



[DOI: 10.35549/HR.2026.2026.59.004](https://doi.org/10.35549/HR.2026.2026.59.004)

Original paper



Alexey A. Rubtsov

Department of History of Culture, State and Law

Ulyanov (Lenin) Saint Petersburg Electrotechnical University (LETI)

St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

E-mail: alex-rubtsov@inbox.ru

The Trajectory of a Political Criminal Case in the Russian Empire: From Intelligence Reports to Statistical Tables (1870s)

Abstract

This article examines the transformation of record-keeping and administrative practices relating to political cases in the Russian Empire during the 1870s. The post-reform decades marked a crucial stage in the evolution of approaches to safeguarding state and public security in the Russian Empire. The study focuses on the complete trajectory of a political criminal case – from initial gendarmerie intelligence reports and the covert collection of operational information, through the procedures of formal preliminary investigation, to the systematization of the resulting data in departmental tables, nominal registers, and statistical summaries. Particular attention is devoted to the impact of the Judicial Reform of 1864 and the Regulations of 19 May 1871, which assigned gendarmerie officers the leading role in conducting preliminary

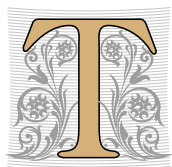
investigations into crimes against the state. The article also analyzes the terminological ambiguity surrounding the concepts of “state crime” and “political crime”, which created significant practical difficulties both in the imposition of administrative penalties and in the classification of persons under investigation. Drawing on a wide range of archival sources from the collections of the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of the Interior, the Third Section of His Imperial Majesty’s Own Chancellery, and the Moscow Governorate Gendarmerie Administration, the study reconstructs the specific mechanisms by which information on “politically unreliable” individuals was collected, recorded, and summarized. Special attention is paid to the internal tensions between the Third Section, the Gendarme Corps, and the procuracy (Prosecutor’s Office), which reflected an intense struggle for control over the information gathered through political surveillance. The article concludes that, during the 1870s, investigations of political offenses evolved from procedures aimed at proving a specific crime into processes designed to establish the social “profile” of political radicals and the revolutionary milieu itself. This evolution in bureaucratic record-keeping became a key instrument in the construction and institutionalization of the category of “political unreliability”.

Keywords:

Political surveillance; The Third Section; Gendarme Corps; Ministry of Justice; Political crime; Criminal statistics

For citation:

Alexey A. Rubtsov. The Trajectory of a Political Criminal Case in the Russian Empire: From Intelligence Reports to Statistical Tables (1870s). *The Historical Reporter*. 2026. Vol. 59. P. 94–123. DOI: [10.35549/HR.2026.2026.59.004](https://doi.org/10.35549/HR.2026.2026.59.004)



he 1870s in the history of the Russian Empire marked a time of intense search for new forms of political control, prompted by both the reforms of the previous decade and the unprecedented growth of the revolutionary movement. The judicial reform of 1864, which enshrined new principles of legal proceedings, and the law of May 19, 1871, which transferred the investigation of state crimes to gendarme officers, created a fundamentally different legal and administrative reality. Under these circumstances, the bureaucracy faced the task not only of investigating specific crimes but also of developing a unified language for describing, systematizing, and accounting for the people classified as “politically unreliable”. This article examines the trajectory of criminal cases for political crimes in the 1870s, from the use of primary data during gendarme investigations to attempts to create departmental tables summarizing information on defendants. During this period, not only did the institutional restructuring of political investigation take place, but also those office forms (circulars, statements, lists, tables) were formed that would become the basis for subsequent practice.

A study of records management allows us to see the mechanisms of political control “from within” – not as an abstract repressive policy, but as the daily work of officials faced with the need to classify new phenomena that did not fit within the previous legal framework. The focus is on the “political vocabulary of the era” – the conceptual apparatus with which officials of the Third Section, the Gendarme Corps, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs described and, thereby, constructed the figure of the political criminal. Terminological ambiguity and the gap between the legally enshrined concept of “state crime” and the widely used, but legally unstated, concept of “political crime” created serious difficulties in practice – from confusion over the degree of supervision for exiles to conflicts between departments over who had the right to store and use accumulated information.

The historiography of the political police of the Russian Empire has a large number of serious studies¹. Many of them examine in detail the

¹ Рууд Ч., Степанов С.А. Фонтанка, 16: политический сыск при царях. М.: Мысль, 1993; Жандармы России. Политический розыск в России XV–XX вв.: новейшие исследования / Ред. В.С. Измозик. СПб.: Нева, 2002; Севастьянов Ф.Л. Между тайной экспедицией и III Отделением: от тай-

practices of investigating state crimes, including the internal aspects of conducting investigations by officers of the Gendarme Corps². In recent years, works have appeared that highlight various areas of activity of both the Third Section and the Gendarme Corps, which also pay attention to the specifics of gendarmerie office work³. However, it should be noted that most authors skip the study of the 1870s, which is inconsistent with the significance of this decade for the history of both the gendarmerie and political investigation in general.

I would like to separately note the research of the American historian J. Daly⁴, which indicates that the Russian political police were incapable of preventing major social upheavals and could effectively combat only well-hidden radical groups. Without contesting this assessment in its entirety, this work aims to demonstrate that the agencies responsible for state and public security were fully aware of the challenges posed by the mass revolutionary movement and made significant efforts to ensure the state had the capacity to counter it.

In order to fully understand the process of investigating political crimes in the 1870s, it is necessary to address the concept of “legality” in the post-reform period. In the historiography of the Russian Empire, one of the important debates revolves around the question of whether a strong legal tradition had developed in Russia or whether legality

ного сыска — к политическому розыску. СПб.: МИЭП, 2008; *Перебудова* З.И. Политический сыск России, 1880–1917. 2-е изд., перераб. и доп. М.: РОССПЭН, 2013; *Щербакова Е.И.* Органы безопасности Российской империи XIX — начала XX в. // *Тайная стража России. Очерки истории отечественных органов госбезопасности* / Под ред. А.Ю. Попова. М.: Алгоритм, 2017. С. 51–126; *Страхов Л.В., Перебудов А.В.* Воронежские жандармы в эпоху модерна. Воронеж: Издательский дом ВГУ, 2019.

