

*The Medical Intelligentsia Life in the Post-revolutionary Russia
(Doctors Letters Material to Nikolay Semashko)*

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Abstract

In the State Archive of the Russian Federation there are many documents, containing the doctors' letters arrested by Cheka¹ in 1919-1922. The letters were addressed to N.A. Semashko, the People's Commissar of Health Care of the Soviet Russia. It is more than 200 stories of the doctors and medical workers life during the Civil War and the period of War Communism. In the stories of the events that preceded the arrest, the people, consciously or unconsciously, bring a lot of facts, indicating their life, the relationship with colleagues and with the local authorities. On the basis of this evidence, the professional relationships are analyzed, the response characteristics of ordinary physicians on the current events are given. The aim of this study is to reconstruct a picture of the ordinary doctor world of this time period. Practitioners have been very busy at work and, as a rule, are not interested in politics. Belonging to the doctor's estate was characterized by professionalism and high level of culture. This is often prevented from finding a common language with the new government. After all, they were the workers and peasants by origin and they saw in a doctor not sympathetic or neutral-minded intellectual, but rather a representative of the bourgeoisie. The professional and cultural differences were the reason of mistrustful attitude to physicians from the authorities and, at the same time, became a support, which helped to deal with disadvantaged circumstances.

Keywords: Soviet Russia, the medical intelligentsia, Nikolay Semashko, the Civil War

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¹ the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage at the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR.

Introduction

The end of the 10ths up to the beginning of the 20ths of the XX century was the time of severe trials for Russia: World War One, the revolution events of 1917, the Civil War entailed a series of social, political and economic problems. The population of the country was on the verge of survival because of hunger and epidemics. An important role in this period belonged to the doctors and medical personnel who resisted adversity.

During the Civil War the graduated doctors were a small section of society. So, before World War I in the country, with a population of about 1 hundred 75 million people, there were about thirty thousand doctors [7, p.624]. A few more specialists involved in medicine were medical assistants, midwives, women doctors, who were singled out for a special category [2]. With the finishing of World War I, and, especially after 1917, the shortage of physicians became particularly palpable. And in 1918-1919 years in the civil department of thirty nine provinces there were about eight thousand five hundred doctors and paramedics, and more than sixteen thousands were at the front.

Not only medical problems had to be dealt with by physicians. During the Civil War, almost any person could be arrested by the Cheka (the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage at the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR), headed by Felix Dzerzhinsky.. And belonging to the medical intelligentsia, which was mostly of a noble character, could not but affect the biased attention of the Bolshevik leadership of the Soviet State.

The documents, which led to this study, are related to the activities of the first People's Commissar of the Public Health of the Soviet Russia, Nikolai Semashko. The documents are represented in the State Archives of the Russian Federation (GARF).

N. Semashko's correspondents were arrested doctors, their relatives and members of the Cheka during the period of 1919 up to 1922. [1]². These are more than two hundred stories from the life of the people associated with medical activities.

What new can we learn from these letters?

1. The doctors sought to enlist the support of Nikolay Semashko as the head of the People's Commissariat of Public Health. Almost all requests for assistance were not left without N. Semashko's attention. Most of the cases contain documentary evidence of the doctors' release (at least from custody) and return to their official duties.

2. Why did N. Semashko help arrested people? This, above all, testifies to the desire of the head of Public Health to cope with the epidemiological catastrophe in which the Soviet Russia was at that time.

We do not know whether the doctors were guilty of these crimes, or not. The documents do not give full information about this. But N. Semashko was not

² The documents are inaccurately dated - the first documents date back to December of 1919.

interested in the degree of their guilt. He was the head of the public health system, in which there were very few employees.

3. The doctors of the materials were quite apolitical. The characteristics that were given to untried physicians both by their defenders and accusers, very accurately characterize their attitude to political life in the country: "... not an active counter-revolutionary, but simply a non-partisan philistine" [1, 110], "... always was completely loyal political." [1, 277].

Doctors did not distinguish between working in a Soviet hospital or in the White Army. These people are so far from the political realities of their time (despite of the fact that they are in the thick of events!), that they did not even notice the facts, which in any such situation and at any time would be interpreted as involvement in treason [1, 244].

4. Doctors from the letters were lonely in their professional activities. Firstly, because they are sorely lacking, one doctor can manage two hospitals - and be the only qualified specialist in them. And there could be a similar situation when a large medical institution was headed by a non-professional. These people had a colossal responsibility, in conditions close to the military, they had to make decisions alone.

They were also lonely as the social elements of society. The most doctors during the revolution and the Civil War existed outside the professional associations. The "Society of Russian doctors in memory of Nikolay Pirogov", the most influential medical organization in Russia before the revolution, opposed the October Revolution at the end of 1917 and was dissolved by 1922. The most doctors were, in mainly, far from big cities, did not communicate with people from their professional environment, and, as a result, they had nowhere to get support. In Vitebsk, Gomel, Tyumen, Porkhov, Rezhitsy, doctors were left alone with their problems [1, 44, 58, 110, 277,].

5. It is important to emphasize that the people with pre-revolutionary experience in the Bolshevik Party prevailed among the leadership of the Soviet power. But they were with a low level of education and experience in leadership work very often.

The revolution always contributes to the coming to power of people of dubious moral qualities. Some of them tend to make a career at any cost, others - to deal with their abusers. Such people were in local health authorities too. Apparently, they are connected with warnings of N. Semashko: "I have reason to assume a calumnation" [1, 20], "... intrigue is suspected. Be cautious "[1, 24], et cetera, which appear on the pages of archive documents many times.

Problems could also be connected with the incompetence of the leadership of the Soviets in health care matters. There are voices about the need to introduce experts in cases of specialists' trials, including doctors, because "... medicine and sanitation are just such areas in which everyone considers themselves fully competent, but in reality they understand nothing" 1, 111].

Conclusions

Letters themselves are an extremely subjective source of historical material, and the letters of the accused or arrested are all the more so. Materials of the letters to Nikolay Semashko does not always allow us to see the end of the case of arrested doctors. We can not establish the degree of their guilt or innocence in the offenses and crimes in which they are accused.

The letters reflect all the problems of life in the Soviet Russia at that time - disciplinary, labor, food, problems of interpersonal relations and relations with the organs of the Soviet power. We can see living people who just continued to fulfill their professional duty and which became the foundation of the Soviet health system.

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