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Killer Fabulations

Terrorists-Writers and the Propaganda of the Deed in the Russian Empire

This paper examines the structural affinity between terrorist violence and literary fiction in the Russian Empire through the concept of autofabulation: a mode of discourse in which testimony and invention, sincerity and deception, and factuality and counterfactuality become inseparable. It argues that the ‘propaganda of the deed’ was not merely a political use of violence but a communicative practice that necessarily assumed an aesthetic narrative form. Like narrative, terrorist communication generates both a plot – a sequence of transgressive events – and a perspective that seeks to control their interpretation. Like fiction, it recursively embeds mental states and splits communicative roles between direct participants and a wider audience, incorporating the communicative situation itself into the act of communication. The article traces this logic through Nikolai Leskov’s anti-terrorist writings and the self-representations of Boris Savinkov and other writers. It argues that autofabulation operates at a level above the distinction between fact and non-fact: it concerns the distinction between discourses subject to the demand to distinguish truth from untruth and those that, like fiction, suspend that distinction. Autofabulation thus emerges as a mode in which violence, narration, and self-fashioning jointly destabilize meaning precisely through the attempt to control it strategically.

1. Introduction*

In this contribution, I propose to speak not of autofiction but of autofabulation. Whereas the term *autofiction*, introduced by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, designates a specific current within contemporary literature shaped by psychoanalysis, leftist thought, and postmodernism (Gratton 2002), *autofabulation*, as theorized by Vincent Colonna, refers not simply to a genre but to a broader discursive posture of “fabulation de soi” (“fabulation of the self”) (Colonna 2004, 70–71, 75, 93), whose genealogy reaches back to Lucian of Samosata (2014). It designates a play between falsehood and confession that constitutes a cultural constant, recurring across historical contexts – inter alia in recent and contemporary autofiction (Colonna 2004; Giroud 2024). This autofabular dynamic becomes particularly salient in periods marked by political violence and provocation, such as the era of terrorism in the Russian Empire, where the boundaries between testimony, invention, and self-fashioning were persistently, intentionally, and skillfully destabilized.¹

In what follows I show that autofabulation combines testimonial intent with counterfactual elements, doing so in a deliberately provocative, even transgressive manner that calls its factual status into question. Yet it cannot be dismissed as falsehood, since it does not primarily aim at the

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¹ See Venturi 1972; Geifman 1993; Geifman 2010; Mogil’ner 1999; Budnickii 2000; Hilbrenner 2014; Dietze 2016; Patyk 2017; Patyk 2018.

statement of verifiable facts but operates within the domain of art. An autofabular utterance is therefore not a proposition in the strict sense. At the same time, its counterfactual dimension cannot be reduced to fiction understood as an inconsequential imitation of propositional discourse, for it remains bound to the testimonial impulse. In contradistinction to fiction, an autofabular utterance is not exempt from the demand for truthfulness or falsity, because it speaks in the mode of testimony, yet it also resists being judged by that criterion alone. The issue, then, is not an inability to distinguish between fact and fiction; rather, autofabulation operates at a higher level, distinguishing between types of discourse – those subject to the constraint of truth and falsehood, and those that, like “pure fiction” (if there ever was one), suspend that very difference.

2. Propaganda of the Deed/of the Dead

From the 1870s to the 1910s, so-called “individual terrorism” – targeting specific figures in power rather than the general populace – was sufficiently widespread in the Russian Empire that attacks on rulers and leading politicians became known worldwide as the “Russian method” (Geifman 1993; Patyk 2017). In the 1870s and 1880s, within the milieu of *narodnichestvo*, and again around 1905 under the aegis of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, Russian revolutionary terrorists captured broad public attention and, in some circles, were elevated to the status of idols – figures admired for their radical commitment and readiness for self-sacrifice in the struggle against autocracy (Pipes 1990; Mogil’ner 1999). This coincided with the glory days of realist fiction, which produced a large body of works depicting terrorists and their exploits.