² *Суворов А.И.* Борьба с терроризмом в России в XIX — начале XX века: Историко-правовое исследование антитеррористической деятельности правоохранительных органов дореволюционной России. М.: ЮНИТИ-Дана, 2002; *Краковский К.П.* Политическое дознание во второй половине XIX — начале XX в. Историко-правовые проблемы: Новый ракурс. 2012. № 5. С. 315–344.

³ *Абакумов О.Ю.* «Безопасность престола и спокойствие государства»: политическая полиция самодержавной России (1826–1866). М.: РОССПЭН, 2019; *Бибиков Г.Н.* Жандармский надзор в системе государственного управления Российской империи (1826–1856 гг.). М.: Квадрига, 2023.

⁴ *Daly J.W.* Autocracy under siege: Security police and opposition in Russia, 1866–1905. DeKalb: Northern Illinois university press, 1998.

was weak, and what were the distinctive features of the imperial legal regime in Russia⁵. Within this approach, I adhere to a viewpoint that affirms the diversity and flexibility of governance and legal approaches as necessary aspects of imperial policy.

Of course, the problems of shaping the authorities' language regarding political threats deserve special mention. These issues are examined in monographs devoted to the study of major criminal trials⁶ and the work of the gendarmes⁷. Thus, in her book, L.V. Ulyanova addresses the problem of creating a political language for the Russian Empire. An important component of this language were the categories by which structures and individuals involved in political activity described other participants and their positions. The subject of this monograph is the concept of "a liberal" as perceived by the political police. The approach employed in the work is crucial. It analyzes the political marker "liberal", used to describe the positions of individual figures or groups, not as a fixed position, but as a specific scale along which a set of meanings associated with the concept of "liberal" was located. Thus, from the author's perspective, political police officials could, by varying their framing and use of the available set of meanings and ideologemes, define the positions of various individuals as more or less liberal. The overall conclusion is that, while there was a general consensus among political police officers that liberalism posed a threat to state security, officials in different structures could assess the degree of this threat differently, and this consequently influenced the behavioral models developed in political investigations regarding "liberals". A similar practice – determining a person's position on a scale of "(political) unreliability" and choosing measures based on this assessment – was used by gendarmes and prosecutors against the "unreliable" individuals in the 1870s.

⁵ For an overview of the historiography, see: *Wirtschafter E.K. Russian Legal Culture and the Rule of Law // Kritika. 2006. № 1. P. 61–70; Borisova T., Burbank J. Russia's Legal Trajectories // Kritika. 2018. № 3. P. 469–508; Демичев А.А. Историография судебной реформы 1864 года // Памятники российского права. В 35 т. Под ред. Р.А. Хачатурова. Т. 13. Судебная реформа 1864 года в Российской империи. М.: Юрлитинформ, 2015. С. 9–51.*

⁶ *Verhoeven C. The Odd Man Karakozov: Imperial Russia, Modernity and the Birth of Terrorism. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.*

⁷ *Ульянова Л.В. Политическая полиция и либеральное движение в Российской империи: власть игры, игра властью, 1880–1905. СПб.: Алетейя, 2020.*

Political vs. state crimes

On December 22, 1879, the Acting Governor-General of Eastern Siberia K.N. Shelashnikov sent a letter to the Minister of Internal Affairs with a request to clarify what kind of exiles should be called state and what kind political⁸. The question arose because those charged with “criminal propaganda” in the empire had begun to be exiled to Eastern Siberia through administrative means. Most of those accused in this case were not brought to trial due to a lack of evidence incriminating them. However, the authorities had no intention of releasing them from punishment, so many were ultimately given administrative penalties, one of which was exile to various parts of the empire. Shelashnikov’s confusion stemmed from the lack of a clear legal distinction between those exiled administratively (“political”) and those sentenced by the courts (“state”). This created a practical problem in determining the supervisory measures to be applied to the different categories of exiles.

The Main Administration of Eastern Siberia did not find an answer to this question, since the category of state criminals is defined in the *Code of Punishments*, while “the category of political exiles is not”⁹. The Administration of Eastern Siberia contacted the Ministry of Internal Affairs for clarification. However, as can be seen from the marginal notes “following the report of the Minister, it is permitted to leave it unanswered”¹⁰. The question reflected the important problem of categorizing political criminals and exiles and, consequently, the direction of the measures applied to them. This terminological contradiction is fundamentally important for understanding the trajectory of criminal cases – from the initiation of investigation to sentencing – in the sphere of political and state crime.

In post-reform Russia, “political crime” was systematically synonymous with “state crime”. This equivalent substitution can be found in office documentation, journalism, and the scholarly literature of the

⁸ РГИА. Ф. 1286. Оп. 41. Д. 524. Л. 2.

⁹ Ibid. Л. 1 об.

¹⁰ Ibid. Л. 1.



Konstantin Nikolaevich Shelashnikov.

From open sources

time¹¹. However, the term “political crime” was not legally defined: it was absent from legislation, had no legal status, and in practice could encompass a variety of illegal acts. In contrast, “state crimes” in the 1870s constituted a strictly defined legal category – they included actions falling under the relevant articles of the *Penal Code* of 1845 and its subsequent revisions.

Officials frequently used the term “political crime”, so a clearer definition was needed. However, the initial vagueness of the concept proved convenient, as it allowed for a wide variety of forms of political activity to be treated as “criminal”. This, in turn, served as a justification for the use of police and administrative measures in the context of the growing revolutionary movement. Thus, in the 1870s, the meaning of this concept simultaneously expanded (new actions were included under it) and became more precise, since the authorities attempted to find a balance between a convenient tool and a formal definition. This process can be linked with the pan-European trend in European criminal law and state-building. Historian Lindsay Farmer notes that the verb ‘to criminalize’ was used in two meanings: to turn a person into a criminal,

¹¹ See also: Краковский К.П. Политическая юстиция в России во второй половине XIX – начале XX в.: историко-правовое исследование. М.: Юрист, 2012.



Count Konstantin Ivanovich Pahlen.
From open sources

especially by making his actions criminally punishable, or to turn (some action) into a criminal offense by making it illegal. The first recorded use of this sense dates back to 1832 and belongs to Jeremy Bentham¹². Farmer notes that criminalization in this sense is linked to the emergence of a certain type of modern legislative thinking. The world was understood to operate according to certain principles of order, which could be discovered and manipulated by those possessing the requisite knowledge and understanding. Thus, criminal law can be viewed as a kind of tool that can have positive or negative social consequences and be used accordingly.

