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## Living for a 'Cause'

# Radical Autobiographical Writing in Russia at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The ambiguous term *delo* (thing, matter, act or cause) was fundamental for the Russian radical autobiographical writers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The dedication to a cause was the 'leading star' to frame one's own biography, as it proved one's reputation within the radical milieu. Therefore, it was important not only to choose which parts of one's radical past needed to be emphasised, but also which deeds were better to silence, omit or vindicate. While radical writers often framed the topics of their autobiographies in a similar way, polemics and debates generated among the senior radicals. This article proposes basic guidelines on how to read and analyse the numerous Russian radical autobiographical writings by identifying the most common authors' choices of framing and emplotment.

Every one of them is a man, dauntless, firm, unwavering, capable of undertaking any matter [umeiushchii vziat'sia za delo]; and if he undertakes it, he adheres so resolutely to it that it cannot slip out of his grasp. This is one side of their nature. Another side: each one of them is a man of irreproachable integrity, so much so that the question never even enters our mind, "Is it possible to rely on this person unconditionally?" It is as clear as the fact that he breathes with his lungs; as long as the lungs breathe, such a heart is warm and unchanged. You can lean your head upon such a chest, you can rest upon it. These general features are so prominent

that the personal peculiarities are covered over by them.

It is not long that this type has been in existence among us. In former times there were only isolated individuals, who gave promise of it; they were exceptions, and as exceptions they felt lonely and powerless, and for that very reason they were inactive, or they fell into despair, or they felt exalted, or became romantic or fanciful; that is, they could not possess the chief characteristic of this type; they could not show any cool practicability, an even, well-regulated activity, or active, sound good sense. (Chernyshevskii 1886: 198-9; 1975: 148-9)

This is how Nikolai Chernyshevskii described the ‘new people’, who were forming a just, honest and rational society. His novel *What is to Be Done?*, written in 1863, was a pivotal work, inspiring the young educated people who were growing up in the Russian Empire. During the Great Reforms under Alexander II, Russian society began to change at a faster pace: press censorship was reduced, serfdom was abolished, the juridical system was reformed and local autonomy introduced. In the first years of Alexander’s reign, almost everything seemed to be possible. Progressive thinkers like Chernyshevskii, Dobroliubov or Pisarev brought these tendencies to their extreme. However, at the beginning of the 1860s, Alexander’s regime considered such tendencies more and more of a threat; therefore, representatives of the most radical tendencies were repressed. Chernyshevskii, for instance, was arrested and exiled to Siberia, becoming the most prominent ‘martyr’ among the progressive circles. His novel became a ‘bible’ for many generations (Paperno 1988: 26-37; Mogil’ner 1999: 28-31; Drozd 2001: 9). Catching the *Zeitgeist* and influencing the formation of underground radical circles, Chernyshevskii helped to form the

radicals’ imagery, behaviour and values. More broadly, his novel affected the ways in which the revolutionaries wrote about themselves. It provided patterns on what to tell, what to emphasise and what to silence.

In the following pages, I will focus on how the Russian radicals of the 1870s and 1880s perceived their own lives retrospectively. Most of their memoirs and autobiographies were published in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, before and after the revolutions of 1917. At the beginning of the century, journals like «Byloe» (The Past, 1900-1926) or «Golos Minuvshego» (Voice of the Past, 1911-1922) gave the veterans of the radical movement a chance to publish and discuss their memories. Close to the Socialist Revolutionaries, these people were fundamental for the formation of a common sensibility about how to commemorate their shared radical past (Henderson 2017: 106-107; 122-123). After 1917, the Bolsheviks established their own journals: in the early Soviet period, «Katorga i ssylka» (Conviction and Deportation, 1922-1935), «Proletarskaia revoliutsiia» (Proletarian Revolution, 1921-1941) or «Krasnyi arkhiv» (Red Archive, 1922-1941) would be in charge of the commemoration of the revolutionary past, while veterans, Bolsheviks and early