Terrorist activities were often described as “propaganda of the deed” (*propaganda dei fatti*, *propagande par le fait*, *пропаганда делами*), which they themselves presented as a last resort – an answer to the brutal repression that had rendered “propaganda by the word” among peasants and workers largely ineffective (Stepniak-Kravchinskii 1883). Thus, deeds – words by other means – became part of a communicative situation; accordingly, terrorism is still understood today as a form of violent communication.² As I will demonstrate, this communication had a lot of common features with literary fiction or fabulation – and with narrative (Mrugalski 2024).

“Propaganda of the deed” is usually understood as “propaganda by the deed”: the idea that acts of political violence – especially targeted assassinations – should shock the public and inspire imitation, encouraging the masses to participate in the same violence (Linse 1982; Constance 2019). Yet for such acts to be effective, they must be publicized; they must enter circulation as narrative, otherwise they remain socially inert. In this sense, “propaganda of the deed” also implies “propaganda for the deed”: the deed is not only the medium but also the object of communication. Form and content thus coincide, becoming two aspects of a single activity that is at once destructive and productive – an operation not unlike that of modernist literature, which dismantles and reconstructs its own medium, often being autothematic. The ambiguity of the term “propaganda of the deed” therefore reflects the intimate connection between political violence and literary fiction in the nineteenth-century Russian Empire.

² See Schmid / de Graaf 1982; Schmid 2012; Dietze 2016; Hilbrenner 2014.

The corpus of writings associated with terrorism in the Russian Empire reproduces, on a global scale, the provocative structure of an autofabular utterance, setting fiction and factuality in continual tension. Alongside canonical works by writers such as Dostoevsky, Leskov, and Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), it includes factual – or, as I will demonstrate, autofabular – texts produced by terrorists themselves, who persistently publicized and interpreted their own actions (Savinkov 1909a; Stepniak-Kravchinskii 1883). While the biographies of terrorists provided material for fiction, real-life revolutionaries, *mutatis mutandis*, described their own actions as shaped by literary models. Figures such as Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinskii and Boris Savinkov recur as characters across numerous works of fiction (Savinkov alone obviously inspired Aleksandr Blok's *Vozmezdnie* [1910–1921], Andrei Bely's *Peterburg* [1913], Roman Gul's *General BO* [1929; revised as *Azef*, 1959], Boris Akunin's *Ne proshchajus'* [2018], and most probably many others). Conversely, Michail Bakunin and Sergei Nechaev invoked the plot of Schiller's *Räuber* (1781) as a model for the further actions of the radical youth (Rudnickaia 1997, 219). Nikolai Chernyshevsky's novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863) came to function as a “behavioral text” of sorts for revolutionary militants modeling their lives on the figure of Rakhmetov (Paperno 1988, 28-31). The ease with which revolutionary terrorists turned writers moved between document and novel is striking. This is particularly evident in the case of Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinskii, who authored the novel *The Career of a Nihilist* (1888; Scotto 2010) alongside numerous proclamations and the documentary, albeit propagandistic, study *Underground Russia* (1883). A similar fluidity characterizes Boris Savinkov (Ropshin), whose *Memoirs of a Terrorist* and the novel *The Pale Horse* appeared in the same year (Savinkov 1909a; Savinkov 1909b).

Ostensibly fictional works draw on real events, while political statements and proclamations – embedded in ongoing struggle – employ narration, fabrication, and a strategic loosening of reference in order to achieve their effect. Rather than merely reporting facts, they often seek to produce them, frequently adopting the form of reports and the voice of the first-person plural (Rudnickaia 1997). The relation between fact and fabrication thus resembles a Möbius strip. Most stories and novels rest on a documentary substratum, while proclamations and manifestos, conversely, incorporate counterfactual elements. The question is not whether such elements are present, but which parts they occupy and how they function within the whole.

