



Natalia Klimova was a member of a terrorist group that took part in preparations for the famous explosion in the dacha of Prime Minister Petr Stolypin in August 1906. She was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1908. She later escaped prison and fled the country.

Female terrorists: political or just mad?

Conservative narratives in the historiography
of early 20th century female terrorism in Russia

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abstract

Most historians writing about revolutionary terrorism in Russia in the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century have long treated it as the history of a righteous fight against the autocratic regime, which is the way the terrorists themselves represented their activities. However, conservative contemporaries of the terrorists, with a progovernmental perspective on revolutionary terrorism have until recently not been taken into account. This article discusses the main narratives employed by conservatives at the beginning of the 20th century to explain the political violence committed by women, and it shows how these narratives have been employed in the scholarly analysis of the topic. The article provides an answer to the question why progovernmental conservative views on the female terrorists and terrorism in prerevolutionary Russia have never been influential in the historiography.

KEYWORDS: terrorism, Russia, women, conservative narratives, historiography, conservative turn.

The revival of conservatism in the political life of contemporary Russia has influenced the work of Russian historians in many ways. Diverse aspects of the conservative past of the country have become popular research topics, and progovernmental conservative interpretations have been applied to different historical issues by researchers inspired by the state ideology.¹ Although political terrorism is one of the most important problems faced by Russia and the whole world nowadays, research on the history of Russian terrorism, and particularly on female participation in such activities, is present only marginally in the conservative turn in historiography. Such a lack of interest in women can be explained by interpretations of the feminine as being second-rate in the context of the current conservative “remasculinization of Russia”.² In addition, in the patriarchal culture that promotes traditional forms of femininity for women,³ women who participate in political violence are not seen as an interesting research subject. The

lack of interest in female terrorism in Russia in contemporary conservative historiography, however, cannot be explained by the absence of conservative views on the issue. Before 1917 and even after that conservative contemporaries of terrorist women wrote at length about female participation in political violence.

The purpose of this article is, therefore, to show why the conservative narratives have never become influential in the historiography of female participation in political terrorism. It will focus particularly on the conservative narratives and historiography of female terrorists from the beginning of the 20th century, who were the second generation of Russian terrorists and who received much attention from both scholars and laymen. In order to answer the central question of the article, I will first introduce conservative views on women in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. Second, I will identify the typical narratives that appeared in prerevolutionary accounts of female terrorists written by conservative authors. Third, I will show what role these narratives have played in the professional historiography of female participation in political terrorism in Russia. In the final section, I will present the way contemporary conservative historians and laymen have approached this question.

Conservative perspective on women

During the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian authorities were seriously challenged by systematic political terrorism, which was used as a means of political struggle by many left-wing political groups. Members of these groups saw the tsarist regime as autocratic, and having no legal way to change the situation in the country they considered political terrorism as the only powerful means to resist tyranny.⁴ Women had even fewer legal rights than men in Russia at that time, and many of them joined terrorist units where they could enjoy the freedom and equality with men that were otherwise denied to them.

According to their conservative contemporaries with progovernmental views, however, women were not expected to take part in political activism of any kind. The female ideal of that time that was promoted by both the tsarist regime and conservatives was for a woman to be a good wife to her husband and a good mother to her children and to dedicate her life to her family.⁵ Female terrorists, the majority of whom chose not to start families in order to be politically active, were in the eyes of their conservative contemporaries individuals who deviated from that female ideal. Their wish to be present in the political arena that was considered to be an exclusively male domain⁶ was interpreted as an abnormality by the conservatives, who tried to find explanations for the women's behavior using various narratives.

