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A Female Agent of Political Violence in Pre-revolutionary Russia: Gendered Representations of Maria Spiridonova

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Abstract:

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Russian authorities were facing serious problems because of systematic political terrorism, which was mostly connected to the activities of the Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries (the PSR). The most striking feature of that terrorism was that many of the terrorists were women – a feature that makes it justified to maintain that by taking part in political terrorism women entered the domains that in patriarchal societies were considered to be exclusively male: the domain of violence and the domain of politics. Such intrusion to the male territory was especially shocking for the traditional patriarchal society of pre-revolutionary Russia. Despite this striking feature however, systematic historical research on gendered representations of the Russian female terrorists at the beginning of the 20th century is still in short supply whereas in other academic disciplines portrayals of women as agents of political violence are a frequent topic in the research on contemporary terrorism. To help fill up this void, the purpose of the article is by using the case of Maria Spiridonova, the most famous female terrorist in pre-revolutionary Russia, to see whether the conclusions made by non-historians about gendered representations of contemporary female terrorists can be used for historical research in order to identify eventual distortions in the representations of violent female agency in the past and, thus, obtain deeper knowledge about gender order in historical perspective.

Key words: terrorism, Russian women, Maria Spiridonova, agency, gendered representations

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Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Russian authorities were challenged seriously by systematic political terrorism that was mostly initiated and carried on by the Party of Socialists-Revolutionaries (the PSR). The most striking feature of that terrorism was that

many of the terrorists were women; and it would not be an exaggeration to say that in pre-revolutionary Russia terrorism gave women one of the greatest opportunities to take part in the political life of the country: in the absence of legal political rights they could act only illegally. However, by taking part in political terrorism women entered the domains that in patriarchal societies were considered to be exclusively male: the domain of violence and the domain of politics. Such intrusion to male territories of public life was especially shocking for the traditional patriarchal society of pre-revolutionary Russia. Therefore it is interesting to examine how the contemporaries represented terrorist women in their texts.

Representations of Female Agents of Political Violence

Representations of the Russian female terrorists at the beginning of the 20th century have received remarkably little scholarly attention. Researchers have in their historical studies only sporadically addressed different questions connected to portrayals of female terrorists by their contemporaries (see for example Breitbart 1981; Mogilner 1999: 50, 55; Budnitsky 2000: 162-165; Mescheryakov 2001: 4-5, 98-99; Praisman 2001; Leontiev 2005; Morrissey 2006: 291-293; Petukhov 2006: 73; 92-93; Yukina 2007: 148; Boniece 2010: 139, 140, 141, 142, 150). However, gendered portrayals of women as agents of political violence are very often analyzed in the research on contemporary terrorism in other academic disciplines. The starting point of this kind of analysis is the idea that women who perform violence are approached differently than violent men, and that the main reason for this differentiated treatment lies in the still dominant 'patriarchal' framework that produces misconceptions about women in general (Steel 1998: 276). Within this framework the female nature and appropriate female behavior are largely defined as peaceful while men are thought to be more readily disposed to employ violence under particular circumstances (Sjoberg & Gentry 2007: 1-2). Therefore gendered dichotomous framing of political action often ascribes political violence in masculinized terms (Cunningham 2005: 76). Subsequently, in the cases of political violence women are usually represented as passive victims whereas men as aggressors—victimizers (Wood 1999: 313). Therefore if a woman acts as an agent of political violence it is considered to be an extraordinary and rare phenomenon which needs to be explained and this is where gendered representations come into play.

Research devoted to the analysis of gendered representations of terrorist women has uncovered different patterns in gendering politically violent women. According to philosopher Herjeet Marway, politically violent women are normally constructed either as agentless victims by those who oppose them, or alternatively as wholly agentic individuals by those who endorse them (2011: 222). In the former case these women are often shown as acting on the order of men (who are considered to be real political agents subordinating women) (see for example Talbot 2000: 165, 174; Patkin 2004: 85; Sternadori 2007; Ness 2008: 3; Nacos 2005: 223-226; Friedman 2008: 841, 849; Sjoberg; Cooke & Neal 2011: 5; Narozhna 2012: 83; Bielby 2012: 86-89) or portrayed as abnormal or unnatural, being sexually or mentally deviant with the effect that their violence is typically explained by their deviation from the female normality) (see for example Sjoberg & Gentry 2007: 12; Naaman 2007: 117; Jacques & Taylor 2009: 505; Bielby 2012: 40). When it comes to the authors who in their writings support the female terrorists, contemporary research shows that they tend to represent politically violent women as outstanding individuals, who possess the best female and male features together, a combination that gives them an opportunity to play the male role of a warrior without transgressing the existing female norm (see for example Patkin 2004: 84; Hasso 2005: 36, 37; Schweitzer 2006: 40; Ness 2005: 22, 27-28; Oliver 2008: 7; Colvin 2009:

254-257; Marway 2011: 227). Another strategy that is used by this category of authors is the historicization of female terrorists in such a way that their actions are not seen as aberrant but are introduced as continuation of an older tradition (Ness 2005, 21). Generally speaking gendered portrayals of violent women warp female political agency (Marway 2011: 231) making our knowledge about female terrorists blurred; and as Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry (2008) observe, this kind of blurriness is observable in almost all narratives of violent women throughout history, all “from the Bible to the War on Terror”, revealing thus the deep historical roots of the contemporary trend to sexualize women’s political violence. Therefore, it is important to deconstruct the existing representations of violent women in order to be able to overcome the gender related distortions and to avoid misrepresenting female terrorists in future research, and in performing this task it is particularly interesting to see whether the conclusions made by non-historians about gendered representations of contemporary female terrorists can be used for the historical research on terrorist women in order to identify eventual distortions in the representations of violent female agency and, thus, get deeper knowledge about gender order in the past.