Autofabulation encapsulates the essential logic of terrorist propaganda, which consists of both provocative deeds and provocative utterances – two communicative regimes that refer to and depend upon one another (Schmid 2012; Paris 2015). In each, form and content, medium and message, as we have seen, coincide as aspects of a single act of communication – of propaganda. Attentats and proclamations alike are designed to incite imitation among the populace and to provoke self-compromising reactions from the authorities, thereby exposing their true character (Paris 2015, 49). Deeds generate narratives, narratives anticipate and shape deeds, and both operate in a space where the actual and the possible continuously fold into one another. By orienting themselves toward a possible (and desired) rather than an existing state of affairs, such acts of provocation destabilize the boundary between factuality and counterfactuality, while foreclosing any retreat into fiction, where the obligation to distinguish between truth and falsehood is suspended (Ingarden 1983). The reality of death – as a *signifiant* at play in these communicative actions – renders such suspension impossible.

Therefore, although “propaganda of the deed,” understood as a form of communication, shares at least two essential formal features with fictional works, it cannot be classified as fiction, since it

produces real deaths and suffering. In this respect, it more closely resembles autofabulation. The most salient qualities shared by individual terrorism and fiction are as follows:

(1) *Recursive embedding of mental states*. According to Lisa Zunshine (2022), fictional discourse is characterized by the presentation of “recursively embedded mental states,” that is, by representations of what people think about how others think about their thinking. Such structures are typically absent from factual discourse. Yet in situations of pervasive uncertainty – such as those produced by terror and provocation – individuals are compelled to act and speak in ways that resemble fictional characters: they attempt to anticipate how others interpret their intentions and what is expected of them. In doing so, they reach at least the third level of mental-state embedding. As Zunshine (2022, 4) notes, “literature, as we know it today [...] cannot function on lower than the third level of embedment.” I argue that in the case of the propaganda of the deed literature, reactions to violence, and acts of violence themselves operate within the same cognitive register, apparently restricted to literary fiction. As John Dewey (2021, 84) suggests, violence presupposes not only the intentionality of a forceful act, but also that this act is directed against the intentions of others. Violence disrupts, redirects, or, conversely, implants intentions; in the context of terrorist struggle, the perpetrator seeks to shape the intentions of the addressee and of public opinion, strategically presenting their own intentions so as to guide their interpretation and response.

(2) *The splitting of communicative instances*. According to the United Nations Consensus Academic Definition (Schmid 2012, 158), acts of terrorism are communicative acts structured by a division between “direct targets” and “main targets.” In such a configuration, those directly affected by violence serve primarily as carriers of a message addressed elsewhere (this is why I referred to their deaths as *signifiant*, whereas normally, in factual life and many a fictive story death functions as an ultimate *signifié* of each action). The immediate victims serve as mediums through which communication is directed toward a broader audience – whether political authorities or the public at large – since, as is often noted, dead politicians cannot be coerced into making concessions. It is precisely this division within communicative roles – between direct and indirect participants – that makes it possible to align acts of terror with literary works, which likewise presuppose both explicit and implicit instances of authorship and readership. As Balcerzan (1971) observes, literary narrative texts uniquely incorporate the act of communication itself into their structure, representing processes of transmission and reception alongside the diegetic world; they therefore necessarily differentiate between intra- and extratextual, fictional and empirical levels. In a similar vein, Foucault (1981, 58f.) maintains that “authored texts” are characterized by a structural discontinuity between the fictional speaker and the empirical writer; the “author function,” central to fiction, emerges precisely within this gap.

As a rule, in the context of the Russian Empire, this division on the side of the receiver corresponds to a parallel split on the side of the emitter – the communicating ‘I’ or ‘we.’ The sender in terrorist communication is thus invariably autofabular, never fully identical with a stable, authentic subject presupposed by serious factual communication. In order to generate revolutionary energy, sustain conspiracy, disorient the adversary, and heighten general uncertainty, historical actors endowed their speaking instance with imaginary attributes: the “Revolutionary Central Committee” appears as the author of the manifesto *Young Russia* (1862), though it was in fact written by the imprisoned student Petr Zaichnevskii (Rudnickaia 1997, 142–150); Mikhail Bakunin and Sergei Nechaev invoked the fictive, omnipotent organization “People’s Retribution” (Wurr 2017, 50–67), and so on. In this respect, terrorist communication approaches the logic of

fiction, where the splitting of sender and receiver into actual and constructed instances is not incidental but constitutive. And still, it cannot be recognized as fiction despite sharing with fiction the latter's most salient features.