Conservative narratives of female political violence

The tsarist regime, whose most hated representatives were the targets of political terrorism, and the conservatives, who supported that regime, saw women who participated in political terrorism first of all as law breakers. As a result, the attitude towards them was more or less similar to the attitude towards criminal women in prerevolutionary Russia. That attitude was based on Cesare Lombroso's criminal anthropology, according to which criminal women were seen as unnatural and unsexed.⁷ Women who committed violent crimes were seen as the worst kind of criminals because they contradicted the existing gender expectations about women as "naturally" peaceful. Their participation in violence was often attributed to extreme emotionality, which was considered to be a "typical" feminine feature at that time. As a result, female violence was attributed to emotional motivations like love, jealousy, or revenge.

However, political violence perpetrated by women could not be easily portrayed as stemming from such emotions.⁸ As a result, in order to explain female participation in political terrorism, the conservatives suggested particular narratives. In the following paragraphs, I will introduce the conservative narratives that would have particular importance for future historical works, and I will illustrate them with examples of conservative writing on some of the female terrorists in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century.

First of all, female terrorists were seen by conservatives as unnatural women, which was very much in line with the existing criminological perspective.⁹ Their participation in political terrorism was, therefore, often attributed to their failure to be "natural" women. Such a narrative was used, for example, by the philosopher Vasily Rozanov, an ardent advocate of patriarchal domesticity,¹⁰ in his article on Fruma Frumkina in *Novoe*

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vremya [New time], an influential conservative newspaper. Fruma Mordukhovna Frumkina (1873–1907) was a midwife born into a better-off Jewish family and was a member of the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (PSR), the biggest socialist party in Russia at that time. On May 27, 1903, while in custody, she tried to cut the throat of the head of the Kiev gendarmerie General V.D. Novitsky, who was particularly notorious for his repressions of revolutionaries. On April 30, 1907, while in Moscow's Butyrki prison, Frumkina made an unsuccessful attempt to kill the prison

warden Bagretsov. She justified that attempt by Bagretsov's cruel treatment of political prisoners.¹¹ In his article on Frumkina, Rozanov contrasts her profession of midwife to her participation in political terrorism. He writes that giving life and easing suffering, the "typical" duties of a "natural" woman and the basics of the midwife's profession, were rejected by Frumkina in favor of tak-



Maria Spiridonova was sentenced to hard labor for the assassination of provincial government councillor G.N. Luzhenovsky. In the right photo she is seen in centre of the top row.

ing lives and creating suffering.¹² In this way, Rozanov represents Frumkina as a deviant woman who consciously rejected her “natural” female duties in favor of activities considered as “unnatural” for a “good” woman.

Another way of approaching female violence for the conservatives was to see the perpetrator as insane.¹³ The narrative of madness was one of the first reactions to the political assassination committed by Maria Spiridonova. On January 16, 1906, Maria Alexandrovna Spiridonova (1884–1941), a member of the PSR, born into the family of a nonhereditary Tambov noble, fatally wounded the provincial government councillor G.N. Luzhenovsky who had ordered the brutal police suppression of a peasant uprising.¹⁴ Two days after the assassination of Luzhenovsky, *Tambovskie gubernskie vedomosti* [Tambov provincial gazette], a local conservative newspaper published in Spiridonova’s hometown, contained an editorial in which she was described as “some kind of insane, unscrupulous female revolutionary”.¹⁵ The assassination of Luzhenovsky was thus represented by the conservative author not as a political action, but as the result of Spiridonova’s madness.

In a different manner, the narrative of madness was used in the case of Natalia Klimova. Natalia Sergeevna Klimova (1885–1918) was born into a noble family in Ryazan and was a member of the Union of Socialists-Revolutionaries Maximalists, a terrorist group that took part in preparations for the famous explosion in the *dacha* of Prime Minister Petr Stolypin in August 1906.¹⁶ Aleksandr Ellis, the commandant of the Trubetskoï bastion, where Klimova was incarcerated after her arrest, wrote in his message to Maximilian Trusevich, the head of the police department “The prisoner Klimova doesn’t value her life, and in view of her extremely indomitable temper I request orders from Your Excellency about her temporary transfer to some hospital to prevent harmful consequences of the hunger strike.”¹⁷ A hunger strike was considered to be a popular and effective method by Russian revolutionaries to sustain the political fight against the regime even while in prison.¹⁸ However, the prison authorities chose to define Klimova in this case not as a political activist, struggling for her rights in prison, but as

a suicidal, unruly, and mentally unstable individual in need of hospitalization.

