

To the biography of N.A. Semashko: on the work of the first People's Commissar of Health in 1920–1925

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Abstract

The article deals with the main turning points in the life and work of N.A. Semashko, the first People's Commissar of Health of the RSFSR, from 1920 to 1925. The authors of the article proceed from the fact that the historical and biographical data available about Semashko are interpreted according to ideologically tinted stereotypes that were formed in the Soviet historiographic school. Based on various sources (mainly documents from the State Archives of the Russian Federation and Semashko's family archive), as well as critical analysis of data from literature, an attempt was made to give an ideologically neutral assessment of the participation of Semashko in the organization of the sanatorium and resort sector in the RSFSR and the assistance provided to Soviet Russia from foreign public organizations. New facts were discovered about Semashko's life, which in particular made it possible to clarify his role in helping medical personnel in Crimea during political repressions there (after the Bolsheviks established power on the peninsula). The authors of the article point out that despite the difficulties that existed at that time, in many respects, it was only due to Semashko's authority and organizational abilities that the famous Soviet All-Russia health resort was established in Crimea. While work was carried out on the archives, data were found on the supply of humanitarian aid to the People's Commissar of Health by US public organizations, sympathizing with Soviet Russia in the first half of the 1920s. It is concluded that the formation of Semashko's scientific biography, which assumes an objective assessment, in particular, concerning his contribution to the organization of medical care, will make it possible in general to move on to an objective analysis of the features of the Soviet health care system and the transformation of the Soviet model (the Semashko model) into the modern Russian model of health care.

Keywords

history of public health, scientific biography, N.A. Semashko, the first People's Commissar of Health, Soviet model of health care

Introduction

Currently, an ideologically neutral revision of historical events of the 20th century is considered topical for Russian historiography. Regarding medicine, the history of the organisation of Soviet healthcare requires special attention. The first national system of healthcare for all citizens was established in the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federation of Soviet Republics) in 1918. Many of the principles of Soviet healthcare (the principle of district doctors, preventative medicine, regular clinical examination, etc.) were later used in international practice and intro-

duced into the practical public healthcare of the Russian Federation. Comprehension of many historical events inevitably raises questions of the role of some individuals in history. One of the major figures of the Soviet public health system is N.A. Semashko, under whose leadership the foundations of the Soviet healthcare system were laid. However, there are a few little-known periods even in the biography of the first People's Commissar of the Soviet public health. The period from 1920 to 1925 – the time when the foundations of sanitarium and resort business were laid in the USSR – was one of them.

N.A. Semashko's activities and the establishment of health resorts in Crimea

In Soviet historiography, the decree “On the Use of Crimea for the Medical Treatment of the Working People,” signed by V.I. Lenin on the 21st of December 1920, was for a long time considered to be the beginning of the recreational and resort development of the Crimea (Usov 1925, Nadinskiy 1951). However, at the all-Russian level, the prospects of organising resorts in Crimea were announced soon after the 29th–30th of August 1883, when the delegates of the VII Congress of Russian naturalists and physicians visited Yevpatoria. Doctor Pavel Andriyanovich Dobychin shared his impressions of the trip in the newspaper *Vrachebnye Vedomosti*¹ (October–November 1883). In his essay, he noted the opportunities for treatment in the resort of Yevpatoria. Thus, contrary to the claims of many Soviet sources, the organisation of the sanitarium and resort business on the Crimean Peninsula began even before the Bolsheviks came to power. Moreover, after the nationalisation of the Crimean resorts in 1920, for a long time recreational facilities on the peninsula was developed chiefly based on the material and technical base and infrastructure inherited from the Russian Empire (Meshkov 2016).

Also, it wasn't customary in the national historiography to mention the mass political repressions that followed the establishment of Soviet power on the peninsula. After the final military defeat of P.N. Wrangel's army in November 1920, mass repressions against the “class enemies” of the new government began on the peninsula. So, on the 6th of December 1920, at a meeting of Moscow Party Activists, Lenin declared: “There are at present 300,000 bourgeois in the Crimea. These are a source of future profiteering, espionage and every kind of aid to the capitalists. However, we are not afraid of them. We say that we shall take and distribute them, make them submit, and assimilate them”² (Lenin 1970, p. 74).