Agency

The concept of *agency* is essential in the research on representations of contemporary female terrorists. Therefore it is important to define the particular understanding of *agency* that is used in this article. Often in the literature *agency* is defined as political subjectivity and, thus, refers to how individuals act and how historically specific relations of subordination influence this capacity to act (see, for example, definitions in Karp 1986: 137; Ahearn 2001: 112; Mahmood 2009:9, 15; Shepherd 2012: 6). The scholars working with action-oriented definitions of *agency* normally distinguish between individual and supra-individual (the property of organizations) agency (Ahearn 2001: 112-113). However, since the present article does not focus on the actions of individuals, but on the way agentic individuals have been represented within different discursive traditions, the action-oriented definitions of *agency* do not seem to be useful. Therefore for the purpose of this article it seems more adequate to use the concept of *agency* in the way it has been used in the works of feminist philosopher Judith Butler, who argues that *agency* is an effect of the operations of discourse-power through which subjects are produced. Accordingly “agency belongs to a way of thinking about persons as instrumental actors who confront an external political field” (1992: 13). In other words, Butler understands agency not as the action of individual actors but rather as an effect of the processes through which subjects are constructed.

An interesting example in this regard is to be found in the work done by political scientist Linda Åhäll who applies Butler’s understanding of *agency* specifically for the analysis of representations of female agency in political violence. Åhäll is interested in how *agency* is represented through discourses that produce subjects. In her recent study she analyzes the subject position of ‘female’ in discourses of political violence and the representations of agency held by that subject. In other words, Åhäll understands *agency* as “representations of agency through subject positions within discursive practices” (2012: 107). According to the author, the concept of subject positions accounts for the multiple forms by which agents are produced as social actors, with the effect of that, as Åhäll argues, rather than being a homogenous subject with particular interests, an individual can have multiple subject positions.

Male and Female Norm in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century

Research on representations of contemporary female terrorists reveals that gender is a significant factor when considering female violence. Therefore in order to be able to identify and analyze the gendered representations of the female terrorists it becomes relevant to identify the ideas about masculinity and femininity that were dominant in pre-revolutionary Russia.

The prevailing ideals of masculine and feminine at the beginning of the 20th century in Russia had their roots in Orthodox Christianity, which viewed women as essentially different from men and inferior to them. According to this view women were considered to be impure by nature, tainted and sinful (Stites 1978: 11-12; Engel 2004: 7-8; French 2008: 55). Nonetheless, on the other hand, there had always existed a positive model of a good woman, whose characteristic features were modesty, piety and chastity, being hard-working and submissive to her husband (Engel 2004: 9). These presumed differences between the sexes had of course crucial social implications in the sense that because of these “natural” differences in the constitution of men and women, they were supposed to occupy different spheres in the society – a principle of division which became particularly obvious in the 19th century: the masculine public sphere included political activity and employment, while the feminine private sphere was connected to home, family life and passivity in public affairs (Atkinson 1978: 35; Caine & Sluga 2000: 4). In these separate spheres both sexes were expected to express different qualities: intellect, honor, sense of duty were considered to be desirable male qualities, while sensitivity, love and modesty were regarded as desirable female qualities (Atkinson 1978: 34; Caine & Sluga 2000: 28). Women were seen as weak and fragile (Caine & Sluga 2000: 40), constantly in need of protection from a strong and healthy man. It is of particular interest to underline that the presumed “essential” differences between the sexes often led to the situation that the same quality meant different things for women and men: with regard to personal strength for instance, women were expected to show this quality in passive suffering, while men were supposed to demonstrate their strength actively and through their deeds. (Atkinson 1978: 34).

These conceptions of men and women were of course used as measures of judgment in the sense that women were praised when they in agreement with the ideal of a “good” woman acted as good and virtuous wives, and they were criticized when they neglected gender order or dared to enter male domains (Engel 2004: 24). The latter – the intrusion of women into the male spheres – represented a particularly severe deviation from the norm, and those women who breached this boundary were seen as the opposite of a “good” woman, that is as “bad” women.

In the middle of the 19th century, however, when the privileged Russian women eventually got better opportunities to access higher education, some of the educated women, who had radical political views, started openly challenging the conventional gender expectations. These women, *nihilistki*, tried to challenge traditional ideas about femininity by for instance smoking in public, wearing simple clothes, cropping their hair and going about on the streets without male escort (French 2008: 62; Engel 2004: 73). Such behavior as well as participation in political activities that until then were considered to belong to the male domain represented significant deviations from the expected gender norm, and consequently placed the radical women in the category of “bad women”. In this way the Russian female political radicalism was even at the beginning of the 20th century closely connected to sexual naughtiness in the eyes of the conservative representatives of the ruling regime (Stites 1978a: 42): standing out as a “bad” woman, these politically radical women who challenged the prevailing gender order could not be virtuous. At the same time, the intelligentsia held a totally different

perception of these women. Radical intelligentsia in Russia proclaimed the equality of sexes, and from this standpoint it regarded men and women as equal partners in the common struggle against autocracy (Stites 1978a: 48). Thus the female political activity of the time was hailed rather than being criticized by their comrades, who tended to see radical women as self-denying, modest and proper (Stites 1978: 16; Engel 2004: 83-84), qualities which were generally considered to be essential for the ideal womanhood.