In addition, the attitude of conservatives towards both revolutionary women in Russia, who openly broke with the gender conventions, and women who committed violent crimes was based on assumptions about their sexual promiscuity.¹⁹ On February 19, 1906, *Tambovskie gubernskie vedomosti* characterized Spiridonova’s letter from Tambov prison, where she wrote among other topics about the sexual abuse that she had been subjected to after her arrest,²⁰ as “a work of pornography”. The author of the article wondered how Spiridonova’s womanly morals could have sunk so low as to allow her to write a letter of that kind.²¹ Spiridonova was constructed in this case as a promiscuous woman solely because she mentioned in her letter the sexual advances of the government agents who interrogated her. Her political engagement was not mentioned.

Conservative narratives in historical works on terrorism in Russia

The conservative narratives discussed in the previous section did find their way into works on political terrorism in Russia written by professional historians, but they have never been dominant there. In this section, I will explain what place these narratives have had in historical works on the topic.

The first research work on political terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century was written by a conservative progovernmental author. It was Aleksandr Spiridovich, a major general of the Russian gendarmes, who in 1916 wrote a book on the history of the revolutionary movement in Russia, which was meant to be a textbook for the Secret Police. The book is written from the criminological perspective of that time as discussed above, and the revolutionary terrorists are represented there not as political activists, but first of all as people who broke the law. Female terrorists are mentioned in the book sporadically; Spiridovich does not take up the problem of women’s participation in political terrorism, and he represents terrorist women similarly to terrorist men. Some of individual terrorist women, including Natalia Klimova and Fruma Frumkina, are mentioned in the book in connection with their participation in political violence, but the author tries to maintain an objective tone in his book by avoiding any judgmental representations.²² Spiridovich writes about crimes committed by these women without discussing the reasons for their participation in political terrorism. As a result, the conservative narratives of female participation in political terrorism were not employed in the only research work on political terrorism in Russia written by a conservative from the beginning of the 20th century.

When it comes to professional historiography, the perspective that has dominated it from the beginning is not the conservative one. Oliver H. Radkey, the author of the first comprehensive scholarly work about the PSR,²³ used as his main sources interviews with émigré leaders of the party whom he met in the 1930s.²⁴ Radkey was also influenced by numerous works of Russian radicals who lived abroad and glorified the terrorists. As a result, the perspective of the conservatives is not at all present



Actress Alla Demidova as terrorist Maria Spiridonova in the film version of Mikhail Shatrov's play *The Sixth of July* (*Shestoe iulya*).

in his book. Besides that, under the influence of his mainly male informants, Radkey does not pay attention to the problem of female participation in political terrorism.

Radkey's work has become the starting point of almost all Western historiography on terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, where the terrorists, including the women, were represented with sympathy as fighters against the autocratic regime.²⁵ Russian historians who started writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s about female terrorists in prerevolutionary Russia followed the majority of their Western colleagues in representing revolutionary terrorists as fighters against the autocracy. The reason for this was partly the influence of the Western historiography that emerged much earlier, and partly Russian scholars' focus on the sources created by the terrorists themselves. Thus, the mainstream historiography of female participation in political terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century has been dominated both in Russia and in the West by the narratives created by the terrorists and their sympathizers.

