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N.A. Semashko – the first people's commissar of health: A new century – new research horizons

M.Y. Chernichenko

I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University, The Ministry of Health
of the Russian Federation

The article investigates the problem of insufficient knowledge of the life and work of the first people's commissar of health, Nikolai Aleksandrovich Semashko. Documents from the collections of the Museum of the History of Medicine at the I. M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University are introduced into scientific circulation for the first time, shedding new light on the work of N.A. Semashko as the chief editor of the Great Medical Encyclopedia, the head of the Department of Health Organization at the 1st Moscow Order of Lenin Medical Institute during World War II, as well as his role in the development of Russian endocrinology.

Keywords: *N.A. Semashko, People's Commissariat of Health of the RSFSR, biography, historiography, 1st Moscow Medical Institute, Museum of the History of Medicine at the I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University, history of medicine*

In the 1990s, research interest concerning Soviet statesmen and Bolshevik (Communist) party leaders almost completely disappeared. Moreover, almost all of the historical legacy of the Soviet era acquired negative connotations. The focus of historians, as serious professionals and as opportunity seekers, was on subjects that were previously under ideological prohibition: the history of the White movement, the execution of the Royal family, the Stalinist repressions. New readings and interpretations were given to key events of Russia's recent history: the February Revolution, the October Revolution, Civil War, socialist construction and the Great Patriotic war. Largely, this was due to the declassification of archival documents previously unavailable to historians.

At the same time, both for the general public and for professional historians, there was a seamless process of depreciation of research issues related to textbook heroes, which the powerful apparatus of Communist propaganda had praised and put on pedestals. This phenomenon contributed to the effect of "false knowledge", a topics which was formed through a range of measures to perpetuate the memory of outstanding Soviet statesmen, implemented by

the Soviet state, but not for purposes of research and development.

We regret to say that this is exactly what happened to the brilliant health administrator, scientist, physician, and educator Nikolai Alexandrovich Semashko (1874–1949). His name was immortalized in all ways available for that time: they built monuments, hung commemorative plaques and named streets in his honor. More than 100 organizations of different types were named after the first People's Commissar of Health of the RSFSR and the USSR. The result is predictable. Name recognition is associated with greater knowledge of the life and works of N. A. Semashko, which is quite far from the real situation.

One of the well-known books, "The First people's Health Commissar" was written for the 90th anniversary of the birth of N.A. Semashko by the famous historian of medicine M.B. Mirsky and frequently reprinted [1]. It consists of four chapters, "Character Development", "Revolutionary Leninist", "Chief Doctor of the Republic", "Medical Academic" and is essentially an artistic retelling of the memories of N.A. Semashko, "Lived and Experienced", first published ten years after his death, during the Khrushchev "thaw" [2].

Another anniversary edition, "N.A. Semashko" [3], was modest by Soviet standards, with



Fig. 1. N.A. Semashko giving a lecture to students of the 1st MMI, 1937.
Medical History Museum of I.M. Sechenov First MSMU. PKh 71/99.

a circulation of 5000 copies. However, it cannot be considered a full-fledged research work, because despite the author's declaration about the use of archival documents and materials, it has practically no scientific research mechanism or review of sources. In addition to the facts described by N.A. Semashko in his memoirs, the publication mentions that an important stage of his work was the creation of the "Great Medical Encyclopedia" (GME). But here, the authors did not develop the sources well: there is no analysis of the editorial staff archives and the correspondence between N.A. Semashko and the authors has not been studied, although the multi-year labor required for the doctor to create this ambitious multi-volume edition requires detailed study and the special attention of researchers of the history of medicine.

In 1986, he published the work of B.M. Photolava "N.A. Semashko doctor and revolutionary" [4]. It largely repeats the stories contained in "N.A. Semashko" and is supplemented solely with facts from sources published in the Complete Works of V.I. Lenin.