Understanding the growing gap between the concepts of “state” and “political” crime in the 1860s and 1870s requires an analysis of their legal content. According to the legal historian Krakovsky, in the Russian Empire in the 19th century, “the term ‘political crime’ became an update (modernization) of the term ‘state crime’. To the ‘traditional’ Russian rebels and traitors (state criminals) were added ‘committed’ fighters for the common good, persecuted by the reaction (political criminals)”¹³.

¹² Farmer L. *Making the Modern Criminal Law: Criminalization and Civil Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. P. 4.

¹³ *Краковский К.П. Политическая юстиция в России...* С. 67.

This distinction was reflected in a memorandum addressed to the Emperor, prepared on May 27, 1871, by the Ministry of Justice at the behest of Count Pahlen. It outlined considerations for an international agreement to clarify the definition of “political crime”. The authors of the document assumed the existence of universal characteristics of political crimes, independent of national legal systems, and aimed to identify common grounds uniting international legal concepts in this area¹⁴.

The authors believed that the differences in the political systems of European countries led to the adoption of a number of exceptions, where the same act could be assessed differently by two states with different political systems. In practice, this could lead to difficulties in the event of the need to request the extradition of a Russian citizen suspected of a political crime from another country.

The memorandum was prompted by the events of 1871 in France. It reflected an attempt to understand the difficulties the French government faced in trying to bring to justice the Communards who had fled abroad. This circumstance became the starting point for a critique of the existing system of international extradition of political criminals. However, one can also speculate that there was an unstated reason. The memorandum’s composition coincided with the preparation of the Nechaev trial, so the considerations expressed in it were likely intended to form the basis for the policy of persecuting Russian citizens accused of political crimes and hiding abroad – including Sergei Nechaev.

It’s worth noting that the range of phenomena that could be considered political threats was not limited to this formal definition. Referring to academic theories, the authors noted that “political crimes are recognized as those that have as their target the form of government established by the fundamental laws and the integrity of the state, and in monarchical states, in addition, the Head of State as the source of all legal order”¹⁵. This definition fully corresponded with the crimes specified in the Penal Code. However, the formal definition did not exhaust the entire spectrum of phenomena that could be classified as political threats in practice.

¹⁴ ГА РФ. Ф. 109. Оп. 4а. Д. 147. Л. 1.

¹⁵ Ibid. Л. 10 об. – 11 об.



Sergei Gennadyevich Nechaev.
From open sources

In this regard, the memorandum stated that “as a result of the development of certain destructive and harmful trends in European society, crimes are currently being committed which, although they are caused by certain theoretical teachings, and although they therefore have some external similarity with political crimes, can hardly in themselves be considered crimes of this category”¹⁶. Thus, a distinction was made between which actions could be considered state crimes, and which actions, caused primarily by “new theoretical teachings”, did not.

The authors pointed out that the parties that emerged under the influence of the “new teachings” “do not aim to establish this or that form of government, but strive only <...> to destroy property, family union, and the religious and moral principles of class society. For these people, a change in the form of government is not an end in itself, but only a means to an end”¹⁷. For the authors, the lack of desire for a change in the form of government indicated the absence of political motives on the part of such parties, and therefore their actions should not be considered “state crimes”.

Thus, the memorandum reveals the basic distinction that became fundamental in understanding political crime throughout the 1870s: it

¹⁶ Ibid. А. 13–13 о6.

¹⁷ Ibid. А. 13 о6. – 14.

could be either political (meaning anti-state) or anti-social. The memorandum expressed doubts that the described new manifestations of socio-political struggle in the West could be called “political crimes” if the latter were understood as synonymous with “state crimes”. Although this interpretation was not the only possible one, it was based on a solid legal tradition.

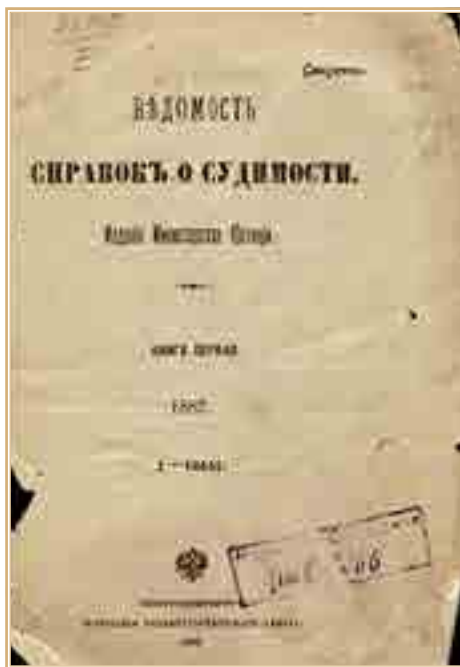
The memorandum on the draft international agreement aimed at defining the concept of “political crime” discussed above is just one of many examples of how attempts were made in the 1870s to legally accommodate the expanding spectrum of revolutionary activity. Officials sought to align the changing political reality and growing protest dynamics with existing legislation. It is in this context that multiple interpretations of “state” and “political” crimes arise, as well as debates over which acts fall under them.

This state of affairs, which persisted throughout the 1870s, was sometimes misleading, as proves the above-mentioned case of the Acting Governor-General of Eastern Siberia. The growing number of participants in the revolutionary movement, as well as the increase in the number of political investigations, led to a larger number of defendants. Not all of them were brought to trial, and most often, due to a lack of evidence, the cases against such individuals were resolved administratively. The growing number of individuals under investigation and the issues associated with organizing their exile and supervision necessitated the categorization of those under investigation for political cases.

From suspicion to punishment

Under the new judicial regulations of 1864, prosecutorial oversight officials were required to prepare reports in a format approved by the Minister of Justice. These documents were to reflect information on the progress of cases and data on defendants for the previous year¹⁸. The statutes, however, did not specify the format for organizing such

¹⁸ On the basic principles governing the organization of criminal statistics after 1864, see: *Остроумов С.С. Очерки по истории уголовной статистики дореволюционной России*. М.: Б.и., 1961. С. 131–136.



