

Killer Autofiction. Terrorists-Belletrists and the Propaganda of the Deed in the Romanov Empire

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The terrorist activities in the Romanov Empire of the late nineteenth century have frequently been characterized as “propaganda of the deed”, following a period of propaganda tout court that failed to resonate with the people. The propaganda of the deed prototypically means “propaganda by the deed” – i.e. by resorting to political violence – but in the case of individual terror in the period mentioned, it also means making public the act of violence, which would have remained futile without a discursive resonance. Advertising violence is a provocative activity, especially when the perpetrator himself advertises the act. The ambiguity of the term “propaganda of the deed” corresponds to the close connection – indeed, a personal union – between political violence and autofiction in the nineteenth-century Russian Empire.

Acts of “individual terror,” aiming at scarring and disorienting decisionmakers and not anonymous crowds, occurred all over Europe during the protracted nineteenth century, eventually triggering the start of World War I, but nowhere were they such a crucial social issue, involving both outcasts and pillars of society, as in the Romanov Empire, including the Kingdom of Poland. The development of the political strategy of terrorism in the Romanov Empire went hand in hand with, or was even preceded by, the creation of a large number of narrative texts expressing – in an emphatic or abhorrent way – the state of mind in which an act of terror could become not only acceptable, but glorified.

Many of these texts were autobiographical or rather autofictional in nature: in my talk, I would like to focus on three terrorists who wrote both factual and fictional accounts of terrorism: Sergei Nechaev (1847–1882), Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinskii (1851–1895), and Boris Savinkov (1879–1925), as well as an outspoken opponent of the revolutionaries, Nikolai Leskov (1831–1895).

The overarching question concerns the “transcendental” conditions of this coincidence of narrative and violence. My contention is that acts of violence not only share with utterances the quality of being a communicative act, which is a commonplace assumption in current research on terrorism. But – I argue – this communication takes the form of provocation and – propaganda. Terrorist autofictions thus shed new light on the necessarily provocative nature of all autofiction, which goes beyond mere exhibitionism.