Interestingly this contrast in perspective appears to find an echo in contemporary world. That is, the sharp contrast between, on the one hand, the attitudes towards radical women as “bad” fostered by the conservative pro-governmental forces that viewed the behaviour of these women as unacceptable and, on the other hand the more affirmative perception of such women held by the Russian intelligentsia resembles the views on contemporary terrorist women put forth in non-historical research on them. Therefore, it is interesting to see whether the representations of political agency of the Russian female terrorists in the texts of the authors who belonged to different political camps correspond to the representations of politically violent women as agentless victims or wholly agentic individuals, which have been identified in contemporary texts.

Representations of Maria Spiridonova as a Case Study

There were quite many women who took part in political terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, and a great deal was written about all of them before the October Revolution of 1917. In what follows however the analysis is limited to the representations of Maria Spiridonova, probably, the only female terrorist member of the PSR, who gained national recognition for her heroism, because she, to use the words of historian Sally A. Boniece, embodied “the ideal of Russian womanhood”, being considered as a noble revolutionary heroine fighting for the liberty of her country against tyranny (2010: 135-136). Maria Alexandrovna Spiridonova (1884–1941) was a member of the PSR before 1917 and a leader of the radical socialist Left SR Party after the October Revolution (Rabinowitch 1997: 182; Zhukova 2001: 82). In January 1906 she assassinated Police Inspector General Gavriil Nikolaevich Luzhenovsky, who had carried out the brutal suppression of a peasants’ revolt. After her arrest Spiridonova was subjected to physical torture and allegedly sexual abuse, which became widely known after the publication of her letter from Tambov prison (see Spiridonova 1906b). Spiridonova served eleven years of her sentence in Siberia but following the February Revolution of 1917 she was released (Zhukova 2001: 82). After the October Revolution however after a short-lived cooperation with the Bolsheviks Spiridonova turned to the opposition and maintained her critical stance against the Bolsheviks until the end of her political activism as the Left SR rebellion was defeated in July 1918. From this point on she faced a new life of imprisonment, alternating treatments in sanatoriums and hospitals and exile (Rabinowitch 1995: 430; Rabinowitch 1997: 186; Zhukova 2001: 83) until she finally was executed by the NKVD together with other political prisoners outside Orel in 1941 (Budnitsky 1996).

For a variety of reasons Spiridonova’s fate attracted attention from representatives of different layers of pre-revolutionary Russian society, who constructed her agency in different ways in their texts. Indeed, no other Russian female terrorist has ever enjoyed this much attention, and therefore, the case of Spiridonova seems to be the most suitable to examine whether the ideas suggested in the research on contemporary female terrorists could be fruitfully applied to the historical material from pre-revolutionary Russia.

The First Conservative Reaction

Maria Spiridonova was arrested by the police at the railway station in Borisoglebsk on January 16, 1906 directly after she shot G.N. Luzhenovsky. She was taken to the police department, placed in a cell, and brutally interrogated by assistant police superintendent T.S. Zhdanov and Cossack officer P.F. Avramov. During this interrogation as well as later on train to Tambov these two men spoke to and about Spiridonova in a particular way. There are no sources that were personally created by Zhdanov and Avramov that include representations of Spiridonova. Their words about her and the way they treated her (closely connected to these words) are instead re-told in Spiridonova's letters (see Spiridonova 1906a; Spiridonova 1906b) as well as in the account of medical assistant Zimin,¹ who was on train together with her and Avramov when Spiridonova was being transferred to Tambov. These documents contain mainly the personal impressions of two persons, one of whom (Spiridonova herself) was naturally interested in representing brutality of the government agents in full detail, and the story of the second witness (Zimin) was reported and conveyed to the public by V.E. Vladimirov, a liberal journalist, who had the same interest as Spiridonova and who already had read her letter from prison before he started questioning his informant Zimin. Moreover, Spiridonova, who was badly mistreated during the interrogation, tells her story in almost a surrealistic manner, quoting only the fragments that she could remember rather than the whole conversation that took place, thus re-telling Zhdanov's and Avramov's utterances in an incoherent and out-of-the-context fashion. However, taken together all the reported phrases and the manner in which the two men treated Spiridonova show a particular attitude towards a female political terrorist which can be re-constructed as follows.

