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“Returned with Saddened Hearts”: Memoirs of the World War I Refugee, 1914–18

Abstract

The article uses method of historical commentary to examine valuable memoirs of Roman

Bagrovsky, a World War I refugee from the Grodno gubernia, born in 1906; the memoirs were transcribed in 2000 by local historian Vladimir Sidoruk. The events of the Great War of 1914–18 affected the population of the Western territories of the Russian Empire directly, as they, unlike the inhabitants of the interior regions, had to leave their native lands, fleeing the Germans, and they were leaving for long years. It should be noted that the memoirs reflect all periods of the Bagrovskys' refugee life: their evacuation, their residence in the Ryazan gubernia prior to the Bolsheviks' rise to power and in the Soviet period, and their return to the homeland. The source allows us to visualize the realities of the summer of 1915, when, the Russian army retreating and the threat of German occupation of the Grodno gubernia growing, the entire population of R. Bagrovsky's native village joined the refugee column riding to Belovezha. The memoirs can be used to reconstruct the unprecedented process of horse-drawn movement of people masses in the summer of 1915 and to identify its circumstances: willy-nilly low speed, shortage of water, heat, adversely affecting the refugees' well-being and health. The source demonstrates informal side of such fleeing, never recorded in official documents: for example, moving by rail, deliveries, stationing in rural areas (village of Bolshoe Pirogovo, Ryazan gubernia). According to the memoirs' author, local farmers and refugees lived well before the revolution. Everything changed with the rise of the Bolsheviks: the refugees experienced hunger, lack of essential goods, they witnessed dissatisfaction of the local peasants with the “new order,” their armed resistance and its consequences. The final part of the memoirs is also important, as it permits to detail the difficult process of returning: first, the refugees reached Moscow, then Brest, then home, where in August 1920 they found “only ruins” and their fathers' land “overgrown with weeds.” Roman worked as shepherd. New life began. Only 12 years later Roman Bagrovsky started his own family, as he and his father had first to restore the farm. Thus, taking into account that the memoirs of the First World War refugees are rarely used in the Russian scholarship, the publication may be of interest not only to specialists, but also to anyone interested in the humanitarian aspects of the history of the First World War and problems of the Russian wartime refugees.

Keywords

Historical source, memoirs of refugee R. V. Bagrovsky, fleeing, World War I of 1914–18, Russian Empire, Grodno gubernia, Ryazan gubernia, life in evacuation, refugee rations, Bolshevik government, return to the homeland.

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