Soviet historians were competing in writing the history of the Russian revolutionary movement (Saburova, Eklof 2016: 371-376). The Soviet state spent large sums and efforts in a welfare program for the revolutionary veterans, regardless of their former party affiliation. The “Society of Former Political Convicts and Deportees” (1922-1935) was the main institution to take care of the senior radicals. It would also take care of the interpretation of the revolutionary history (Junge 2009). Up to the 1930s, radical autobiographic writings were heavily influenced by such attempts by the Soviet state. However, after seizing power, Stalin condemned historiography based on ‘documents’, ‘facts’ and ‘experience’ in favour of a monolithic interpretation of Soviet History, where he was the only “master editor” (Stalin 1931: 15). Such policy reached its apogee with the infamous *Short Course on the History of the Communist Party* in 1938. It set an end to every debate on how to write Russian revolutionary history until Stalin’s death in 1953 (Yurchak 2006: 39-44). Before Stalin prevented any pluralistic approach to the radicals’ history, its protagonists had taken the opportunity to create a meaningful narrative out of their own life (Smith, Watson 2010,

102; Eakin 1999, 99-102; Bourdieu 1994: 81-9). I will focus on a few prominent veterans of the movement radicalised in the late 1860s and in the 1870s such as Vera Zasulich, Lev Deich, Ekaterina Breshkovskaia, Anna Kornilova-Moroz or Vera Figner. These veterans’ autobiographies were widespread and influential within the debate on the revolutionary past, as their autobiographies have been positively received by young radicals. They were among the first generation of revolutionaries and perceived themselves as fighters for good against an absolute evil (Brower 1975: 22). I will also take into consideration the autobiographical writings of the most famous radical ‘apostate’, Lev Tikhomirov, as his texts interacted closely with the other radical autobiographies.

Based on these documents, I will depict how the revolutionaries perceived and sketched their own biographies and their participation in the revolutionary movement, and how they made sense of their lives. Hilde Hoo-genboom has already analysed the autobiographical writings by Russian radicals under the aspects of genre and gender by underlining the differences in the self-perception, e.g. how male and female radicals perceived their childhood and the

reasons for their radicalisation (Hoogenboom 1996: 79-80). While revolutionary women associated their personal sacrifice for the revolutionary cause with their loss of rank and privilege, men associated it rather with their loss of career opportunities (Hoogenboom 1996: 85-86). However, in my article I will not emphasise what separated the veterans' narratives, but point out what they had in common. On the one hand, I will focus on why they believed it to be crucial to be a member of the radical circles and the radical community as a whole. On the other, I will seek to understand if they had problems in dealing with their own life stories, as they could potentially endanger their whole narrative. I will therefore point to the processes of silencing, omission and apology. Finally, I will outline the reasons for the numerous polemics among the senior radicals from the 1900s up to the 1930s. My concluding thesis is that despite common framing of the topics, the veterans were struggling on what Hayden White called the modes of "emplotment" (White 1973: 7-11), i.e. the way the story of the radical movement is told. White's four modes of emplotment (tragedy, comedy, ro-

mance and satire)<sup>1</sup> can help to analyse the veterans' narratives beyond certain ideological frames, like (neo-)narodnichestvo, Marxism or Anarchism. Vera Figner's autobiography would be an example of a tragic emplotment. She was a leading member of 'Narodnaia Volia' (People's Will), an organisation best known for the terrorist campaign it led against the Tsar from 1879 to 1881. In her autobiographic texts (1922; 1932), she emploted her life story as a gradual story of moral development that led her to armed resistance against the regime. Though she and her comrades failed, she nevertheless saw her biography as an example for future generations of radicals. In contrast to Figner, Lev Deich's

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<sup>1</sup> While in a romantic mode the forces of good triumph over evil, in the tragic one the protagonists fail this task. However, in the latter there is still hope for a change for the better. The narrative mode of comedy was absent in the radical autobiographies due to the prevailing Manichaeian mind-set of them. This mode implies the possibility of (temporary) reconciliation of the forces at play, whereas in the radicals' eyes – including the 'apostates' – there was no chance of compromise between traditional and modern life, between autocracy and revolution. Finally, the satiric mode "presupposes the ultimate inadequacy of the visions of the world dramatically represented in the genres of Romance, Comedy, and Tragedy alike" (White 1973, 10).