Bulletins of Criminal Records.
From open sources

statistics. Therefore, until the 1870s, the data in the Ministry of Justice's reports could be so disparate that it was extremely difficult to compare them. The situation changed in 1870 with the creation of a new system of criminal statistics, which began to more accurately reflect both the work of the courts and the actual crime picture¹⁹. However, the key objective in registering criminals remained not so much statistics as law enforcement: the records could show repeat offenders so that the court could impose a more severe punishment²⁰.

The new system of criminal statistics was based on the clear organization of primary records. It was carried out on an individual basis, when the criminal case and the accused were registered on a separate card. On January 15, 1870, the rules for the issuance of certificates of criminal records by the Ministry of Justice were approved by the Emperor. The courts were required to compile certificates on

¹⁹ Остроумов С.С. Преступность и ее причины в дореволюционной России. М.: Изд-во МГУ, 1980. С. 25–26.

²⁰ Жаров С.Н. Регистрация преступников и оперативные учеты // Памятники российского права. В 35 т. / Под ред. В.А. Хачатурова. Т. 22. Спецслужбы Российской империи: учеб.-науч. пособие. М.: Юрлитинформ, 2015. С. 204–219.



Collections of Statistical Information on Criminal Cases Initiated in 1872.

From open sources

each convicted person sentenced to a punishment with imprisonment and above. The Ministry of Justice sent specially prepared forms to the courts, which were filled out for each defendant. They contained the following seven points: 1) the court that passed the sentence; 2) rank, first name, patronymic, last name or nickname of the defendant; 3) age; 4) place of birth, permanent residence, registration, occupation or craft; 5) the criminal act for which the defendant was convicted; 6) the punishment to which he/she was sentenced; 7) the time of execution of the sentence²¹. In 1870, *Bulletins of Criminal Records* began to be published. These were official publications of the Ministry of Justice, recording data on court verdicts, including name, article, punishment, and duration of sentence.

As of January 1, 1872, criminal case records system was reformed. Courts were now required to submit criminal record certificates to the Ministry of Justice, regardless of whether the defendant was convicted or acquitted. The number of fields to be filled out by investigators

²¹ *Rules Approved by the Emperor for the Publication by the Ministry of Justice of the Bulletins of Criminal Records*, 15 January 1870 // Сборник правил и распоряжений по изданию ведомости справок о судимости. СПб.: Тип. Правительствующего Сената, 1880. С. 1–5.



Ivan Yakovlevich Foinitsky.
From open sources

and prosecutors was increased to twenty. The list of required information was supplemented by items on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of birth, religion, rank (social status and social class), literacy and education, and family relations. In addition to information about the defendant, sections were added concerning the circumstances of the crime. Essentially, all established characteristics could be divided into two groups: demographic and legal. In this form, criminal record certificates became the main primary documents for criminal statistics in the 1870s²². The information thus provided was carefully processed by the Ministry of Justice. Based on the collected material, *Collections of Statistical Information on Criminal Cases* were then published. The first *Collection* was published in 1873, and four more volumes followed by 1878²³.

²² *Supplement to the Rules Approved by the Emperor on 15 January 1870 Concerning the Submission by Judicial Institutions to the Ministry of Justice of Criminal Record Information*, 9 December 1871 // Сборник правил и распоряжений по изданию ведомости справок о судимости. СПб.: Тип. Правительствующего Сената, 1880. С. 11–13.

²³ Министерство юстиции за сто лет. 1802–1902. Исторический очерк. СПб.: Сенатская типография, 1902. С. 142.

The renowned pre-revolutionary lawyer I.Ya. Foinitsky, in his review of the *Collections* for 1872, noted that the initial registration of criminal and legal data met all the requirements of contemporary statistical science. However, he harshly criticized the poor arrangement of the data in the *Collections*, which greatly complicated the use and analysis of information²⁴. Yet, despite the shortcomings and criticism, in the early 1870s, a relatively streamlined procedure for compiling criminal statistics was established in the imperial judicial system – from the initial recording of information to the annual compilation of the *Bulletins* and the *Collections*.

The general trend toward improving criminal statistics naturally affected such a specific area as the recording of political crimes and the individuals involved in their investigation. The expansion of the record system in this area was consistent with nationwide reforms. Nevertheless, the unique nature of cases and the organizational nuances of investigative bodies led to the development of a unique approach: this was evident in the initial data recording stage and in the methods of their subsequent grouping, both in the departmental tables of the Ministry of Justice and in the analytical summaries conducted by the Third Section.

The legal historian S.S. Ostroumov noted, regarding the statistical sources of political crime in Tsarist Russia, that “the vast majority of political crimes were repressed extrajudicially or tried by military courts. In both cases, the number of such crimes was not even included in the ‘*Collections*’”²⁵. Ostroumov particularly noted the extremely limited statistical data on political crime in Russia in the mid- to late 19th century. Indeed, there is no published aggregate information on “politically unreliable” individuals punished administratively. However, the records of political crimes retained a wealth of data, often presented in tables, on individuals under investigation or punished administratively. Such surveys were compiled ad hoc, unsystematically, in the 1870s; however, they were organized around a number of general principles.

²⁴ Фойницкий И.Я. Системы размещения цифровых данных в таблицах уголовной статистики: по поводу «Свода статистических сведений по делам уголовным, возникшим в 1872 году». СПб.: Изд-во. Министерства юстиции, 1873. Отт. Из Судебного журнала. № 6. 1873. С. 4.

²⁵ Остроумов С.С. Очерки... С. 263.

The reports that, under the new judicial statutes of 1864, new judicial rulings and prosecutorial oversight bodies were required to prepare likely served as a benchmark.

The regulations of May 19, 1871, changed the procedure for prosecuting crimes against the state, significantly impacting the initial registration of political offenders. From now on, preliminary investigations of these cases were assigned directly to gendarmerie officers. Consequently, they were now responsible for recording initial data on individuals brought to trial on political charges.

