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Searching for Soviet Identity: Soviet Society as Reflected in the Epistolary Heritage of the Era

Abstract

The article describes results and prospects of the scientific analysis of the Soviet era epistolary heritage – ‘workers’ letters to higher authority.’ The array of documentary evidence created amid the most complex socio-cultural processes that swept over Russian society in the 20th century, is a substantive matter for scientific analysis, moreover, a matter that exhibits internal unity and system features. Mass nature of sources to be found in archives all over the country, provides a reliable basis for creating an objective picture of historical realities. The purpose of the article is to conduct a source study analysis of the Soviet era epistolary legacy and to assess the ramifications and the cognitive value of letters to authority for studying historical

development of the Russian civilization in the 20th century. Considering general characteristics of the 'workers' letters to higher authority' as depicted in the scholarship, the author identifies those trends of scientific reflection, that call for this type of sources: to begin with, study of social images patterns and changes in value system that affected social and, particularly, mass or ordinary consciousness, social sentiment, and self-perception of the society; analysis of structural components of the socio-cultural environment (symbolic activities, reputable social behavior, social interaction, nature of the dialogue between authority and society); study of social history and history of everyday life in their entirety. The most important result of this research, and one that lays bare the backbone of the author's approach, is formulation of the concept of social identity as a 'depot' for social reactions, that help society to adapt itself to the changed realities, while preserving the cultural core even through the dismantlement of an old system of values. According to the author, formation of the Soviet identity is a methodological basis for studying the 20th century epistolary heritage.

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Keywords

Sources, source studies analyses, systemic crisis, USSR, Soviet everyday life, social images, social adaptation.

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