The exact number of victims of political repressions in Crimea is difficult to establish: researchers, eyewitnesses, and direct participants of the events provide different information. But even according to official Soviet data, more than 56,000 people were executed by shooting in the largest cities of the peninsula alone from November 1920 to the end of 1921 (Grazhdanskaya voyna... 2010). According to the testimony of General Danilov, who served in the headquarters of the 4th Red Army, more than 80,000 people were executed by shooting in Crimea from November 1920 to April 1921. The Russian writer I.S. Shmelev, who lived in Alushta at the time,

talked about 120,000 executed. Poet Maximilian Voloshin believed that 96,000 people were shot in the autumn of 1920 alone. Basing his opinion upon eyewitness accounts, historian and publicist S.P. Melgunov writes about 50,000, 120,000 and 150,000 people in his work *Red Terror in Russia 1918–1923*. There are allegations of 52,000–53,000 executed in the materials of the Special Commission to Investigate Bolshevik Atrocities. General A.A. von Lampe, on the contrary, spoke of only 15,000 people. Y.P. Gaven, member of Crimean Revolutionary Committee, reported that approximately 7,000 people and more than 20,000 prisoners were executed by shooting at the initiative of B. Kun and R.S. Zemlyachka.

It should be noted that repressive measures have always been considered a theoretically justified and acceptable means of fighting by Russian revolutionary parties and many other parties worldwide. The Bolsheviks, rejecting (but applying in practice) individual punitive measures, justified the use of mass repressions during the period of “the highest point of class struggle” – as being a necessary element of the proletarian revolution (Kurtua et al. 2001).

Political repressions in Crimea concerned the widest social and public groups of the population – officers and military officials, soldiers of the White Army, doctors and employees of the Red Cross, Sisters of Mercy, teachers, officials, local dignitaries, journalists, former nobility and priests.

Despite the shortage of medical personnel on the peninsula, only the People's Commissar of Public Health N.A. Semashko, who arrived with a mandate from the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR in 1920 to organise the resort business, was able to save many medical workers from capital punishment (Felshtinskiy and Chernyavskiy 2004).

The First People's Commissar of Public Health had not only administrative and organisational talent, he also possessed courage, as evidenced by the case we found in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), which contained his correspondence with the staff of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (VChK³), including its chairman – F.E. Dzerzhinsky – on the issues of a possible release of the medical workers convicted during the Civil War (Arsent'ev and Reshetnikov 2017).

Several hundred letters from N.A. Semashko asking for a revision of convictions against ordinary medical personnel say a lot about him as a person and professional. The case also preserved the letters of ordinary citizens to the People's Commissar with requests to assist in the release of their relatives from arrest. N.A. Semashko didn't ignore such letters – he would make a request to VChK (Cheka) regarding every letter, asking to clarify

¹ Russian for “Medical Gazette”.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk%3AVladimir_Lenin/Archive_4.

³ Known as the Cheka and the OGPU – the secret police organisations founded by Feliks Dzerzhinsky and the principal organisations of repression for the Bolsheviks. – *Editor's note*.

the reason for the arrest in question and reconsider the possibility of revising the conviction. In this period of tragedy for the Russian state, thanks to N.A. Semashko's personal intervention, several dozen ordinary medical workers (doctors, nurses and orderlies) and ordinary citizens of Soviet Russia (for example, the release of doctors Gordzinsky, Kudryavtsev, and Kridener, and the fitter Zubkov (fig. 1, 2)) were vindicated.⁴

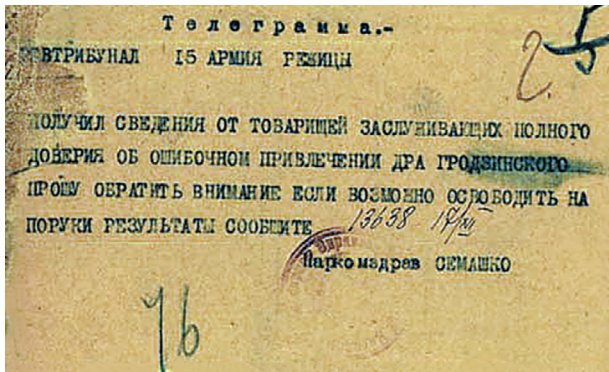


Fig. 1. N.A. Semashko's telegram on the possible release of doctor Gordzinsky.⁵ GARF. F. A482. I. 1. C. 226. P. 5.

