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Alsu Biktasheva

INSTRUCTIONS FOR STAFF OFFICERS OF THE SPECIAL CORPS OF GENDARMES IN RUSSIA (1826 – 1836)

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*Alsu Biktasheva*¹

INSTRUCTIONS FOR STAFF OFFICERS OF THE SPECIAL CORPS OF GENDARMES IN RUSSIA (1826 – 1836)²

This paper reconstructs the rationale and principles governing the work of the Special Corps of Gendarmes in the Russian Empire during the first decade of the reign of Nicholas I. An analysis of instructions given to police officers and of their feedback reveals an intention to create an efficient watchdog — an institution that would keep an eye on the population as well as control local administrative bodies. The article demonstrates the ways in which the police produced knowledge about the empire. This knowledge, along with the findings of institutional science, was to serve as a basis for a new concept of power and rational governance.

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¹ National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia).

E-mail: biktashi@mail.ru

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The history of documents regulating the activities of the secret police in Russia is of interest both to political and social historians, as it provides vivid examples of questionnaires and ethical recommendations, much like those from the early period of colonial ethnography. In this sense, the concept of ‘internal colonization’ (*vnutrenniaia kolonizatsiia*), as developed by Alexander Etkind,³ is perfectly applicable to this source material.

The problems of building a vertical power structure in a discrete political space and of efficient governance in even the remotest regions retain their relevance for Russia even up to the present. This problem is immediately related to issues of optimizing administrative machinery and rationalizing its functions. The presence in the Russian empire of various models of local administrative governance makes each territory’s experience unique and indispensable for the reconstruction of the empire’s overall history. One would think that it is awareness of this fact and the appeal of historical experience that call for the reconstruction of imperial administrative practices. However, this is not the case. Both scholarly literature and the statements of contemporary politicians on the topic convincingly demonstrate just how poorly the Russian intellectual community is informed in this respect. We still have no analytical summary of the Russian Empire’s experience of governing the provinces. Our knowledge is especially incomplete concerning the mechanisms of self-organization in the framework of state-building.

In this context, new information derived from managerial documents and record keeping produced by the authorities charged with administrative supervision could bring welcome changes to the existing state of research.

In the 19th century, institutional reforms of the Russian police followed one after another. The Ministry of the Interior was created in 1802. A short while later, the Ministry of Police was instituted in its stead (1810–1819). After the Decembrists’ revolt, the political police was reorganized during 1826–1827, and the Third Section of His Majesty’s Own Imperial Chancellery (*Tretia sektsiia Ego Imperatorskogo Velichestva Kantseliarii*, hereafter the Third Section) was established⁴. The institution of a special ‘surveillance police’ (*nabliudatel’naia politsiia*) pursued the purpose of removing the Russian Gendarmerie from the Ministry’s executive jurisdiction, which would allow the former to give an ‘unbiased’ assessment and arms-length judgment on the efficiency of various bodies of state administration. Reporting directly to the emperor, the political police was immune to governmental and institutional pressure. In 1880, the Third Section was replaced by the Department of Police, which survived until 1917.

This brief survey shows that throughout the 19th century the supreme authorities were looking for an optimal form of police surveillance over the administrative apparatus. Were these

³ Etkind, Alexander. *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience*. Cambridge, UK, 2011. Russian translation: Etkind, A. *Vnutrenniaia kolonizatsiia. Imperskii opyt Rossii*. Trans. V. Makarov. 2nd ed. M., 2013.

⁴ *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiskoi imperii*. Sobranie 2. SPb., 1830–1884. Vols. 1-30. № 449. (Hereafter PSZ-2).

institutional reforms the result of personal initiatives or of state-run modernization, or were they a reaction to social challenges? To what extent did they conform to the contemporaneous theories of public order or political development? Can police institutions have mechanisms of self-organization similar to those typical of other professions?