writings (1908; 1926) are an example of a romantic emplotment. One of the 'founding fathers' of the Russian Social Democracy, he focused on the adventurous parts like his escapes from prison, but he also recounted the failure of 'Narodnaia Volia' and its terrorist campaign as one necessary prerequisite for the growth of Russian Marxism. Last but not least, in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the autobiographic writings of 'apostates' like Lev Tikhomirov (1927) were also part of the discourse. In his satiric emplotment he made fun of the radicals' silly behaviour. Such struggles for the 'right' emplotment came to an end in the mid 1930s, when the romantic Bolshevik narrative suppressed any alternative to tell the radicals' history (Saburova, Eklof 2016: 384). Considering the limited space at my disposal, I consider this a preliminary analysis for further investigation.

### 1. Framing a Radical's Life

From the 1850s, the term *delo* (pl. *dela*) had been crucial for a progressive or revolutionary discourse among the Russian intelligentsia, particularly inside the forming radical circles. The Russian word *delo* is highly ambiguous. One can translate it as

*thing*, but also as *matter*, *act* or *cause*. According to the dominant intelligentsia discourse it was important that a person had to be looking for a *delo*. In the end of the 1850s and at the beginning of the 1860s, this enigmatic term would be used to fool the Tsarist censors and therefore to allow the public discussion of radical or even revolutionary topics. Depending on the context, the adept readers could decipher *delo* as *useful social activity*, *progress* or *revolution*, as for instance in Chernyshevskii's novel. *Delo* was always read in opposition to passive, conservative traditional values (Müller 1971, 324). The term expressed the possibility that men forge their own destiny, that they were not dependent on a god, master or Tsar. *Delo* became a symbol in radical discourse. Later, in the autobiographical texts of the people radicalised in the 1860s and 1870s, it was a marker for the revolutionary community (Rindlisbacher 2014: 19-20, 48-52).

*Delo* symbolically opened to everyone – men and women, nobleman or peasant – a new, self-determined perspective on things. In retrospect, this word seemed fundamental for radical men and for women like Vera Zasulich. Zasulich grew up

in a poor noble family. Her destiny in accordance to the traditional social frame seemed to be sealed, since her relatives tried to train her as a governess. However, she decided to become a famous revolutionary as well as a founding member of the Russian Social Democracy. Zasluch later imagined her longing for a *delo* as a starting point of her radical career:

Even before my revolutionary dreams, [...] I was planning how to escape all this [i.e. fate as a governess]. A boy in my position could easily find a solution. Planning the future would be an open space. But there, the spectre of revolution equated me with a boy. I could dream about the cause [*delo*], about heroic deeds, about the great battle [...]. (Zasluch 1931: 15)

This word inspired thousands of young people like Vera Zasluch, to whom writers like Chernyshevskii, Nekrasov or Turgenev gave ideas on how the 'new people' should portray their own lives.

The desire to devote him- or herself completely to a cause was essential to the radicals' identity. They described such a

dedication with the word "samooverzhenost'", another crucial term in the radicals' perception. When a radical was accepted as 'devoted to the cause', he or she had the respect of his comrades (Lavrov 1907: 67-8; Kornilova-Moroz 1926: 11), as their biographies could serve as examples for other sympathisers. For instance, Berta Kaminskaia and Mariia Subbotina, who died in 1878 in prison, were immediately canonised by «Obshchina» (The Commune), an underground journal, as ideal representatives of the radical milieu:

No one could outshine Kaminskaia and Subbotina. On the one hand, they shared a deep and unconditional love for the cause [*delo*] [...], and on the other, a dedication [*samooverzhenost'*] that was in all their acts. (Nekrologi 1878: 9)

Ever since the beginning, social distinctions among different categories of 'new people' grew more and more visible. At first, there was a distinction drawn between the radicals – devoting their life for the cause 'in the underground' – and their sympathisers, who remained in the 'legal world'. Almost all radicals

mentioned the importance of this threshold between legality and illegality. Many of them described the act of initiation into the revolutionary circle as a personal point of no return (Breshkovskaia 1931: 8; Deich 1926: 146-8; 215; Figner 1932, vol. 1: 353). Their motivations differed: Vera Figner described her decision as a logic consequence of her moral background (Figner 1932, vol. 5, 95-6), while Lev Deich or Vera Zasulich insisted on the importance of experiencing adventures among like-minded people (Zasulich, in: ADP (RNB), f. 1098, ed. khr. 29, ll. 1-3; Deich 1926, 187-90).