“Propaganda of the deed” and “provocation” evoke the two central dimensions of terrorist communication. While the former connotes the coincidence of medium and message, the latter inscribes this coincidence within a dynamic structure of communication, in which each action calls forth a reciprocal – often intensified but always oppositional – response. Each receiver is predestined and enticed to become a sender, and vice versa. And this demand for a response is so poignant that the presentation of the communicative situation (the exchange [of blows]) becomes an aspect of the communication itself, as in a literary work of art, which likewise embeds presumed or desired mental states in advance as impulses toward action.

Terrorist communication does not operate merely as communication, but it necessarily assumes the form of *narration*. First, it is at least partially verbal (propaganda) and concerns events arranged in sequence – or indeed actively arranges them into a sequence – where narrative events, in Jurij Lotman's (1977, 231–238) sense, are defined as transgressions, violations of established boundaries that make them narratable in the first place. Second, it inevitably involves a narrative perspective, since the stake of communication lies in securing interpretive authority (*Deutungshoheit*) over these events and mental states. Once mental states are embedded in and controlled by the communicative act, they must, as a matter of logical and analytical necessity, be localized: they necessarily presuppose a point of view, just as narrative does. What is at issue, therefore, is not only *what* happens, but also *how* it is presented and understood. Terrorist acts thus generate both a plot, i.e., a sequence of transgressive events, and a perspective that seeks to control their meaning, or responses they generate.

3. Responses to the Propaganda of the Deed. Anti-terrorist Autofabulation

Nikolai Leskov (1998) engaged with nihilist conspiracies in two capacities. As a conservative journalist, he reported on the wave of arsons that shook St. Petersburg in 1862 – a subject later taken up in a traditionalist, anti-nihilist novel, Vsevolod Krestovskii's (1869) *Panurge's herd* [*Panurgovo stado*]. Leskov also treated the same topic of conspiracy and provocation in his fiction, notably in *No Way Out* [*Nekuda*] (1863) and *At Daggers Drawn* [*Na nozhakh*] (1871) (Leskov 1997; Leskov 2004b). In what follows, I focus on the representation of the historical figures Artur Benni and Leskov himself in the novel *No Way Out* and in the documentary account *The Mysterious Man* [*Zagadochnyi chelovek*] (1871) (Leskov 2004a).

No Way Out caused a major scandal as a *roman à clef*, particularly for its depiction of Vasili Slepov's commune in St. Petersburg – also parodied in Krestovskii's novel – the first such commune in which men and women lived together (Johnson 2011, 3). The British-Polish revolutionary Artur Benni – who imagined himself a Russian revolutionary – appears in the novel under the alias Vilgelm Rainer (Szyszko 1996). The narrative's documentary veneer allows the narrator to reinforce propagandistic distortions. Just as contemporary discourse portrays Russia as supposedly fighting the whole NATO in Ukraine, the Polish January Uprising of 1863 is represented as a large-scale international Russophobic military effort. Having joined the Polish

insurgents, Rainer dies in a field infirmary beside a Black fighter. The implication is that the entire world had allied itself with the Polish “gangs” [*bandy*] (Leskov 2004a, 80) in order to threaten Russia.

