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'One Can't Help Shuddering at the Sight of the Ruin of This Thriving Town': The Great Fire in Yeniseisk and Its Consequences. 1869-1870

Abstract

This archive draws on archival sources to study the Great Fire in Yeniseysk in 1869 and its consequences for development of this northern provincial town. The research derives its novelty from the first publication of documents of the State Archive of the Krasnoyarsk Krai and that of the Irkutsk Region, which describe measures of fire response and name benefactors. Historical approach allows to place specific patterns of local community in the context of social history of the 20th century. Anthropological approach allows to identify means and modes of surviving in a natural disaster. The fire claimed about 200 lives, destroyed all wooden buildings in the town, and disrupted daily activities of more than 7 thousand Yeniseysk citizens. At present, such disasters are considered as more than just local disasters. From the religious point of view, such natural disasters disrupt the balance and harmony of the God's world and require worldwide effort to set it to rights. The case-study of the Yeniseysk community concludes that actions of a person within the fire storm were determined not just by self-preservation, but also by responsibility for the lives of those around them. People appealed to church for help. Many Yeniseysk priests rose to the occasion as their vocation demanded. The archival documents show how rapidly the nation responded to the disaster. The case-study of Yeniseysk in 1869-1871 demonstrates an array of measures aiming to attract external resources. The activities were based on Christian principles of communal spirit and charity, community help and civic cooperation in joined efforts of state and public institutions, private and corporate donors. The article concludes that effective moneyed assistance and social support significantly decreased the severity of losses.

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Keywords

Archival document, Yeniseisk, Siberian city of the 19th century, fire, charity, mutual aid.

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