It is difficult to recognize the books described as a complete scientific body of research because they lack historiography, source reviews or a scientific mechanism. Furthermore, one should not forget that they were written, reviewed and revised at a time when a totalitarian Soviet

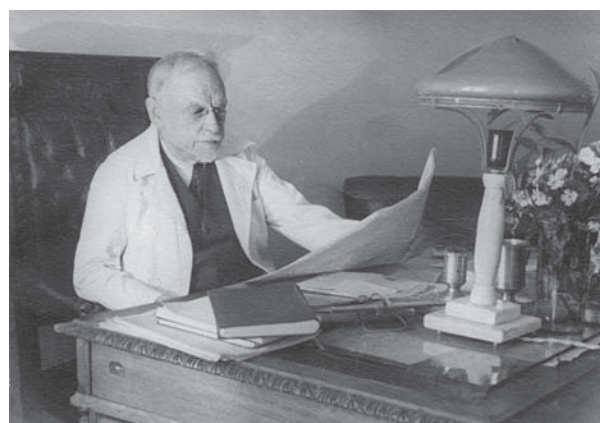


Fig. 2. N.A. Semashko in his office at the Department of Health Organization at the 1st Order of Lenin Moscow Medical Institute (1945-1947).
Medical History Museum of I.M. Sechenov First MSMU. PKh 14/363.



Fig. 3. N.A. Semashko with members of the scientific student club of the Department of Health Organization, 1st Order of Lenin Moscow Medical Institute, 1945.

Medical History Museum of I.M. Sechenov First MSMU. PKh 14/414.

ideology was dominant. Therefore, the authors had to primarily write about leadership role of V.I. Lenin in building the Soviet health care and the role of Marxist-Leninist philosophy in all the activities of N.A. Semashko. Apparently, the authors set themselves the task of writing a non-fiction biography of a famous statesman within the context of the dominant ideology, following the directive to create the image of "ardent revolutionary" and "diehard Bolshevik".

About the only article concerning N.A. Semashko was released in recent years in the popular media begins with the words: "Almost forgotten in modern Russia, the first People's Commissar of Health, Nikolai Semashko, created an exemplary system, which was borrowed by many countries of the world" [5]. And here, we cannot but agree with the author: forgotten and unstudied.

It is obvious that the multiple activities of N.A. Semashko require the rethinking and full attention of professional historians, which of course, cannot be done without the use of new scientific sources. For these purposes, the collection of the Museum of the History of

Medicine I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University is particularly valuable.

The N.A. Semashko fund stored in the Museum of the History of Medicine, has 1247 items that are waiting to be discovered by their researchers. The collection consists primarily of materials from the period when N.A. Semashko was at the department of social hygiene of the 1st Moscow Medical Institute. Located here are manuscripts of articles, reports, dissertation reviews, minutes of faculty meetings, educational materials and business correspondence (Fig. 1–3).

The Fund has only one document related to the activities of N.A. Semashko, when he was chief editor of the Great Medical Encyclopedia – his letter to the well-known therapist and endocrinology professor C.D. Shervinsky on November 23, 1935 (Fig. 4).

It would seem that the document is relatively insignificant, but it opens up for researchers new facets of the personality of N.A. Semashko, his organizational talent as People's Committee Commissar.

Work on creating the first national medical encyclopedia lasted more than eight years.