During the interrogation by Zhdanov and Avramov Spiridonova introduced herself as a member of the PSR (Spiridonova 1906b: 12). As it can be understood from their comments, the government agents had no doubt that Spiridonova was acting on behalf of a political party,² which means that they tended to regard her as a woman who participated in political violence. Spiridonova writes that she was undressed and left totally naked during the interrogation (Spiridonova 1906b: 12), that the two men were swearing while talking to her, the practice that was continued by Avramov later on train to Tambov (Spiridonova 1906a; Vladimirov 1906a: 58-59). Spiridonova doesn't describe the character of the words used by the interrogators, but Zimin's remark that Avramov's swearing insulted him as a man (Vladimirov 1906a: 59) implies that the words he used had sexual character. For instance, one of the threats addressed to Spiridonova by Zhdanov and Avramov was to hand her over to the Cossacks for the night, but only after having their own way with her themselves (Spiridonova 1906b: 12). Furthermore Spiridonova mentions numerous sexual advances made by Avramov towards her as well as sexual descriptions of her body parts voiced by him ("elegant feet", "satin breasts", "graceful body", "small teeth") (Spiridonova 1906a: 16; Spiridonova 1906b: 12-13). Zimin confirms that while on train, Avramov was using "tender names" when talking to Spiridonova (Vladimirov 1906a: 59). In the letter written for *Rus* Spiridonova also mentions that during this interrogation she was asked several times how many lovers she had (Spiridonova 1906a: 16). Taken together all these reported details of Zhdanov's and Avramov's behavior suggest that the two officials treated Spiridonova as a promiscuous woman. Since, according to Spiridonova's words, her affiliation with a political party and, thus, political nature of the assassination, were acknowledged by the interrogators, the way

¹ This account was retold by V.E. Vladimirov in his article for liberal newspaper *Rus* from March 12, 1906 (see Vladimirov 1906a, 58-59).

² According to Spiridonova, Zhdanov and Avramov mocked her among other things for being politically active since they asked her to make a stirring speech while they were beating her (Spiridonova 1906b: 11).

she was treated shows that Zhdanov and Avramov were influenced by the patriarchal conservative discourse that perceived a direct connection between women's political activities and their sexual availability. This means that the two men saw Spiridonova as a "bad" woman, who didn't stay in the private sphere the way a "good" woman was supposed to and, thus, was the opposite of a "good" woman – not chaste, but promiscuous. And in this sense Zhdanov and Avramov approached Spiridonova's violent agency not as a result of her political beliefs, but as connected to her low morals and deviation from the valid female norm. The same representation of Spiridonova as a "bad" promiscuous woman was introduced on February 19, 1906 in a local conservative newspaper *Tambovskie gubernskie vedomosti* (*Tambov provincial gazette*), which characterized Spiridonova's letter from prison, where she told the whole story of her arrest, as "a work of pornography" and which introduced her as a woman of low morals (quoted in: Boniece 2010: 141). Thus, the idea of Spiridonova as a promiscuous woman was the first possible explanation for her violent political agency that was put forth by the conservatives.

However, when it comes to the conservative newspapers, they most of the time looked for the reasons behind Spiridonova's participation in political violence in other spheres. On January 18, 1906, two days after the assassination of Luzhenovsky, *Tambovskie gubernskie vedomosti* contained an editorial, where Spiridonova was described as "some kind of insane, unscrupulous female revolutionary". Although the article acknowledged the fact that Spiridonova's actions were connected to her underground political activities, the author sought to undermine Spiridonova's political convictions by questioning her mental health, attributing thus Spiridonova's participation in political violence to her madness. This discourse of madness in this case was used intensively in other conservative newspapers as well. In similar ways the central papers like *Novoe vremya* (*New Times*) (quoted in: Boniece 2010, 140-141) and *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti* (*St. Petersburg gazette*) (quoted in Praisman 2001: 189) called her "sick". In all these cases the authors fail to provide their readers with any proof of Spiridonova's mental instability, and instead appear to focus more on just occasionally denying that her violent agency had a political nature. Such representations seem to be also connected to the intention to portray Spiridonova as an unnatural woman, with the only difference being that in this case her deviation from the conception of female normality is derived from her assumed mental instability rather than from her moral flaws and from her alleged promiscuity.

The idea of Spiridonova as an unnatural, deviant woman was also present in other publications, where her assassination of Luzhenovsky was described as an act of "savagery", or where Spiridonova was introduced as a "human monster" (quoted in: Boniece 2010, 141). Apparently, in these cases, the authors of the articles lack any ground to proclaim Spiridonova as either promiscuous or insane, yet still wish to picture her as an unnatural woman in order to explain her participation in political violence.

Thus, as the above analysis of the first conservative reaction to Spiridonova in the role of a violent political agent shows, the dominant tendency to explain her agency is to seek to derive it from perceived deviation from the existing norm of female normality, be it of sexual, mental or some other character. What is common to all these conservative representations of her agency in other words is that Spiridonova is represented as an unnatural woman – a representation that however was to be changed after the publications of the liberal journalist V.E. Vladimirov in newspaper *Rus*, who investigated the whole case.

V.E. Vladimirov's View

The doubts about Spiridonova's letter from the prison that were voiced in the conservative newspapers that suspected that it was written in delusion (see for example *Novoe vremya*, no. 10746 (13 February 1906); *Tambovskie gubernskie vedomosti*, February 19, 1906; *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*, quoted in: Praisman 2001, 189) were the starting point for the investigation of her case that was undertaken by V.E. Vladimirov.

