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“Kind Advice of a Competent Writer-Scientist and Warm Compassion of a Kind Sympathetic Person”: V. D. Ulrich’s Letters to V. I. Semevsky (1893–1905) as a Historical Source

Abstract

The article publishes letters of the Riga Social Democrat, publicist and translator Vasily D. Ulrich addressed to the prominent Narodnik historian and public figure Vasily I. Semevsky. They are of considerable interest to researchers. They help to trace with an unbiased eye the specifics of interpersonal communication between a Marxist and a Narodnik during active discussions that unfolded between these movements in the 1890s and were identified in the Soviet historiographical tradition as an ideological defeat of the Narodniks. Alongside with the principle of historicism, the authors have applied the method of biographical analysis, which made it possible to explore the life paths of the correspondent and his addressee. The archeographic method has permitted to compile a historical description of the archival collection and to publish a number of letters dating 1893?1905. The letters are kept in the personal provenance fond of the Narodnik historian in the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences located in Moscow. The beginning of the correspondence dates back to May 17, 1893; it ended on December 30, 1905. The archive file includes 20 letters from Ulrich to Semevsky (51 sheets). Reasons for termination of the correspondence are unknown. It could have been Ulrich’s going underground as a member of the Riga committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party or his loss of utilitarian interest in the addressee. Chronologically, the correspondence can be divided into three periods: prior to the correspondent’s arrest, during Ulrich’s exile to Ilimsk, and after his return to the European part of Russia. The letters cover such issues as writing opinions and reviews on Ulrich’s works on the liberation of the Ostsee peasants; problem of early Marxists’ materialistic approach to history; joining the “Union of Mutual Assistance of Russian Writers” and discussing the its Charter; sending books to Ulrich in his exile and petitioning the authorities to improve his life conditions; seeking additional earnings; representing his interests in the censorship commission; functioning of the Literary Fund; describing the provincial socio-cultural atmosphere; Semevsky’s lobbying for publication of translated Marxist literature. The letters show great tact and benevolent attitude of the convinced Riga Marxist to his addressee. Ulrich’s letters to Semevsky are a valuable source of personal provenance, reflecting nature, forms, and specifics of non-public communication between the representatives of Marxism and Populism at the turn of the 20th century and awaiting its researcher and publisher.

Keywords

Historical source, personal provenance fond, V. I. Semevsky, V. D. Ulrich, Narodnichestvo, Marxism, censorship, Literary Fund

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