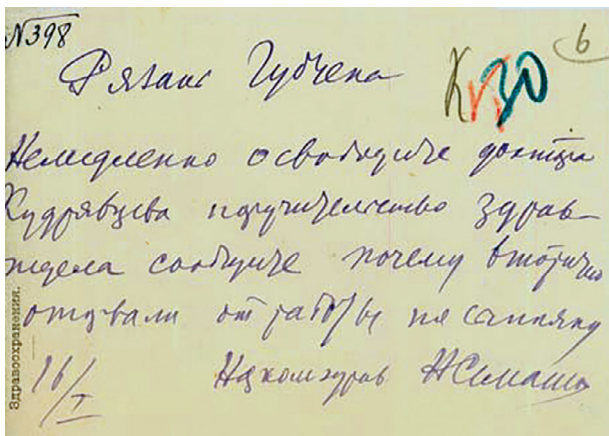


Fig. 2. The text of N.A. Semashko's telegram regarding doctor Kudryavtsev.⁶ GARF. F. A482. I. 1. C. 226. P. 31.

⁴ GARF. F. A482. I. 1, C. 226. Correspondence with the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission on the arrest and release of doctors. P. 5, 31, 60, 77.

⁵ Text on the picture:
Telegram
Revolutionary tribunal 15th army
Received information from comrades deserving full confidence about the erroneous conviction of doctor Gordzinsky.
Please note, release on bail if possible. Report the results.
17/XII
People's Commissar of Public Health Semashko.

⁶ Text on the picture:
Release doctor Kudryavtsev immediately. Pledge of the Health Department. Report why [he] was deterred from work at (illegible) again.
16/I
People's Commissar of Public Health Semashko.

It should be noted that, according to the evidence of this case (the letters from VChK employees in response to N.A. Semashko's requests), the majority of medical workers were convicted of criminal offences without political overtones (for example, the arrest of doctors Pogonyalova for accepting a bribe or Abramov for bribing a Cheka employee).⁷

As early as September 1918, N.A. Semashko sent an official paper to the Administrative Department of the CPC on the issues of mass arrests of doctors "as notable figures to be held as hostages." In that paper, the People's Commissar insistently demanded that the staff of the Extraordinary Investigation Commission, as well as the Commissar of Military Affairs, have it explained to them that doctors should only be prosecuted if they were politically guilty of political crimes, not because of their professional popularity. So, N.A. Semashko appealed against the arrest of Peter Andreevich Minakov, a professor of forensic medicine widely known in both Russia and Europe, who was a member of the academic council at the Commissariat of Public Health.⁸

However, N.A. Semashko was quite strict in business matters. This is evidenced by the telegram that we found, written to VChK by Semashko: "Commit the Ruzaevsky Executive Committee for trial for inaction in fighting the epidemic." Back then, such a telegram from the People's Commissar of Public Health was tantamount to a death sentence.

Regarding political repressions on the Crimean Peninsula, the head of the VChK F.E. Dzerzhinsky later admitted that he and other leaders of the department had made a grave mistake: "Crimea was the main nest of the White Guard, and we sent comrades with extraordinary powers to destroy this nest. But we couldn't have thought that they would use those powers in THAT way" (Ratkovskiy 2017, p. 272).

N.A. Semashko personally travelled to all the sanatoria on the peninsula, and then went to the Crimean Revolutionary Committee (Blinkin 1976). This is how he describes those events in his memoirs: "...Made a deal with the Revolutionary Committee about organising sanitariums in palaces and manor houses, sealed them all, one by one, declared in a thunderous voice that anyone who dared break the seals and use the sanatoria's property would be executed by shooting on the spot, and thus preserved all of those buildings with their commodities for the resort" (Semashko 1960,

⁷ GARF. F. A482. I. 1, C. 226. Correspondence with the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission on the arrest and release of doctors. P. 23, 37.

⁸ GARF. F. 353. I. 2. C. 772. P. 1. The People's Commissar of Public Health Semashko's paper to the Council of People's Commissars on the on-site explanation of the reasons for the arrest of doctors who are guilty politically, not as a result of their professional activities.

p. 75). Upon his return to Moscow N.A. Semashko drafted the decree “On the Use of Crimea for the Medical Treatment of the Working People,” which was signed by V.I. Lenin on the 21st of December 1920 (Mirskiy 1974).

