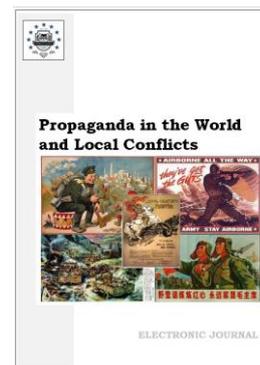


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Letter to the Editor

The Agit-Steamer Krasnaya Zvezda in Later Photographs

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Abstract

The period 2019–2021 marks 100 years since the launch of the storied agit-steamer sailings along the Kama and Volga rivers, which had a significant cultural effect on life in the regions. During the Soviet era, the topic of these sailings was highly popular, as they were taken part in by top Soviet government officials. Yet at the same time, the fate of the actual steamers remains largely obscure. To date there are no integrated works on the biography of those ships. This paper reviews a set of existing photographic sources dealing with the later period of the life of the steamer Krasnaya Zvezda [Red Star]. Use was made of materials from the city of Sarapul's municipal and private archives, as well as materials from the Center for Documenting Contemporary History of the Udmurt Republic. The photographic testimonies provided offer an unequivocal indication that in the late 1960s the steamer Krasnaya Zvezda was no longer a self-propelled vessel. Its paddle wheels appear to have been removed, while the space within the housings appears to have been put to use. Its boilers and engines clearly appear to have been removed too. Despite some sources indicating that the steamer was transferred from the Kama River Shipping Company to the Izhevsk Mechanical Plant, within the timeframe under examination the vessel appears to have been on the books of the Sarapul Ordzhonikidze Radio Factory, which is indicated by the captions accompanying the photographs. In 1973, while being beached on the shore, the vessel sustained a severe deformation to its hull, which would eventually make impossible both its further use and restoration. Despite certain elements of the ship's hull being still in existence as of the early 2000s, it appears to be highly unlikely that one will be able to reconstruct the steamer just based on those remains.

Keywords: agit-steamer, Krasnaya Zvezda, Kama, navigation, photographic source.

1. Introduction

The period 2019–2021 marks 100 years since the launch of the storied agit-steamer sailings along the Kama and Volga rivers, which had a significant cultural effect on life in the regions. During the Soviet era, the topic of these sailings was highly popular, as they were taken part in by top Soviet government officials. Yet at the same time, the fate of the actual steamers remains largely obscure. To date there are no integrated works on the biography of those ships. This paper

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reviews a set of existing photographic sources dealing with the later period of the life of the steamer *Krasnaya Zvezda* [Red Star].

2. Materials and methods

In putting this work together, principal use was made of collections of photodocuments from the Udmurt archives. While some other archives may, too, contain photographs showing the steamer *Krasnaya Zvezda* subsequent to its removal from the fleet of the Kama River Shipping Company, the relevant photographs were found only in three major repositories. The first place is the Department for Archives of the Administration of the City of Sarapul (Sarapul, Udmurt Republic). The second place is the holdings of the Sarapul Historical, Architectural, and Art Museum Preserve. This is no wonder as the steamer was on the books of the Ordzhonikidze Radio Factory and was being used not far from Sarapul. The third place is the photoarchive of the Center for Documenting Contemporary History of the Udmurt Republic (Izhevsk, Udmurt Republic). In addition, use was made of private photocollections, specifically that of well-known Perm collector G.A. Rakitin.

Currently, amid active efforts to digitize photomaterials, the photograph has become a mass source that is especially valuable in terms of history. Yet, despite considerable research analyzing photographic material, special methods for analyzing it have yet to be produced. Perhaps, the problem is that this objective is hard, or maybe even impossible, to formalize at this time. Consequently, photograph analysis is currently performed using the methods of integrated source studies, with a focus on engaging as many sources pertinent to the photographed item as possible. In this regard, there appears to be an issue with the photographic source attribution. In this particular case, it appears to be in conflict with the existing recordkeeping documentation. Specifically, based on the documentation of the Kama River Shipping Company, on decommissioning the *Krasnaya Zvezda* was transferred to the Izhevsk Mechanical Plant, while, based on the captions to the photographs, the vessel was on the books of the Ordzhonikidze Radio Factory. This mismatch provides the basis for research aimed at reconstructing the later biography of the *Krasnaya Zvezda*.