Scholars discuss these questions in two contexts: in connection with the study of the history and theory of police states in Europe⁵, and in relation to concepts of political power in the Russian empire. In the latter case, it is the adaptation of ideas of French *surveillance* and the political utopia of an enlightened state that raises particular interest. The present essay aims to reconstruct the purpose of the police as envisioned by its founders (1826-1836). The study is based on archival documents of the Third Section of His Majesty's Own Imperial Chancellery preserved in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF, Funds 109 and 110). It was to the Third Section that information of all kinds was sent from every corner of the Russian empire. Here, the gendarme officers' reports on administrative irregularities and anything else of interest to the political police were preserved, and the intelligence – communicated through memoranda, reports, briefs, and surveys – was systematized for presentation to the emperor. The texts of these reports offered a detailed interpretation of the opinions of provincial residents regarding their local authorities.

Social history focuses on the means of group self-organization and practices of professional self-identification. The history of guidelines for the political police in the Russian empire allows us to evaluate the means of self-representation utilized by the authorities, as well as their construction of the self — not only as an enemy within, but also as a 'researcher' amongst the 'natives'. Archival documents of the Special Corps of Gendarmes for the years 1826-1836 provide ample grounds in favor of this approach to the subject matter.

In the Soviet Union, a study of almost any imperial governing institution was rather limited in scope. Historians of the time had little patience for 'bourgeois institutions', with the 'surveillance police' being the only exception, as it served as an illustration of a centuries-old struggle of the tsarist regime with revolutionary ideas. Scholarly literature mostly viewed the Third Section as a penal institution. A departure from the official interpretation was first made possible by the contribution of international historians to the study of the secret police of Nicholas I⁶, but it was only in the 1990s at the time of *perestroika* that domestic researchers

⁵ The project *Police order and Situational solidarity: the Dynamics of interaction and Transformation* (part of the HSE Program of Fundamental Studies in 2013). <http://www.hse.ru/org/projects/79579505>; Ovchenko Yu.F. *Moskovskaia okhranka na rubezhe vekov, 1880 – 1904 gg. M.*, 2010.; [Polizeiwissenschaft in Deutschland](#). In: *Polizeiwissenschaft 1*, hrsg. von Möllers/van Ooyen, Frankfurt 2013, S. 111–146 (Nachdruck des Beitrages in *Polizei & Wissenschaft* 2007).

⁶ Monas S. *The Third Section. Police and Society in Russia under Nicholas I*. Harvard, 1961; Squire P.S. *The Third Department. The establishment and Practices of the Political Police in the Russia of Nicholas I*. Cambridge, 1968; Emsley C. *Gendarmes and the State in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Oxford, 1999; Lincoln, W. Bruse. *Nicholas I. Emperor and Autocrat of All Russians*. The Press, Worcester, and London, 1978; LeDonne J. P. *Absolutism and ruling class: the formation of the Russian political order, 1700–1825*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. P. 121–177.

adopted a functionalist approach, which views the matter in hand as a quest for efficient governance in the framework of ethnic and cultural diversity⁷.

The majority of scholars focused their attention on von Benkendorff's political activity and his influence on the emperor's decisions. This being so, the activities of the Special Corps of Gendarmes, of which von Benkendorff was the chief, meaning the everyday routines of the political police, remained virtually unknown. It was only recently that the notion of the corrective role the gendarme officers played in the imperial administration appeared, due to the development of regional studies on government institutions⁸. Since this is usually just a peripheral subject for regional historians, and because documents on general policies are scarce in regional archives, a few questions remain unanswered: Specifically, what was the gendarmerie's mandate in the provinces, what powers did the gendarme officers have, and how well did they manage.

Establishment of the Secret Police

The foundations of the Russian Gendarmerie were laid by an Edict of His Imperial Majesty, issued on April 28, 1827, which created five districts of the Special Corps of Gendarmes⁹ headed by the adjutant general von Benkendorff. From this moment on, Saint Petersburg relied on the gendarme staff officers as the main suppliers of information from provincial towns: their special reports highlighted local specifics. The empire's communicative space started filling with their secret briefs, all eventually finding their way to a single 'surveillance' point, supervised personally by Nicholas I. In other words, the gendarme staff officers' briefs took over the function of feedback from the population, which had earlier been fulfilled by reports from local officials or marshals of nobility. This permanent covert surveillance over the local government and provincial society replaced an overt, yet sporadic control by senators¹⁰.