This decree outlined the measures necessary for the smooth operation of the Crimean resorts. Particularly, the decree took into account the procedure for the selection of patients, the provision of sanatoria with sufficient foodstuffs, the supply of fuel, the allocation of special trains, the provision of resorts with food and the implementation of an employment regime.

On the 24th of December 1920 the Council of People's Commissars' decree “On the Use of Crimea for the Medical Treatment of the Working People” was transferred to D.I. Ulyanov (V.I. Lenin's brother) in Crimea, who was plenipotentiary of the Commissariat of Public Health for the Crimean resorts, and on the 25th of December 1920, in the Decree No. 1, the Crimean Revolutionary Committee declared Crimea the All-Russian Proletarian Health Resort.

So, the idea of the Bolsheviks' to create an “All-Russian Proletarian Health Resort” on the peninsula, where the new ruling class, the proletariat, could receive recreational benefits inaccessible before, was made true.

On the 12th of January 1921, the Council of Labour and Defence considered a draft decree “On restoration of the Crimean resorts,” regulating the use of the Crimean resorts as sanatoria and retreats. N.A. Semashko delivered the report. According to the decree, it was a requirement to provide any vital building materials with no planned orders in order to restore the resorts. Local authorities were given the right to involve the local people in this work.

In Soviet historiography it was constantly emphasised that it was the decree of the 21st of December 1920 “On the Use of Crimea for the Medical Treatment of the Working People” that became the basis for the new concept of recreational development of Crimea and legally settled the availability of sanatorium treatment for representatives of the formally privileged class, the proletariat (Usov 1925, Nadinskiy 1951). However, in reality this decree had more of a political and ideological, rather than a practical significance.

Another decree – “On the therapeutic areas of national importance,” the draft of which was presented to N.A. Semashko on the 13th of March 1919 at a meeting of a Small Council of People's Commissars and signed by V.I. Lenin on the 4th of April – was more informative. According to this document, all resorts were to be nationalised and further ways of developing the resort business in the republic and the principles of the organisation of medical care were decided. This decree gave the first ever definition in the Soviet legislation of the term “therapeutic area” (“resort”) – it concerned such areas of the country where there were

sources of mineral water and therapeutic mud, places for liman (estuary) and sea bathing, climatic and mountain clinics for treatment at high altitudes and premises for kumys therapy (fermented horse milk used for treatment, for tuberculosis).

The decree also determined the need for the special purpose and protection of Soviet resorts, their direct subordination to the People's Commissariat for Health of the RSFSR, and removed their management from the competence of local authorities in full accordance with the Soviet principle of The Unity of Soviet Health, which was supported by N.A. Semashko. In 1925, the Council of People's Commissars issued a decree “On the reorganisation of resort business,” which regulated the possibility of transferring the mandate for managing resorts to local authorities, and also granted resorts a greater economic independence, leaving only the function of a financial and economic body to the Main Resort Administration. As head of the People's Commissariat for Health, N.A. Semashko immediately criticised the decree which, in his opinion, undermined the principle of the unity of the Soviet healthcare system.⁹

The central body of the People's Commissariat for Health, which supervised the entire resort business of the republic, was the department of therapeutic areas. Upon the initiative of the People's Commissariat for Health, the first All-Russian Congress on the resort business was held in 1921 (from the 10th to the 16th of February), which brought together all the local leaders of the resort industry. The decisions of the Congress concerned general organisational issues, the organisation of medical services at the resorts, health regulations of the resort areas, resort construction, provision of goods, staff and services for resorts, the organisation of scientific work, the training of medical staff for resort work and the research and protection of the mineral springs. One of the foremost issues discussed at the Congress was the forms of management of resorts of national importance. The Congress confirmed the People's Commissariat for Health's point of view on the need to subordinate the administration of the resort administrations directly to the centre. The decisions of the Congress served as the basis for the development of a new decree on the management of resorts of national importance which was approved by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars on the 23rd of June 1921. This decree gave the People's Commissariat for Health the right to manage resorts through resort administrations on site.

⁹ GARF. F. R1235. I. 104. C. 656. The case on the protest of the People's Commissar of Health of the RSFSR on the resolution of the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR of the 30th of October 1925 “On the reorganisation of resort business”. P. 1–29.