As time went on, a proper hierarchy within the radical networks developed. The authority or the political capital of a person depended on his or her revolutionary prestige (on capital see: Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992: 118-9). This prestige could be built on the ability to organise radical circles, the intimate knowledge of radical writings, successful propaganda among the peasants or the cold-bloodedness during the confrontation with the police (Rindlisbacher 2014: 96-7). Extraordinary people, successfully promoting the revolutionary cause in public, could become venerated idols of the whole community. Such outstanding

examples were Ippolit Myshkin thanks to his speech in the 'trial of the 193', Vera Zasulich after her attempt to shoot the chief commander of St. Petersburg Fedor Trepov in 1878, or Piotr Karpovich after he assassinated the minister of education Nikolai Bogolepov in 1901. Their names were well known and venerated among the radicals and later emphasised in many autobiographies (e.g. Breshkovskaia 1931: 158-9; Figner 1932, vol. 2: 30; Plekhanova 1925, 82-87)

The revolutionary prestige led to a hierarchical differentiation between minor and major activists in the radical circles, even though organisations like 'Zemlia i Volia' and even 'Narodnaia Volia' stated in their charters that all members were equal (Volk 1965, vol. 2: 200-204). Major activists of a high revolutionary prestige were well known in the radical underground milieu and could influence its policies more effectively. Later, these 'celebrities' could gain attention with their autobiographical writings and therefore influence the emplotment of the revolutionary history. They were undoubtedly considered trustworthy, whereas minor activists had to fulfil minor duties, such as the delivery of messages. They had virtually no voice in the decision making

process and always had to demonstrate their trustworthiness (Džabadari 1907: 170; Figner in: RGALI, f. 1185, op. 1, ed. khr. 167, l. 24).

## 2. *Topics of Silencing, Omitting or Apology*

Major failures challenged the heroic and immaculate status of radical narratives. In a heroic narrative, there was no place for weakness, personal failure or serious doubts. Many radicals agreed to cooperate with the state organs after their arrest, having in return a reduction of their sentence. These were mostly radicals of minor prestige, as for instance Mariia Kaliuzhnaia, a young student who joined the terrorist group 'Narodnaia Volia' in 1882 and became a close assistant of Vera Figner in Khar'kov. After her arrest, Kaliuzhnaia collaborated with the police (GA RF, f. 102, 7-oe del-vo, 1884 g., op. 181, d. 747, ch. 10, l. 45). Vera Figner omitted that Kaliuzhnaia was an essential part of her radical activity.

If leading members of the radical circles defected from the radical cause, silencing was no more possible. Lev Tikhomirov, the chief ideologist within 'Zemlia i Volia' and later within 'Narodnaia Volia', begged Alex-

ander III for pardon in 1888 due to his miserable life in exile. After his return to Russia, he became a prominent supporter of the Orthodox Church and the autocratic regime. Since Tikhomirov was too well-known to be simply silenced or omitted by the radical writers, his former comrades tried to discredit him and his behaviour at any cost. They portrayed him as a sinister conspirator or simply as mentally ill (Deich 1923, 48-51; Figner 1927: XXXVI).