3. Discussion

Despite the abundance of literature mentioning the steamer *Krasnaya Zvezda*, to date there are no integrated works on its biography. Among the poorly covered timeframes is the period subsequent to the decommissioning of the vessel from the fleet of the Kama River Shipping Company.

In the mid-1970s, a number of newspapers published in the area near the River Kama carried a sensational story about the scrapping of the agit-steamer's hull. Specifically, on August 28, 1976, the *Kama Pravda* wrote that "the steamer's hull [had] already been sawed in half" (Tyurina, 1976). However, after the *Bolshaya Kama* published on December 24, 1987, a photograph showing a vessel that is allegedly being disassembled, most of the veterans alive at the time argued it was not the *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Bol'shaya Kama, 1988). The reason behind this confusion may be due to the fact that, subsequent to being decommissioned from the fleet of the Kama River Shipping Company on September 18, 1963, the vessel was officially put on the books of the Izhevsk Mechanical Plant. However, the photographs indicate that it actually was on the books of the Sarapul Ordzhonikidze Radio Factory.

In the days of the 100th anniversary of the *Krasnaya Zvezda*'s storied sailings along the Kama and Volga rivers, the periodical press was taking a renewed interest in the steamer's biography (e.g., Vostrikov, 2019 and Kachkina, 2019). However, this mostly was limited to a series of unoriginal messages intended to make a splash (e.g., "The *Krasnaya Zvezda* has made three agitation sailings along the Volga – in 1919, 1920, and 1921. Prior to the 1960s, the vessel was employed for regular sailings by the Volga River Shipping Company, and later by the Kama River Shipping Company. Subsequent to being decommissioned (1963), it was used as a holiday ship of the 60th Anniversary of the USSR Izhevsk Mechanical Plant. Starting in 1968, the *Krasnaya Zvezda* was employed to transport holidayers from Sarapul to the Krutyte Gorki holiday center. The vessel was damaged during a spring ice drift. By some accounts, in the late 1980s its hull was scrapped for metal. However, based on what is shown in a set of photographs that surfaced in 2013, the steamer is still alive and is in the Kama boatyard. The issue of restoring it has been raised more than once in the Perm press" (Kachkina, 2019). There are a number of logical discrepancies in the material about the steamer, so it is obvious that its later history needs detailed reconstructing. With

this in mind, the object of this work was to review a set of later photographs of the steamer that could possibly shed some light on the issue.

Photographs from the holdings of the Sarapul Archive

The holding R-840 ('Platova Margarita Afanas'evna – Honored Worker of Public Education of the UASSR, Head of the Lenin Museum at Sarapul Boarding School for Hard-of-Hearing Children (16.01.1937 – 16.11.2008)') of the Department for Archives of the Administration of the City of Sarapul contains two photographs of the steamer *Krasnaya Zvezda*. Given M.A. Platova's being in charge of a museum, it is quite likely that the photographs were taken either by herself or by an employee of the school at her request (Figures 1 and 2). Both of the photographs have the same caption: "The steamer *Krasnaya Zvezda*, which in 1919 took a group of instructors from the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the All-Russian Central Executive Committee to the areas near the Volga and Kama rivers for the conduct of agitation-propaganda and cultural-educational work among the military units and the population. The agit-team included member of the Collegium of the People's Commissariat for Education N.K. Krupskaya. The city of Sarapul [1970]" (SGA. F. R-840. Op. 3. D. 810, 811). Unfortunately, no other additional information about the photographs is available in the archive.