Fig. 3. N.A. Semashko on holiday in Crimea (mid-1920s). Right – Nadezhda Mikhailovna Semashko, N.A. Semashko’s first wife. From the family archive of E.G. Farobina.¹⁰

The decree “On the Use of Crimea for the Medical Treatment of the Working People,” on one hand, was of a technical nature, clearly prescribing the mechanism of management of the nationalised resorts of Crimea and defining the foremost tasks of their development (Popov 2017a). On the other hand, it also had a political character – at the beginning of the 20th century, the news about the legal transfer (even formal) by the Bolsheviks of private property (mansions, palaces and cottages) of the Russian elite “into the hands of workers” was an attractive tool for ideological propaganda abroad.

In the early years of the Soviet government, as well as during the pre-revolutionary period, the Crimean resorts were created and developed spontaneously, without any unified plan. Palaces, estates and cottages, created in the Russian Empire as independent buildings, unrelated to each other as architectural objects, were handed over to sanatoria and resorts (Popov 2017b).

The announcement of the transformation of the peninsula into a proletarian health resort in the first months after the adoption of the decree “On the Use of Crimea for the Medical Treatment of the Working People” was associated with more serious problems than those that used to be discussed in the official Soviet balneology (the study of mineral waters for therapeutic purposes) (Yakutseni and Burovskiy 2015). The fact that the situation in the Crimean resorts at the time was very complicated is shown in the article “The truth about the All-Russian Health Resort” written by N.A. Semashko after a business trip to the peninsula

and published in the summer of 1921. The People’s Commissar called food and transport accessibility (for example, getting to Crimea from the central regions of Russia by train would take at least 5 to 7 days) the main problems of the first proletarian holiday season (Popov 2017a). But, despite the difficulties, 9 sanatoria were restored on the Southern Coast of Crimea by the beginning of 1921, and by the end of the year their number had increased to 23 (Belyatskiy 1974, p. 142).

In 1920–1921 N.A. Semashko regularly travelled to the resorts of the country to organise work on-site (Gorfin 1967). During his trips he would normally receive mandates of the Council of People’s Commissars granting him extensive rights. If there were only 5 resorts in the country in 1919 – Staraya Russa, Lipetsk, Sergievskiy Mineralnyye Vody, Elton and Kashin – by 1920 there were 22 resorts in the Urals, the North Caucasus and Siberia (Belyatskiy 1974, p. 141). In 1921–1922 resorts were opened on the Caucasian Coast of the Black Sea, and in Transbaikal and in the Far East in 1923 (Belyatskiy 1974, p. 142) (fig. 3, 4).

The Main Resort Administration (the highest state body governing the construction of sanatoria and resorts in the country) was created in 1923. N.A. Semashko (fig. 5) was assigned to head this work, and N.I. Teziakov was appointed his deputy.

The complexities of the construction of resorts during the first years of the Soviet government didn’t prevent Crimea from becoming the leader amongst ther-

¹⁰ Elena Gavrilovna Farobina is the granddaughter of N.A. Semashko.



Fig. 4. N.A. Semashko with friends on holiday in Crimea (mid-1920s). Bottom left – N.M. Semashko, the first wife; the second on the bottom right – Maria Solomonovna Goldin, the second wife of the People's Commissar. From the family archive of E.G. Farobina.



Fig. 5. N.A. Semashko on holiday in Crimea (mid-1920s). From the family archive of E.G. Farobina.

apeutic areas of the young Soviet state in 1925. By the number of admitted patients Crimea was, albeit quite insignificantly, ahead of the Caucasian Mineral Waters, which was ranked second in that regard. The capacity of the Crimean health resorts by that time was about 7,000 beds, and in the period from 1921 to 1926 a total of about 133,000 patients had been there. In terms of the number of beds in 1925 primacy belonged to the Southern Coast of Crimea where 4,253 patients could be accommodated simultaneously, followed by the resorts of Yevpatoria (1,478 beds) and Saky (700 beds), and the list was completed by Sevastopol, with only 175 beds at the time (Popov 2017a).