Vladimirov's investigation is focussed on the way Spiridonova was treated after the arrest and, therefore the assassination of Luzhenovsky doesn't take much space there. Here Spiridonova is represented by Vladimirov rather as a victim of the ruling regime than as an agent of political violence. However, in some of his articles the author pays attention to the reasons why Spiridonova decided to take part in a political assassination. In the article dated by March 8, 1906 for instance Vladimirov writes:

“Широкие волны крови, проливаемой по всей России, возбуждали в ней ужас и страх за судьбу несчастной, замученной страны. Ежедневные казни, нескончаемые страдания засекаемых, разоренных братьев по крови и духу терзали ее и привели ее к решению вмешаться и самой в активную борьбу” (Vladimirov 1906a: 44-45).

“Wide waves of blood spilled across all Russia raised in her the horror and fear for the destiny of the unfortunate, tortured country. Daily executions, never-ending sufferings of the flogged, ruined brothers by blood and spirit tormented her and led her to the decision to interfere in the active fight.”³

Here Vladimirov seeks to establish that Spiridonova took the sufferings of Russian people to her heart. This particular way of representing Spiridonova motivation and driving force implies that she was an emotionally sensitive person, capable of feeling empathy with the others, a quality that in the prevailing gender discourse was considered to be essential for a “good” woman. From this follows that the author, who in general was supportive of her, tries to show Spiridonova's decision to participate in political terrorism as stemming from and reflecting her femininity – a feature that was required for introducing her as a “good” woman. Having accepted a woman as an agent of political violence, Vladimirov had to explain the origins of her agency. Since the author was sympathetic with Spiridonova, he couldn't follow the conservative authors and represent her as an unnatural deviant woman. Instead Vladimirov chooses to portray Spiridonova as an exceptional woman, who could become an agent of political violence because of her unusual personal qualities.

Vladimirov does it by telling the reader Spiridonova's personal biography. The main part of the story is devoted to the representation of her outstanding features, including her intelligence which, according to Vladimirov, distinguishes her from an early age. Among other qualities highlighted by Vladimirov are Spiridonova's love for freedom that was expressed in different protests that she had initiated in the conservative milieu of her gymnasium;⁴ her persistence in attaining different goals as well as her strong character and truthfulness (Vladimirov 1906a: 42, 45). Remarkably, none of features that Vladimirov mentions in his account were considered to be typically feminine in pre-revolutionary Russia but were instead taken to be characteristic of men with outstanding personality. This thus gives rise to the impression that by introducing Spiridonova as a woman who possessed male features Vladimirov explained her agency as possible by referring to her unfeminine character.

³ All translations in the text of the article are mine (N.P.).

⁴ “бездушный холодный формализм” (Vladimirov 1906a: 41).

However, since a woman with a male character is nonetheless considered in a patriarchal society to be deviant, Vladimirov takes special effort to make Spiridonova look more feminine. For example, the author gives a detailed description of her appearance:

“Хорошенькая, совсем крошечная, стройная, с светло-каштановыми волосами, которые, распущенные, закрывают всю ее фигуру ниже колен, с тонкими чертами небольшого лица, с нежной прозрачной кожей, с синеватыми, широко открытыми глазами - вот внешность Маруси. Много свежести, мягких светлых красок на этом прелестном лице. Верхняя губа ее немного короче нижней и придает ее смелому открытому лицу что-то детское и вместе с тем твердое и решительное” (Vladimirov 1906a: 43-44).

“Pretty, absolutely tiny, slender, with light brown hair which, when loosened, covers all her body below knees, with thin features of her small face, with gentle transparent skin, with bluish, widely open eyes - here is Maroussia's⁵ appearance. There is a lot of freshness, soft light colors on this pretty face. The upper lip is a little shorter than the lower lip and gives something childish and at the same time firm and resolute to her courageous open face.”

As it is apparent above, the author describes Spiridonova as very feminine, using words like “pretty”, “tiny”, “slender”, paying special attention to such features as long hair and fresh face. At the same time, Vladimirov mentions that, despite all those feminine features, Spiridonova's appearance also had signs that implied her strong character and unfeminine courage. By providing this kind of description Vladimirov shows that in spite of all her femininity Spiridonova was nonetheless not a regular woman but also possessed clear masculine qualities.

Besides the feminine appearance of Spiridonova, Vladimirov also underscores some of the feminine traits of her character, namely, kindness and readiness to sacrifice herself, both represented as important for understanding Spiridonova's political activities (Vladimirov 1906a: 41, 44). According to Vladimirov, it was her natural kindness and love to common people that drove her to the revolutionary underground; she loved the revolutionary cause with all her heart and was ready to sacrifice her life for it, and that's why she could stalk Luzhenovsky in any weather without thinking about her own health (Vladimirov 1906a: 44). By underling the importance of such feminine personality feature the author in other words, emphasizes that Spiridonova's feminine features were at least equally important for her political activities as her male attributes.

To sum up, Vladimirov recognizes Spiridonova as an agent of political violence and seeks to explain her agency in terms of her exceptional personality that combined the best masculine and feminine features. Seemingly in his view such a combination gave Spiridonova an opportunity to become an agent of political violence and to be a “good” woman at the same time. However, the author's general focus on Spiridonova's victimization after the arrest shows that he was not ready to accept her as wholly agentic, feeling more comfortable by introducing a woman as a victim in the situation of political violence.