Changes affecting the means of administrative control and the supreme authority's political settings were due not only to the personality of the emperor and his personal power tactics: they were also prompted by the experience of studying and resolving provincial conflicts in the first quarter of the 19th century. Clearly visible failures of management by ministries and

⁷ See: Tchukarev A.G. *Tainaia politsiia Nikolaiia I (1826–1855)*. Yaroslavl, 2003. Vols 1, 2; Tarasov B.N. *Nikolai I – rytsar' samoderzhavii*. M., 2007; Bibikov G.N. A.Kh. *Benkendorff I politika imperatora Nikolaiia I*. M., 2009; Oleinikov D.I. *Benkendorff*. M., 2009; Idem. *Nikolai I*. M., 2012.

⁸ See: Romanov V.V. *Podrazdeleniia politicheskoi politzii v Povolshskikh guberniakh v 1826 – 1860 gg.: formy i osnovnyie napravleniia deiatel'nosti*. Ulianovsk, 2008;

Bibikov G.N. *A.Kh. Benkendorff i politika imperatora Nikolaiia I*. M., 2009. P. 147; Biktasheva A.N. *Antropologiiia vlasti: kazanskiie gubernatory pervoi poloviny XIX veka*. M., 2012. P. 374- 413.

⁹ PSZ-2. № 1062.

¹⁰ Biktasheva A.N. [Gubernator kak zhertva konfrontatsii koronnoi vlasti, gubernskogo dvorianstva i 'lokal'nogo' obshchestva \(pervaiia polovina XIX veka\)](#) // *Istoriia i istoricheskaiia pamiat'* / Ed. A. Gladyshev. Issue 5. Saratov, 2012. P. 71-84.

the inefficiency of provincial inspections carried out by senators in disguise moved the supreme authorities to replace senatorial public inquiries with covert surveillance by gendarmes. Historians of the secret police have no doubts as to the connection between the events of December 14, 1825, and the reorganization of the ‘sensitive institution’¹¹. Official investigation into the Decembrists’ revolt uncovered evidence that the Decembrists believed it necessary to strengthen the police and to endow them with functions of administrative surveillance¹². In all likelihood, von Benkendorff considered the opposition’s suggestions when devising his project of the secret police. Scholars agree that von Benkendorff’s *Project for the Organization of the Secret Police* bears a vivid resemblance to a number of articles in P.I. Pestel’s *Russkaia pravda*¹³.

The creation of the secret police went hand in hand with conceptualizing the experience of the Decembrist movement and the struggle against it. Consequently, on December 6, 1826, the secret committee gathered to work out a new concept of state governance. As a result, the Second Section of His Imperial Majesty’s Own Chancellery was established, with an intention to see through an old project of codifying the law. As Nicholas I and his associates hoped, this measure would help stabilize the state, make its administrative system more efficient, and thus save the country from social disorders and civil wars.

From the moment of its creation, the ‘surveillance police’ played the role of resident appraiser of the state of power both in the capitals and on the periphery. Ten years later, as the secret police’s political influence, competence, and cognizance grew, its jurisdiction expanded to include control over government appointments. The Third Section collected information on practically every Russian employee, and the chief of Gendarmes personally weighed in on many administrative appointments.

Thus, the concept of the ‘higher’ police was built on lessons of political events of the time, in addition to previous administrative experience and a belief in the power of knowledge and observation, meaning of a panoptic governance regime. From the second quarter of the 19th century onward, the gendarme staff officers became for the supreme authorities the main source of information on the state of administrative bodies and ‘persons’ in local government, along with attitudes among the provincial and district gentry and other estates. For this reason, the transcripts of the gendarmes’ reports allow us to judge how new knowledge was acquired and what role it played in making political decisions.

The first decade of the Third Section’s operations produced management and record-keeping texts of a complex genre. They reflect the creativity of the ‘founding fathers’ of the new

¹¹ For more details, see Bibikov G.N. A. *Kh. Benkendorff i politika imperator Nikolaiia I*. M., 2009. P. 114 – 146.

¹² Pestel’ P.I. *Russkaia pravda*. SPb., 1906. P. 110-112, 119.

¹³ Golovkov G.Z., Burin S.N. *Kantseliariia nepronitsaemoi t’my*. M., 1994. P. 9 – 12.

profession. The documents of the Special Corps of Gendarmes from the years 1826-1836 are full of suggestions, clarifications, interpretations of western experience and Russian realities. They clearly show visible traces of various administrative practices and discussions of institutional ethics. This was the period when higher gendarme officers and the chief of the secret police tried out new methods and worked out professional norms. This circumstance makes these documents especially appealing to students of political history.