The resort business, the foundations of which were laid by N.A. Semashko, continued to successfully develop over time. Nowadays, the Russian Federation undertakes to provide certain categories of citizens with sanitarium treatment within the framework of the Programme of State Guarantees For Free Medical Aid Provision through the federal budget allocations in accordance with Federal Law No. 323-FZ of 21.11.2011 “On Basics of Health Protection of the Citizens in the Russian Federation”.¹¹ According to the State Register of the Resort Fund of the Russian

¹¹ [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_121895/248fa4675f997421558da42faa042975de97cb91/]

Federation, there are 36 resorts in the Crimea as of June 2018.¹² According to official data presented on the website of the Department of Labour and Social Protection of the Population of Moscow as of 2018, only 16 of the Crimean sanatoria provide services for the provision of sanitarium treatment (with vouchers) to certain categories of people receiving benefits (federal categories of people receiving benefits, individual categories of people receiving benefits) through budget allocations.¹³

N.A. Semashko's participations in attracting the help of foreign public organisations

The fundamentals of the organisation of the sanitarium and resort business in the RSFSR were laid in the difficult conditions of the Civil War (Reshetnikov et al. 2014a, b). With an acute shortage of financial and material resources, the People's Commissariat for Health, headed by N.A. Semashko, considered foreign countries, particularly the United States, as possible sources of humanitarian aid.

In domestic and foreign historiography the Civil War in Russia has traditionally been viewed as a period during which foreign states gave full support to the White Movement in order to isolate the Soviet state from foreign politics, overthrow the Bolsheviks' government and restore the monarchy in Russia. However, these stereotypes didn't correspond to the situation existing at the time.

So, for example, the foreign policy position of the US government regarding the Civil War in Russia was based firstly upon the non-recognition of Soviet Russia, and secondly upon rendering assistance (openly or covertly) to all anti-Bolshevik forces. Partly, this was reflected in the support of General P.N. Wrangel, whose military prowess it was believed could ensure the victory of the White Movement in the Civil War. Moreover, there was a representative office of the American Red Cross under the White Army, which was engaged in supplying troops. However, in American society the attitude towards the events in Russia was quite ambiguous. In the early 1920s, a number of social movements and organisations that supported Russia were widespread in the United States – Hands Off Russia!, The Friends of Soviet Russia, Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee, and Soviet Russia Technical Assistance Society, etc. In the setting of the approaching presidential elections, many US politicians

had to reckon with public opinion, generally sympathetic to Soviet Russia (*Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya... 2008*).

The Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee was one of the rarely-spoken-about public organisations in the United States. The committee collected funds for the purchase of medicine in the United States, which was organised in New York in early April 1920. This was the time of a serious reaction from the United States government after raids on the Soviet Bureau, pogroms (repression) of radical communist organisations, and numerous arrests and expulsions of communists from their workplaces. Despite the obvious anti-Soviet agitation in the US, the work of the Committee was rapidly expanding, and it was even possible in many cities to organise mass rallies in support of the young Soviet state.¹⁴

The Committee also had local branches: by January 1921, there were 110 peripheral committees in the US and Canada, headed by the centre in New York. By that time, about 130 mass rallies had been organised by local committees. In total, by 1921 the Committee cashiers received \$88,199 through collections at rallies and through the mail, of which \$74,283 was spent on purchasing and shipping medicine to Soviet Russia.¹⁵

The Committee's activities were not limited to supplying medicine to Soviet Russia. For example, in order to familiarise Soviet scientists with the latest achievements in medicine, the Committee sent several hundred medical books and scientific journals to the People's Commissariat for Health of the RSFSR. The exchange of experience in the area of scientific achievements wasn't one-sided. This is evidenced by a letter from the 14th of June 1921, preserved in the GARF, written by the head of the Foreign Information Department addressed to the Chairman of the Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee, doctor Mikhailovsky: "... Book publishers in Illinois asked us to send them all the publications of the People's Commissariat for Health; I propose to send our publications in exchange".¹⁶

The activities of the Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee undoubtedly contributed to the creation of a favourable image of Soviet Russia. However, despite the Committee's positive contribution to Soviet-American relations, the documents preserved by GARF testify to the abuse of its authority by the leadership of this organisation. So, in one of the documents (Appeal to the Entire Russian Workers' Colony of the USA and Canada) it is noted that at the mass meeting of the Russian revolutionary workers of the United Organisations of the City of Detroit on the 24th of October 1920, a

¹² https://kurort.rosminzdrav.ru/advanced_search?id_voc_region=89&search=1#search_result.

¹³ http://www.dszn.ru/activities/informatsiya_o_putevkakh/in-the-sanatorium-and-spa-institutions/sanatorium_spa_treatment/.

¹⁴ GARF. F. A482. I. 35. C. 17. P. 89. Correspondence with the US institutions, organisations and individuals about medical and material assistance to the Soviet people. Part of the document is in English and French.