The key ideas that help us understand the general logic of the reform of political investigation in Russia in the early 1870s were presented in *Conclusion of the Legal Adviser on the Memorandum by the Minister of Justice and the Chief of Gendarmes on the Procedure for Conducting Investigations into Cases of State Crimes*²⁶. The document contained a detailed justification for the need to involve members of the Separate Corps of Gendarmes in the investigation of state crimes, a task previously assigned exclusively to the police under the supervision of the Prosecutor's office, according to the 1864 Charter of Criminal Procedure. The legal advisor argued that the regular police were overburdened and not always successful in solving crimes, whereas the gendarmes, relieved of numerous secondary duties and with an extensive surveillance network, possessed both specialized information and material resources for the effective investigation of political cases. At the same time, the need to retain the Prosecutor's supervision of investigations was emphasized, in order to ensure the legal validity of the materials collected and their compliance with the new judicial statutes. As a negative example, the activities of the imperially established Investigative Commission were cited: its materials, compiled according to the old rules, proved unsuitable for consideration in the new judicial systems. The document placed particular emphasis on the specific nature of state crimes, which often involved not isolated incidents but extensive conspiracies requiring coordinated actions across vast territories and consideration of connections with previous cases. For such instances, it proposed the introduction of a special procedure: the investigation would be entrusted to a specially appointed person attached

²⁶ РГИА. Ф. 560. Оп. 35. Д. 39.

to the Chief of Gendarmes (with powers equal to those of a prosecutor), acting jointly with the prosecutor of the judicial chamber under the supreme supervision of both agencies. The document also detailed a mechanism for resolving potential conflicts between the gendarme and prosecutorial authorities, particularly regarding the application of preventive measures, where it was proposed to refer contentious issues for approval to the Minister of Justice and the Chief of Gendarmes. This conclusion not only substantiated the future legislative changes of 1871 but also revealed the rationale for the formation of a new order of interaction between the political police and the judiciary system, assigning to the gendarmes a leading role in the investigation of state crimes while maintaining procedural control by the Prosecutor's office.

In practice, the legal adviser to the Chief of Gendarmes was tasked with explaining the nature of investigations into state crimes under the new rules. The position was established in 1871. The adviser's role was twofold: on the one hand, he was responsible for ensuring that the gendarmes complied with the law, and on the other, he was tasked with upholding the interests of the Corps. In his work, the legal adviser typically relied on precedential materials, using these as examples to analyze any errors or conflicts that arose.

One such precedent was the investigation conducted in Moscow in 1871–1872. It began with a report filed by a certain physician, Lehman, against his printing house partner, Leontyev. M.N. Bazhenov, the appointed legal adviser, after reviewing the case materials, found a number of significant errors in the actions of the Corps's staff captain, Ya.T. Dudkin, who conducted the investigation. First of all, Bazhenov combined two different aspects of the gendarmes' activities – observational and investigative – under the term “investigation”. In his opinion, gendarme officers should distinguish between “two aspects to investigations into state crimes: the first is the secret collection of information <...> and the adoption of various measures for the initial verification of the truth of the rumor that has reached them about state crime, all of which they are not obliged to report to the Prosecutor”. The second moment occurred when it became necessary to begin some kind of investigative actions, such as searches, etc., “which must be reported to the Prosecutor without fail, unless the above-mentioned case prevents this, i.e., if there is no fear, through reporting to the Prosecutor, of losing the

traces of the crime and the time to capture these traces”²⁷. Thus, the collection of information was already becoming part of the investigation, and the second stage, which required an appeal to the Prosecutor, was intended to serve as a legal framework for the actions already taken and began to be more functional than independent in nature.

Bazhenov then criticized the actions of Staff Captain Dudkin, pointing out that the gendarme had used the methods typical of general criminal investigation, whereas in cases of state crimes, “every piece of information must be used and verified by multifaceted questioning, and not by repeating the same thing”²⁸. This again emphasized the key role of gathering of evidence, which constituted the gendarmes’ primary responsibility and made them indispensable participants in the investigation of political crimes. In his conclusion, the legal adviser noted a violation of established procedure, manifested in the lack of prior approval of the case’s merits by the Prosecutor. Such an approval could have led to the recognition of the collected evidence as sufficient to initiate proceedings, and then the case would not have been devoid of “internal substance”. In this case, the Prosecutor was tasked with the legal assessment of the facts, i.e., determining whether the information obtained complied with legal norms. However, relations with the Prosecutor’s office were once again purely formal; according to the legal adviser’s logic, the investigation should nevertheless have been the exclusive purview of the gendarmerie corps.

Bazhenov believed that the gendarme conducting the investigation did not fully understand the distinction between general criminal and state crimes, and therefore made a number of mistakes at the beginning of the investigation. In fact, the *Charter of Criminal Procedure* established a general investigative procedure for all criminal offenses. The idea of applying different procedures to investigations into state crimes was influenced by law enforcement practices that developed after the *Charter’s* adoption. The development of new methods occurred promptly during internal discussions on similar challenging cases.

Bazhenov’s commentary contains a reference to his own opinion on the conclusion of the Commission, which in 1872 considered the

²⁷ ГА РФ. Ф. 58. Оп. 1. Д. 5. Л. 7–7 об.

²⁸ Ibid. Л. 7 об. – 8 об.



Petrovsky Barracks. 1913.

From open sources

question of amending the articles on “illegal associations” in the Penal Code. In his *Dissenting Opinion* on the Commission’s draft, he noted that in investigating state crimes, it is far more important to identify all those involved in anti-government activities and to fully reconstruct the connections of “state criminals”²⁹. He considered the interrogation of witnesses to be a particularly productive means for this purpose and considered their importance in the investigation of state crimes higher than the establishment of other evidence in the case.

I.L. Slyozkin, Chief of Moscow Provincial Gendarme Directorate, entered into a debate with the legal adviser regarding the specifics of inquiries into state crimes. Citing the circumstances of the case, which began with Lehman’s denunciation of Leontyev, he argued that the need for an inquiry was due precisely to Leontiev’s long-standing reputation as a “liberal” figure. This was supported by information about his interactions with students of the Petrovskaya Academy, whom the authorities viewed with suspicion after the Nechaev case. Thus, Slyozkin argued that the available information about the suspect’s “unreliability” was sufficient to initiate a full-fledged inquiry³⁰.

²⁹ РГИА. Ф. 1405. Оп. 72. Д. 7073. Л. 70 об. — 71.

³⁰ ГА РФ. Ф. 58. Оп. 1. Д. 5. Л. 9–10.



