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“We Are All Flying into the Abyss”: Correspondence of F. D. Batyushkov, L. V. Sobinov, and A. I. Sumbatov-Yuzhin in November – December 1917

Abstract

In the fonds of the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art and in the Manuscript Department of the Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences there is stored correspondence of F. D. Batyushkov (who on the days of the revolution held the position

of the chief commissioner for state theaters) with commissioners for the Moscow Bolshoi and Maly Theaters L. V. Sobinov and A. I. Sumbatov-Yuzhin over November and December 1917. These letters, most of which haven't been published previously or introduced into scientific use, show the attitude of the leaders of the Department of Theatres to the Bolsheviks coming to power and to the prospect of cooperation with them. All three correspondents assessed the October Revolution negatively and spoke of their possible resignation (Batyushkov most definitely, Sobinov and Yuzhin with some reservations), but later serious discrepancies emerged in their personal strategies. Batyushkov was an implacable opponent of the Soviet government, rejecting all cooperation with the “terrorists” Bolsheviks and their representative, People's Commissar of Education A. V. Lunacharsky. On these grounds, he wanted to rally the Department of Theatres, at the head of which he stood. Positions of Yuzhin and Sobinov were more complicated. Yuzhin, who headed the Maly Theatre, shared Batyushkov's critical view of the “dominant party,” moreover, he was outraged and shocked by the pogrom of the Maly Theater by the Red Guards during street fighting in Moscow. However, his whole life was dedicated to the Maly Theater and he doubted whether he had the moral right to leave his position at such a crucial moment. Sobinov, on the other hand, was never able to overcome his personal dislike for Batyushkov (formed long before the October Revolution in disputes over the “autonomous” rights of Moscow theaters and their heads). In the emergency of November – December 1917, when the Bolsheviks established their control over banks and money transfers were extremely difficult, Sobinov did not want to put himself in the chief commissioner's shoes and blamed him for the lack of money for the Bolshoi Theater. In December 1917, when A. V. Lunacharsky began a direct attack on Batyushkov's position in the Department of Theatres, the Petrograd state theaters expressed their support to Batyushkov. In Moscow, the situation was different: because of Sobinov's grievance with the chief commissioner and Yuzhin's attempts to coordinate his position with Sobinov, the Bolshoi and Maly Theaters did not unequivocally declare their confidence in Batyushkov, weakening the latter's position in his conflict with Lunacharsky. The correspondence of Batyushkov, Sobinov, and Yuzhin over November – December 1917 is an important source on history of the Russian theater, as well as for studying the period of the so-called “sabotage” of civil servants after the October Revolution.

Keywords

Letters, Russian revolution of 1917, Russian theatre, Bolsheviks, Bolshoi Theatre, Maly Theatre, F. D. Batyushkov, L. V. Sobinov, A. I. Sumbatov-Yuzhin.

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