Let us turn to the position and functions of provincial staff officers. The official edict, which established the Special Corps of Gendarmes, divided the territory of European Russia into five districts, each having district gendarme generals, with centers in Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Vitebsk, Kiev, and Kazan'. The districts were further subdivided into sections headed by staff officers in the rank of at least a lieutenant colonel. The original staff of the Corps of Gendarmes comprised 4,278 men. Out of this insignificant number, only 41 had the title of a staff officer¹⁴. Starting from 1829, staff officers were appointed to each province. Later on, the structure of the Corps continued to grow larger and more complex. New districts appeared with centers in Warsaw, Tobolsk, and Tiflis. By 1836, there were 66 staff officers and 56 adjuncts¹⁵.

The significance of these structural and territorial innovations is revealed by von Benkendorff's clarifications made at one of the meetings of the secret committee in 1826. According to him, the reorganization of the secret police aimed essentially to create the institute of gendarme staff officers and to make provisions for its operation. Benkendorff summed up the purpose of reorganization as the setting up of district gendarme administrations and of provincial staff officers. He specified that the responsibilities of gendarme brigades and their chiefs were different from the powers of staff officers¹⁶.

Documents from the gendarme archives bear witness to the fact that the job description and the division of powers between these various officials took quite a while to crystallize. The experience of creating a universal network of observers found its expression in the *Guidelines on the Special Corps of Gendarmes*, issued on July 1, 1836¹⁷. The *Guidelines* stated that staff officers go by the 'special instructions of the Chief of Gendarmes'. As for the legal norms regulating the gendarmes' operations, they are set out in just a few judicial acts. The earlier mentioned edict from April 28, 1827, entitled *On the Creation of Five Districts...*, established the position of staff officer in relation to combatant forces and the various ranks of gendarmes. The legal code — *Svod zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii* — lists the gendarmes' functions in articles

¹⁴ See. Ruud Ch.A., Stepanov S.A. *Fontanka 16: Politicheskii sysk pri tsariakh*. M., 1993. P. 46; Tchukarev A.G. *Tainiia politsiia Rossii: 1825-1855*. M., 2005. P. 130.

¹⁵ Bibikov G.N. *A.Kh. Benkendorff i politika imperatora Nikolaiia I* / Grigorii Bibikov. M., 2009. P.182.

¹⁶ Zhurnaly Komiteta uchrezhdenogo Vysovchaishim reskriptom 6 dekabria 1826 goda // *Sbornik Imperatorskogo Russkago Istoricheskago Obshchestva*. V.74. SPb., 1891. P. 48.

¹⁷ PSZ-2. № 9355.

138 and 345 of the *Instructions for Civil Provincial Governors* of June 3, 1837¹⁸. These articles regulate mutual relations between provincial governors and gendarme staff officers in specific cases of conflicts of interest. Thus, it was ‘secret’ directives — not laws — that defined the ‘discretion’ and responsibilities of the Russian gendarmes.

Instructions for the Gendarmes

The tradition to give the gendarme officers special instructions came about in the time of Alexander I. Scholarship on the topic presents the history of the first instructions for gendarmes rather schematically and confusingly. We know that the first directive of the chief of gendarmes, also known as the original, or basic instruction for an employee of the Third Section,¹⁹ was somewhat different from its complementary edition²⁰, and that the two operated unchanged throughout the reign of Nicholas I. However, the questions, such as for whom, how, and when these documents were created, have thus far not been answered satisfactorily²¹.

The first provincial staff officers took up their duties in late 1826 and early 1827. Each received for guidance the original – or basic – secret directive compiled by the chief of gendarmes in September 1826²². The first article of this document recommended, ‘Special attention is to be paid to potential disruptions at every level of management without exceptions and to abuses, disorders, and violations of the law in every estate and location.’ The second article charged the gendarmes with ‘observing that civic peace and rights not be disrupted by anyone’s personal power or domination of the strong, or by subversive direction of malicious persons.’ The third article declared the right of citizens to address local authorities on the subject of ‘illegal actions’ of their employees. The next two articles indicated specific professional ways for the gendarmes to carry out their official duties. They were to acquire respect of all estates and, ‘on those grounds’, to recruit numerous collaborators and assistants ‘who love the truth and desire to establish peace and quiet in every place.’ They also ought to look up and find the ‘poor and orphaned’ disinterested employees and give them ‘every kind of assistance’ in reward for their services.

