

INTRODUCTION

Otto Boele

ON MAY 4, 2017, PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN unveiled a cross-shaped monument on Senate Square in the Moscow Kremlin, exactly on the spot where more than a century earlier Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, an uncle of the tsar, had been killed in a bomb attack. A copy of the original monument, which the Bolsheviks had torn down only weeks after their seizure of power, the newly erected cross was, according to the president, an important reminder. It would make people remember the price that Russia had paid for the mutual hatred and discord of the late imperial period, as well as appreciate the need to preserve national unity in the future. The killing of the grand duke in February 1905 had led to violence and chaos, Putin assured his audience, but the return of the monument was a sign of hope as well as atonement, showing that “in the end truth and justice always prevail.”¹

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1. The transcript and video of Putin’s speech can be accessed on the Kremlin’s official website. “Otkrytie pamiatnika velikomu kniaz’iu Sergeiu Aleksandrovichu,” March 4, 2017, accessed November 29, 2017, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54447>.

Together the restoration of the monument and the ceremony accompanying its unveiling form a striking example of the “memory politics” that the Kremlin is currently pursuing. The revolution, once a heroic chapter in Russian history that provided the nation with a glorious founding myth, is now officially regarded as a tragic error, as is any form of resistance against “legitimate” regimes, be it in Russia or abroad. Although the grand duke was killed at the beginning of what Soviet historians used to call the “failed revolution” of 1905, in his speech Putin did not specifically mention any of the three revolutions that took place between 1905 and 1917.² Instead he spoke of “dramatic events,” “civil strife,” and a “genuine national catastrophe,” as if encouraging his listeners to regard the early twentieth century as a prolonged *smuta*, a period of “troubles” that had nearly destroyed the very idea of Russian statehood.

The grand duke’s violent death and its assumed consequences for the Russian Empire look even more dramatic if we consider that Putin refers to the grand duke’s killer as “a terrorist,” as if he were an anonymous agent, possibly a lone wolf. Yet Grand Duke Sergei’s killer did not operate on his own; the assassination was the result of well-coordinated teamwork and meticulous planning. Nor did the bomb thrower go down in Russian history as the nameless nonentity that features in Putin’s speech. On the contrary, Ivan Kaliaev (1877–1905) is doubtless one of the most famous Russian revolutionaries who inspired dozens of writers to produce a story, a play, or a few lines of poetry, quite often in support of the assassination. In Soviet times at least fifteen cities had one or more streets named after Kaliaev; even today, more than twenty-five years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, only a handful of them have been renamed.

How could a Russian terrorist become so famous and indeed so popular? A tentative answer to that question is the well-known

2. The “three revolutions” are the “failed” Revolution of 1905, the February Revolution of 1917, which led to the tsar’s abdication, and the October Revolution of 1917.

adage that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.”³ Kaliaev qualified as the latter in the eyes of many Russian contemporaries who abhorred the political oppression and police violence by which the autocracy tried to retain its power. Yet another decisive factor was Kaliaev’s good fortune of having an authoritative hagiographer. Without the writing of his friend and fellow terrorist Boris Savinkov, Kaliaev’s fame might have been considerably less secure. Savinkov’s *Memoirs of a Terrorist*, which has been translated into many languages, describes in great detail the assassination of several top officials, including the grand duke. As early as 1906, only a year after Kaliaev had been arrested and hanged, Savinkov published a very personal essay to honor the memory of his friend, emphasizing not only his dedication to the cause but also his meekness and spiritual contrition over the very act of killing.⁴ All of this helped establish Kaliaev’s reputation as a revolutionary martyr and a “noble” terrorist in the service of freedom and justice.⁵

Boris Savinkov’s novel *Pale Horse* (1909) is essentially another account of the assassination of the grand duke. The main characters can easily be traced to their real-life prototypes, including Kaliaev and Savinkov himself; discussions between the narrator and the party leadership echo genuine controversies that were splitting the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRP) in whose name the killings were carried out. And yet, when the novel appeared on the pages of the émigré journal *Russian Thought*, it caused outrage and shock.

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3. The origin of this saying is contentious. In quoting it I rely on Charles Townshend’s *Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.
 4. Boris Savinkov, “Iz vospominanii ob Ivane Kaliaeve,” in *To chego ne bylo: Roman, povesti, rasskazy, ocherki, stikhotvoreniia*, by Boris Savinkov (V. Ropshin) (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1992), 120–29.
 5. Viktor Chernov, the main theoretician of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, described Ivan Kaliaev as “ebullient and direct, a thoughtful enthusiast with a big heart and of uncommon depth. All his words and gestures bore the stamp of something otherworldly.” Chernov, *Pered burei. Vospominaniia* (New York: Izdatel’stvo imeni Chekhova, 1953), 188.