The first photograph (Figure 1) must have been taken in summer, which is suggested by the exuberant vegetation in the fore- and backgrounds. The picture also takes in two people, who are sitting on a bench in the foreground with their backs to the photographer, two more people, who are standing on the ramp at the entrance to the steamer, and one more person, who is sitting on a bench on the left, all wearing summer outfits, which confirms the assumption that the picture was taken in summer. The steamer is missing its wheels and smoke funnel. There being a trodden road and a well-fitted-out holiday area near the steamer is suggestive of the spot being the vessel's permanent dock by a holiday center.

The second photograph was taken at a time the vessel was wintering (Figure 2). It, likewise, is missing its paddle wheels and, apparently, its smoke funnel. A few other wintering ships can be seen in the background. The name '*Krasnaya Zvezda*' and the registration number 'KM-177' are clearly visible on the side of the vessel. There is a poster attached to its side. While it appears to be impossible to make out what it says, it seems to start with the word 'Comrade', so it can be suggested that it is a poster designed to warn people against getting on the ship from the ice.

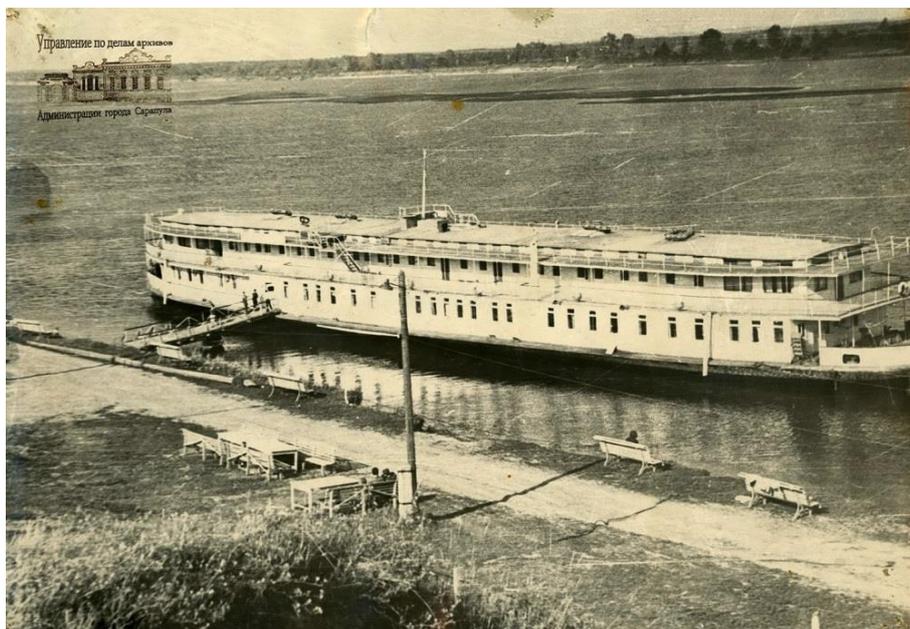


Fig. 1. Photograph of the steamer *Krasnaya Zvezda* (SGA. F. R-840. Op. 3. D. 810)

The holding R-750 contains a photograph showing the steamers *Krasnaya Zvezda* and *Lunacharsky* (Figure 3). The caption to it says the following: “The steamers *Krasnaya Zvezda* and *Lunacharsky* at the dock of the *Krutyye Gorki* holiday center of the *Sarapul Ordzhonikidze Radio Factory*, with their cabins used for the accommodation of holidayers” (SGA. F. R-750. Op. 1F. D. 10880). The photograph is dated May 1969. It was taken from a steep bank of the River *Kama*. On the left, there is an anchored steamer that has the words ‘*Krasnaya Zvezda*’ written on its side, and to its right there is another vessel with an illegible name. Both steamers are shown with their ramps down. As the spot is a shallow one, there is a small special raft propping the long ramp of the *Krasnaya Zvezda*.