While minor activists who were considered traitors by the radicals were often killed as means of deterrence for the others, double agents among the upper ranks of the radical milieu enjoyed their comrades' protection. This posed tremendous difficulties for radicals' autobiographers, as such cases of treason were the proof that they were fooled by people who they considered fully trustworthy comrades. Two traitors shocked the radical milieu in particular: Sergei Degaev and Evno Azef. They were in top positions, the first within 'Narodnaia Volia' in 1882 and 1883, the latter within the Combat Organisation of the Socialist revolutionaries from 1903 to 1908. Most comrades ignored rumours that they could be working with the secret police. In the underground life, com-



plete mutual trust was indispensable among the leading radicals, even despite ideological differences. The danger of arrest was pervasive. This unconditional trust was useful in general, but fatal in this case. Only when evidence against Degaev and Azef became obvious, their comrades ostracised them. The radical movement was heavily damaged by the scandals following these acts of treason (Geifman 2000; Pipes 2003). Vera Figner was fooled even twice. In 1883 she was arrested because of Degaev's denunciation. After her release from Shlisselburg prison in 1904, she became a leading member of the Socialist Revolutionaries. She also supported its Combat Organisation and Azef in particular. Until the end, she believed in Azef's innocence (Savinkov 2002: 354). In her memoirs, there was virtually no space for reflection on the episode.

Repression against minor activists who were considered traitors could cause propagandistic damage for the whole revolutionary cause. In 1876, a young student, Nikolai Gorinovich, was trying to join the circle of the 'Iuzhnye Buntari' (Southern Rebels). In the eyes of the other radicals, Gorinovich was a coward and not worthy to join the movement. Later the 'Buntari'

suspected him to be a traitor, because he was arrested in 1875 but released soon after. That is why Lev Deich proposed to make a warning for future traitors:

If he was again able to sneak into the radical milieu, then Gorinovich could probably bring even more damage to the cause [*delo*] and the people than the first time if he is arrested again. The circumstances made it necessary to put him away, or this is how we have perceived them. We were drooling over action [*delo*] and we were somewhat trigger-happy. (Deich 1926: 274).

In the end, Gorinovich was beaten by Deich and two of his comrades. As they thought that he was dead, they spilt acid over his face so that it would be impossible to identify his body. However severely injured, Gorinovich survived, his face disfigured. This incident was like a present for the tsarist propaganda (Geifman 1993: 86), as Gorinovich's fate proved the radicals' cruelty and arbitrariness. Therefore, it was important for Deich to find in his autobiographical writings a sound apology for his act against Gorinovich. He tried

to show that Gorinovich was indeed guilty of treason. After 1917, he searched the archives of the secret police for incriminating documents against Gorinovich. In the end, he managed to present to his readers the evidence that Gorinovich was talking with the police in 1875. His own act of 'defence' was thereby justified (Deich 1926: 272; GARF, f. 109, 3-ia eks-ia, op. 159, 1874 g., ed. khr. 144, ch. 136, A, ll. 13-14.).

Another aspect that was often silenced or omitted in the revolutionary autobiographies were private feelings, love affairs and unexpected offspring (Hoogenboom 1996: 84; Engel 1983: 192-194). In the narrow underground world, the radicals began to form couples. Sofiia Perovskaia and Andrei Zheliabov, leading members of 'Narodnaia Volia', were the most prominent of them. Other couples were Nikolai Morozov and Ol'ga Liubatovich, Fanni Lichkus and Sergej Karvchinskii as well as Georgii Plekhanov and Rozaliia Bograd (later Plekhanova). Though radical women mentioned that they gave birth to children, these children did not play any role in their mainly political narrative (Liubatovich 1906: 129; Plekhanova 1928: 103-5).

Personal problems, hardships and failed relationships were also silenced or omitted in auto-

biographical writings. For example, Vera Figner married the progressive lawyer Aleksei Filippov and went with him to Zurich in order to study together medicine. However, due to political and personal quarrels their relationship deteriorated. Finally, they got divorced in 1876. In Figner's autobiography, Filippov plays only a marginal role. She avoids every reflection on the reason why their marriage failed. In general, she perceived such topics as not suitable for a revolutionary biography (Figner 1932, vol. 7: 215).

Only a few autobiographers wrote about their comrades' depression or personal crisis. Vera Zasulich and Lev Deich formed a couple at the beginning of the 1880s. After Deich's arrest in Germany in 1883 and his following extradition to Russia, Vera Zasulich felt so lonely that her comrades feared that she could commit suicide (Visconti 1924: 155). Since Deich had fallen in love with another woman during his Siberian exile, Zasulich went through an even deeper depression. She became more and more addicted to Chloral, without which it was impossible for her to fall asleep (Savel'ev 2009: 481). In her and her comrades' autobiographical writings, this failed relationship and her addiction were silenced, as Zasu-

lich was considered an outstanding heroine and founding mother of Russian Marxism (e.g. Haimson 1987: 110).