Rather than discussing the legitimacy of terrorism in terms of tactics and pragmatism, as had been customary before the bloody events of 1905, *Pale Horse* seemed to focus entirely on the moral complexities of the terrorist's craft.⁶ In so doing it not only raised the issue of political violence to a more philosophical, "Dostoevskian" level; for many observers on the left and the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) in particular, the novel diminished the lofty aura of the terrorists and damaged the revolutionary movement as a whole. Arguably more than any other fictional text published around this time, *Pale Horse* seriously undermined Russia's "mythology of the underground,"⁷ that overarching narrative of political resistance and heroic self-sacrifice through which the left-wing opposition preferred to imagine itself as a tight-knit community of selfless freedom fighters.

Reading *Pale Horse* exclusively in the context of the revolutionary movement and its post-1905 crisis would be insufficient to appreciate the Savinkov phenomenon, however. Apart from masterminding terrorist attacks and fighting the Bolsheviks after the Revolution, Savinkov entertained close contacts with some of the figureheads of Russian modernism, who exposed him to the neoromantic mythmaking with which Russia's fin-de-siècle culture has so often been associated. While providing an exhaustive account of Savinkov's checkered life and literary oeuvre is beyond the scope of this introduction, the discussion below will touch upon both in order to show how his life and work often merged and how the author became indistinguishable from the literary persona he created in *Pale Horse*. Presented as a terrorist's authentic "inside" story, the novel is therefore also an example of what is usually referred to as "life creation": the fashioning of one's life according to the principles of artistic creation, as well as the intentional blurring

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6. Daniel Beer, "The Morality of Terror: Contemporary Responses to Political Violence in Boris Savinkov's *The Pale Horse* (1909) and *What Never Happened* (1912)," *Slavonic and East European Review* 85, no. 1 (Jan. 2007): 25–27.
 7. M. Mogil'ner, *Mifologija podpol'nogo cheloveka* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1999), 41–66.

of the boundaries between art and life.⁸ A terrorist, a vice-minister of war in the provisional government under Alexander Kerensky, and a political émigré, Savinkov was simultaneously a writer, a poet, and, above all, the creator of his own eventful life.

Early Years

Boris Viktorovich Savinkov was born in Kharkiv in 1879 and brought up in Warsaw, where his father was appointed a district justice of the peace shortly after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II.⁹ His mother, Sof'ia Savinkova (née Iaroshenko), with whom he would remain close throughout his life, was an aspiring playwright who instilled in her children—three sons and three daughters—a love for the arts, in particular literature. Young Boris had a preference for the adventure novels of Sir Walter Scott and Mayne Reid,¹⁰ but as an adolescent he was also well read in the Russian classics. Dostoevsky and Lermontov counted among his favorite authors, a predilection that clearly shines through in *Pale Horse*.

At the first Warsaw Boys' Gimnazium, Savinkov enjoyed the reputation of an exemplary pupil, earning high grades and adhering strictly to the rigorous rules of comportment for which Russia's *gimnaziums* were well known and hated. The tightening of discipline and even firmer surveillance that became customary at institutions of secondary education during the reign of Alexander III did not prevent Savinkov from joining a socialist cell that was operating in his school. Here he befriended Kaliaev (a classmate of

8. On life creation see the excellent edited volume *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, ed. Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

9. For information on Savinkov's life I rely mainly on Richard B. Spence's biography *Boris Savinkov: Renegade on the Left* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1991).

10. Thomas Mayne Reid (1818–1883) was an Irish American writer of adventure novels.

his older brother Alexander), with whom he would carry out two of the SRs' most sensational assassinations.

After moving to Saint Petersburg to study law in 1897, Savinkov immediately became active in the radical student movement, boosting his revolutionary credentials further by marrying Vera Uspenskaya, daughter of the well-known populist author Gleb Uspensky. He was arrested twice and expelled from university, after which he spent a year abroad. Back in Russia, his freedom proved short-lived; the assassination of minister of education Nikolai Bogolepov—widely despised for having rebellious students conscripted into the army—led to a wave of arrests that finally caught up with Savinkov as well. He was incarcerated for several months in the notorious Peter and Paul Fortress in January 1902 and then sentenced to live under police surveillance in the provincial town of Vologda.

Although Savinkov managed to escape to Switzerland in less than a year, his forced stay in Vologda was to have a lasting impact on his political views and the role he envisioned for himself. Unsatisfied with the political agenda of Lenin's Social Democratic Party for "leaving the agrarian question unresolved,"¹¹ Savinkov decided to join the SRs, who bet on the Russian peasantry, not the urban proletariat as Marxism dictated. Whether this really was a crucial issue to Savinkov is open to debate. A romantic and a man of action, he seems to have lacked the appetite and the patience for political theory, while his familiarity with the peasantry must have been fairly limited. Above all, he was attracted by the prospect of following in the footsteps of The People's Will, the terrorist group that had killed Alexander II and for which Savinkov was said to harbor deep sympathy.¹² The ultimate trigger to choose the path of terror was the arrest of Grigory Gershuni, the founder of the Combat Organization of the SRs, who had devised the shooting of minister of interior Dmitry Sipiagin in April 1902.¹³ This was the

11. Boris Savinkov, "Vospominaniia terrorista," in *Izbrannoe* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura: 1990), 25.