The diegetic world of *No Way Out* is structured by multilayered conspiracies: Russian revolutionaries are manipulated by Polish conspirators, who are in turn controlled by the Jesuits. In this way, the narrative’s reference to real events, such as the Polish uprising, serves as a vehicle for elaborate conspiracy theories and far-fetched counterfactuals. These theories – significantly, propagated by or in support of the government – are, in turn, partially bracketed or attenuated through allusions to Eugène Sue’s *The Wandering Jew* (1844/45) and to the conventions of the Gothic novel. Such framing does not invalidate them; rather, it renders them more palatable to an educated public – the sweet coating allowing at least some of the bitter substance to pass into the bloodstream. Interestingly, the novel reproduces a similar strategy of manipulation within its diegetic world. Beloiarov, modeled on the real-life writer Slepcev, appears as the leader of the commune. In the early chapters, he advocates an art-for-art’s-sake position; yet it later becomes clear that his aestheticism functions as a smokescreen for manipulative rhetorical techniques, which he deploys to influence other members of the commune, especially women, and bend them to his will. This portrayal of communication – constantly oscillating between sincerity and fabrication – raises questions about the relation between fact and fiction and is characteristic of terrorist discourse, particularly the logic of the “propaganda of the deed,” thereby situating the narrative within a broader horizon of provocation and propaganda. Within this framework of provocation, Artur Benni was accused – by those he took to be his like-minded revolutionary friends – of being an agent of the political police (Szyszko 1997, 39).

Leskov’s (2004a) documentary account of Benni (the model for the novel’s Rainer), titled *The Mysterious Man* (1871), must be read against this backdrop. In the eight years following the publication of *No Way Out*, the accusations that Benni was an agent provocateur gained increasing traction, forcing him to leave Russia; he eventually died in 1867 while fighting in Garibaldi’s army (Leskov 2004a, 557). Prefaced by a letter to Ivan Turgenev – another friend and defender of Benni – *The Mysterious Man* ostensibly seeks to clear his name, yet it also bears the marks of autofabulation.

After becoming a pariah in the eyes of the general public – largely under the influence of the progressive critic Dmitrii Pisarev, who vehemently attacked *No Way Out* (Pisarev 1981) – Leskov sought to defend himself without alienating conservative circles. To do so, he had to clear Benni of the charge of being an agent of the political police, since such an accusation, if upheld, would implicate both Benni and Leskov in the eyes of their critics, particularly within revolutionary circles. The result is a form of autofabulation that is not overtly egocentric: the first-person narrator remains a secondary figure, yet the narrative nonetheless serves to rehabilitate the author’s public persona. In the novel *No Way Out*, the author defends Benni by granting his avatar, Rainer, a counterfactual death – modeled on the fate of the most ardent revolutionaries, such as the Ukrainian Andrei Potebnia, who joined the Polish insurgents. In the documentary account, the focus on the real-life Benni, sticking to true events, foregrounds the counterfactuals – indeed, outright falsehoods – that permeate Russian society, its skewed self-image.

Benni – an Englishman born and raised in partitioned Poland under Tsarist rule – comes to Russia with the aim of liberating its people. *The Mysterious Man* thus unfolds as the story of a stranger in a strange land. Russia, and especially the milieu of the progressives with whom Benni seeks contact, appears as a domain of deception, layered with falsehoods that are exposed by his

estranging naïveté and fashionable idealism. He arrives with illusions: an admiration for peasant collectivist institutions and communal landholding, and the conviction – encouraged by *émigré* thinkers such as Aleksandr Herzen and Mikhail Bakunin – that Russia stands on the brink of revolution. Yet these expectations are swiftly undermined. A scene in chapter nine, depicting what is supposed to be a clandestine maneuver in a public square – effectively an assembly of revolutionaries – reveals the illusory nature of such hopes: only five people appear (Leskov 2004a, 23–26). Leskov thus pointedly recasts the so-called “revolutionary period” of Russian history as a “comical period” (63), not least because everybody does its utmost to sustain the illusion against one’s better judgement: “They tried to attribute the failure of the maneuvers to the fact that Benny was a new face and that not everyone trusted him; Benny showed that he believed this; but he understood perfectly well that this was a ploy” (25). The fragment exemplifies the embedding of mental states within an apparently factual narrative, thereby pointing to its autofabular character. Russia emerges in it as a land of illusions, such that its only truthful representation is to be found not in political discourse but in fiction, above all in Gogol’s (1842) *Dead Souls* (Leskov 2004a, 91).

