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Migration of the Chinese to the Urals: Characterization of Archival Sources of the 20th-21st Centuries

Abstract

In the article, the author examines documents from the State Archive of the Russian Federation, United State Archive of the Chelyabinsk Region, State Archive of the Perm Krai, and State Archive of the Sverdlovsk Region concerning migration from China to the Urals in the 20th-21st

centuries. This chronological period covers the main milestones of the Chinese stay in Russia, and in the Urals on particular. In order to conduct historical research on the topic of Chinese migration within the territorial framework of the Urals, it is necessary to generalize these sources, to assess their potential and cognitive limitations. The most significant array of archival documents dates back to the early 20th century. It was during the First World War that severe labor shortage forced Russian officials to approve engaging workers from China to fulfill a large-scale defense order. Thus, a rather voluminous layer of documentation for 1915–17 was formed at the local level, characterizing the practice of recruiting the Chinese to the Ural factories, mines, and logging, the features of their life, and specifics of their social organization. Working with these documents allows the researcher to get a full picture of placement and use of the “yellow” labour in the Urals before the revolution. The available archival files indicate that the efficiency of the Chinese often left much to be desired, but their large numbers, low cost of transportation and maintenance were an undoubted advantage. Some archival fonds of the Soviet authorities give an idea of the socio-demographic composition of the Chinese who remained to live in the USSR in the 1920s-1930s. The next voluminous collection of documents on the topic was formed during the years of the Soviet-Chinese friendship in the 1950s. During these years, the Chinese took a significant part in the construction of industrial enterprises and infrastructure facilities. In the Urals, the Chinese concentrated mainly on the construction of the Molotovstroy facilities. The last layer of archival data dates back to the post-Soviet period and does not seem as informative as the fonds deposited in the late imperial and Soviet periods. To date, relatively few sources have been found in the archives to characterize the migration from the PRC to Russia after the collapse of the USSR. The most reliable data from archival documents permit to trace the number of the Chinese labor migrants in Russia in the first two decades of the 21st century and to establish the main areas of their concentration in the Urals and other regions of the country.

Keywords

Historical sources, migration, Chinese, labor migration, Soviet-Chinese relations, Ural.

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