12. Savinkov, "Vospominaniia terrorista," 25.

Combat Organization's first major success and it did much to establish the SRs as one of the regime's most formidable opponents.

Savinkov was eventually recruited by Yekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaya (1844–1934), the “Grandmother of the Revolution,” who visited Vologda twice during Savinkov's exile. A radical populist and a participant in the “going-to-the-people” campaign of the mid-1870s, Breshko-Breshkovskaya was eager to reboot the populist movement by helping to establish the SRs as a formal organization and recruiting new members. Apart from informing Savinkov about Kaliaev's decision to participate in the terror campaign (thereby encouraging him to follow suit), she actually helped him escape to Switzerland, where he was introduced to Evno Azef, the acting chief of the Combat Organization. It was from Azef, who would later be exposed as a double agent, that Savinkov received his first major assignment: coordinating the murder plot against minister of the interior Vyacheslav von Plehve. After months of stalking their intended victim and several abortive attempts, Savinkov and four other combatants (among whom was Kaliaev) finally succeeded in executing their plan. On July 15, 1904, Yegor Sazonov, dressed as a railway worker, hurled a bomb at von Plehve's carriage, killing both the minister and his coachman.

Three Martyrs and a Voyeur

Our twenty-first-century perception of terrorism is inevitably shaped by the events of 9/11, suicide bombings in the Middle East, and the more recent attacks in Europe by Islamic State, but, as Anthony Anemone has pointed out, in late imperial Russia “advocates of political violence construed legitimate targets quite nar-

13. Savinkov, “Vospominaniia terrorista,” 25.

14. Anthony Anemone, “Introduction,” in *Just Assassins: The Culture of Terrorism in Russia*, ed. Anthony Anemone (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 5.

rowly.”¹⁴ Potential victims were members of the imperial family and government officials, whose assassination would confuse the authorities, the SRs believed, and destabilize the entire regime.¹⁵ The modern practice of hitting “soft targets” among the civilian population was alien to the SRP, even if certain factions eventually resorted to more indiscriminate forms of violence using increasingly heavier explosives. As a shocking example of some terrorists’ lack of concern for human life, Anna Geifman adduces the attempted assassination of prime minister Piotr Stolypin in his villa on Aptekarsky Island by three socialist revolutionary “maximalists” in August 1906 that left twenty-seven people killed and over sixty injured.¹⁶

In 1903, when Savinkov and Kaliaev had just joined the Combat Organization, terrorists were still widely perceived as martyrs, exceptional men and women prepared to sacrifice their young lives in exchange for that of a considerably older governor or minister. By getting killed in the attack or receiving the death penalty the assassin was believed to atone for the bloodshed he or she had caused. This romanticized view conveniently ignored the issue of collateral casualties, as well as the fact that some terrorists survived and escaped,¹⁷ but it does illustrate the apparent allure of political violence that many terrorists must have experienced knowing that

15. On the purpose of terror see Beer, “Morality of Terror,” 32–33; see also Daniel Brower’s essay “Nihilists and Terrorists,” in *Times of Trouble: Violence in Russian Literature and Culture*, ed. Marcus C. Levitt and Tatyana Novikov (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 91–102.

16. Anna Geifman, *Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894–1917* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 74.

17. In 1878 Sergei Kravchinsky killed Nikolai Mezentsov, head of Russia’s secret police, with a dagger, but managed to escape to England where he became a celebrity, especially after the publication of his *Underground Russia* (1883), in which he offered to the Western reader a “who’s who” of Russian terrorists. Egor Sazonov, who threw the fatal bomb that killed von Plehve, was severely wounded, but survived. After his recovery, he was sent to Siberia, where he committed suicide in 1910. On Kravchinsky see Peter Scotto, “The Terrorist as Novelist: Sergei Stepiak,” in Anemone, *Just Assassins*, 97–126.

it was exclusively directed at carefully selected representatives of an oppressive regime. Kaliaev's now legendary split-second decision to abort the first attempt on the grand duke's life after noticing that his wife and children were in the carriage with him stemmed, in Kaliaev's own analysis, from the party line as much as from his own moral constraints.¹⁸

A key element in the mythology of the revolutionary movement, the idea of heroic self-sacrifice was an obsession for some of Savinkov's accomplices, who often insisted on being allowed to throw the first bomb instead of acting as mere backup. This is faithfully depicted in *Pale Horse* when Vanya and Heinrich (in whom one recognizes Kaliaev and Sazonov) dispute each other's right to make the first attempt. The only woman on Savinkov's team, Dora Brilliant, who prepared the bombs for the attacks on von Plehve and the grand duke, was devastated by the impossibility of paying for the assassinations with her own blood. Time and again she asked Savinkov permission to take part in the actual killing, but he never conceded.¹⁹ Smitten by her conscience, she was arrested in 1907 and imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress, where she died two years later.