The Attitudes of Russian Intelligentsia

Vladimirov's way of representing Spiridonova's agency of political violence has despite all the critique from the socialists (see, for example, Nechetnyi 1907) become a model for representations of her created by liberal and socialist intelligentsia.

⁵ “Maroussia” is a diminutive-hypocoristic version of “Maria”.

Already during the trial in March 1906 one of Spiridonova's lawyers, liberal N.V. Teslenko, in his speech underlines her suffering and indignation as response to the torments of common people ordered by Luzhenovsky, and highlights these strong emotions as the prime driving force that motivated the assassination that Spiridonova committed (quoted in Vladimirov 1906:112). At the same time, Teslenko like Vladimirov, refuses to make the impression that Spiridonova was an unnatural deviant woman because she took part in activities that traditionally belonged to the male spheres. It is therefore from this stance that he made historical parallels between Spiridonova's assassination of Luzhenovsky and Charlotte Corday's⁶ assassination of Jean-Paul Marat⁷. In his own words:

“Во время французской революции Марат вселял ужас в сердца приверженцев старого порядка. Он погиб от руки такой же чудной и благородной девушки, имя которой служит предметом поклонения и восхищения. Каждый Марат должен найти свою Шарлотту Корде. И в этом, быть может, великий закон человеческой совести” (quoted in Vladimirov 1906:113).

"During the French revolution Marat installed horror in the hearts of the supporters of the Old Regime'. He lost his life by the hand of a similarly extraordinary and noble girl whose name is worshipped and admired. Each Marat has to find his Charlotte Corday. And that is, perhaps, the great law of human conscience".

The comparison of Spiridonova to Corday represented nothing new but was earlier made in the newspaper *Rech*, though not in the direct connection to the assassination of Luzhenovsky but in the context of the police brutality (8 March 1906). Such a comparison was intended to show that Spiridonova was not the only woman in history who had assassinated a tyrant. The main point to make was instead to demonstrate that, far from anything abnormal her deed was an extraordinary event made possible or even necessary only in the context of despotism. Nonetheless it is remarkable that at the same time Teslenko also puts in an extra effort into feminizing Spiridonova by calling her “extraordinary and noble girl” (quoted in Vladimirov 1906:115). By using such an expression the author seeks to establish that Spiridonova was a “good” young woman who had some unusual features lacking in other women, perhaps implying that she possessed some positive male attributes. In other words, similar to Vladimirov, Teslenko chooses to explain Spiridonova's violent political agency as a result of the rare combination of the best female and the best male features in her personality – a type of account of Spiridonova's agency which was very common in the works of the liberal authors at the time (see for example Vserossiiskii Soyuz ravnopraviya zhenshin 1906:11; M-in 1906). Moreover, the end of Teslenko's speech was devoted to reminding the court about the sufferings that Spiridonova had gone through after she had been arrested (Quoted in Vladimirov 1906:114-116). Such kind of ending with emphasis on her suffering shows that the attorney, as well as Vladimirov before him, wanted to represent Spiridonova in the “typically female” role of victim and not to focus on her violent political agency, a feature that might be interpreted as an indication of his unwillingness to recognize and introduce her as wholly agentic.

⁶ Charlotte Corday (1768-1793) was a French noble woman who murdered Jean-Paul Marat because of his tyranny and betrayal of the French Revolution.

⁷ Jean-Paul Marat (1743-1793) one of the Jacobin's leaders during the French revolution, and one of the ideologists of the revolutionary terror of the time.

When it comes to Spiridonova's fellow socialists however it is worth noting that despite their generally critical attitude towards Vladimirov's work, they in effect followed the same pattern in the way they constructed Spiridonova as an agent of political violence. A fine example of this kind of construction is to be found in the letter to Spiridonova written in March 1906 by the terrorist members of the PSR Grigorii Gershuni, Petr Karpovich, Shimon Sikorsky and Egor Sazonov, who all were incarcerated in the Pugachev tower in Moscow. In the same way as Vladimirov before them, the imprisoned members of the PSR saw Spiridonova's motivations as purely political, when referring to her as:

“сознательная социалистка-революционерка, впитавшая в себя все муки трудового народа, горящая ненавистью к его угнетателям за все обиды, унижения и издевательства над этим народом, ... член партии, взявший на себя исполнение приговора над диким насильником тамбовских крестьян и отдавший за благо народа свою жизнь...” (Gershuni, Karpovich, Sikorsky & Sazonov 1906: 88).

"a conscious socialist-revolutionary who has absorbed in all the torments of the working people, burning with hatred of their oppressors for all the offences, humiliations and mockeries at these people,... a party member who volunteered to execute the sentence over the wild tyrant of the Tambov peasants and who has given her life for the benefit of the people..."

Like Vladimirov, the members of the PSR represent Spiridonova as a person who was acting on behalf of the Russian population because she took its sufferings as a personal matter. However, what makes this representation different is that the authors highlight what had been omitted in Vladimirov's account, namely Spiridonova's membership of the PSR, and that the assassination of Luzhenovsky was actually masterminded by the party and was not Spiridonova's individual initiative.