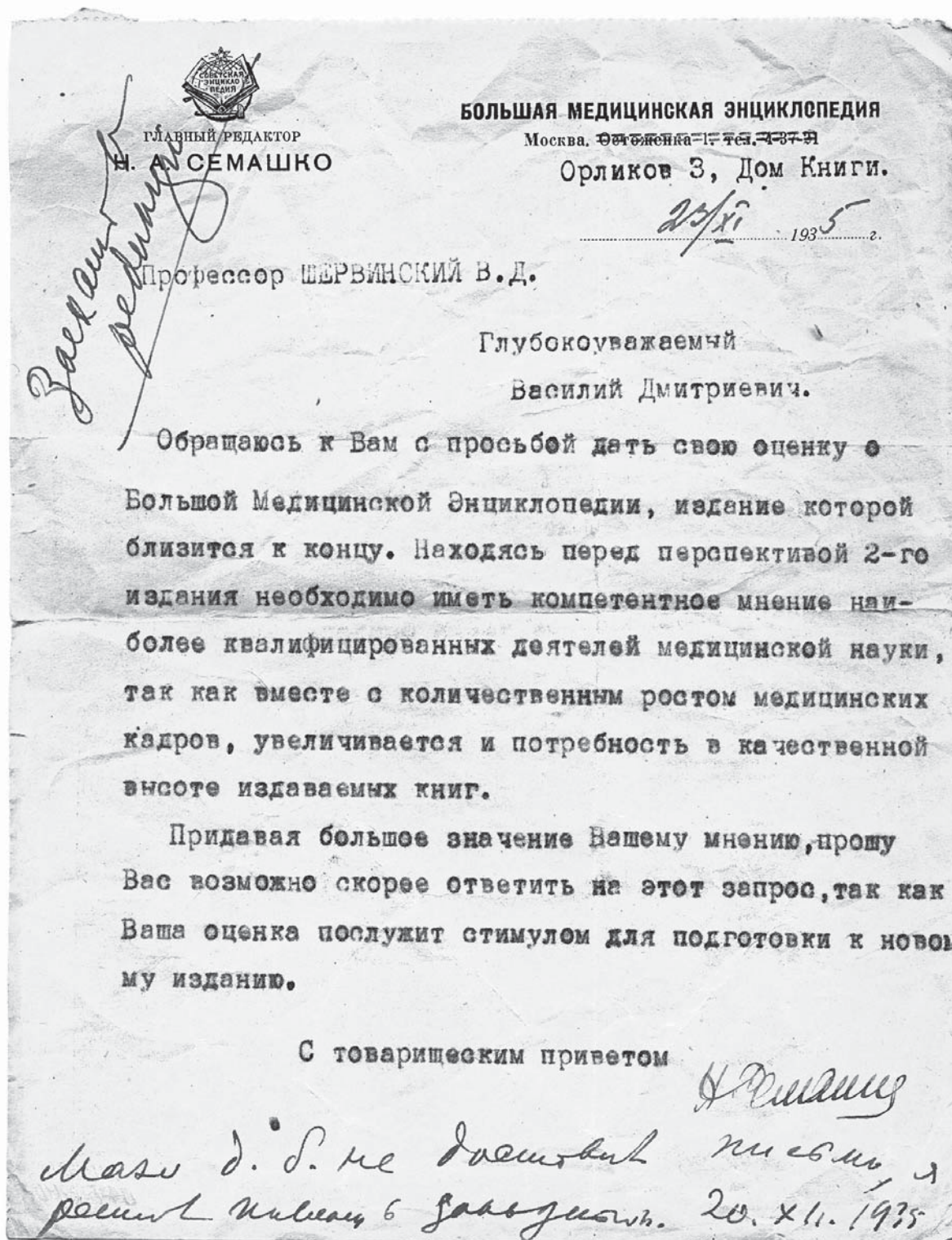


Fig. 4. Letter from N.A. Semashko to V.D. Shervinsky. 23/08/1935.
Medical History Museum of I.M. Sechenov First MSMU. OF 605/107.