In his memoirs Savinkov writes warmly about his partners in crime, who, for all their characterological differences, had two things in common: their almost religious faith in the revolution and their fanatical commitment to the terror. The portraits of Brilliant and Sazonov in *Memoirs of a Terrorist* may be somewhat exaggerated, as they appear to be informed by earlier depictions of "unwavering" revolutionaries, but it is certain that they were almost pathologically preoccupied with the terror. In this respect they form a striking contrast with Savinkov, who, most observers agreed, was of

18. Kaliaev as quoted by Savinkov, "Vospominaniia terrorista," 99. Kaliaev's restraint inspired existentialist Albert Camus to write his famous play *The Just Ones* (*Les justes*, 1949).

19. Savinkov, "Vospominaniia terrorista," 48–49.

an entirely different bent.²⁰ His never-waning egocentrism, as well as the ease with which he would later adopt a more nationalistic rather than a revolutionary agenda, set him apart from the other combatants, some of whom were pious Christians. Although *Pale Horse* is permeated with Christian symbolism, the example of Jesus Christ never seems to have appealed to Savinkov. In the words of Richard Spence: “Like his comrades Sazonov, Brilliant and Kaliaev, Savinkov was willing to kill for the cause, but unlike them he was not particularly interested in dying for it.”²¹

Whether Savinkov actually killed is questionable too, as he had a different role than the rank-and-file members of the Combat Organization. Being in charge of the operations, but not an assigned killer, he may have never spilled any blood himself, not even during the revolution or the civil war. Although no one ever felt inclined to question his courage or his willingness to use any of the weapons he was always carrying with him, with regard to death and violence, Savinkov was, as Spence puts it, “basically a voyeur.”²² With its connotations of sexual gratification, the term “voyeur” may seem out of place in this context, and yet it is quite appropriate considering Savinkov’s proclivity for the theatrical (of which more below) and his ability to perceive a murder plot “aesthetically”; that is, as something creative that requires planning, deceit, and role play. In this respect, too, he was quite different from his comrades for whom terrorism was an entirely moral dilemma. With a bit of a stretch one could argue that the dividing line between the “martyrs” and the “voyeur” Savinkov replicated the “either/or” oppo-

20. Anatolii Lunacharsky, who headed the People’s Commissariat for Education in the late 1910s and 1920s, knew Savinkov well from when they were both serving time in Vologda. In an article published in *Pravda* in September 1924 he acknowledged Savinkov’s literary talent, but also emphasized his “petty-bourgeois romanticism.” See Anatolii Lunacharskii, “Artist i avantiury,” *Pravda*, September 5, 1924.

21. Spence, *Boris Savinkov*, 37.

22. Spence, *Boris Savinkov*, 37.

sition that Søren Kierkegaard described juxtaposing the aesthetic view of life to the ethical one.

After 1905

The assassination of the grand duke in 1905 was the zenith of the Combat Organization's existence and of Savinkov's personal career as a terrorist. Only weeks later the organization was severely weakened by a wave of arrests (mostly Azef's doing); toward the end of the year the Central Committee decided to disband it, despite Savinkov's vehement protests. Although the terror would eventually be resumed and the Combat Organization reinstated, in subsequent years none of the attacks would have the resonance created by the earlier killings. The old method of stalking and covert observation seemed superseded, especially for high-profile targets who were increasingly better protected. Attempts on lower officials were more successful, but these were typically carried out in the provinces by smaller terrorist units or even individuals operating on their own initiative. In addition to an avalanche of "revolutionary expropriations," these uncoordinated attacks on almost anyone remotely associated with the regime did much to discredit the SRs and the revolutionary movement as a whole.

From 1907 until the fall of the monarchy in February 1917 Savinkov spent most of his time in France. In May 1906 he had been arrested in Sevastopol for his supposed involvement in a murder plot against General Nepliev (which is ironic, as he *was* preparing an attack on Admiral Chukhnin), but he had managed to escape from prison disguised as a soldier and make his way in a small boat across the Black Sea to Romania. Having settled in Paris, Savinkov made many new acquaintances both in political and cultural circles. He was particularly close to the symbolist poet Zinaida Gippius and her husband, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, whom he had met while still in Russia. Under Gippius's mentorship, but with significant input from Merezhkovsky as well, Savinkov started working on *Pale*

Horse. The novel was written simultaneously with the more factual accounts of the assassinations of von Plehve and Grand Duke Sergei that would eventually morph into Savinkov's *Memoirs of a Terrorist*.

