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Materials of the Dmitrov Correctional Labour Camp in the Moscow A. M. Gorky Archive:
1928–36

Abstract

The article reviews the corpus of previously unknown documents from the A. M. Gorky Archive of the A. M. Gorky Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow

on the history of the cultural and educational department of the Dmitrov Correctional Labour Camp (Dmitlag), created for the construction of the Moscow—Volga Canal. The official Soviet rhetoric of the 1920s–30s declared that Soviet penitentiary system was to reform convicts, to “rehabilitate” them through communal labour, civic education, and communist agitation. The core of this ideological construct was the concept of *perekovka* (“reforging”), which the writer Maxim Gorky imbued with personal socio-philosophical meaning. The reviewed corpus of documents includes the following categories. A. M. Gorky Archive contains manuscripts of M. Gorky's greetings to the canal builders. The writer visited the canal twice and sent six messages to the workers, which were published in both the central and the camp press. Four letters from Gorky to the head of the labour camp, S. G. Firin, discuss the involvement of Soviet writers in the propaganda and two projects of the former: “Two Five-Year Plans” and “History of Factories and Plants.” Nineteen letters from S. G. Firin to Gorky and nine letters to the writer's secretary, P. P. Kryuchkov, form a historically valuable and rare collection of ego-documents that shed light on private attitudes and interactions between Gorky and Firin. The official letters of the Dmitlag prisoners to Gorky highlight agitation activities in the penitentiaries and mechanism of the labour camp communication with the outside world. The prisoners' unofficial letters/appeals provide data on the Soviet justice system and on the social composition of the Dmitlag. These letters also contain some personal stories of the canal builders. Other documents have been discovered in the archive: letters, publications from “The Bibliotheca of “*Perekovka*” series, etc. This documents complex provides additional data on the different aspects of Soviet history in the 1930s: chronicle of Dmitlag and of the canal construction, agitation activities in the Gulag. The documents help to reconstruct the biographies of writers, poets and artists sent to the Dmitlag, not to mention ordinary construction workers of the canal. In addition, these materials shed light on M. Gorky status of this period when a person became an institution. They provide a better understanding of Gorky's role in the shaping of Soviet ideology and of the role of Soviet writers in the propaganda of *perekovka*. Gorky's letters, editorial plans, and reviews supplement the knowledge on his projects “History of Factories and Plants” and “Two Five-Year Plans.”

Keywords

Historical sources, epistolary sources, Maxim Gorky, archive, Dmitlag, Gulag, Moscow—Volga canal, Moscow Canal, S.G. Firin, repressions, correspondence, *perekovka*.

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