The narratives of female participation in political terrorism created by the conservatives before the revolution, however, re-emerged first in the Soviet Union. Soviet historians did not consider the political terrorism of the political parties that operated alongside the Bolsheviks in Russia prior to the revolution as an important research area. As a result, nothing was written about the female terrorists by professional historians. The conservative narratives of female participation in political violence, however, can be found in some works of fiction published in the 1960s, where female terrorists from the beginning of the 20th century were introduced as characters. As it will be shown later, the conservative narratives employed in these works influenced some later works on the topic. Particularly interesting for this article are Nikolay Virta's novel *Evening Bells* (*Vecherny zvon*) and Mikhail Shatrov's play *The Sixth of July* (*Shestoe iulya*).

“THE NARRATIVE OF SPIRIDONOVA AS MAD WAS ESTABLISHED IN THE CONSERVATIVE NEWSPAPERS IN THE COURSE OF REPORTING ON HER CASE.”

Maria Spiridonova was introduced as a character in both of these works.

In Virta's novel there is a character named Sashenka Spirova, whose appearance, biography, as well as the surname, resemble Spiridonova. Spirova is a member of a terrorist group of the PSR, but the author does not represent her as a devoted revolutionary. First of all, Spirova is introduced as a young woman of questionable sexual morals and as an “empty minx”, who was interested more in opportunities to meet men than in participation in revolutionary struggle.²⁶ Virta thus represents a terrorist woman first of all as promiscuous, very much in line with the tendency mentioned above of conservative authors from the beginning of the 20th century. One of the characters in the same novel is called Nikolay Gavrilovich Luzhkovsky. Luzhkovsky is introduced as a local attorney and one of Spirova's beaux. The name and occupation of that character recall Spiridonova's victim Luzhenovsky, who was a liberal attorney in Tambov before he started working for the government.²⁷ Although the assassination of Luzhkovsky does not take place in the book, by making him and Spirova personally involved, Virta undermines any political motivations of the female terrorist, implying that if the assassination was to be committed, it could only be a crime of passion. This, again, is reminiscent of the attitude of the conservatives from the beginning of the 20th century towards women who committed violent crimes. Virta thus interprets Spiridonova's case in his novel very much in line with the conservative criminological perspective from the beginning of the 20th century.

In Shatrov's play, Spiridonova is introduced after the end of her participation in political terrorism as the leader of the Left SR party, the radical wing of the PSR that became a separate political party in 1917. The party was considered as oppositional towards the Bolsheviks after the July uprising of 1918, which was organized by the leadership of the Left SRs against the Bolshevik dictatorship. Although it is not Spiridonova the political terrorist who is the focus of the play, Shatrov employs the conservative narrative of madness when he writes about her. The author often describes Spiridonova's way of talking as hysterical and characterizes her on one occasion as almost insane.²⁸ Shatrov's representation of Spiridonova was the direct continuation of the characteristics that were attributed to her by the Bolsheviks

after the July uprising.²⁹ As Sally A. Boniece has argued, such attributions were typical of the opponents of politically active women at that time, including the conservatives.³⁰ Furthermore, the narrative of Spiridonova as mad, as we have seen had been established in the conservative newspapers in the course of reporting on her case.

The literary works discussed above were never introduced by their authors as anything other than fiction. These works seem, however, to have become the source of inspiration for the emigrant Russian philologist Ekaterina Breitbart, the first person

who tried to question the glorification of the revolutionary terrorists in the mainstream Western historiography. In an article published in the Russian emigrant journal *Kontinent*, Breitbart suggested an alternative version of Spiridonova's attack on Luzhenovsky claiming that it was not a political crime, but a crime of passion. According to her, Luzhenovsky was a former lover who left Spiridonova, which was the reason for her, a hysterical young woman, to shoot him.³¹ The narrative about the love affair between Spiridonova and Luzhenovsky, which is not confirmed by any sources available to historians,³² recalls the narrative about the fictional Spirova and Luzhkovsky from Virta's novel. The introduction of Spiridonova as hysterical by Breitbart, also without any clear references to historical sources, also recalls the characteristics attributed to the former terrorist in Shatrov's play. In this way, Breitbart used in her article both the conservative narrative of promiscuity and the conservative narrative of madness to explain the assassination committed by Spiridonova. In addition, likewise, in line with the conservative authors from the beginning of the 20th century who preferred to see violent crimes committed by women as stemming from their emotions, Breitbart denies Spiridonova's political motivations.