### 3. *Struggling for the Emplotment of the Revolutionary History*

Though such struggles for details were daily business in autobiographical literature, they were only the superficial part of the question how to emplot the history of the revolutionary movement as a whole. Within these polemics, 'facts' as such did not really matter. The honour or the prestige of a comrade seemed much more important.

In his autobiographical writings, Lev Tikhomirov used the same strategies of the other radical veterans, but in his emplotment he made fun of the radicals, their values and their actions. In his eyes, they were stuck in adolescence and were simply looking for "revolutionary action" (revoliutsionnoe delo) without deeper intellectual reflection. From this perspective, he interpreted the turn to terrorist violence in the late 1870s as a result of the radicals' failure to initiate a broad social movement (Tikhomirov 1890: 89-96; 1927: 30-1; 60). Nevertheless, he perceived the longing for action as something completely normal

for young people, but perverted in the case of the Russian radicals:

It is necessary to understand this point: the young people were not interested in reading, science or even the truth [...], but in action [*deiatel'nost'*], in the use of their abilities. I do not make any judgement here because, in the end, this is a normal thing. Only their form of activity was stupid, but not their intention. (Tikhomirov 1927: 50)

With such an emplotment, Tikhomirov was the outcast, as his critical approach intended to discredit the radicals' life stories as misled and morally failed. It was no wonder that writers who underlined the importance of radical life stories were more successful. Vera Figner was one of the most prominent among them, as her 1922 autobiography *Zapechatlennyi trud* (Accomplished work) was positively received. Thus, she was able to set the tone on how to write the memoirs among the radical veterans, and could influence the way the history of the revolutionary movement in general was recounted (Saburova, Eklof 2016: 361-366; Goodwin 2010:

232-3; Volk 1966: 41-2). In her old age, she was not only reviewing the encyclopaedic biography *Deiateli revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia Rossii* (Activists of the Russian revolutionary movement; Figner 1989), but was also contributing comments to the works of early Soviet historians like Dmitrii Kuz'min (Kuz'min 1931: 231-275). Therefore, she aimed to tell her readers a heroic story with herself as its iconic figure (Hartnett 2001: 266-8). Although her and her comrades' revolutionary actions failed, their biographies were in her eyes examples to inspire future generations. Thus, she emphasised that their struggle for the 'cause' were tragic, but not in vain (RGALI, f. 1185, op. 1, ed. khr. 133, l. 16). This is why she rejected all doubts and criticism on the revolutionary cause. She upheld such a revolutionary rigor in private up to her old age as her niece later remembered: "She was demanding that one's word [*slovo*] is always in accordance with one's act [*delo*]. Thus, she was remorseless towards herself and her fellows" (Margarita Figner 1980: 212).

This tragic emplotment of the early revolutionary history was challenged not only by a satiric alternative, but also by a romantic one. The polemic between Lev Deich and Osip Aptekman

in the mid-1920s is illuminating. This polemic revolved around the evaluation of the split of 'Zemlia i Volia' (Land and Freedom) in the terrorist 'Narodnaia Volia' and the propagandist 'Chernyi peredel' (Black Repartition). According to Aptekman, a leading member of 'Chernyi peredel', the latter organisation was simply one big disappointment:

If 'Zemlia i Volia' is linked with my best thoughts and with my bravest hopes, then already after the formation of 'Chernyi Peredel' I lost them all. This is not because I was in such a bad shape [*mrachno nastroen*] in that time, but because our situation – because of objective reasons, not depending from us – was from the beginning hopelessly sad. I took part in the birth of this heavily sick child. I was also witnessing how it got sicker and sicker. I was observing its agony and death. (Aptekman 1924: 401)

Lev Deich opposed this tragic view. He had also been a member of 'Chernyi peredel'. Unlike Aptekman, he put the failure of 'Chernyi peredel' into the ro-

mantic narrative of Russian Marxism:

[...] everyone who is familiar with the transitory phase of our revolutionary movement must agree – of course, if he is not blinded by prejudices. I can definitely underline that if ‘Chernyi peredel’ would not have existed, then our first Marxist party cell – the Group ‘Liberation of Labour’ – would not have emerged at the beginning of the [18]80s. (Deich 1926: 270)

For Deich the failure of ‘Chernyi peredel’ was one step forward in the victory of Russian Marxism, leading to the revolutionary events in 1917. But in the eyes of Aptekman who had not become Marxist, this failure was related with a strong personal and political disappointment.