It is easy to see that von Benkendorff’s first directive, full of verbose commonplaces, was a declaration of intent more than a set of practical guidelines. This was a moral code of sorts, outlining the basic principles of the ‘higher police’ (*vysshaia politsiia*). These principles aimed

¹⁸ PSZ-2. № 10303.

¹⁹ See: Instruktsia grafa Benkendorfa tchinovniku “Tretiego Otdeleniia” // *Russkii arkhiv*. 1889. № 7. P. 395 – 397.

²⁰ GARF. F. 109. 1 expedition. 1832. D. 373. L. 2. This document was first published by T.G. Derevnina in an appendix to her dissertation for the degree of C. Sc. entitled *III Otdeleniie i ego mesto v sisteme gosudarstvennogo stroiia absolutnoi monarkhii v Rossii* in 1973.

²¹ Romanov V.V. *Politicheskaia politsiia Rossiskoi imperii 1826 – 1860 gg.: osnovnye tendentsii razvitiia*. Ulianovsk, 2007. P. 267–320.

²² Orzhikhovski I.V. *Samoderzhavie protiv revoliutsionnoi Rossii. 1826 – 1880*. M., 1982. P. 58; GARF. F. 109. 1 expedition. 1832. D. 373. L. 1.

to shape the gendarme officers' social responsibility for society and an enlightened government: a gendarme stands on guard for truth and order²³.

The directive may have addressed outsiders as well. In spite of its being a secret missive, the news of the directive spread quickly. The Third Section likely gave its blessing for the information leak, so the public would view the gendarme officers as carriers of the highest will and as observers independent from government and with immediate access to the emperor. The aura of secrecy surrounding this document did its part. Many high-ranking officials were familiar with its contents, but no copies were circulating. The earliest briefs by the gendarme staff officers quite frequently reported on how the gendarmes were perceived by the provincial and metropolitan population and by individual officials. This verification by public opinion could help adjust the Gendarmerie's fields of concern and simultaneously make the position of the Third Section stronger. To quote a relevant fragment of the report by major-general A.A. Volkov, chief of the Second Moscow District of the Corps of Gendarmes, 'In fact, the party of the governor-general Prince Golitsyn, displeased by the establishment of our service or, to say it more openly, by the fact that our service may disclose their activities, vigilantly follows ... my every movement and makes ready to let arrows fly at us at a moment's notice.'²⁴ The civil governor general of the Kaluga province, Prince A.P. Obolenskii, adhered to the opposite opinion. He perceptively asserted, 'The establishment of the Corps of Gendarmes is rather beneficial for Russia in her present weakened condition, and many actions of the gendarmes are the shortest way towards improving the state. All governors-general must be glad to receive help, which, by virtue of not being prosecutorial in form, is all the freer and more successful at eradicating evil and restoring the well-being of citizens.'²⁵

Differences of opinion and apprehension among governors-general were to be expected. The newly arrived 'policemen of integrity', with their bright uniforms and secret powers, were very different from the self-serving senators who used to inspect the provinces. The gendarmes – on a mission and acting at a distance from their headquarters – were quick to create new corporate traditions.

Each agent received secret instructions defining his conduct in the 'culture' in question. However, just like anthropologists, the reality that the first gendarme researchers had to face was much more complex than the written prescriptions. The problems and conflicts the first gendarmes encountered are recorded in the correspondence the chief of gendarmes maintained with district generals and chiefs of provincial branches. The number of letters of this kind —

²³ Bibikov G.N. *A.Kh. Benkendorff i politika imperatora Nikolaiia I* / Grigorii Bibikov. M., 2009. P.156.

²⁴ GARF. F. 109. Op. 3a. D. 1191. L. 16.

²⁵ Ibid. 1 expedition. 1827. D. 143. L. 5 ob.

with questions, responses and clarifications, discussions, and directives concerning gendarme powers — was at its peak in 1827–1828.

