the life of the diplomat Z. M. Polyanovsky after his return from the German captivity.

Keywords

Archival document, historical source, Russia, Germany, World War I, consulate, Koenigsberg, Zinovii Mikhailovich Polyanovsky

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