¹⁵ GARF. F. A482. I. 35. C. 17. P. 90.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* P. 103.

report of the audit commission (which was entrusted to monitor the Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee) was presented. The report indicated that the leaders of the committee – in particular, A.M. Rovin and B. Rose-Back spent money collected at mass rallies on their own needs – expensive restaurants, cigars, hairdressers, flowers, tips for doormen, etc. According to the summary of the report, the revolutionary commission recommended “to stop collecting money for medical supplies until we get rid of the thieves, and until we are sure that the medical supplies will be delivered safely to Soviet Russia”.¹⁷

The US federal authorities closely followed the activities of the American communist movement with the help of undercover agents and informers. A secret investigation carried out by the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the US Department of Justice also shows that the US authorities were well aware of the harsh criticism in the communist community regarding the ethics and accounting practices of the Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee.¹⁸

N.A. Semashko, as the People's Commissar of Health, closely interacted with the leadership of the Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee, and in 1920 the Committee published a 16-page brochure written by N.A. Semashko and translated into English, entitled *The Care of Health in Soviet Russia*, with a circulation of 6,000 copies (fig. 6). This work briefly describes the main principles of the organisation of the Soviet healthcare system. One of the copies of the work of the People's Commissar of Health in English is preserved in GARF.

Despite the success of the Committee, a year later it faced serious difficulties. This is evidenced by a letter from the 1st of May 1921, in which a representative of the Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee writes to the Foreign Information Department of the People's Committee for Health “...Several organisations which also advocate medical assistance to Soviet Russia and try to exploit the favourable opinion nurtured by our society have been created here in recent times. Of all of them, the so-called Red Star League led by Charles Drake, the same Drake whom we needed to suspend from our work in our Western Committee in Chicago, is especially vocal. He and some others greatly compromise and disorganise the work of medical care. ...It is impossible to work productively in such conditions. Our collections have been greatly reduced lately”.¹⁹ The work of the Committee was directly dependent upon the donations collected in the United States, but we couldn't find any written evidence of external, foreign funding of the Committee.

¹⁷ GARF. F. A482. I. 35. C. 17. P. 38.

¹⁸ <http://www.marxisthistory.org/subject/usa/eam/amredstar-league.html>.

¹⁹ GARF. F. A482. I. 35. C. 17. P. 17.

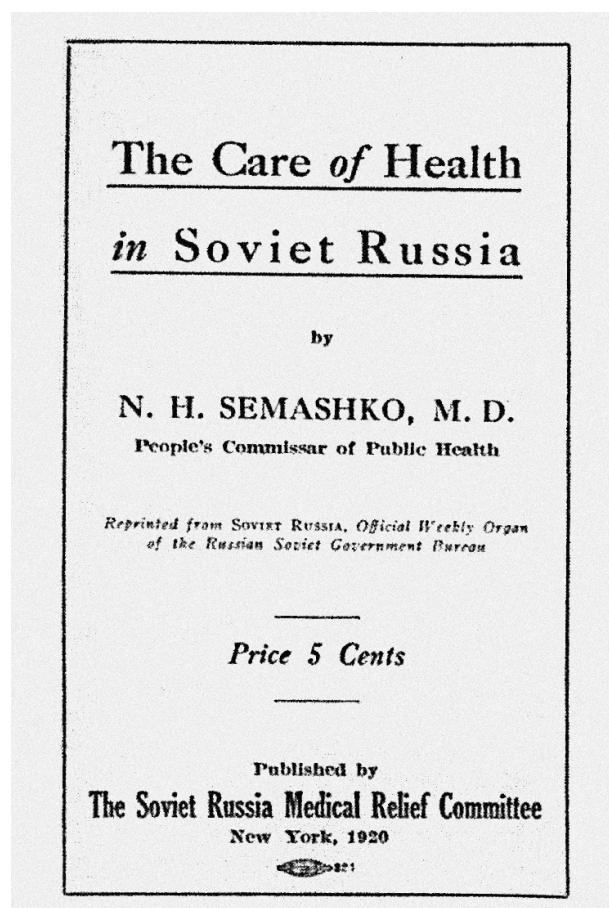


Fig. 6. The cover of N.A. Semashko's brochure (New York, 1920). GARF. F. A482. I. 35. C. 17. P. 4.