If Leskov seeks to clear his own name of calumny by demonstrating – through the example of Benni – the distorted nature of the revolutionaries’ worldview, he must proceed with considerable restraint; any overt self-justification would risk being dismissed as an exploitation of Benni’s fate. Accordingly, Leskov introduces himself only late in the narrative, first appearing in chapter twenty-seven (of forty-four) as Benni’s roommate and confidant (Leskov 2004a, 61f.). His most candid statement of intent in this biographical account is, tellingly, half-concealed in a footnote in chapter twenty-nine:

Usov [...] had been advised not to retain Benni among his employees. This fact, known to many who are still alive today, deserves to be recorded as evidence that Benni was never protected by any special department; on the contrary, his presence brought trouble upon those who came into contact with him. Such difficulties, at times quite serious, befell several people, but they weighed most heavily on me. In addition to the vile slanders spread at my expense by those who inspected Benni’s correspondence – because I did not share the views they sought to impose on everyone – my association with him appeared so suspect that even my most innocent wish to travel abroad, through Lithuania and Galicia, gave rise to curious inquiries about my person. Arthur Benni found himself in such a position that even the most natural expressions of friendship toward him could not be entertained without arousing suspicion: anyone who befriended him was liable to be regarded as either a revolutionary, a spy, or both at once. (Leskov 2004a, 65f.)

Not only Benni and his associates were perceived as both revolutionaries and spies; this overlap reflects a broader phenomenon rooted in the dynamics of autofabulation. Evno Azef, for instance, simultaneously headed the Combat Organization of the Socialist Revolutionary Party and served as an agent of the secret police, a dual role earlier exemplified by Sergei Degaev (alias Alexander Pell; Pipes 2003 is devoted to the Degaev affair). In such a context, the biography of any revolutionary becomes suspect, always liable to be read as fabrication. The very fact that leading militants could be regarded at once as committed revolutionaries and as agents provocateurs points to a fundamental feature of terrorism as a form of communication: both sides rely on provocation (Paris 2014, 53–54). As the preferred method of both terrorists and secret services – the two parties engaged in this communicative exchange – provocation renders their positions structurally symmetrical and, at times, interchangeable (Enzensberger 1964, 353–359; Budnickii 2000, 4). Through provocation, terrorism emerges as a genuinely communicative practice, in which terrorists and the secret police mutually sustain one another’s existence; neither can operate without eliciting a response from the other. The very existence of these opposing sides thus becomes a function of

communication – of provocation itself – a condition encapsulated in the necessity of autofabulation, which unsettles the boundary between veridical and fictional discourse.

In this context, an innocent and naïve individual such as Benni not only can but must be falsely accused, since his naïveté cannot be recognized for what it is. Conversely, a writer accused of being a provocateur can hope to be seen as simple, guileless, and sincere once his audience understands the structural necessity of innocence being slandered.

Provocation operates through a calculated interplay of falsehood and truthfulness. It deploys fabrications that align with the perceiver's expectations about the structure of the world in order to achieve tangible effects, while real acts of violence serve to trigger the production of explanatory narratives about the intentions of the actors involved. The intensity of this interpretive effort, however, leads to an excess of explanation – an overproduction of meaning that, in turn, amplifies rather than dispels falsehood. As quantity changes into quality, explanations gain the quality of excuses. Leskov's narratives demonstrate defensive tactics of provocation directed against the propaganda of the deed and entails the exchangeability of positions in this communicative practice.

4. Terrorists' Fabulations and Autofabulations

Boris Savinkov was the deputy leader of the combat organization of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, responsible for the two most famous assassinations (for his biography see Alexandrov 2021). In 1909 he published two books on the same subject: *Memoirs of a Terrorist* [*Vospominaniia terrorista*] and *Pale Horse* [*Kon' blednyi*], a testimony and a novel (Savinkov 1909a; Savinkov 1909b).

