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“Notes on the Past” of E. A. Nikolsky as a Source for Studying World War I Refugees

Abstract

The article is devoted to the analysis of Eugene (Yevgeny) A. Nikolsky’s memoirs concerning refugees of the Great War of 1914-18. Nikolsky was authorized by the government organization Severopomosch’ (i.e. “northern help”) established in the end of June 1915 to settle refugees of the North-Western Front. He described his first steps in the welfare of forced migrants taken before the mass refugee movement began. He evacuated over a thousand people from the Radom gubernia of the Kingdom of Poland, where he then served, deep into Russian lands. He faced then complete indifference of the Smolensk and Moscow gubernia officials to war victims and unwillingness to help them. The memoirs highlight extremely difficult situation that

developed in Kobrin, Grodno gubernia, in July 1915, as swarms of refugees hoped to stay there till the end of the war and never moved eastwards. The problem was exacerbated by enemy bombing. Nikolsky described dedicated work of the infirmary staff of the St. George community of the Red Cross in Kobrin who assisted the hundreds who were hurt in the bombing of the refugee camp. The memoirs also reflect the period of highest increase of mass refugee movement in August–September 1915. In the city of Roslavl, Smolensk gubernia, E. A. Nikolsky’s working day began at dawn and continued well after midnight. Thus, the humanitarian disaster caused by huge concentration of refugees was averted. And yet, E. A. Nikolsky noted, despite the difficult situation in Roslavl, representatives of the gubernia authorities were absent, apparently believing that assistance to refugees must be the work of the governmental organization Severopomosch’, nothing to do with them. He encountered unlawful behavior of some officials and representatives of local governments, who attempted to steal money intended for refugee accommodation at every turn. In autumn 1915, E. A. Nikolsky was engaged in food and fodder supply of refugees in the Tula, Oryol and Voronezh gubernias and had to deal with unscrupulous suppliers and corrupt representatives of Zemstvo administration who recommended them. However, in the Riga region in the first half of 1916, Nikolsky was forced to cooperate with profiteers to get food for refugees. Nikolsky’s work as an official of Severopomosch’ continued until August 1917, when refugee care passed under the control of the Union of Cities.

Keywords

Historical source, refugees of the First World War, government organization Severopomosch’ (“Northern help”), E. A. Nikolsky’s memoirs, evacuation, food supply, medical assistance.

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