Fig. 2. Photograph of the steamer *Krasnaya Zvezda* (SGA. F. R-840. Op. 3. D. 811)

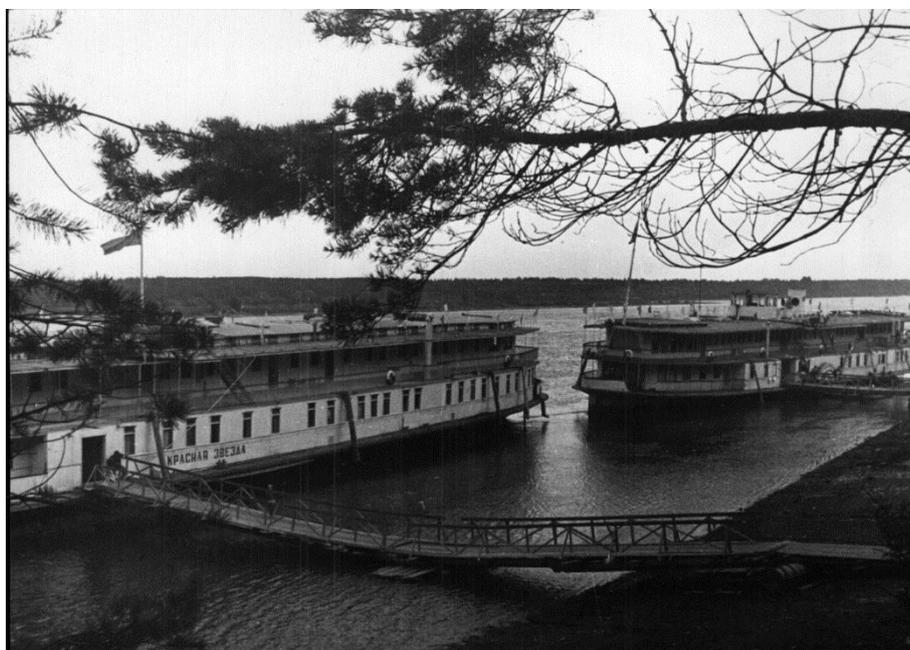


Fig. 3. Steamers *Lunacharsky* and *Krasnaya Zvezda* by the *Krutyye Gorki* holiday center (SGA. F. R-750. Op. 1F. D. 10880)

Photographs from the Sarapul Museum

The holdings of the Sarapul Museum (SM) contain several photographs of the steamer *Krasnaya Zvezda*. Three of them, all of poor quality but fairly unique, are dedicated to the same event – a failed

beaching of the steamer. The event resulted in a deformation in the ship's hull, making impossible its further use. Based on the captions, the photographs were taken in June 1973 (Figure 4). All three photographs are a film negative. However, given the fact that the image is quite blurry, it can be suggested that we have here a photograph reproduction. This is supported by the characteristic flaws of a paper image in the form of scuffs and creases, which would not have been there had the photograph been taken from life.

An analysis of the photographs indicates that two of them (Photo No. 20297/2429 and Photo No. 20297/2430) represent the same item (Figure 4, right). In the second photograph, the image of the steamer is cropped, and there is a black smear on the right. However, the images have the same point of view, as well as the same characteristic basic natural elements (some driftwood and rocks by the foreship). The third photograph (Photo No. 20297/2428) was taken from a different point of view (Figure 4, left). In it, the steamer is seen in stern view. One of the photographs takes in the front part of an unknown powerboat. The image is too blurry to determine what kind of powerboat it is. However, it may well be what the photographer arrived at the place on. The first photograph (Photo No. 20297/2428) must have been taken prior to the vessel hitting the beach, onboard the powerboat, and the rest of the pictures must have been taken later on the shore. This scenario is supported by the positioning of the photographs on the film, with them numbered in ascending order.