Despite this difference, Gershuni, Karpovich, Sikorski and Sazonov find it important to explain as Vladimirov did it before them, Spiridonova's participation in political violence, and like Vladimirov they find their explanation in her unusual personality. They for instance write:

“с каким светлым чувством восторженного удовлетворения, с какой гордостью и любовью склоняемся мы перед вашей обаятельной смелостью, перед вашей несокрушимой стойкостью и беззаветной верой, перед величием дела, которому вы служите, и всемогуществом идеи, вас одухотворяющей и дающей вам, такой юной и хрупкой, такие гигантские силы!” (Gershuni, Karpovich, Sikorsky & Sazonov 1906: 89).

"with what pure feeling of enthusiastic satisfaction, with what pride and love we bow in front of your charming courage, in front of your indestructible firmness and complete belief, before the greatness of the cause that you serve, and omnipotence of the idea that spiritualizes you and gives you, so young and frail, such huge strength!"

As it can be seen the authors of the letter describe Spiridonova, as Vladimirov did, as a woman who possessed the best male features: courage, firmness of will and strength. It is also remarkable that the authors of the letter represent the roots of Spiridonova's strength in her political beliefs closely connected to her membership in the PSR. What is implied here in other words is that Spiridonova could become an outstanding woman because she was

affiliated within the right party. At the same time, this part of the letter also highlights that Spiridonova was a woman and possessed typically female features like frailty and charm. In other words, the authors of the letter chose, like Vladimirov, to introduce Spiridonova as an outstanding person, who combined the best male and female features, the combination that gave her an opportunity to become an agent of political violence. No wonder that later in the letter Spiridonova is directly called “unusual woman” (Gershuni, Karpovich, Sikorsky & Sazonov 1906: 90). The difference is that while Vladimirov saw her as unusual because of her personality, the PSR members introduced her as such because of her political beliefs.

However, it should be also noticed that despite the similarity with Vladimirov’s representation of Spiridonova as an unusual woman, the account produced by Gershuni, Karpovich, Sikorski and Sazonov highlights that her greatness lay more in her agency than in her sufferings:

“Вас уже сравнивали с истерзанной Россией. И вы, товарищ, несомненно, - её символ. Но символ не только измученной страны..., - вы символ ещё и юной, восставшей, борющейся, стойкой и самоотверженной России. И в этом всё величие, вся красота дорогого нам вашего образа”. (Gershuni, Karpovich, Sikorsky & Sazonov 1906: 88).

"You have already been compared to the tormented Russia. And you, comrade, undoubtedly, are its symbol. But the symbol not only of the exhausted country... - you are also the symbol of the young, rising, fighting, resistant and self-sacrificing Russia. And in this lies all the greatness, all the beauty of your image, which is so dear to us".

The authors of the letter highlight here that Spiridonova is an important figure in the political life of Russia, but not because she suffered in the hands of the ruling regime. They express quite clearly that in their eyes Spiridonova is important because she was able to show the example of fighting, resisting and sacrificing herself for the country. In other words, they highlight that Spiridonova is interesting to them not in the female role of victim of violence, but in the male role of fighter.

Thus, Vladimirov’s representation of Spiridonova as an unusual woman possessing both the best male and female qualities has become the dominant model for introducing her by both liberals and socialists. The main difference in their representations lay in the fact that liberal authors tended to limit the significance of Spiridonova to the typically female role of victim of violence, while the socialists highlighted her agency or more specifically her ability to fight the enemy. However, even as such the representations that they created can’t be called wholly agentic since Spiridonova’s strength is still represented by them as the result of her political affiliation rather than originating within her – a feature which highlights the supraindividual agency of the PSR behind her deed rather than her individual agency.

Conservative Discourse after V.E. Vladimirov

After Vladimirov’s publications about Spiridonova became known in the country, conservative authors have begun to change the attitude towards the nature of her agency in their writings. After the story of Spiridonova’s sufferings in the hands of the government agents and parts of her individual history became known to the wider public nobody pictured her as an unnatural woman anymore. However, despite that change of opinion, the conservative authors were still not able to recognize her, a woman, as an agent of political violence.

On March 12, 1906 Cossack captain A.P. Filimonov, one of Spiridonova's attorneys, made his speech in Spiridonova's defense during her trial. With reference to Spiridonova's motivation for Luzhenovsky's assassination he reported to the court:

“я вижу слабую, измученную, едва достигшую совершеннолетия молодую девушку, почти девочку, которой предъявили обвинение по статье закона, знающей только одно наказание - лишение жизни. (...) ...у меня в ушах стоит горячая, искренняя история - исповедь этой удивительной девушки, с горячей головой и пылким воображением, увлекшейся сладкой, но несбыточной мечтой о счастье дорогого нам всем народа” (quoted in: Vladimirov 1906: 109).

“I see a weak, exhausted, young girl who has hardly reached majority, almost a little girl, who is accused under the article of law which knows only one punishment - execution. (...) ...I hear a searing, sincere history - a confession of this amazing girl, with a hot-headed and ardent imagination, who got fond of the sweet but unrealizable dream of happiness of the common people, who are dear to all of us”.