Breitbart's article, however, did not change the mainstream historiography on female participation in political terrorism at the beginning of the 20th century. The main reasons for this were that Breitbart did not use any reliable sources of information to verify her ideas and that she did not go any further in her discussion than simply denying the information from the sources created by Spiridonova's sympathizers. The majority of professional historians have either ignored Breitbart's ideas or expressed a critical attitude towards them.³³ Only emigrant Russian historians Yuri Felshtinsky and Semion Lyandres as well as American historian Anna Geifman mention in their works Breitbart's ideas as a new approach to the question.³⁴ However, even these historians do not integrate Breitbart's ideas into their own arguments, but mention them only in notes, thus distancing their professional research from her article.

The 1993 book by Anna Geifman was the first scholarly work on political terrorism in Russia that instead of exclusively using sources created by the socialists and liberals, as other historians had before her, employed previously unused materials from the Foreign Agency of the Okhrana [the tsarist secret police]. In this way Geifman has offered an alternative view on terrorism in prerevolutionary Russia. Although her book does not have a gender perspective, the prominent female terrorists and their motivations for participation in political violence are discussed. In the chapter entitled "Psychologically Unbalanced Terrorists", Geifman writes about mental problems as the main reason for participation in political violence by both men and women. As a result, the conservative narrative of madness often appears in the accounts of different terrorist women. For example, according to Geifman, Fruma Frumkina became a terrorist because of feelings of inadequacy and a desire to confirm her own importance as an individual.³⁵ In addition, Geifman mentions that Spiridonova was accused of hysteria on numerous occasions.³⁶ Geifman also writes about Zinaida Vasilievna Konoplyannikova

(1879–1906), a village teacher who was born into the family of a soldier, and who on behalf of the PSR on August 12, 1906, assassinated General G.A. Min, who had brutally suppressed the Moscow uprising in December 1905.³⁷ Geifman interprets the famous narrative from the socialist accounts about Konoplyannikova's eagerness to be executed as a sign of suicidal tendencies.³⁸ As we have seen conservative authors at the beginning of the 20th century wrote about the suicidal tendencies of female terrorists.³⁹ In addition, Geifman offers an interpretation of Spiridonova's letter from Tambov prison that is quite similar to the interpretations of conservative newspapers from the beginning of the 20th century. The letter is characterized as containing irrational, troubled fantasies.⁴⁰

Geifman's book attracted much attention from scholars working on the history of political terrorism in Russia because, unlike the previously discussed article by Breitbart, it was based on reliable historical sources and contained well-grounded scholarly discussion. Although Geifman's book was recognized as a novel contribution to the research field, it did not start a new historiographical trend. In Russia, although contemporary professional historians actively use the results of Geifman's research, many of them express critical opinions about her main points, including those that stem from the prerevolutionary conservative narratives. For example, Oleg Budnitsky, a recognized authority in historical research on political terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, does not share Geifman's opinion about mental problems as the main reason for individuals of both sexes to join terrorist units. According to Budnitsky, the mental illnesses of some individuals were rather the result of a hard life in the revolutionary underground and not the reason that led them towards participation in political violence.⁴¹ Budnitsky's position illustrates the eagerness of the majority of professional historians in Russia who write on prerevolutionary terrorism to continue working with their research questions within the tradition started by their Western colleagues who in turn chose to follow the narratives created by the terrorists and their sympathizers.

Conservative narratives in contemporary Russian historiography

The conservative turn in contemporary Russian historiography has left the research field of terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century almost unaffected. Conservative views on women's roles in society are applied to female terrorists from the beginning of the 20th century mostly by laymen who write about them in their Internet blogs or in newspaper articles. Most of the time the authors of such works explain the political activism of terrorist women as an irrational attitude towards political violence.⁴² In this way they employ the narrative of madness that was used by conservative authors prior to the revolution.