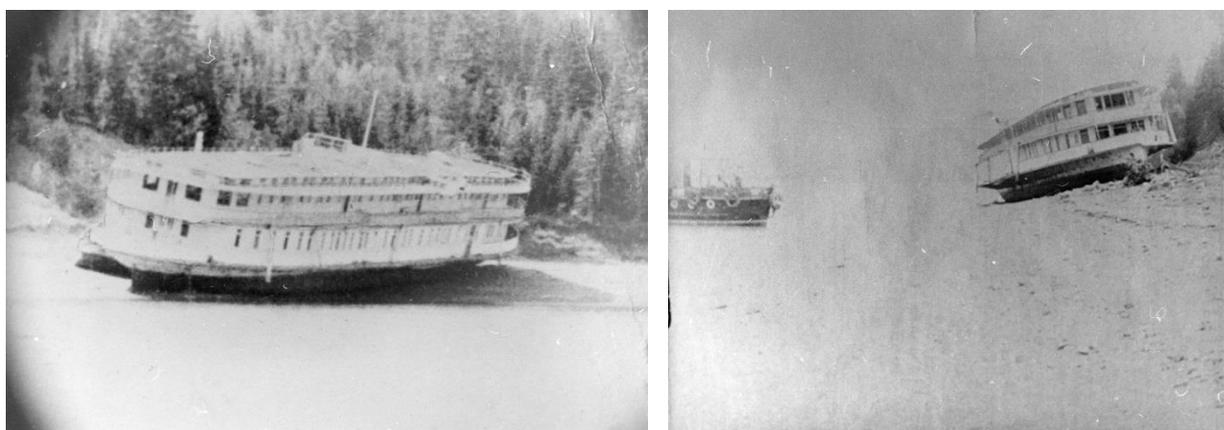


Fig. 4. Failed beaching of the steamer Krasnaya Zvezda in June 1973: left – Photo No. 20297/2428; right – Photo No. 20297/2429

There are another two photographs from the holdings of the Sarapul Museum, and these were clearly taken earlier, despite their large accession numbers (Figure 5). Yet again one gets an impression that the negatives were made based on existing photographs. This, for instance, is confirmed by the characteristic worn corners, a result of being fixed in a photoalbum (Figure 5, left). Both photographs have the same caption and date: “The Krasnaya Zvezda, a one-time agit-steamer, served in 1969 as a holiday center for workers at the [Sarapul Ordzhonikidze Radio Factory]” (Photo No. 20297/2456, 2457).

It is well possible that these photographs were taken in the same place as the one shown in Figure 3. This is supported by the date – 1969. There is also a characteristically long ramp, although the raft propping the ramp in the middle was left out. Whereas the photograph in Figure 3 takes in just one branch of a fir tree, the one in Figure 5 clearly shows an entire forest on the bank. Of interest is also the second photograph, which shows two powerboats to the left of the ramp. The one closer to the photographer is most certainly a bridge erection powerboat. Unfortunately, the number on its side is illegible.

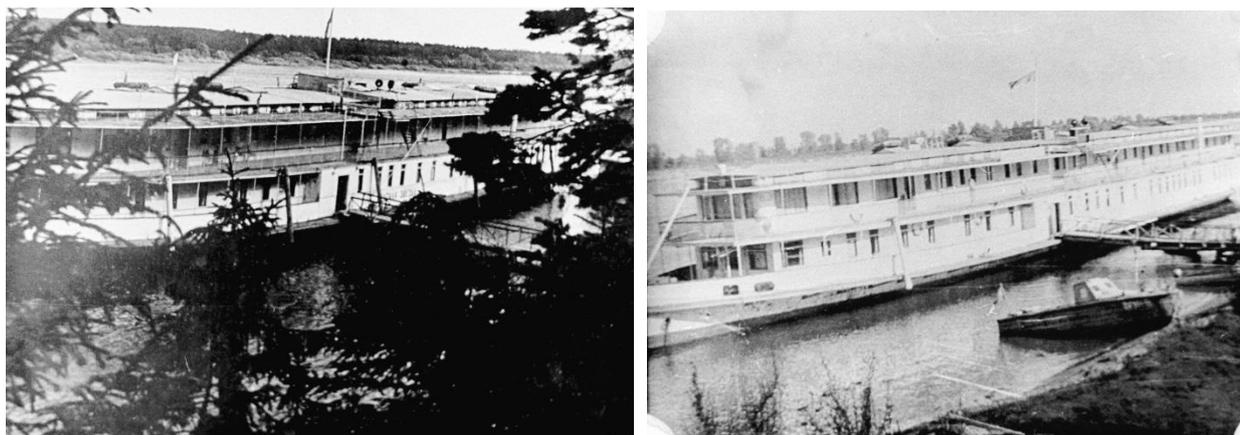


Fig. 5. Krasnaya Zvezda serving as a holiday center for workers at the Ordzhonikidze Radio Factory: left – Photo No. 20297/2456; right – Photo No. 20297/2457

