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Private letters of Siberian exiles about the 'Turukhansk revolt': 1908–1912

Abstract

The article studies the Turukhansk region as a territory with distinct climatic conditions and, consequently, with distinctive state management institutions and does so in the context of modernization processes of late 19th – early 20th century. This part of the Yenisei gubernia having become a region of mass exile after the First Russian Revolution of 1905–1907, its integration into a general system of management slowed down. Private letters of exiles are an important historical source, they reveal many aspects of the daily life of the persons under supervising in the inter-revolutionary period. The 'Turukhansk revolt' in the winter of 1908/09 revealed not only the ineffectiveness of exile as a penal measure, but also several major

problems of the region: archaic and scanty management institutions, lack of transport communication with southern uezds of the gubernia, underpopulation, and also gubernia and metropolitan officials’ ignorance of local affairs. The agencies of the Police Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs expanded the practice of perlustration as involvement in the revolutionary movement grew. Siberian exiles had their correspondence routinely inspected, and yet in most cases they were inexperienced enough not to encrypt their messages. Surviving perlustration materials offer an ambivalent picture of the ‘Turukhansk revolt’: there were both approval and condemnation of the participants’ actions. The documents tell a tale of extreme cruelty of the punitive detachments even towards those who were not involved in the resistance. The subject of the Siberian exile of the early 20th century has research potential. There is virtually no scholarship on the exiles’ self-reflection concerning the ‘common violence’ of both anti-governmental groups and state punitive agencies. Diversification in political/party or social/class affiliation is not enough. The new materials have revealed a significant gap between several ‘streams’ of exiles: those banished to Siberia in midst of the First Russian Revolution differed from those exiled in 1910s. The article concludes that, having departed from the previous approach to studying the exile, ego-sources cease to be of lesser importance than other types of historical sources. Their subjectivity becomes an advantage for a high-quality text analysis.

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Keywords

Archival document, historical source, Siberia, exile, perlustration, ego-document.

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