This was the first, transitional period in the history of the Corps of Gendarmes: one that required greatest responsibility. It was the time of trial and error. Any officer could take initiative, come forward with a suggestion or criticism. Although their reports were structured in compliance with uniform questionnaires, the resulting narratives displayed features of all kinds of different genres. These texts make it obvious that the observers had difficulties defining exactly what they were supposed to observe. The narrowing of the focus depended on the political idiosyncrasies of an individual staff officer. It was up to his personal voice in the report to quench the headquarters' thirst for information.

In the period in hand, colonel Zhemtchuzhnikov was considered the most successful informer²⁶. His brief regarding the governance of the Kaluga province drew attention first of the chief of gendarmes, and then of the emperor²⁷. Zhemtchuzhnikov compiled a survey, where he both noted the shortcomings and made suggestions on how to reform the local police, complete with statistical data and neatly arranged arguments. This document became an example for all the other staff officers to follow. We know of cases when officers appointed to different provinces met up specifically to exchange their experiences in constructing the best type of a written report²⁸. In this way, one person's success became available to everyone.

A file dated from 1827 and entitled *The Guidelines for the Chiefs of Gendarme Districts and Subdivisions* provides insight into their guiding principles²⁹. The texts collected in this file allow us to trace the motives behind various secret prescriptions, directives, and instructions. Just as informative are marginal notes and comments by von Benkendorff. For instance, in response to a report by N. Bakhmetiev, a head of a gendarme subdivision who asked permission 'to enter public offices' whenever necessary, von Benkendorff left a note that read 'Impossible'.

This request was not one of a kind. Civil governors-general, unhappy with the scope of the powers of gendarme staff officers, were prone to show resistance. A number of reports feature von Benkendorff's clarifications on the limits of his employees' powers³⁰. For example, one of the texts bears his comment, 'It is the duty of a prosecutor.' In 1828, a special directive forbade staff officers from 'engaging with Ecclesiastical Administrations'³¹. This correspondence creates an impression that the first years of the Corps' existence were marked mostly by prohibitions. In fact, the dry formulas were the result of a painstaking work on

²⁶ GARF. F. 109. 1 expedition. 1827. D. 143. L. 1-32.

²⁷ Ibid. L. 29; Op. 3a. D. 1191. L. 53.

²⁸ Ibid. L. 64.

²⁹ Ibid. 1 expedition. 1827. Op. 2. D. 207. L. 1-48.

³⁰ L. 37-38.

³¹ GARF. F.110. Op.2. D. 97. L.3.

creating a new profession from scratch. By means of explanations and prohibitions, the chief of the secret police disciplined his subordinates and transformed them into enlightened researchers of the Empire. He demanded that they maintain objectivity and distance in respect of administrative bodies and persons, which required both intellectual and psychological efforts.

The practice of written discussions of instructions issued from above also continued in later years: I was able to trace it up to mid-1850s, making it is safe to call it a tradition. One of the archival files of the Third Section preserved a whole collection of ‘considerations regarding the usefulness of instructions’ from various years³². In the absence of special professional education for the secret police’s human resources, one may see this practice of communal discussion as a practice of professional self-regulation and self-control.

An analysis of the gendarme reports from the first decade allows me to conclude that their institutional competencies formed from within, both casually and collectively. Secret instructions served only to give a general direction to the gendarme activities, whereas the actual ‘sum of responsibilities’ and professional ethics took shape through communal effort, based on the experience of ‘field operations’. This ritual gave each member of the Corps a sense of participation in governing the empire, united all officers, reinforced their corporate ties, and formed their elite solidarity. The very existence of a long-term collective ‘discussion’ of secret instructions testifies to the presence of systemic professional reflection and an in-house dialogue about the efficiency of the police’s functions and actions.

Von Benkendorff’s instructions were designed to convey the principal reasons for the creation of the Corps of Gendarmes: to assert fairness and to restore ‘perfect justice’. These guidelines lay down new approaches to organizing the political police. The police fulfilled the will of the supreme authority, as well as protected the interests of its subjects. These texts construct a new public image of the institutes of the secret police and the Russian Gendarmerie.

³² GARF. F. 109. 1 expedition. 1832. D. 373.

Alsu Biktasheva

National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia). E-mail:
biktashi@mail.ru

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