

THE LETTERS FROM RURAL SIBERIA, THE YEAR 1925

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Abstract. The extracts from the letters of Nikolai Tarasov, the originals of which are at the Krasnoyarsk Regional Studies Museum, are published for the first time. Mr. Tarasov wrote his letters in 1925 and addressed them to Ms. Maria Krasnozhonova, who worked for the Krasnoyarsk Regional Studies Museum. The following are excerpts from letters that give a glimpse of the author’s attempts to found the Regional Studies Museum in a remote Siberian village.

Key words: Nickolai Tarasov, Maria Krasnozhonova, letters, ego-documents, museum, voluntary work, Yenissei Province, 1920s.

ПИСЬМА ИЗ СИБИРСКОЙ ДЕРЕВНИ 1925 ГОДА

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Аннотация. В статье представлена часть корпуса писем Н.Г. Тарасова, оригиналы которых хранятся в научном архиве Красноярского краеведческого музея. Отрывки из писем публикуются впервые. Письма были написаны в 1925 году и адресованы Марии Васильевне Красноженовой, заведующей отделом Старого Красноярска Государственного Музея Приенисейского края. Ситуации, описанные в письмах, прежде всего, касаются общественной деятельности автора – попытки организовать работу краеведческого музея в сельской местности.

Ключевые слова: Н.Г. Тарасов, М.В. Красноженова, письма, источники личного происхождения, музей, волонтерская деятельность, Енисейская губерния, 1920-е гг.

“A keen provincial interest in the regional studies has been supported by many Siberian towns and cities. Before the Great October Revolution, fragmentation and isolation were a phenomenon of research work. Only few scientists were involved in the process. The general public was indifferent to scientific endeavours. The Revolution has completely changed the situation. The new Soviet research facilities are far more inclusive now than they used to be. The main tasks of the new institutions are, on the one hand, to attract public support to the idea of working for the common good. On the other, the new institutions aim to effectively and beneficially utilize the public efforts. There is a possibility now to organize regional studies societies at the grassroots levels” [13, pp. 140-141]. This observation, published in the “North Asia” journal back into 1925, was symptomatic of socio-political and cultural developments that were taking place in early Soviet Russia.

Following several letters written in the same year by Nikolai Tarasov, the article examines how regional studies in early Soviet Siberia were formed and solidified around voluntary activities of ordinary people and governmental efforts to build the better life.

Despite a recent increase in scholarly interest towards egodocuments [8, p.125; 25, pp.15-22; 19; 24, p.33], personal writings of ordinary Siberians from 1920s, especially those who lived in rural areas, seldom come under the spotlight [16, p. 147]. Turbulent years of Russian history left little if no place to store or keep the letters safe. In this context, the letters of Mr. Tarasov written in 1925 provide a unique source of information that could enhance knowledge of the socio-historical context of early Soviet Siberia.

Nikolai Tarasov, natural historian and geologist, attempted to solve a specific problem – to found the Museum of Regional Studies in Balakhta [9] – the village in the Yenissei Province that was the center of Balakhta volost inhabited by approximately 14000 people [14]. During that period Mr. Tarasov, aged 76, together with his wife Agnia, who worked for a local school, lived there. The letters do not contain any information on when the Tarasovs moved to the village. However, “the ways to help the Museum in Balakhta” were discussed in Krasnoyarsk at the meeting of the Regional Department of Education in the

summer of 1920, the year when the Soviet power was restored in the Yenissei province [6]. Mr. Tarasov addressed his letters to Ms. Maria Krasnozhonova, who worked for the Krasnoyarsk Regional Studies Museum and was the curator of “Old Krasnoyarsk” collection [10].

Being a “laboratory of the soul” [7] of a “silent person of history” [11, p.19], Mr. Tarasov’s letters stand somewhere in between the letters to the authorities [23; 17; 20; 15; 21; 18] and personal ones. Those are the letters written to a soulmate. They outline the social endeavours and voluntary activities of an ordinary person, who was neither young nor healthy. He did not write the letters to fit in the new conditions of life. He wanted to adjust to it his local community to the new way of life. By opening the museum, he wanted to introduce the locals to the benefits of a cultural site [5, p.13; 12, pp. 27-44; 27; 22, p.29]. It was his top priority, thus making it highly unlikely to draw a demarcation line between a private and social endeavour. Equally important is another characteristic of the letters. They can help to correlate general trends in public opinion with the trends in the content of Soviet official narrative and personal feelings of an old person who wanted to do something for the common good.