Nikolai Vladimirovich Mezentsov.
From open sources

The Chief sought to defend the investigative methods used by the Gendarme Corps in investigating political crimes and to introduce new practices into the inquiry process. Slyozkin provided an extensive commentary, covering the general problem of conducting inquiries into crimes against the state. He pointed out that the method for conducting inquiries into crimes against the state was not precisely defined by law, “but it is only indicated in the explanation to Article 21 of the Law of May 19 that the communication of initial information during an investigation must be accompanied by extreme caution, deliberation, and generally with a certain tact, under the condition of completely covert surveillance”³¹.

Drawing on his experience, he advocated for greater autonomy for Gendarme Corps officers during the initial stages of investigation, as this provided greater efficiency in investigative actions and a more complete collection of evidence during the initial stages of the investigation. In correspondence with his subordinates, Slyozkin offered recommendations on how to conduct surveillance and investigation without separating them. In one of his circulars, he included clarifications regarding the specific data required to be collected on a person

³¹ Ibid. A. 12.



Konstantin Nikolaevich Zhukov.
From open sources

suspected of a state crime. “The following information [collected secretly about the personality of the accused] must be gathered in as much detail as possible: 1) lifestyle; 2) behavior; 3) morality; 4) level of development of the accused; 5) what he/she does; 6) his/her acquaintances; 7) his/her political standing and reliability; and 8) in particular, the reason or motive for committing a crime or for uttering a criminal idea”³². This template long determined the structure of many investigative materials in political cases. Applying years of accumulated experience in surveillance and covert intelligence gathering, the gendarmes significantly transformed the investigative procedure itself. The recording procedure they proposed differed significantly from the rules for compiling criminal records established by the regulations of January 15 and the amendments of December 9, 1870: the emphasis shifted to the social circle and mentality of the person suspected of a political crime.

The information collected by Gendarme Corps officers might not be directly related to the circumstances of a specific crime. However, as part of political investigations, there was an increasing desire to systematically record the data necessary to elucidate the environment in which revolutionary ideas were spreading.

³² Ibid. А. 49 о6.

Primary materials collected by members of the Gendarme Corps served as the basis for documents subsequently compiled by officials responsible for prosecutorial oversight. Prosecutors' reports and reports were sent to the Ministry of Justice. They contained "all criminal acts committed that go beyond the ordinary, and thus the Minister of Justice received the opportunity to direct the activities of the Prosecutor's office in criminal cases from the very moment they arose until their final resolution"³³. The information contained in these documents formed the basis, among other things, for the tables describing defendants in political cases. Thus entered the next stage in the criminal case's trajectory: beginning with the recording of initial information by gendarme officers, the process continued through the systematization of data in the form of summary tables.

The Ministry of Justice's archives contain materials from the investigative and administrative proceedings in the case of propaganda in Moscow and Vologda Governorate from 1876 to 1878, which demonstrate how a typical investigation into political crimes was completed³⁴. Of particular interest in this case is the content of departmental tables and their role in the document flow of the Third Section and the Ministry of Justice: "List of 20 persons accused in the case of criminal propaganda" and "General list of persons involved in this investigation".

First of all, an analysis of these tables allows us to create a social portrait of the accused: among them, the majority were people from the clergy (children of priests), nobles, commoners and students; most were young people aged 17 to 24³⁵. Women and minors were generally subject to more lenient preventive measures. The document recorded not only personal information and the nature of the charges (active participation in propaganda, possession of banned books, membership in a "criminal society") but also the length of pretrial detention, which

³³ Министерство юстиции за сто лет. 1802–1902. Исторический очерк. СПб.: Сенатская типография, 1902. С. 140.

³⁴ РГИА. Ф. 1405. Оп. 74. Д. 7413.

³⁵ The data presented in the tables confirm the established historiographical view regarding the social composition of the revolutionary populist (*narodnik*) movement. See: Лурье А.Я. Перепись народников: От Нечаева до Дегая. СПб.: Нестор-История, 2022.



Dmitry Nikolaevich Nabokov.
From open sources

for some reached two years and eight months, as well as the requested penalties – from exile to Eastern Siberia to overt or covert police surveillance.

Of particular value is the correspondence between the Third Section and the Ministry of Justice included in the case file, revealing the decision-making mechanism and disagreements regarding punishment. For example, the Minister of Justice initially considered limiting Survovtsev and Polikarpov to police supervision, but the Head of the Third Section, Mezentsev, insisted on their administrative exile³⁶. Subsequently, Deputy Chief Prosecutor K.N. Zhukov proposed to bring to trial only two of the twenty defendants, citing the length of their pretrial detention and the young age of the accused. This was ultimately supported by Justice Minister D.N. Nabokov, who proposed resolving the case administratively for all defendants, with differentiated punishments³⁷.

The document also contains interesting clarifications regarding the identity of the defendant Khazov. The difficulty in determining his identity lay in the fact that two different individuals with the same surname were involved in the case. Correspondence between the Third Section and the Ministry of Justice revealed that the defendant in the present case was Grigory Ivanov Khazov, a tradesman accused of

³⁶ РГИА. Оп. 74. Д. 7413. Л. 73–74 об., 113–115.

³⁷ Ibid. Л. 173–177.

propaganda in Moscow and Vologda Governorate. However, there was initial confusion with another individual – Nikolai Nikolaev Khazov, a teacher who was being prosecuted in a different political case (“Society of Friends”) and for whom exile to Eastern Siberia had already been proposed. In the Third Section’s communication to the Minister of Justice, it was specifically stated that “in this case, the townsman Grigory Ivanov Khazov is only the namesake of the teacher Nikolai Nikolaev Khazov”³⁸. This clarification was necessary to avoid applying a punishment intended for another person to Grigory Khazov, and to limit his detention to covert police surveillance, as with the other defendants.

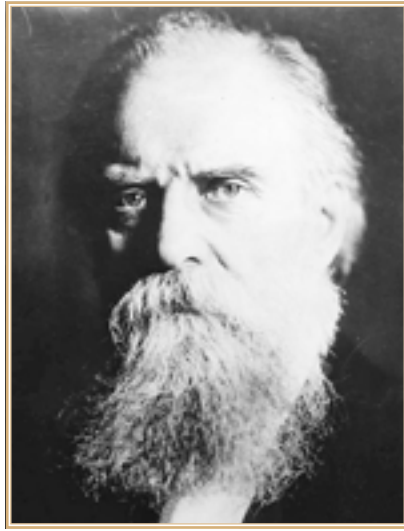
The above-mentioned episode, with the clarification of the identity of the defendant Khazov, demonstrates the importance of cooperation between the Third Section and the Ministry of Justice in the 1870s. The joint work of the two agencies not only allowed for the prompt exchange of information but also avoided serious errors in the imposition of administrative penalties. Thanks to the fact that the Section’s officials had information on various “politically unreliable” individuals³⁹, for the Ministry of Justice, cooperation with the central political investigation agency at that time turned out to be extremely important.

