

Scientific article

doi 10.28995/2073-0101-2024-1-71-84

For citation

Novoselskiy, Sergey S. Towards Freedom of Speech: The Special Council to draw up a new Statute on the Press in 1905 (In Russ). IN: Vestnik Archivista / Herald of an Archivist, 2024, no. 1, pp. 71-84. doi 10.28995/2073-0101-2024-1-71-84

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Towards Freedom of Speech: The Special Council to draw up a new Statute on the Press in 1905

Abstract

The article deals with the discussions that accompanied the work of the Special Council on drafting a new press statute in 1905. The Council, also known as the «D. F. Kobeko Commission», worked from February 10 to December 18, 1905. The minutes of its meetings, which served as the main source for the study, were deposited in the personal fund of the prominent statesman and public figure, lawyer A. F. Koni in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). Researchers who approached them earlier were primarily interested in the institutional aspects of the activity of the The Special Council: the procedure for its formation, composition, course and results of the meetings. The participants in the discussion, with their views, ideas and proposals, remained in the background. Meanwhile at the The Special Council was represented the expert community, organized on the authorities` initiative. In addition to officials, lawyers, publishers, journalists and public figures of various views were involved in drafting the new press law. This determined the problematic nature and acuteness of the discussions. During the meetings of the Special Council, the positions of the two most significant and influential groups of the Russian public – the ideological supporters and the convinced opponents of the reforms – were formulated and determined. Representatives of each of them were guided by different worldviews that determined their political and social position. In their judgments, which for the first time are considered comprehensively in historiography, they went much further than the issues of the press. Their discussions revealed their positions on the key issues of Russian public thought in 1905: representation of the people, constitutional state, political and civil liberties and revolution. The intellectual history`s methodology made it possible to place the statements of the members of the Council in a broad socio-political context. And the use of additional (mostly unpublished) office documents allowed to determine to what extent the Special Council corresponded to the key trends of the state policy in the field of press and propaganda. And to what extent the «D. F. Kobeko Commission» foresaw and determined these trends. On the basis of the study it is concluded that in 1905 the Russian public was widely integrated into the lawmaking process. This cooperation did not always bring legislative fruits. But it significantly changed the political agenda, considerably narrowing the «boundaries of permissible» for the supreme power.

Keywords

1905, The First Russian Revolution, Freedom of Speech, public thought, press, The Special Council to draw up a new Statute on the Press, D.F. Kobeko.

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Grant information

The article has been prepared with financial support from of the Russian Science Foundation no. 23-18-00520, <https://rscf.ru/project/23-18-00520/>

The article was received in the editorial office on 9.09.2023, recommended for publication on 20.12.2023.

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Полностью материал публикуется в российском историко-архивоведческом журнале ВЕСТНИК АРХИВИСТА. Ознакомьтесь с условиями подписки [здесь](#) .