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Unknown Documents on the History of the February Revolution of 1917 and the Circumstances of the Abdication of Nicholas II

Abstract

The question of actions of the Russian Emperor Nicholas II during the February Revolution, and in particular, of his willingness or unwillingness to make concessions to the Duma opposition is a controversial issue in the historiography. Thus, Soviet and ?migr? historians believed that the

tsar agreed to reforms under pressure of the military elite, which collaborated with the State Duma in those rebellious days. However, in modern historical science, an opposite opinion is gaining foothold, according to which in February – March 1917 the monarch showed a conciliatory attitude towards the opposition and was ready to agree to an actual limitation of his power by introducing a responsible ministry. The roadblock is assessment of sufficiency and reliability of the source corpus (mainly memoirs) for drawing the conclusion about the tsar's readiness for reforms. The lack of “documentary” evidence makes the narrative of the tsar's desire to establish a “ministry of confidence” vulnerable. However, documents of the period of the February Revolution that have been identified in the State Archive of Russian Federation (fond 97 “Office of the Palace Commandant of the Ministry of the Imperial Court”) allow us to come nearer the end of this historiographical discussion. They are two typewritten paragraphs on a single sheet of paper, without a title or any additional information on its author, time, and place of creation. Source analysis has concluded that the documents are drafts of tsar's telegrams prepared by the palace commandant V. N. Voeikov on March 1, 1917 to be sent to the ex-chairman of the State Duma M. V. Rodzianko. The content of these drafts clearly indicates that the tsar was ready to provide a “ministry of confidence” even before his arrival at the headquarters of the Northern Front on the evening of March 1, that is, de facto to establish parliamentarism in Russia. The author's reconstruction of the events has showed that the first draft of the telegram is tsar's delayed response to the appeal of the Duma leader encouraging him to reform public administration (dated February 26-27, 1917). The second telegram is supposed to be sent to Rodzianko inviting him to Pskov for final decision concerning the head of the new “government of confidence.” Despite the fact that they for some reasons had never been sent to the addressee, these “messages,” nevertheless, are the “documentary” evidence of Nicholas II's consent to a gradual introduction of parliamentarism in the country during the February Revolution.

Keywords

Historical source, State Archive of the Russian Federation (ГАРФ), February Revolution 1917, Russian Emperor Nicholas II, political reforms, responsible ministry, M. V. Rodzianko, Duma opposition.

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