Obviously, the factors mentioned above make the letters of Nikolai Tarasov, a representative of the Siberian intelligentsia, the unique documents of incalculable value that may shed light on the everyday life and voluntary endeavours of rural Siberians in 1920s. The article aims to introduce the previously unpublished ego-documents that witness a surge of interest in regional studies and allow for a better understanding of the processes at work at the grassroots level of the early Soviet society.

THE LETTERS

The letter dated 19 January 1925 [1].

Dear Maria Vasilievna,

I have a mind to do something about local history, geography and culture. My idea is to collect rock samples from the stone quarries, etc. in order to get a geological “snapshot” of the Balakhta area. I want to build the systematic collection of the local ores and minerals. Dear Maria Vasilievna, there is a special instruction manual ... which outlines how a local museum should be organized. As far as I know, there is one at the Museum*. Is it possible to find a person who can make a copy of it for me? I’ll pay for it. I have a good many ideas about opening the local museum. Unfortunately, both my health and finances leave much to be desired. To communicate the idea of the museum among my fellow countrymen, I’ll give several lectures on paleontology and geology. Of course, it would be great to show them a film, but there is neither cinema nor the necessary equipment in the village.

Much to my annoyance, I have to admit, that now I’m a kind of “immovable property”. I mean I could hardly move.

Agnia is constantly doing something. She is either looking for a flat to rent or trying to make it warm. To say nothing about her work at school. She is constantly getting ready for the lessons in accordance with the brand new “complex system”. They are attending long-lasting conferences and meetings non-stop. No holidays. Even at weekends they hold school board meetings or have to take political science classes...

*Mr. Tarasov writes about the Krasnoyarsk Regional Studies Museum; in 1925 – the State Museum of Preyenissei Krai

The letter dated 10 March 1925 [2].

Dear Maria Vasilievna,

For such a long time, I felt clutches of my modest means. Now, having got 15 rubles, I feel free and rich. Five rubles I’m sending to Krasnoyarsk to buy some heart medications. My health is so poor that I could hardly walk several meters without stopping. Now, having money, I am able to write letters to my friends. But, even such simple activity drains me of all my strength. I need to have a rest after each page. As I’ve already mentioned, I do not want to stop working on the museum. I sincerely wish to keep my activities on track to the extent possible.

I got the letter from Mr. Tugarinov** with his questions about the Balakhta Museum, about the people who are interested in it. For now, nine people signed up...

**Alexander Tugarinov was the head of Krasnoyarsk Regional Studies Museum; in 1925 – the State Museum of Preyenissei Krai [10].

The letter dated 20 June 1925 [4].

Dear Maria Vasilievna,

...Now a few words about my work on regional studies. I’m still collecting ores and minerals from different sites of the Balakhta area. Friends and people who know my interests help me a lot. Unfortunately, the samples have not been identified yet.

At the third week of Lent, I sent to the Krasnoyarsk Museum my report on Balakhta history and geography and the list of people who felt like getting involved with the museum. Besides, I enumerated our museum collections and described each item of each collection. I asked Mr. Tugarinov to express his view and provide guidance on how to further develop the museum. But, there is no answer yet.

It'd be really great to explain the Balakhta geological past with the help of the samples I had succeeded in gathering during the course of my excavations...

The letter dated 9 July 1925 [3].

Dear Maria Vasilievna,

...Thank you very much for your sending me the booklet. However, the booklet provides only common knowledge it's of great importance for me as it inspires to continue my attempts to open the museum in Balakhta.

Not long ago Balakhta authorities removed the Museum and its library to the village reading room. Then they needed this reading room to place the orphanage there. And in the end, the Museum and its library were transferred to the former local lock-up. The windows are without any shutters. Somebody stole the gun through the window. I had bought a screen for the library. And now our local authorities refuse to return it. That's how things stand with public education in Balakhta...

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