The same discord occurred also around the issue of the evaluation of the assassination of Alexander II on 1 March 1881 by ‘Narodnaia Volia’. For instance, Ivan Teodorovich, editor of «Katorga i ssylka» interpreted it in 1931, as a failed attempt by the intelligentsia to mobilise the peasantry. The members of ‘Narodnaia Volia’ misunderstood the mood of the peasant masses,

but opened the way for the only real revolutionary class, the proletariat (Teodorovich 1931: 70). However, in the same volume of «Katorga i ssylka», Pavel Argunov, who in 1881 was a young student, added his own tragic testimony on this event. For Argunov, Alexander’s assassination had a mobilising effect among the radical students and their sympathisers. Although ‘Narodnaia Volia’ was defeated, its ideological legacy brought together new young radicals for a new heroic battle against autocracy (Argunov 1931: 143-4).

#### 4. Conclusion

Radical autobiographies shared a common set of ideas and values, influenced by the discourse within the Russian intelligentsia after the death of Nikolai I. Writers and intellectuals like Nekrasov, Turgenev, Dobroliubov or Pisarev formulated a general mindset. Chernyshevskii grasped these ideas and merged them in his influential novel *What is to be done?* This novel offered a picture on how radicals perceived themselves and how they later wrote their own life stories. The necessity to devote oneself to a certain *delo* (thing, matter, cause or act) was at the heart of this mindset. This term was the marker of the radical

identity, because the way in which someone dedicated him or herself to the 'cause' and the appreciation of this effort by their peers or group defined their prestige within the radical world: sympathiser, minor activist or major activist.

As the dedication to a *delo* was the leading guide for their autobiographies, private life, personal feelings and relationships were placed at the margins or were completely omitted. Failures and essential doubts over the *delo* were also subjected to silencing. The radicals did not want to put the story of the heroic revolutionary movement in jeopardy. How to deal with famous traitors or 'apostates' or with obvious mistakes was a delicate task, as silencing seemed to be no option. Radical autobiographies had to answer to a certain degree on how former leaders like Tikhomirov or trustworthy dedicated activists like Degaev and Azef could change sides.

Despite common structures and procedures of silencing, omission and apology, radical autobiographies were battlefields on how to interpret one's own life story in an accurate way. Though personal animosities and loyalties played also a role, the main point of discord was how to emplot the story of the

revolutionary movement in Russia. Should it be a tragedy, like in Vera Figner's autobiography? Should it rather be an adventurous tale towards the victory of Marxism, like in Lev Deich's? Or was it after all a piece of satire like in Lev Tikhomirov's? The modes of framing and emplotment outlined in the present article can serve as a starting point for the interpretation of the veterans' enormous amount of autobiographical documents in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the mid-1930s, Stalin put an end to this heterogeneous debate and to the flourishing culture of public autobiographical writings about the history of the Russian Revolution. He also used already established structures to legitimise his demand:

Apart from desperate bureaucrats, who can rely on paper documents only? Apart from rats in archives, who does not understand that we have to assess the party and its leaders primarily by their acts [*dela*] and not by their statements? [...]

In my opinion, the task of [a Soviet historian] is to take the issues of Bolshevik history up to its appropriate sublimeness. He

has to put the matter [*de-lo*] of our Party's historical research on scientific Bolshevik tracks [...]. (Stalin 1931: 15; 18)

clusive prerogative. Russian revolutionary history and autobiography had to dedicate themselves completely to Stalin's *de-lo*.

Stalin claimed the interpretation of Soviet history as his own ex-

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