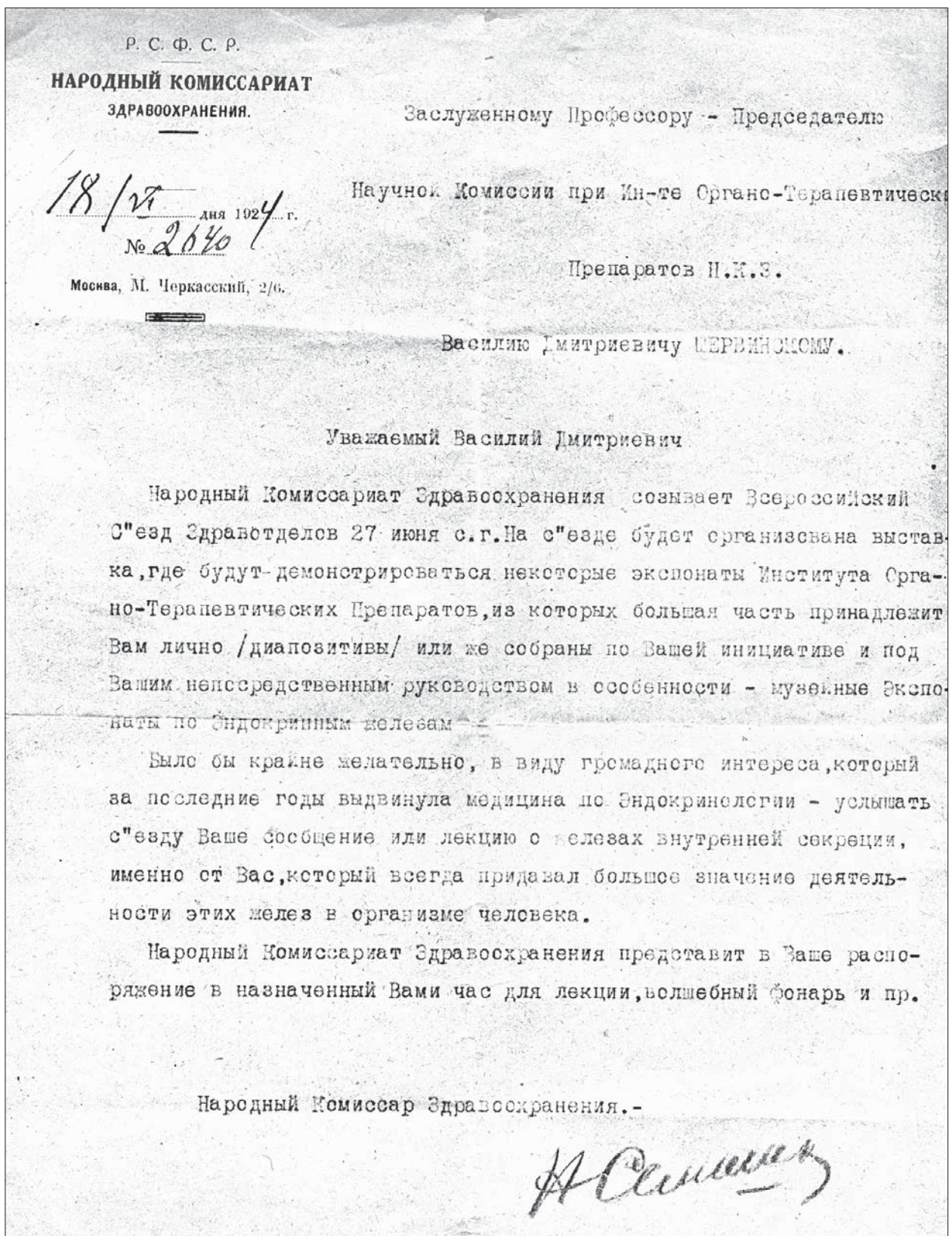


Fig. 5. Letter from N.A. Semashko to V.D. Shervinsky. 18/06/1924.
Medical History Museum of I.M. Sechenov First MSMU. OF 605/105.