That a revolutionary decided to try his hand at a novel is anything but surprising given the crucial role fictional literature played in prerevolutionary Russia. In the absence of a free press, the novel was the vehicle par excellence to convey a subversive message, present inspiring portraits of revolutionary trailblazers, or simply dissect and diagnose Russian society. Having access to *Revolutionary Russia* and other periodicals published abroad, Savinkov did not have to resort to fiction, of course, but literature did offer the prospect of reaching a larger audience and, more importantly, turning his individual experience into something broader. In a way, it was the natural thing to do; some twenty years earlier Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinsky had been quite successful with his novel *The Career of a Nihilist* (also known under the title *Andrei Kozhukhov*), in which the author drew heavily on his own experience as a terrorist and assassin.

Of course, Savinkov's interest in literature was deeper than the mere publication of *Pale Horse* suggests. He was well read in Russian poetry and liked to recite Lermontov and Semion Nadson.²³ Just like Kaliaev, who was nicknamed "the poet," he wrote some quasi-symbolist poetry himself (posthumously published in Paris). As early as in 1903 he had published a story under the pseudonym V. Kanin for which he had received assistance from one no less than Leonid Andreev, then one of Russia's most popular authors.²⁴ Now, in the relative safety of his Paris apartment, he finally had the chance to take his literary ambitions more seriously and embark on a novel.

23. Semion Nadson (1862–1887), a poet heavily influenced by Lermontov, continued Russian poetry's "civic" tradition in the 1880s. Among the radical left he was one of Russia's most popular poets.

24. Spence, *Boris Savinkov*, 92.

Pale Horse

Written in the form of a diary, *Pale Horse* tells the story of a terrorist leader who arrives in Moscow to coordinate a murder plot against the local governor. Having assumed the identity of a British tourist by the name of George O'Brien, the hero meets with his accomplices and discusses the details of the assassination with a mixture of cynicism and boredom. Unlike his four comrades who seem to believe in the ideals of the revolution and are prepared to die for it, George feels nothing but indifference and a vague but growing determination to kill his designated target.

"It's always possible to kill," he replies laconically when his deeply religious friend Vanya posits that murder is only permissible if it's committed out of "genuine love." If it doesn't serve a higher purpose and the murderer isn't tormented by deep remorse, "then it's Smerdyakov" and "everything is allowed." Vanya's reference to the killer in Dostoevsky's last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, is most revealing with regard to George, who recognizes no moral laws and finally commits a murder in an entirely personal affair. By shooting the husband of his mistress he turns Vanya's words about "killing out of genuine love" into a travesty that leaves him to ponder the deeper significance of his deeds. "Why did I kill? What did I accomplish by death? Yes, I believed that one could kill. But now I feel sad: I killed not only him [the husband of his mistress]; I also killed love." Agonized by an inner void that he can no longer ignore, George sees no other solution but suicide.

Russian literature wasn't short of one-dimensional revolutionaries and even terrorists fighting autocracy or otherwise busy creating a better, more just society. Bazarov, Rakhmetov, and Kozhukhov, to name only a few,²⁵ were designed—or so construed

25. Bazarov is the main character in Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Children* (1861); Rakhmetov is a revolutionary superman in Chernyshevsky's *roman à thèse*, *What Is to Be Done?* (1863). Finally, Kozhukhov is the hero in Stepniak-Kravchinsky's novel *Career of a Nihilist*.

by radical critics—as adumbrating a new era, the era of “New People,” in which social justice and prosperity for all would prevail. Together with a few other novels, *Pale Horse* broke with this tradition.²⁶ It was, in Aileen Kelly’s words, a “savage demystification of the monolithic hero,”²⁷ an onslaught on a behavioral ideal that leftist literature had been promoting for years. George not only kills in his own interest; he also expresses sincere doubts about the ends that usually justify the means: “I don’t believe in paradise on earth; I don’t believe in paradise in heaven.” He is even more direct in his last conversation with Andrei Petrovich, a member of the Central Committee, when he declines a new assignment with the words: “Why kill?” Andrei Petrovich’s amazed reaction (“What do you mean?”) serves to illustrate George’s estrangement from the party, but ultimately invites us to question the rationale behind the terror itself: why kill indeed?