However, in the 1870s, this interaction was also marked by inevitable conflicts caused by the struggle for influence over the course of large-scale political criminal cases. In 1875, one of the prosecutors involved in the investigation of the “propaganda case in the Empire” drafted a *Memorandum on the Organization of the Political Case Archives*⁴⁰, which constituted a unique testimony to the intradepartmental clashes. The author consistently refuted three key theses, apparently advanced in the original memorandum (not present in the file). First, he emphasized an important institutional difference: gendarmerie was subordinate not to the Third Section, but to the Headquarters of the Corps of Gendarmes, and the Regulations of May 19, 1871, made no mention of the Section and assigned it no role in conducting investigations. Second, the author

³⁸ Ibid. Л. 178–178 об.

³⁹ Сидорова М.В. Архивы центральных органов политического сыска // Сидорова М.В. О жандармах, императорах и изобразительном искусстве. Архивные заметки. СПб.: Алетейя, 2023. С. 140–152.

⁴⁰ РГИА. Ф. 1405. Оп. 530. Д. 1108. Л. 133–136.



Nikolai Vasilyevich Tchaikovsky.
From open sources

attributed the gendarmes' effectiveness in solving state crimes not to access to the archives of the Third Section, but to the very nature of their service as a specialized police force, with the time and resources to conduct such activities.

The last accusation was the most pointed: the Third Section not only failed to facilitate the investigations, but also deliberately concealed the information it had, refusing to cooperate. A specific example was cited: the refusal to provide access to the N.V. Tchaikovsky file, which contained important propaganda data, which, in the author's view, directly hindered the investigation. Therefore, the author proposed redefining the role of the Third Section, limiting it to its originally intended function, that is, "the concentration and development of all data of the past and present regarding the internal policy of the country for guidance to the highest government"⁴¹. In other words, the Third Section was assigned the role of a central political archive, where all completed cases would be stored, but which was not to interfere with the ongoing operational work of the gendarmes and their interactions with the prosecutor's office. The document not only justified the need to create a specialized archive of political cases but also documented the profound conflict of jurisdiction and departmental

⁴¹ Ibid. A. 135.

interests that arose shortly after the new system for investigating state crimes was enshrined in law.

This radical proposal to transform the Third Section was never implemented, and the situation in the organization of political investigations only changed in 1880 with the Section's liquidation. Therefore, in the mid- to late 1870s, this essentially central political police body continued to influence criminal investigations of state crimes and shape government opinions about the revolutionary movement. Therefore, following the trends already noted, officials of the Section also resorted to a statistical approach.

In addition to the importance of identifying individuals involved in radical political activity (propaganda, distribution of illegal literature), the authorities recognized the need to study the environment in which revolutionary activity developed. In 1875, the Third Section submitted to the Committee of Ministers the question of a more thorough study of the causes of the development of radical political movements in the Russian Empire. The result of this discussion was a memorandum containing statistical data on propagandists in the 1870s, compiled by Section official M.M. Merkulov.

The structure of this memorandum was built around the identification of four groups of people, who were divided based on the degree of participation and the political unreliability established as a result of the investigations conducted⁴². The author thoroughly analyzed the social and professional composition of each group, as well as the distribution of people within them by gender and age. This allowed him to draw conclusions about the environments in which "anti-government activity" was most active and what might have led to it. The statistical approach and the dynamics of its development also influenced the description of the revolutionary movement, which (description) changed as the "propaganda case" unfolded.

The compilation of political investigation materials acquired particular importance in the 1870s for a number of reasons. First of all, it was on the basis of this data that administrative penalties were imposed, and they were applied increasingly widely as the number

⁴² Статистические сведения о пропагандистах 70-х годов в обработке III Отделения. Сообщил Н.И. Сидоров // Каторга и ссылка. 1928. №1(38). С. 29–30.

of defendants expanded⁴³. Furthermore, the accumulation of information made it possible to track repeat offenders, which influenced the severity of sentences – both administrative and judicial. Finally, the desire to understand the nature of the revolutionary movement prompted the authorities to turn to social analysis, resulting in numerous departmental memos proposing various strategies for combating “revolutionary propaganda”.

The 1870s marked a turning point in the evolution of political case management in the Russian Empire. Under the influence of the Judicial Reform of 1864 and the law of May 19, 1871, a new procedure for investigating state crimes emerged, in which gendarme officers played a central role, and the collection of information on “unreliable” individuals became a systematic procedure. This reflected the general trend toward rationalization of record-keeping, characteristic of criminal statistics at the time.

However, the specific nature of political cases – the vagueness of the concepts of “state” and “political” crimes, and the administrative nature of most of them – led to the development of specific data recording practices aimed less at proving a specific crime than at revealing the social “portrait” of the revolutionary milieu. The debate that erupted between the Third Section, the Gendarme Corps, and the Prosecutor’s office demonstrates that the unification of records ran into institutional contradictions and created differences in understanding the goals of investigation. Nevertheless, it was during this period that the foundations for the subsequent centralization of political investigation were laid. The evolution of record-keeping in the 1870s not only reflected changes in the mechanisms of political control but also became a tool for constructing categories of “political unreliability”, shaping the descriptive language the authorities used to understand and classify the revolutionary movement.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.

⁴³ Рубцов А.А. «Политическая неблагонадежность» и административная ссылка в Российской империи в 1870–1880-е годы: наказание, контроль, интеграция // Под ред. А.Б. Богомолова. Пятые Карамзинские чтения, Санкт-Петербург, 15–16 мая 2024 года. СПб.: Аврора, 2024. С. 120–126.



