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“Will Be Arranged by His Imperial Majesty's Decree”: The Little Russian Collegium's Responses to A. D. Menshikov: November – December 1722

Abstract

Official responses of the Little Russian Collegium to A. D. Menshikov (November – December 1722) are being published for the first time. These documents (responses to a private and

influential person) are a unique and previously unknown type of source. In total, three such documents have been discovered. According to the documents, A. D. Menshikov sought the Collegium’s assistance in realization of his private interests that violated the rights of local class groups and contradicted official practices. The Collegium of Little Russia — One of the Peter the Great’s innovations in the system of public administration — was a great obstacle in his way. It was a unique institution of territorial administration located outside the imperial capitals, in the town of Glukhov (1722–27). The establishment of the Collegium was an administrative experiment, as Peter I believed in streamlining the management of Little Russia. The creation of the new Collegium did not imply replacing local institutions of Cossack and municipal self-government or diminishing their role. Actually, this is clearly articulated in the official responses of members of the Little Russian Collegium. In their response to his inquiries, the officials gave Menshikov a negative answer, detailing the limits of their competence. The Collegium could not ignore mandatory procedure approved by Senate decrees and special instructions. In short, all affairs concerning local population were to be solved by the Cossack authorities, and only in case of delay, the Collegium was to check the legality of procedure. Thus, the documents allow us to clarify to what extent the activities of the Little Russian Collegium complied with its normative provisions, whether or not its members observed its mandatory practices and how its work reflected on the institutions of Cossack self-government and the situation of the local population. The value of the published official answers lies in the fact that A. D. Menshikov received virtually the same answers from the president of the Collegium in their private correspondence. Thus, the identified sources permit to outline important elements of the process of formation of modern state, in which corrupt private interest (even on the part of a super-powerful nobleman) could be suppressed through official procedures. Despite complex political conjunctures, the Collegium was able to defend its administrative autonomy. The documents also show that the establishment of the Little Russian Collegium gave certain guarantees and protection to local estate groups and individuals who did not have political influence, and protection against abuses of the Cossack elite in particular.

Keywords

Historical sources, Little Russian Collegium, A. D. Menshikov, Hetmanate, Little Russia, Cossacks, Peter I, collegiate reform.

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