If this is really the novel’s intended message, are we dealing with the confession of a repenting terrorist? This is how many critics preferred to interpret *Pale Horse*, especially when it came to light that it was Savinkov who was hiding behind the pseudonym of V. Ropshin. In the view of conservative and liberal opinion makers the novel signaled the radical intelligentsia’s “moral bankruptcy,” which had revealed itself after the failure of 1905. Starting with Turgenev’s

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26. The most important candidate in this respect is Mikhail Artsybashev’s “pornographic” novel *Sanin* (1907), whose eponymous hero was also construed as an ex-revolutionary “betraying” the revered traditions of the Russian intelligentsia. In a combined review of *Sanin* and *Pale Horse*, socialist critic Vladimir Kranikhfel’d even used the name Sanin-George to emphasize that both characters embodied the same “I-want-and-therefore-have-the-right-to” mentality of Russia’s budding capitalism under Prime Minister Stolypin. Kranikhfel’d, “Literaturnye otkliki. Stavka na sil’nykh,” *Sovremennyi mir*, 1909, 5, 78. For a more extensive discussion of the strong-willed hero in turn-of-the-century literature see Otto Boele, *Erotic Nihilism in Late Imperial Russia: The Case of Mikhail Artsybashev’s Sanin* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2009).
27. Aileen Kelly, “Self-Censorship and the Russian Intelligentsia, 1905–1914,” *Slavic Review* 46, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 201.

epoch-making nihilist Bazarov, radicals had developed a worldview in which the elementary notion of “truth” was always subordinated to a narrowly defined political agenda.²⁸ To some, Savinkov’s novel was therefore a hopeful indication that the radical left was sobering up from its delusions and becoming more susceptible to ideas from outside its own environment. The promise of the hero’s suicide at the end of his diary seemed to provide the necessary poetic justice.

The idea that *Pale Horse* could and, perhaps, should be read as an authentic confession was most emphatically promulgated by Merezhkovsky, who had closely monitored the writing of *Pale Horse* and, of course, knew that Savinkov was the real author. In a long-winded review he hailed the novel as the “most Russian book” to have been written after the immortal works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, not “so much because of the book itself, but because of what is behind it.”²⁹ Here Merezhkovsky in all probability had in mind not only Savinkov’s very real experience with terrorism but also the lengthy discussions that he and Gippius had had with Savinkov on the moral justification of violence. According to Gippius, Savinkov was tormented by the blood he had spilled. He even confessed that each time he killed, it felt as if he were getting killed himself.³⁰

While it is impossible to establish how sincere Savinkov was in these discussions, one should not conclude too easily that it was genuine compunction—or compunction alone—that inspired him to write *Pale Horse*. Not only did he never abandon the idea of waging terror against his opponents, be they tsarist officials or Bol-

28. See in particular the essay “Filosofskaia istina i intelligentskaia pravda,” Nikolai Berdiaev’s contribution to the infamous collection of essays *Vekbi* (Signposts), which was published in 1909. *Vekbi. Intelligentsiia v Rossii* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1991), 30.

29. D. S. Merezhkovsky, “Kon’ blednyi,” in *Ne mir, no mecb* (Moscow: AST, 2000), 495.

30. Zinaida Gippius, “Dmitrii Merezhkovii,” in *Sobranie sochinenii*, T. 6 (Zhivye litsa. Vospominaniia. Stikhotvoreniia), (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 2002), 320.

sheviks; in the same year that his novel was published, he became the head of the Combat Organization, which he would run for over two years. This paradox leads Lynn Ellen Patyk to doubt whether the novel can possibly be read as a moral critique of terrorism or, even more generally, as a polemical statement.³¹ Pointing out that Savinkov started his literary and revolutionary careers virtually in tandem, she argues that *Pale Horse* is best viewed as “the first literary installment of Ropshin-Savinkov’s self-mythologization.”³² Profoundly influenced by romantic poets such as Byron and Ler montov, Savinkov embraced a model of self-authorship that enabled him to transform his life into a work of art playing out his “tormented consciousness” in literary salons and investing his fictional hero with autobiographical elements.

For Gippius and Merezhkovsky Savinkov appeared to be a guilt-ridden, highly intriguing individual possessed by a “fatal mystery” that they interpreted not in a Byronic but a Christian key. In their perception Savinkov resembled Dostoevsky’s antiheroes Raskolnikov and Stavrogin, who subconsciously seek salvation but cannot give up their romantic individualism. Gippius herself provided a positive counterimage to the “revolutionary aesthete”: the ideal terrorist who, while committing a terrible sin, acts out of love and sacrifices himself, thereby performing a “Christian deed of heroic martyrdom.” It is this image of the ideal terrorist that made it to Savinkov’s novel in the character of Vanya, the pious, conscience-stricken terrorist. Patyk urges us to acknowledge the literary origins of the character and not to assume a one-to-one correspondence between Vanya and his alleged prototype, Ivan Kaliaev. As Patyk puts it: “Savinkov and his fictions were in fact saturated with literariness.” Rather than articulating genuine repentance, *Pale Horse* is a testimony to Savinkov’s obsession with the

31. Lynn Ellen Patyk, “The Byronic Terrorist: Boris Savinkov’s Literary Self-Mythologization,” in Anemone, *Just Assassins*, 165.