The portrayal of Spiridonova constructed by Filimonov is not at all representing her as a deviant woman. On the contrary, the author highlights his client's fair sex, and feminizes her even more by using adjectives like “weak” and “ardent”, which are considered to be “typically” feminine features. The author frames Spiridonova as a “good” woman, mentioning her sincerity and describing her as “amazing”. The last adjective however implies that Filimonov, as well as liberal and socialist authors, wishes to picture Spiridonova as an unusual woman. Indeed although he doesn't elaborate on the topic, he labels her political interests and aspirations as “a sweet, but unrealizable dream” and through this labeling the attorney declines to attach importance and meaningfulness to Spiridonova's political convictions. As a result, he portrays his client as a good woman, who has basically been misled by an illusion, and the victimizing representation of Spiridonova that he is intending to create is further reinforced by the usage of words such as “weak” and “exhausted”. In other words, by feminizing and victimizing Spiridonova, Filimonov avoids, in line with others, speaking about her as an agent of political violence.

This discourse of feminization and victimization of Spiridonova became very popular in conservative press. On March 18, 1906 *Novoe vremya* published an article about Spiridonova's case entitled as “The Victim of Provincial Revolution” (“Жертва губернской революции”), where the author portrayed Spiridonova as “a good, kind girl, a gentle person, womanly, soft, moral”, who ended up assassinating a government official because the forces of provincial revolution could use her as their weapon (1906: 86-87). The author of an article about Spiridonova in another conservative newspaper *Russkoe gosudarstvo* (*The Russian State*) from April 7, 1906 gives a more profound explanation of the case. Spiridonova is introduced there as a young girl and passionate enthusiast⁸ who

“успела отравиться слишком сильным и заманчивым для молодых людей ядом революционной пропаганды; на веру приняла она своим юным сердцем звонкие и красивые фразы беспощадной критики всего существующего, фразы, ни к чему не обязывающие их авторов, но сплошь и

⁸ “Молоденькая девушка, пылкая энтузиастка...” (Da zdravstvuet poryadok! 1906: 126).

рядом толкающие на путь самых тяжёлых преступлений неопытные, неустановившиеся умы молодых адептов” (Da zdravstvuet porjadok! 1906: 127).

“managed to get poisoned with the venom of revolutionary propaganda too strong and tempting for young people; she trusted with her young heart popular and beautiful words of ruthless criticism of everything existing, phrases, non-committal to their authors, but pretty often pushing unsteady minds of inexperienced young adherents towards the most serious crimes”.

In both cases the authors focus on introducing Spiridonova as a person who had all the necessary features of a “good” woman: kindness, femininity, gentleness, and high morals. However, at the same time they describe her as a young and naïve person, who was manipulated by the revolutionaries into taking part in a political assassination. By feminizing and infantilizing Spiridonova the conservative authors deny her as an agent of political violence in her own right. Despite the fact that she actually had committed a political assassination, these authors, like Vladimirov, picture Spiridonova in the “typically” female role of victim, but this time as the victim of the revolutionaries, who had manipulated and abused her for their own purposes. In this way Spiridonova’s agency gets overshadowed by her victimhood.

Conclusions

The analysis above of the different strategies used before the Russian Revolution to explain Maria Spiridonova’s violent political agency by different authors shows the way political violence conducted by women was approached in pre-revolutionary Russia.

The conservative forces were obviously not ready to accept a woman as an agent of political violence, as their attempts to explain Spiridonova’s assassination of Luzhenovsky were mainly made in terms of her deviation from the hypothetical female/human norm. Even after Vladimirov’s investigation, when some more details of the case became known, the conservatives still refused to see Spiridonova as a political agent, and preferred instead to introduce her as a manipulated victim of male revolutionaries, lacking political objectives of her own.

The liberals on the other hand seem to have been more open to the idea of acknowledging a woman as a violent political agent, since they recognized Spiridonova as a person who possessed both male and female features and who, above all, was pursuing her political goals. However, the way they focused on her sufferings after the arrest instead of elaborating on her participation in political assassination shows that they still were more disposed to see a woman as a victim in the situation of political violence rather than an autonomous violent agent. Moreover, although Spiridonova’s agency was recognized within that discourse, she was definitely not introduced as wholly agentic.

Indeed, the socialists seem to be the only political force who actually were interested in highlighting Spiridonova as a violent political agent and not merely as a victim. Although they used the same strategy as liberals by representing her as an outstanding personality consisting of the best female and male qualities, they didn’t pay much attention to Spiridonova’s individual agency, and highlighted instead the supra-individual agency of the PSR as the driving force behind Luzhenovsky’s assassination. Spiridonova in other words is pictured hardly more than a mere executioner of the will of the party and, thus, not at all as a wholly agentic individual.

To repeat a point mentioned at the outset, it is possible to see in all these cases significant similarities between on the one hand the ways pre-revolutionary authors chose to construct Spiridonova and on the other hand the discourses on politically violent women in research on contemporary terrorism. Due to these similarities it therefore seems plausible to suggest that the findings of this body of research can be of much value for the analysis of historical material from Russia, and can help us attain a better understanding of the role of political terrorism in pre-revolutionary Russia and women's role in it. Moreover, the case of Spiridonova analyzed in the current article shows that in pre-revolutionary Russia the forces that supported political terrorism were not at all ready to represent a woman participating in political violence as wholly agentic but similarly to the conservative authors, developed different strategies to avoid creating such representations. This means that further historical research into the representations of terrorist women can lead to new theoretical insights that, in their turn, can be used in research on contemporary political terrorism.

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