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“Money Thieves” in Russia: On the History of Counterfeiting in the Kursk Gubernia in the
Second Half of the 19th – Early 20th Century

Abstract

The study and analysis of archival documents allows the authors to conclude that in the Kursk

gubernia of the second half of the 19th – early 20th century there acted solitary criminals, producing and distributing counterfeit money independently, as well as criminal groups. Source base of the study is materials of the State Archive of the Kursk Region and those of the State Archive of the Russian Federation. The following methods have been used in the research: chronological, comparative-legal, method of synthesis, analysis and systematization. The study is to determine the specifics of the development of counterfeiting in the Kursk gubernia in the second half of the 19th - early 20th century. The novelty of the study is due to introduction of previously unused archival materials and use of comprehensive approach. The first counterfeiters appeared in the Russian state simultaneously with single monetary system formation. As this socially dangerous phenomenon developed, a mechanism was created to counteract the counterfeiting trade. It included legal and organizational measures. In the Council Code (Sobornoye Ulozheniye) of 1649 there was a chapter devoted entirely to protection of coins from forgery. Counterfeiting in Russia gained momentum in the second half of the 19th – early 20th century in the heyday of professional crime, when a tight-knit and well-consolidated “caste” of professional criminals was formed, including criminal community of professional counterfeiters. In the Code of Criminal and Correctional Punishments of 1845, forgery of a “exterior minted” coin was cited, tools and methods of counterfeiting banknotes were detailed. The Criminal Code of 1903 prohibited manufacture and sale of counterfeit money on professional basis (as a livelihood). Legal measures against counterfeiting were supplemented by organizational ones, such as creation of the Special Archive of Certificates on Cases of Manufacture and Sale of Counterfeit Money at the St. Petersburg District Court, and by educational work among the population on ways to recognize genuine money. However, counterfeiting was developing not only in major cities of the empire, but also in the Russian provinces, as numerous archival data proves. Counterfeit banknotes, as a rule, were passed off in urban areas (for example, in Oboyan, Kursk), which allowed criminals to evade criminal prosecution for a long time. Both paper money and coins were subject to falsification. They were produced by drawing, printing, coinage copying, casting, changing the ratio of precious and base metals in coin alloy. Special devices were often used to manufacture counterfeit money. However, the counterfeiters were not professionals of their craft, and thus counterfeit money were easily detected and recognized by law enforcement officers and population.

Keywords

Historical sources, archival documents, counterfeiting, counterfeiters, coins, professional criminals, counterfeit money, criminal professionalism, falsification, monetary system.

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