Photographs from the holdings of the Center for Documenting Contemporary History of the Udmurt Republic

The holdings of the Center for Documenting Contemporary History of the Udmurt Republic contain one later photograph of the Krasnaya Zvezda. Holding 120 ('A Collection of Photodocuments') contains a photograph captioned 'Steamer Krasnaya Zvezda at the harbor of the city of Sarapul' (Figure 6). It is dated July 26, 1969 (TsDNI UR. F. 120. Op. 3F. D. 5620).

One of fairly high quality, the photograph shows the one-time agit-steamer Krasnaya Zvezda. The date, again, suggests that it is the holiday center of the Ordzhonikidze Radio Factory. While the photograph does not take in all of the long ramp, which is seen in Figure 3, the characteristic bend suggests that there is a supporting raft somewhere on the left. What makes the photograph particularly interesting is that it makes it possible to see a few parts that cannot be seen in the previous photos. Specifically, to the left of the ramp there is a garbage chute hanging from the second floor. That is where the kitchen must have been located on the ship. In the photo's upper right corner, one can clearly see a ramp leading upwards. Given that the roof of the second floor has no space for strolling, the ramp must be leading to an old captain's bridge. The photo also takes in the bridge's left wing, along with its support brackets. Thus, it can be suggested that during the taking down of the pipe the bridge and its wings were kept in place.



Fig. 6. Photograph of the Krasnaya Zvezda from the holdings of the Center for Documenting Contemporary History of the Udmurt Republic

Photographs from the private archive of G.A. Rakitin

The private archive of well-known Perm collector G.A. Rakitin contains several interesting photographs of the *Krasnaya Zvezda*. [Figure 7](#) displays a photograph that, according to the collector, shows the *Krasnaya Zvezda* at the In Memory of Dzerzhinsky Dockyard in the township of Nizhnyaya Kur'ya. This must be the early 1950s, i.e. when the vessel was still on the books of the Kama River Shipping Company. The *Krasnaya Zvezda* stands on the left in a row of steamers, the closest to the shore. The photograph was taken onboard another wintering steamer. The second photograph ([Figure 8](#)) is perhaps more interesting, as it shows what the *Krasnaya Zvezda* looked like in the early 2000s, with the underbody being what was left of it, most of it eaten away with rust and full of sand.



Fig. 7. *Krasnaya Zvezda* in winter layup at the In Memory of Dzerzhinsky Dockyard (from a private collection of G.A. Rakitin)



Fig. 8. Hull of the now-defunct *Krasnaya Zvezda* in the early 2000s (from a private collection of G.A. Rakitin)

4. Conclusion

The photographic testimonies provided offer an unequivocal indication that in the late 1960s the steamer *Krasnaya Zvezda* was no longer a self-propelled vessel. Its paddle wheels appear to have been removed, while the space within the housings appears to have been put to use. Its boilers and engines clearly appear to have been removed too. Despite some sources indicating that the

steamer was transferred from the Kama River Shipping Company to the Izhevsk Mechanical Plant, within the timeframe under examination the vessel appears to have been on the books of the Sarapul Ordzhonikidze Radio Factory, which is indicated by the captions accompanying the photographs. In 1973, while being beached on the shore, the vessel sustained a severe deformation to its hull, which would eventually make impossible both its further use and restoration. Despite certain elements of the ship's hull being still in existence as of the early 2000s, it appears to be highly unlikely that one will be able to reconstruct the steamer just based on those remains.

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