

УДК 93

DOI 10.28995/2073-0101-2020-2-493-504

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The Bondage Statute of 1815 in Theory and in Practice: The “Search for Liberty” of the 1820s Peasants as Reflected of a Recently Discovered Document

Abstract

The relevance of the study is determined by the fact that, on the basis of a newly discovered document from a private archive, an attempt has been made to consider the little-studied topic — the serfs’ “search for liberty” in the 1820s and reaction to it by both local authorities and higher state institutions. Officially, by the law of 1815, peasants were forbidden to seek liberty; they were recognized as serfs, regardless, under which census the landowner had recorded them. In practice, as confirmed by the analyzed document, the serfs’ search for liberty continued; both local and central authorities continued to receive petitions at least until the

codification of the imperial legislation in the early 1830s. The analyzed document is a report of the Orenburg gubernia prosecutor Garbovsky addressed to the Minister of Justice of Russia D.I. Lobanov-Rostovsky (1826), which contains a statement of the facts of the case. Alongside with standard language of official correspondence, the document contains some phrases which indicate that there are elements of personal correspondence in it, the correspondent somewhat overstepping the boundaries official letter. The report testifies that peasants of the Buzuluk uezd of the Orenburg gubernia I. Ivanov and F. Petrov demanded to gauge the legality of their continued serfdom, but the Buzuluk uezd court dragged out proceedings. Garbovsky petitions for speedy investigation and there is a resolution, apparently in the Minister's hand, that the Simbirsk and Kazan gubernia prosecutors should provide materials related to the legal status of the relatives of the “seekers for liberty” that were necessary for the correct solution of the case. The brevity of the document and lack of further correspondence on the issue does not allow any conclusion on how the case was resolved. However, the fact itself of appealing to the minister in connection with the peasants' “search for liberty,” as well as admission of the petition by the lower authority and by the head of the imperial justice department speaks for itself.

Keywords

Historical source, report, Russian serfs, uezd court, prosecutor, minister of justice, correspondence.

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Submitted 5.06.2019, published (for citation):

DOROZHIN, A. G., BEZRUOKOV, A. V. Zakrepostitel'noe uzakonenie 1815 g. v teorii i na praktike: "poiski vol'nosti" krest'yanami v 1820-e gg. v otrazhenii vnov' obnaruzhennogo dokumenta [The Bondage Statute of 1815 in Theory and in Practice: The “Search for Liberty” of the 1820s Peasants as Reflected of a Recently Discovered Document. In Russ.]. IN: Vestnik arhivista / Herald of an Archivist, 2020, no. 2, pp. 493-504. doi 10.28995/2073-0101-2020-2-493-504

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