In historical works, the conservative turn is represented by only one work, the 2005 doctoral dissertation on the historiography of Russian terrorism at the beginning of the 20th century by Anatoly Bakaev, a member of the progovernmental party *United Russia* (*Edinaya Rossiya*) who had never been a member of the

professional historical community but had worked in different positions in Russia's Home Ministry for many years.⁴³ Although Bakaev does not touch upon the problem of female participation in political violence specifically, he expresses criticism towards apologetic biographies of Russian terrorists written by Russian historians in the 1990s. Bakaev is particularly critical of Konstantin Gusev's book from 1992 about Maria Spiridonova, entitled *The Holy Mother of the Esers (Eserovskaya Bogoroditsa)*. According to Bakaev, it is wrong to call a woman who committed an assassination and who did not become a mother as a "Holy Mother".⁴⁴ His reasoning is obviously inspired by post-Soviet Orthodox conservatism and is reminiscent of the reasoning offered by conservative authors at the beginning of the 20th century who represented female terrorists as unnatural women who failed to fulfill their "natural" womanly duties.

Oleg Budnitsky has written a review of Bakaev's dissertation in which he accuses the author of plagiarism and homophobia.⁴⁵ Although Budnitsky's criticism was not directed towards Bakaev's interpretations of the reasons behind female participation in political terrorism, his general evaluation of the dissertation shows that the conservative progovernmental views expressed by Bakaev are not accepted by historians working in the research field. Other Russian conservative historians, as mentioned above, do not find the topic of female participation in political terrorism in Russia as interesting for their research.

Conclusions

This article has discussed the reasons for why conservative narratives of female participation in political terrorism in Russia have never been dominant in the historiography on the topic. It was shown that conservative contemporaries of the female terrorists discussed the women and their violent political activism at length in their works and offered explanations that could fit with their view on women as "naturally" confined to the domestic sphere and destined to motherhood. To explain women's participation in political terrorism, their conservative contemporaries represented them as unnatural women, as insane, or as promiscuous, implying that this is what led them to be interested in entering the political arena that, according to the conservatives, was reserved for men.

These narratives, although employed by some historians, have never been dominant in the research field mostly because the first influential works on terrorism in prerevolutionary Russia were written by historians influenced by the perspective of terrorists and their sympathizers who saw their activism as a righteous fight against tyranny. As a result, there was no place for conservative interpretations in the narratives constructed in these works.

Conservative interpretations have until recently not been revived by professional historians. In literary works written in the Soviet Union, where female terrorists were seen after 1918 as the opposition of the Bolsheviks, the authors represented their fantasies of these women which were not based on any historical sources. Ekaterina Breitbart, the first person who tried to challenge the dominant historiography with more progovernmental

interpretations, could not present any historical evidence that could support her theories. As a result, even historians who found her conclusions interesting did not use these ideas in their own works so as not to undermine their scholarly value.

The first professional work that tried to give more place to the conservative interpretations, Anna Geifman's book, was published after the tradition of writing about female terrorists as heroines fighting for the people's cause had been established by Western and Russian historians. As a result, although the professional historical community recognized the novelty of Geifman's conclusions and the high professionalism of her work, its publication has not yet led to any historiographical turn in research on female terrorism.