References

1. Abakumov O.Yu. *“The security of the throne and the tranquility of the state”: The political police of autocratic Russia (1826–1866)*. Moscow: Russian Political Encyclopedia (ROSSPEN), 2019. 558 p. (in Russ.).
2. Bibikov G.N. *Gendarme supervision in the system of state administration of the Russian Empire (1826–1856)*. Moscow: Kvadriga, 2023. 354 p. (in Russ.).
3. Highly approved rules on the publication by the Ministry of Justice of the “Bulletin of criminal record certificates”, January 15, 1870, in: *Collection of rules and orders for the publication of the bulletin of criminal record certificates*. St. Petersburg: Printing house of Governing Senate, 1880. P. 1–5 (in Russ.).
4. Demichev A.A. Historiography of the judicial reform of 1864, in: *Monuments of Russian law in 35 volumes. Vol. 13: The judicial reform of 1864 in the Russian Empire* / Ed. by R.L. Khachaturov. Moscow: Yurlitinform, 2015. 448 p. (in Russ.).
5. Addendum to the rules on the delivery of criminal record certificates by judicial authorities to the Ministry of Justice, approved on January 15, 1870, December 9, 1871, in: *Collection of rules and orders for the publication of the bulletin of criminal record certificates*. St. Petersburg: Printing house of Governing Senate, 1880. P. 11–13 (in Russ.).
6. *Gendarmes of Russia. Political investigation in Russia in the 15th–20th centuries: Recent studies* / Ed. by V.S. Izmozik. St. Petersburg: Neva, 2002. 638 p. (in Russ.).
7. Zharov S.N. Registration of criminals and operational records, in: *Monuments of Russian law in 35 volumes. Vol. 22: Special services of the Russian Empire: A teaching and research aid* / Ed. by R.L. Khachaturov. Moscow: Yurlitinform, 2015. 440 p. (in Russ.).
8. Krakovsky K.P. *Political justice in Russia in the second half of the 19th – early 20th century: A historical and legal study*. Moscow: Yurist, 2012. 733 p. (in Russ.).

9. Krakovsky K.P. Political inquiry in the second half of the 19th – early 20th centuries. *Historical and Legal Problems: A New Perspective*. 2012;(5):315–344 (in Russ.).
10. Lurie L.Ya. *The census of the Narodniks: From Nechaev to Degaev*. St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriya, 2022. 301 p. (in Russ.).
11. *The Ministry of Justice for one hundred years. 1802–1902. Historical sketch*. St. Petersburg: Senate printing house, 1902. 360 p. (in Russ.).
12. Ostroumov S.S. *Essays on the history of criminal statistics in prerevolutionary Russia*. Moscow: No publisher, 1961. 303 p. (in Russ.).
13. Ostroumov S.S. *Crime and its causes in prerevolutionary Russia*. Moscow: Moscow State University Press, 1980. 204 p. (in Russ.).
14. Peregudova Z.I. *Political Investigation in Russia, 1880–1917*. 2nd ed., revised and expanded. Moscow: Russian Political Encyclopedia (ROSSPEN), 2013. 518 p. (in Russ.).
15. Rubtsov A.A. “Political unreliability” and administrative exile in the Russian Empire in the 1870s–1880s: Punishment, control, integration, in: *Fifth Karamzin Readings* (St. Petersburg, May 15–16, 2024) / Ed. by A.B. Bogomolov. St. Petersburg: Aurora, 2024. 488 p. (in Russ.).
16. Ruud C., Stepanov S.A. *Fontanka, 16: Political investigation under the Tsars*. Moscow: Mysl', 1993. 432 p. (in Russ.).
17. Sevastyanov F.L. *Between the secret expedition and the Third Department: From secret inquiry to political investigation*. St. Petersburg: Printing house of the International Institute of Economics and Law, 2008. 302 p. (in Russ.).
18. Sidorova M.V. Archives of the central bodies of political investigation, in: Sidorova M.V. *On gendarmes, emperors, and fine art: Archival notes*. St. Petersburg: Aletya, 2023. 947 p. (in Russ.).
19. Statistical information about the propagandists of the 1870s in the processing of the III Department. Reported by N.I. Sidorov. *Penal Servitude and Exile*. 1928;38(1):29–30 (in Russ.).
20. Strakhov L.V., Peregudov A.V. *Voronezh gendarmes in the modern era*. Voronezh: Voronezh State University publishing house, 2019. 278 p. (in Russ.).
21. Suvorov A.I. *The fight against terrorism in Russia in the 19th – early 20th centuries: A historical and legal study of the antiterrorist activities of law enforcement agencies in prerevolutionary Russia*. Moscow: UNITYDana, 2002. 313 p. (in Russ.).

22. Ulyanova L.V. *The political police and the liberal movement in the Russian Empire: The power of play, the play of power, 1880–1905*. St. Petersburg: Aleteya, 2020. 353 p. (in Russ.).
23. Foynitsky I.Ya. *Systems for placing digital data in tables of criminal statistics: concerning the “Set of statistical information on criminal cases that arose in 1872”, Edition of the Ministry of Justice, 1873* (Imprint from the Judicial Journal, 1873. No. 6). St. Petersburg: Printing house of Governing Senate, 1873. 36 p. (in Russ.).
24. Shcherbakova E.I. Security agencies of the Russian Empire in the 19th – early 20th centuries, in: *The Secret Guard of Russia: Essays on the history of Russian state security agencies* / Ed. by A.Yu. Popov. Moscow: Algoritm, 2017. 574 p. (in Russ.).
25. Borisova T., Burbank J. Russia’s legal trajectories. *Kritika*. 2018;(3):469–508.
26. Daly J.W. *Autocracy under siege: Security police and opposition in Russia, 1866–1905*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998. 260 p.
27. Farmer L. *Making the modern criminal law: Criminalization and civil order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 352 p.
28. Verhoeven C. *The odd man Karakozov: Imperial Russia, modernity and the birth of terrorism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. 248 p.
29. Wirtschafter E.K. Russian legal culture and the rule of law. *Kritika*. 2006;(1):61–70.



✧ Alexey A. Rubtsov ✧

C.Sc. (History), Associate Professor Department
of History of Culture, State and Law Ulyanov (Lenin)
Saint Petersburg Electrotechnical University (LETI),
SPIN-code: 3271-8058,
AuthorID: 948205,
ORCID 0000-0002-2211-7432

Received
05.03.2026

Revised
06.04.2026

Accepted
06.05.2026