32. Patyk, “Byronic Terrorist,” 165.

models of literary romanticism and his sensitivity to his symbolist friends' life-creating pursuits.

The *Baba* and the Terrorist

Although the author behind the pseudonym V. Ropshin was not Gippius herself, as some critics had conjectured, her role in the genesis of *Pale Horse* and its publication was indeed of key importance. In the same year that the novel was published in the January issue of the émigré periodical *Russian Thought*, it came out as a separate edition in Russia, albeit with significant cuts made by the self-censoring editors of publisher *Shipovnik*.³³ Gippius, who had plugged the novel and negotiated the adjustments more or less on her own, tried to soothe Savinkov by pointing out that the removal of certain historical details, to which the author had attached great significance, did not diminish the novel's veracity. What mattered was not "how it has really been," but "how it *could* have been. This is where art emerges," she wrote to him.³⁴

Earlier Gippius had also tried to have a say in what is seemingly the plot's most puzzling aspect: George's somewhat unlikely romance with Elena, a sensual woman from well-to-do circles who enjoys having an affair with a dangerous terrorist but refuses to leave the military officer to whom she is married. For Savinkov, who was married twice, had three legal children, and enjoyed the reputation of a womanizer, carnal desire and promiscuity did not necessarily discredit his hero—quite the contrary, if we consider his Byronic-Lermontovian lineage. Gippius, however, in true symbolist fashion, conceived of erotic love as something destructive, even diabolic if it didn't bring closer the ideal of androgyny and only served the

33. Of this self-censored edition a mere 3,200 copies were printed. See E. I. Goncharova's comments in *Pis'ma Merezbkovskikh k Borisu Savinkovu*, ed. E. I. Goncharova (Saint Petersburg: Pushkinskii dom, 2009), 154.

34. Gippius to Savinkov, February 6, 1909, in Goncharova, *Pis'ma*, 157.

continuation of the human species. Hence her conclusion that the novel became somehow “distorted” the moment Savinkov “injected a positive element into the question of sexual love.” Merezhkovsky chimed in, pointing out that the Elena aspect was the weakest part of the novel: “You suffer from a naïve sort of romanticism with regard to Elena. It’s as if not only the hero, but you too are in love with her.”³⁵ In the end, Gippius reconciled herself with Elena’s place in the novel, not because the character had been substantially altered (she remained a *baba* and a “chicken”³⁶) but because, in Gippius’s analysis, the hero ultimately understands that she is not right for him (*ne to*). When George shoots her husband, he quickly loses interest in her and the relationship is over: “I have no bitterness for Elena. It’s as if my fatal shot burned up my love.”

If for Gippius and Merezhkovsky the character of the highly feminine Elena was problematic, from a literary-historical perspective her presence in *Pale Horse* is anything but surprising. Quite a few nineteenth-century Russian novels feature a Westernized hero who seeks the love of a distinctly Russian woman but is frustrated by a third character representing the state. Based on the rivalry of two masculine adversaries (the *intelligent* versus the authorities), this recurring plot reflects the problematic status of the alienated intelligentsia who “courts” Russia by studying and enlightening its people, but never succeeds in winning her love. While in the work of Alexander Blok and Andrei Bely the metaphor becomes more explicit and the fictitious female character is replaced by the image of Russia as unattainable bride,³⁷ *Pale Horse*

35. Merezhkovsky to Savinkov, May 1908, in Goncharova, *Pis'ma*, 112.

36. Gippius uses the words “baba” (uncultured woman from the lower strata of society) and “kuritsa” (chicken) to express her dismay with the “overly” feminine character of Elena.

37. Yurii Lotman was the first to observe this pattern in nineteenth-century Russian prose. See his “Suzhetnoe prostranstvo v russkom romane XIX stoletiiia,” in *Izbrannnye stat'i v trekh tomakh* (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 1993), T. III, 98. A far more developed discussion can be found in Ellen Rutten’s *Unattainable Bride Russia: Gendering Nation, State, and Intelligentsia in Russian Intellectual Culture* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 39–40.

shows a similarly gendered constellation of characters and conflicts with George's political struggle against the existing order having a parallel in his duel with Elena's husband. Although George is, technically speaking, successful in both confrontations (the governor and his amorous opponent are killed), the ultimate goal remains unattainable. Consequently, rather than "distorting" the novel, as Gippius claimed, the inclusion of Elena shows how much *Pale Horse* continues the nineteenth-century tradition of presenting an amorous intrigue between a male *intelligent* and a Russian woman as a metaphor for the social divide between the intelligentsia and the "masses."