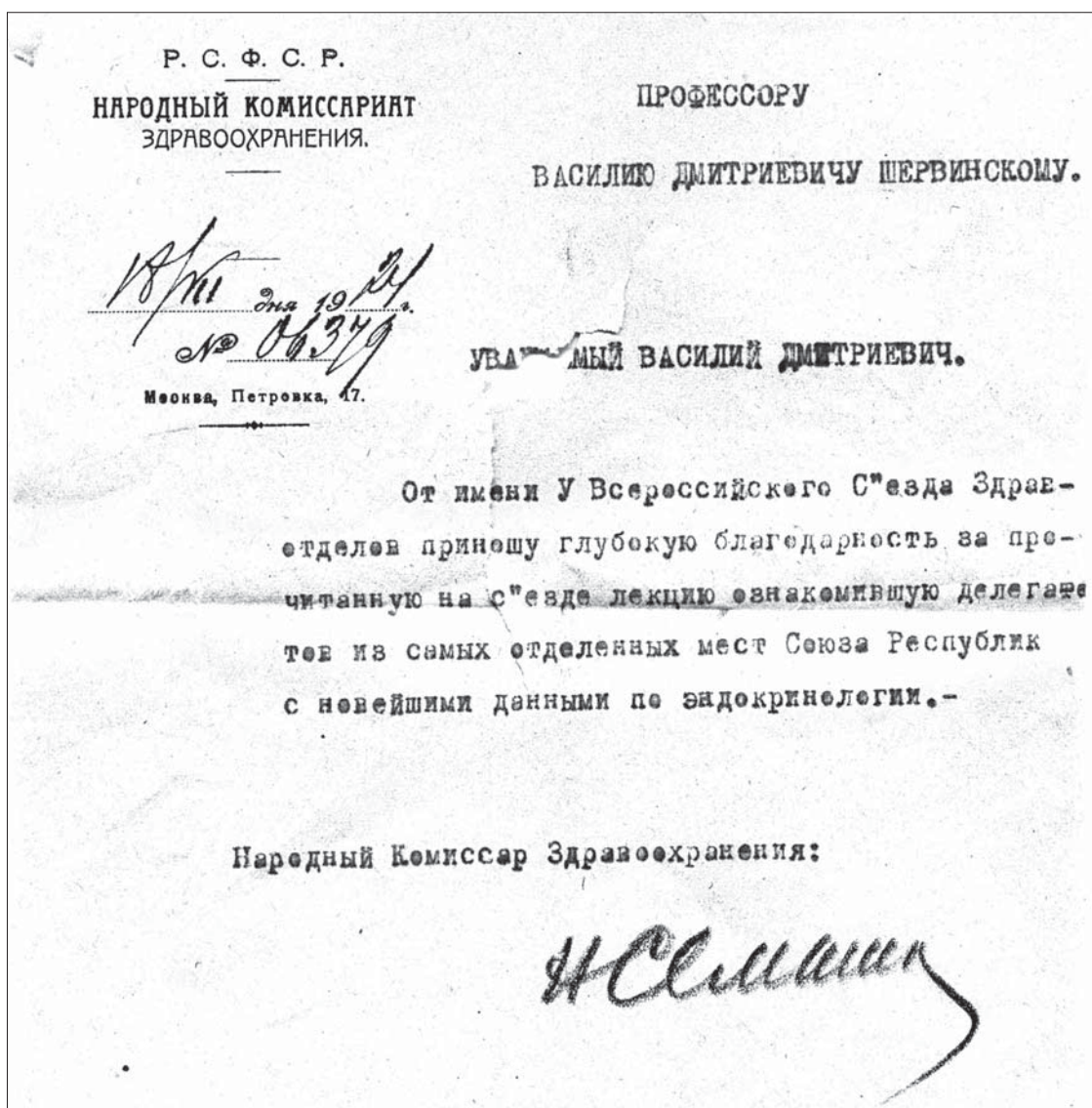


Fig. 6. Letter from N.A. Semashko to V.D. Shervinsky. 18/06/1924.
Medical History Museum of I.M. Sechenov First MSMU. OF 605/106.

The first volume was published in 1928. N.A. Semashko personally initiated the creation of this unique publication, and when he became chief editor, the position was not figurative, as it was common thought. He actually led very serious and responsible work.

A letter was written in 1935. The recently finished final 35th volume would be published in 1936, and N.A. Semashko was already starting to work on the second edition of Great Medical Encyclopedia. He was concerned about the "high quality of the published books", and for this reason, he began work on reviewing all of the published volumes.

When analyzing the text of the letter it becomes obvious: the editor-in-chief did not need formal laudatory reviews, but the specific comments of reputable professors, to whom he listened, and, accordingly, had to listen to the authors themselves.

The mark, made by V.D. Shervinsky in the upper left corner of the letter, says much: "check with the editor" (see Fig. 4). This suggests that V.D. Shervinsky attached great importance to this work and decided to be personally present during editing to clarify any problems associated with the review.

This document has the distinctive characteristics of N.A. Semashko: high efficiency, enthusiasm, commitment, dedication, unwillingness to stop. All of these features were common in many members of the Bolshevik government. N.A. Semashko did not simply ask V.D. Shervinsky to write a review, but urges him on with questions: "I ask you as soon as possible to answer this query" (see Fig. 4). Related queries were apparently sent to many doctors.

Working with these documents opens up new opportunities for researchers. The Great Medical Encyclopedia marked a new stage of development for medicine and became a way of summing up of the work of physicians over many centuries. N.A. Semashko was able to accomplish tremendous work. This of course requires special attention, but it remains unexplored.

Another equally interesting subject that has received very little coverage in modern historiography is the role of N.A. Semashko in the development of national endocrinology. The people's Commissar of health in 1923 not

only supported V.D. Shervinsky's idea to create a specialized Institute of Organ Therapeutic Medicine, but personally oversaw the activities of this organization, actively promoting research in the field of endocrinology. This is evidenced by many documents (Fig. 5 and 6).

In 1925, with the personal participation of N.A. Semashko as People's Commissar of Health of the USSR, the Institute of Organ Therapeutic Medicine was transformed into the Institute of Experimental Endocrinology and received a new building. Two years later, N.A. Semashko supported the initiative of the famous scientist, veterinarian J.A. Tabacina and a primate nursery was built in Sukhumi, where research on endocrinology continued.

During the Soviet years, the working documents of these institutions were classified, so the researchers did not have the opportunity to study such subjects even in general terms. With regard to modern research, it seems that one of the most thorough research articles on this subject was published in 2008 in the United States [6].

