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Peasants Divorcing Adulteresses in 1863–1917: Specifics, Difficulties, Results

Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of divorce cases initiated by men from the peasant class following adultery of their wives. The study is to identify specifics, common and distinctive features of peasant marriages dissolution caused by female adultery in the second half of the 19th – early 20th century in the Yaroslavl, Tver, and Tobolsk spiritual consistories. The source base is previously unknown archival materials from the State Archive of the Yaroslavl Region, State Archive of the Tver Region, and State Archive in Tobolsk. Documents stored in the state archives indicate the existence of a mandatory package of documents established by law, fees for opening a case, requirements for the evidence base, and established stages in office work. Comparative analysis of archival documents shows that women's infidelity was the most frequent reason of peasants requesting divorce in the spiritual consistories in the second half of the 19th – early 20th century. However, adultery was the most difficult to prove motive, making it almost impossible to get a divorce. Studying the papers of spiritual consistories permits to distinguish many degrees of the crime: one-time adultery, constant adultery, elopement, extramarital cohabitation, prostitution. Women's actions were caused by resentment, beatings (on the part of husbands or mothers-in-law), or by forced marriages. The main difficulties in obtaining divorce among peasants were the same: difficulty of proving the birth of an illegitimate child and finding eyewitnesses, ignorance of the wife's place of residence. On the periphery in the Tobolsk gubernia with its large territories and lack of competent employees, the divorce action was hindered by priests' incorrect paperwork and loss of documents in the mail. The relevance of the study is due to the current acute social problems (population decline, above all) caused by large number of family breakups. Turning to the history of divorce proceedings and methods of reconciling spouses (admonition by parish priests, mostly) can be useful for rethinking solving and preventing marital conflicts, as well as for revealing certain aspects of the history of institutions office work.

Keywords

Historical sources, source studies, Yaroslavl gubernia, Tver gubernia, Tobolsk gubernia, spiritual consistories, peasants, divorce, adultery, causes and difficulties of divorce.

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