In the mode of autofabulation, the author and the protagonist typically share the same name, thereby collapsing the distance between lived experience and narrative construction. In Savinkov's case, this convergence is displaced: The first-person narrator of *The Pale Horse* shares with the real militant of the memoirs not a name, but a structural trait: the adoption of a false English identity. Savinkov himself assumed the persona of an English salesman while conducting covert surveillance of the Grand Duke, whereas the autodiegetic narrator of *The Pale Horse*, named George, appears in Moscow under the guise of an English gentleman. What the historical figure and the ostensibly fictional first-person narrator share is a reliance on assumed identity. What may appear contingent in factual accounts is elevated in the novel to the level of a general principle: the revolutionary subject necessarily destabilizes the boundary between sincerity and deception.³

³ Presumably, in keeping with the conventions of the time, the fictional account of *Pale Horse* serves as the privileged space in which the author, in contradistinction to the memoir, can 'say everything' under the protective guise of invention. The sense of sincerity thereby attributed to fiction is further reinforced by the inaccuracies and occasional absurdities that mark the documentary record. In this light, the episode from the *Memoirs* that inspired Camus's *Les Justes* (1950) – Ivan Kalaev's refusal to throw a bomb on the Grand Duke because of the presence of his family members in the coach – proves far less convincing than it appears (Savinkov 1990a, 69–106). Rather than a model of heroic resolve, it reads as an extended justification of what was, from the standpoint of terrorist tactics, a series of miscalculations. Even though the attentat was eventually successful, its execution demanded justification. Kalaev acted as a lone bomb thrower – despite the usual practice of deploying several – and the eventual success of the attack seems largely accidental. What strains credulity is not the claim that he hesitated to kill the Grand Duke's wife and children, but the very decision to attempt the assassination during a public ceremony at a theater, organized by the Duchess herself, a ceremony about which the terrorists learned from newspaper reports, when the conspirators were already aware of the Grand Duke's predictable weekly trips across the town. The assumption that the Grand Duke would appear alone under such circumstances appears implausible. Equally unconvincing are the explanations offered for the

If writers of fiction sought to exert a direct influence on reality as authors, they had to resort to provocation. This entailed, first, destabilizing the merely fictional status of their works by anchoring them in real persons and events; and second, recursively modeling within the narrative the effects of such hybrid (fictional/non-fictional) discourse upon the diegetic world, in the hope of producing a kind of bottom-up metalepsis (Genette 1998, 92–95). This strategy was viable only insofar as activists could be presented as authors. Since such figures devoted their lives to the cause – embodying it and leading by example – they tended to produce forms of autofabulation. This helps explain why the fiction of *The Pale Horse* places far greater emphasis than the *Memoirs* on the literary activity of Janek, the fictional counterpart of Kalaev, nicknamed “Poet,” who is portrayed not only as a poet but also as an ideologue, deluding himself with quotes from the Scripture that killing political enemies amounts to an essence of Christianity (Savinkov 1990b, 336f.).

Fedor Dostoevsky’s caricature of the notorious revolutionary Sergei Nechaev – Petr Verkhovenskiĭ – in *Demons* [*Besy*] (1872) seeks to unleash unprecedented revolutionary energies by disseminating among the people the legend he has fabricated: that the “true” tsar lives in hiding, embodied by the aristocratic Nikolai Stavrogin (Dostoevsky 1974, 325). In doing so, he draws on a pattern characteristic of Russian political culture, in which popular rebellion is closely intertwined with political usurpation (Perrie 1995, 246), that is autofabular claims to legitimate rule. The most prominent precedent is Emel’ian Pugachev, the leader of the great eighteenth-century uprising, who claimed to be the miraculously rescued Peter III, thereby presenting himself as the legitimate ruler displaced by his wife and assassin, Catherine II (Griesse 2021, 13). Such usurpers engaged in a form of autofabulation, grafting onto their real biographies the fabulation of a hidden or returned sovereign. In so doing, they articulated not merely a strategic falsehood, but a deeper truth about the structure of the empire and its political theology.