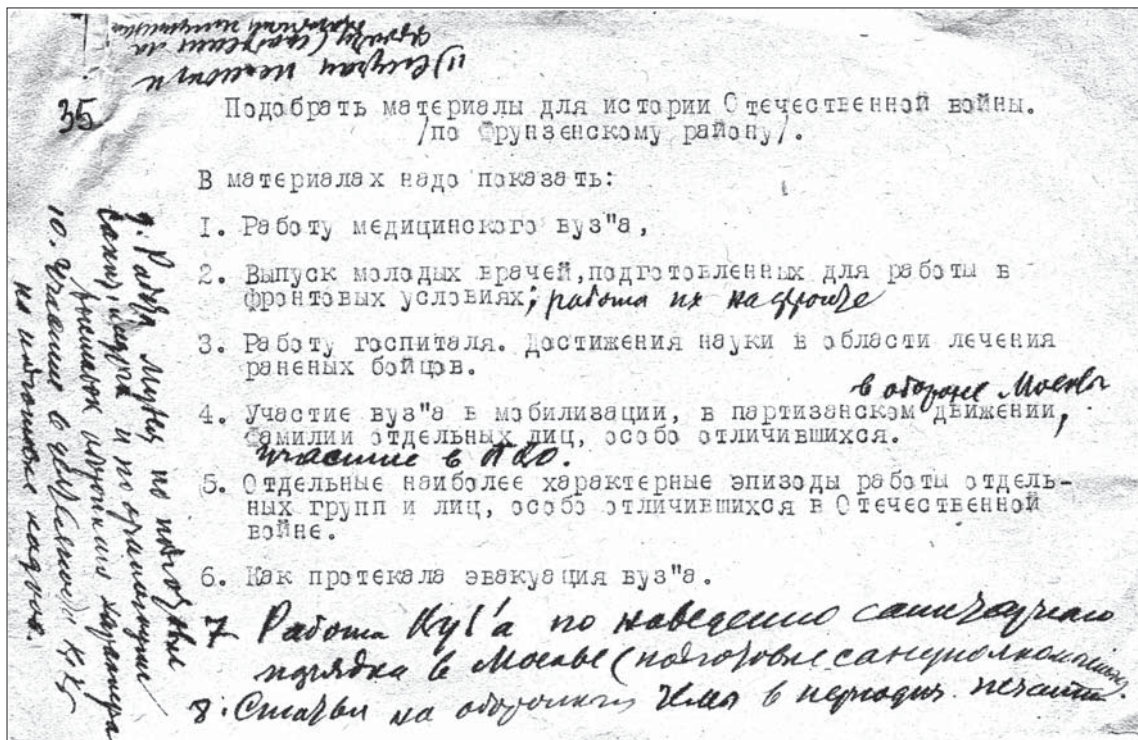


Fig. 7. The plan for collecting materials to highlight the work of the medical school during World War II: N.A. Semashko's handwritten corrections (1943-1944).
Medical History Museum of I.M. Sechenov First MSU. PKh 25/1115.

Of particular interest, of course, are the working documents of the Department of Health of the 1st Moscow Order of Lenin Medical Institute, headed by N.A. Semashko during the great Patriotic war. N.A. Semashko had tremendous experience with the difficult conditions of civil war and economic devastation. This would later serve him well. In 1941, the university department along with the entire Institute was evacuated to Ufa. Before him was the hard work of settling in a new place and organizing the accelerated graduation of physicians. N.A. Semashko was actively involved in all matters, particularly in connection with restructuring the educational system on a war footing.

In March 1942, upon returning from evacuation, with unwavering belief in the coming victory of the USSR over Nazi Germany and its allies, N.A. Semashko began to collect material about the activities of medical schools during the war. The depth and breadth of his plan is shown in the thematic plan he developed (Fig. 7). This

document shows not only that the N.A. Semashko never doubted the outcome of the war, but that he also clearly understood that the enormous experience gained in this war by the Soviet system of public health, health sciences, health services and military surgery, required a thorough study and analysis for future use.

Immediately after the war, NA Semashko wrote a lot about its health implications, posed new challenges to health officials, took part in the establishment of Soviet health systems in the territories liberated from German occupation. In addition, he actively assisted medical schools affected by the war.

In conclusion, I would like to again emphasize that the life and activities of N.A. Semashko remain poorly understood. In the preface to his memoirs, he wrote some very precise words: "My life reflected the era in which I was born, brought up, studied and struggled" [2, p. 3]. The conclusion: an entire epoch of development of national health care, of the history of our country, remains unexamined.

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About the author

Chernichenko M.Y. – Director of the Museum of the History of Medicine, I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University.

E-mail: cher_inbox.ru

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