As a result, contemporary Russian conservative historians, besides their general lack of interest towards women's roles in history, do not have at hand any historiographical tradition of approaching female participation in terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century from a progovernmental perspective. The only historical work of that kind, the doctoral dissertation of Anatoly Bakaev, was rejected by the professional community of historians working within the research field and thus could hardly lead to further attempts in that area. The view of female terrorists as "unnatural" women who preferred political activism to their "natural" destiny of motherhood, which corresponds to the prevailing contemporary view on women's roles in Russia, is present only in the works of laymen who do not have to look for the approval of the professional historical community. ✖

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 - 28 Mikhail Shatrov, *Shestoe iuliya: Opyt dokumentalnoi dramy* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966), 13, 14, 15.
 - 29 See more about the Bolshevik representations of Spiridonova as a hysteric in Yu. Mescheryakov and A. Rybakov, "Blazhennaya" Maria. Novye dokumenty k biografii Marii Aleksandrovny Spiridonovoi (1884–1941)", in *Neizvestnaya Rossiya. XX vek*. vol. 2 (Moscow: Istoricheskoe Nasledie, 1992), 9–56; Boniece, "Heroines and Hysterics".
 - 30 Boniece, "Heroines and Hysterics".
 - 31 Ekaterina Breitbart, "Okrasilsia mesiaty bagriantsem..." ili podvig sviatogo terrora?", *Kontinent* 28 (1981), 321–342.
 - 32 In his book on Spiridonova, Yuri Mescheryakov refers to information from old inhabitants of Tambov about a personal acquaintance of Spiridonova and Luzhenovsky, but without making any clear references to the source of his information (Mescheryakov, *Maria Spiridonova*, 98).
 - 33 See, for example, K.V. Gusev, *Eserovskaya bogoroditsa* (Moscow: Luch, 1992), 56; Leonid Praisman, *Terroristy i revolyutsionery, okhranniki i provokatory* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2001).
 - 34 Yurii Felstinskii, *Bolsheviki i levye esery: oktiabr 1917–iul 1918*, (Paris: Russian Social Fund for Persecuted Persons and their Families, 1985); Semion Lyandres, "The 1918 Attempt on the Life of Lenin: A New Look at the Evidence", *Slavic Review* 48 (1989): 433; Anna Geifman, *Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894–1917* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 315.
 - 35 Geifman, *Thou Shalt Kill*, 156.
 - 36 Ibid, 316.
 - 37 Knight, "Female Terrorists", 145–146; Budnitsky, "Ukazatel terroristicheskikh aktov", 624; N. Erofeev, "Konoplyannikova", in *Politicheskie partii Rossii: Konets XIX – pervaya tret XX veka; Entsiklopediya* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1996), 266; Hillyar and McDermid, *Revolutionary Women in Russia*, 87, 135.
 - 38 Geifman, *Thou Shalt Kill*, 169.
 - 39 Konoplyannikova's eagerness to die, however, was not seen as a suicidal tendency by all of her conservative contemporaries. In his memoirs, Alexander Gerasimov (1866–1944), head of the St. Peterburg Okhranka 1905–1909, writes about her: "All the terrorists died with great courage and dignity. Especially the women. The story of Zinaida Konoplyannikova, who was hanged for the murder of the commander of the Semenov Regiment, General Min, who had in December 1905 suppressed the uprising in Moscow, is still clearly preserved in my memory. She approached the scaffold, reciting the lines of Pushkin ... The heroism of these youths, it must be admitted, attracted sympathy for them in society." (Alexander Gerasimov (1985), *Na lezvi s terroristami*, (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1985), 123.
 - 40 Geifman, *Thou Shalt Kill*, 170.
 - 41 Budnitsky, "Zhenshiny-Terroristki", 16.
 - 42 See, for example, "Terroristski – fanatichki, nesuschie smert", <http://repin.info/kriminalnoe-chtivo/terroristki-fanatichki-nesushchie-smert>, accessed October 27, 2017.
 - 43 See Bakaev's detailed biography at the United Russia website: <http://ulyanovsk.er.ru/persons/7750/>, accessed December 31, 2017.
 - 44 Anatoly Bakaev, *Istoriografiya rossiiskogo revolyutsionnogo terrorizma kontsa XIX – nachala XX veka* (doctoral dissertation, Moscow: Rossiiskiy universitet druzhby narodov, 2006), 302.
 - 45 See Budnitsky's review, <http://socialist.memo.ru/recens/y05/budnic.htm>, accessed December 31, 2017. See Bakaev's answer to Budnitsky's review <http://www.zsuu.ru/deyatelnost/analiticheskie-materialy/6544-analiz-otzyva-retsenzii-dissertatsionnoj-raboty-aabakaeva-istoriografiya-rossiiskogo-revolutsionnogo-terrorizma-kontsa-xix-nachala-xx-veka.html>, accessed December 31, 2017.