Real Nechaev authored *The Catechism of a Revolutionary* [*Katekhizis revoliucionera*] (1869). This catechism is essentially an instruction manual on how to lie to other people, especially about oneself, in accordance with the Bakunin principle of outraging the people rather than enlightening them (Rudnickaia 1997, 244–248).

In Stanisław Brzozowski’s historical novel *Flames* [*Plomienie*] (1908), Nechaev shocks a group of young students by invoking stark images of objectified women. He recounts to the narrator what he presents as his most personal story: how, after finding him ill and immobile on the street, a young prostitute cared for him, and how, while bedridden, he was forced to witness her being regularly beaten by her clients. He also claims that his own sister was sold as a child into sexual exploitation by a passing official. He concludes with a disquieting reflection: “You listen and think: he’s lying again. He tells sensational stories. And maybe I’m lying, maybe it didn’t happen to me. And does it matter? Don’t they abuse us, don’t they sell the bodies of our sisters?” (Brzozowski 1908, 171). In Brzozowski’s novel, Nechaev thus instrumentalizes autobiography as a medium for general processes typically explored by fiction. Yet the affective force of testimony – the outrage it provokes – disrupts the contemplative and theoretical distance usually associated with fiction.

absence of a second bomb thrower after Krolikovskii’s withdrawal: Moiseenko allegedly could not be reassigned without compromising his cover as a coachman, while Savinkov declined the role to avoid jeopardizing the real owner of the British passport he was using (Savinkov 1990a, 95). Such reasoning reads less as necessity than as retrospective rationalization – especially given that, by the time Savinkov’s account was written, Krolikovskii was no longer alive to contest it.

In reality, the aftermath of the Nechaev affair led revolutionary circles to renounce conspiracy and violence for several years; only later did they return to terrorist tactics, culminating in the “hunt for the tsar” and the assassination of Alexander II in March 1881, but ignoring Nechaev’s advice from behind the bars (Yarmolinsky 1956, V). Why, then, does he remain such a troubling and elusive figure? Why does Stepniak-Kravchinskii (1883), in his account of *Underground Russia*, omit so prominent an activist?

Nechaev’s “lies” – and his explicit theorization of lying in the *Catechism* – force revolutionaries to confront a disturbing possibility: that they are not fighting for some higher future truth capable of redeeming or relativizing present falsehoods, but rather operating within a system in which deception is intrinsic. Deception appears not as a provisional means, but as a structural necessity of revolution understood as outrageous, provocative communication. Within this framework, both sender and receiver must divide themselves into authentic and contrived identities; each side continually obscures the boundary between the factual and the non-factual by engaging in recursive projections of intention, anticipating how the other will interpret and respond to their own actions. If revolutionary struggle takes the form of provocation, then there is no revolution outside provocative communication – and no truth awaiting revelation beyond propaganda. That something is the case becomes a function of communicability within judgment, which, under conditions of provocation, can never achieve finality or closure. Just as terrorist discourse destroys the distanced innocence of fiction, it simultaneously undermines the possibility of fully truthful utterance. In the situation of revolutionary terror, both fiction and factual discourse are suspended; what remains is the fabulation of the self.

5. Conclusion

In sum, the phenomenon of terrorist writing in the Russian Empire reveals not merely a historical conjunction of narrative and political violence, but a structural affinity (including plot and perspective) grounded in the logic of provocation and propaganda. Autofabulation emerges as the key mode through which this affinity becomes legible: a form of discourse in which testimony and invention, sincerity and deception, action and narration become inseparable. Terrorist acts and their literary representations do not simply mirror one another; they co-constitute a communicative field in which reality itself is shaped through recursive interpretation and strategic self-fashioning. Figures such as Leskov, Savinkov, and Nechaev demonstrate, each in their own way, that under conditions of revolutionary provocation, neither factual discourse nor fiction can claim epistemic privilege. Instead, both are subsumed into a regime in which meaning is produced through communicability, and truth is displaced by the performative efficacy of propaganda. What remains, in this destabilized field, is the fabulation of the self – not as a deviation from truth, but as its historically specific condition of possibility.

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