However, there are documents that indicate the possible direct subordination of the leadership of the Medical Aid Committee to the Soviet government (in particular, the People's Commissariat for Health and its head, N.A. Semashko). So, in a memorandum of comrade Alexandr Rovin addressed to comrades Semashko and Kalina it is noted: “Due to the changed political conditions in America in relation to Soviet Russia and in view of the establishment in the North American United States of the Representatives of the Red Cross Society, the activities of the Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee completely lose their importance”.²⁰ The same is evidenced by the surviving letter from N.A. Semashko to the Chairman of the Public Commissariat for Health in the United States comrade M. Mikhailovsky from the 14th of October 1921: “The Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee in the United States of North America is not to be dissolved, but used as a private society for the purpose of the Representative Office”.²¹

Due to the decrease in the collection of funds in the United States, as well as the lack of financial subsidies

²⁰ GARF. F. A482. I. 35. C. 17. P. 138.

²¹ *Ibid.* P. 114.

from the RSFSR, the Committee was forced to cease its activities relating to the provision of medical aid to Soviet Russia in the summer of 1921.

There was another organisation involved in raising funds for the procurement and shipment of humanitarian aid to Soviet Russia – the American Red Star League. The main organiser of the Red Star League was Charles Drake, who previously headed the Chicago Department of the Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee (he was responsible for collecting donations and organising rallies). But his methods of collecting funds, which made it impossible to account for the funds raised, displeased the Committee members. The resulting conflict led to the resignation of Charles Drake.

Immediately after his resignation, Drake established his own organisation, the American Red Star League, which was independent from the Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee. He used the former headquarters of the Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee in Chicago as a base for the new organisation.

Despite the infractions committed by the American Red Star when collecting donations, as well as criticism of the organisation by the American communist movement, in 1921 the Red Star League sent 17,000 pounds of soap to Soviet Russia.²²

The Federal Bureau of Investigation of the US Department of Justice closely followed the activities of the Soviet Russia Medical Aid Committee and the American Red Star League at the request of the Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, who harshly criticised these organisations, believing that the groups had no possible way to fulfil their obligations to provide medical and health care assistance to Soviet Russia, and that thus the fraudsters were simply raising money for themselves. However, a report prepared by the special assistant to the United States Attorney General indicated that, despite the infractions, both organisations in general fulfilled their obligations to deliver medicine to Soviet Russia.²³ Despite the openly anti-Bolshevik position of the US government, in the early 1920s there were many people amongst the ordinary citizens of the US who sympathised with the plight of the Soviet state. So, for example, in a letter from June 1921 addressed to N.A. Semashko from the Russian Relief Committee of Seattle (local branch of the Soviet Russia Medical

Aid Committee), indicates that several American women sympathising with Russia organised a committee to collect funds for the purchase and shipment of food-stuffs and surgical equipment to Soviet Russia.²⁴

Conclusion

So, the creation of a scientific biography of N.A. Semashko remains a topical task. In the interpretation of historical events at the beginning of the 20th century in the works devoted to the life and work of the first People's Commissar of Health, ideological stereotypes are preserved.

Soviet historical science has traditionally considered the events of this period from the standpoint of the teachings of Marxism-Leninism, which leads to a distortion of the interpretation of historical facts. The creation of the All-Russian Health Resort in Crimea by N.A. Semashko was advertised but the mass repressions carried out on the peninsula by the Bolsheviks at the same time were concealed. This distorted the concept of the era as a whole. The ideologically neutral scientific biography of the founder of Soviet public healthcare will give us a clearer picture of that historical period. A special subject is Soviet-American relations in the 1920s. In the United States, pro-Soviet organisations were engaged at that time in raising funds for the provision of humanitarian aid to Soviet Russia through the People's Commissariat for Health. N.A. Semashko's correspondence with the leaders of these organisations testifies that, in addition to providing humanitarian aid, these organisations were disseminating the ideas and propaganda of Bolshevism in the USA.

Taking the biographical data about N.A. Semashko into consideration, it is advisable to continue work on the creation of his scientific biography, which in the future will make it possible to more accurately identify the features of the Soviet healthcare model (Semashko's model), as well as consider its reflection in the modern Russian healthcare system.

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²² This is evidenced by the surviving letter addressed to N.A. Semashko. See GARF. F. A482. I. 35. C. 17. P. 53.

²³ <http://www.marxisthistory.org/subject/usa/eam/amredstar-league.html>

²⁴ GARF. F. A482. I. 35. C. 17. P. 41.

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