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The Imperial Train Disaster at the Borki Station in 1888 through the Eyes of an Eyewitness

Abstract

This is the first publication of the previously unknown testimony on the imperial train disaster at the Borki station of the Kursk—Kharkov—Azov railway. The diary of the Hofmarshal of Alexander III, Lord V. S. Obolensky-Neledinsky-Meletsky, preserved in the Department of Written Sources of the State Historical Museum (OPI GIM), contains many details from the life

of the imperial family and the court, including those of the catastrophe, which occurred on October 17, 1888. The diary reflects the condition of the survivors of the crash, their mood, behavior, as well as the experiences and assessments of those close to the imperial family who, although absent on the tsar's train, could nevertheless observe the survivors' reaction. Due to his closeness to the royal couple, with whom he was connected not only by official, but also by friendly relations, the author of the diary had the opportunity to observe the emperor and empress in a family setting and knew their feelings hidden from the public. Of particular interest are the rumors about the causes of the crash that spread among the emperor's retinue (and still emerge in the literature), as well as the authorship of some initiatives, such as changing the route of the imperial train. The diary highlights the daily life of the imperial family and the relations between the aristocratic court and servants that have not attracted the attention of contemporaries or researchers. The analysis of all these themes has required maximum use of the source and its detailed commentary. The study draws on both published and unpublished materials, as well as on periodicals. Special attention has been paid to identifying data on the persons mentioned in the diary, many of whom have been researched for the first time. Identification of the author's immediate environment was particularly problematic, as he used diminutive names (Sofa, Varya) and did not mention surnames. To determine the kinship and friendship ties of V. S. Obolensky, the historical and genealogical method has been widely used. The testimony of V. S. Obolensky about the Borki train disaster, as well as preceding and subsequent days of the journey, is characterized by high information potential and reliability. Not only it expands the source base, but also corrects some established notions on Alexander III, his environment, and era.

Keywords

V. S. Obolensky, Alexander III, imperial family, Borki station, railway disaster, railways, imperial train, diary.

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