The butterfly effect in history-making

Conservative subjectivities of women in the anti-communist discourse in Slovakia

by **Zuzana Maďarová**

“My name did not belong to me any more. People pronounced it stammeringly, artificially and heavily. A substantive reason to feel out of place. And my way of speaking in a new language was suspiciously awkward. Every time I made a mistake, a hole opened up. And the locals liked smooth relations and fixed holes. My teacher tried to convince me: ‘Adapt. Just imagine that you walk down the street and everybody thinks you’re a local.’ But I knew that my face, shaped like a full moon, would betray me.”¹

In the novel *Die undankbare Fremde* [“The ungrateful stranger” or “country”]², the Swiss author Irena Brežná, who emigrated with her family from Czechoslovakia in 1968, reflects upon the place of a woman immigrant in a new language and a new society. As she suggests, one can try, learn, struggle, challenge, and conform, but the language resists, as does the society that creates it. The main character strikes back and looks for her own ways of speaking and living. The author examines a power game between a newcomer and a new country, as well as the story of their expectations, inclusion, and resistance. Readers may ask along with the protagonist: to what extent does a person need to integrate to become a part of the collective story; how much can one resist; to what extent can one create one’s own place in an appropriated language?

In the collective memory in Slovakia, women are still treated as strangers in the male-dominated mainstream discourse.³ While a few “women worthies”⁴ are publicly

commemorated, they are usually not a part of the country’s modern history and very rarely challenge dominant historical narratives.⁵ Placing women in history, as Gerda Lerner puts it,⁶ or placing major historical events in the life stories of female individuals, thus causes tension like that experienced by an immigrant in a new country. It invites women to search for language that would enable them to articulate their life stories while admitting that neither life nor a story can precede its articulation.⁷ This tension provides an opportunity to explore the ways women remember, and it also underlines the role of social context in the process of recollection and history production. Edna Lomsky-Feder argues that society frames and channels the way subjects create and represent their memories.⁸ She writes that personal memory is “embedded within, designed by, and derives its meaning from a memory field that offers different interpretations” of a given event.⁹ The remembering subject cannot freely choose an interpretation of an event (at least, not without consequences) as the memory field is not an open space. Rather,

there are distributive criteria that frame and channel a subject’s recollection and interpretation. These criteria may be particularly strict in a situation when memory fields are very limited for women.

This article is guided by two major assumptions: every account of experience is an interpretation and needs an interpretation¹⁰ and every historical interpretation is in need of exploration. In the context of women’s overall limited participation in the articulation of history in Slovakia, I explore some aspects of life stories of women embedded in the anticommunist discourse. I ask what types of subjectivity and

abstract

The oral history archive of the non-profit organization *Nenápadní hrdinovia* (The Inconspicuous Heroes) is considered as an example of a wider trend in Slovakia to exploit women’s memories for the purposes of conservative or nationalist interpretations of history, placing women in the traditional roles and discourses of victims, auxiliaries, and self-sacrifice. The purpose of this politics of remembering is to emphasize the totalitarian nature of the state-socialist regime by bringing forward the oppression and violence inflicted on women. Using the concrete oral history project as a vehicle and a case study for the argument, the article contributes to the understanding of the current discursive landscape of memory of state socialism and of gender in Slovakia.

KEYWORDS: gender discourses, history writing, oral history, populism.