Revolution, Civil War, and Death

Savinkov's second novel, *What Never Happened* (*To chego ne bylo*, 1912), is a longer and more ambitious work with an omniscient narrator telling the story of three brothers who all die in the name of the revolution. Describing, among other things, the Battle of Tsushima, the bloody exploits of a "flying squad" of terrorists, and the betrayal and exposure of a double-dealing agent, the novel contains far more violence than *Pale Horse*, thus conjuring up a captivating image of the anarchy and chaos during roughly the years 1904–1908. In addition to presenting the revolutionary movement as lying in shambles, the novel offers highly unflattering portraits of "phrasemongering" party leaders no longer in touch with reality. One of the few exceptions is Andrei Bolotov, the second of the three brothers (like Savinkov himself), who comes to the conviction that "only he has the right to talk about murder who commits murder himself and about death who himself is prepared to die."³⁸ On these grounds he ignores the Central Committee's orders not to engage in combat himself and decides to support a spontaneous revolt of Moscow workers. Even if Andrei Bolotov's

38. "To chego ne bylo," in Savinkov, *To chego ne bylo*, 258.

determination to join the action could be interpreted as a desperate attempt to restore the monolithic hero to his former glory, his embitterment and estrangement from the party indicate otherwise.

Predictably, among the radical left, particularly in the ranks of the SRs, *What Never Happened* created a scandal that made the fuss over Savinkov's debut novel pale. But apart from blackening Savinkov's former comrades and discrediting the revolutionary movement as a whole, the novel also seemed to articulate a militant kind of chauvinism that placed its author on the right of the political spectrum. The deepest emotion inciting the oldest of the three fictional brothers to support the revolution is indignation over Russia's humiliating defeat against Japan. Alexander Bolotov comes to the conclusion that it would only be fitting if he, an officer of the Russian navy and a former POW, sacrificed himself for the revolution, thus "taking revenge for Port Arthur and Tsushima."³⁹ Wandering through the Kremlin, he experiences an epiphany of "Russianness": "Only here, in peasant Moscow, in the city of tar, oilcloth, miracle-working icons, and crushed barricades, did he feel with all this heart that he was Russian, that he was connected to Russia by blood."⁴⁰

While these are only the words of a fictional character, it is true that at the eve of the First World War Savinkov seemed to care less about the revolution than about Russia as a nation. He welcomed the outbreak of the war and even called for the suspension of all revolutionary activities with a view to Russia's military needs. Working as a freelance war correspondent in France and Belgium, Savinkov proved himself an unabashed patriot and a supporter of the Allied cause. After his return to Russia in April 1917 he continued in a similar vein as a military commissar on the Galician front boosting men's morale and urging them not to give in to the anti-

39. "To chego ne bylo," 470.

40. "To chego ne bylo," 470.

war propaganda of the Bolsheviks. For two months he was acting minister of war in Kerensky's provisional government.

During the last years of his life Savinkov was obsessed with one thing: to oust the Bolsheviks and seize power himself. None of the many political alliances he forged in war-torn Russia or abroad were successful, however, and the fact that he supported and openly admired Alexander Kolchak (chief commander of the White Army) or even tried to win Benito Mussolini over to his cause, testifies to the desperation he must have felt, as well as to his fascination with "strong" leaders. According to Spence, Savinkov was more of a "power-seeker than a true revolutionary and more an authoritarian than a democrat."⁴¹

Eventually, Savinkov decided to return to Soviet Russia knowing that he would be immediately arrested and convicted for his contrarevolutionary activities. Like other emigrants he may have hoped to join the Bolsheviks once their defeat proved impossible and that he could be of use to them as a one-time but now "remorseful" opponent with an expertise in conspiracy and covert warfare. It is indeed remarkable, and probably telling, that while being imprisoned and interrogated by Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the Cheka,⁴² Savinkov was allowed to continue writing and that his stories were published. One of them, "Imprisoned," is about a contrarevolutionary whose self-aggrandizement and cowardice are negatively contrasted with the correctness and honesty of the Cheka officers interrogating him.

Savinkov died a prisoner on May 7, 1925. While being escorted to his cell after a stroll, he seized the opportunity to throw himself out of a window on the fifth floor of the Liubianka prison. This, at least, is the official version, but rumors about Savinkov being pushed spread almost immediately after his death was announced. The third and most unlikely version holds that the suicide attempt

41. Spence, *Boris Savinkov*, 374.

42. The Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counterrevolution and Sabotage.

was a fake, designed by the Cheka or Savinkov himself, and that he lived well beyond 1925. In Russia, with its rich tradition of pretenders and conspiracy theories, such speculation is usually restricted to the imperial family, but the dissemination of such rumors about Boris Savinkov stands as a monument to his reputation for disguise and deceit.