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“I could hardly be called an ignorant fanatic”.

Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia and the Construction of a Revolutionary Autobiography

Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia is one of the better-known protagonists of the Russian Revolution, often referred to as the grandmother (*babushka*) of the revolution. Her auto/biographical writings have been composed in different periods and to different audiences. Therefore, the question of whether the presentation of *babushka*'s autobiography and of the revolutionary movement changed over the course of time and in view of the audience is of particular interest. How did Breshko-Breshkovskaia represent the revolutionary cause, the revolutionary biography, and the ideals of a revolutionist's life? Which strategies did she use to attract the audience and how did she explain her pathway to radicalization? What does this tell us about the self-perception of the revolutionaries – and especially female revolutionaries – or at least of *babushka*'s concept of a revolutionary life?

Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia is one of the better-known characters of the Russian Revolution. Belonging to the first generation of *narodniki*, she turned to the revolutionary cause at the age of 26 leaving behind a stable life, her husband, and her son. She actively took part in the propaganda among Russian peasants and was one of the founding members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. She was arrested twice and served long terms in prisons and in Siberian exile – the second term as an elderly woman. Like many other revolutionaries, Breshko-Breshkovskaia was eager to share her experiences with an audience both inside

and outside the Russian Empire. At several stages during her revolutionary career Breshko-Breshkovskaia published autobiographical material addressing readers of various countries. The majority of her works were aimed at a Russian readership, with the most extensive publications produced in English.¹ This fact was ignored by most of her biographers, as were the ambivalent aspects of her character and life. Instead, biographers of the ‘grandmother of the Russian Revolution’ followed the romanticized picture painted by contemporaries and friends of an

¹ For an extensive list of Breshko-Breshkovskaia's autobiographical writings see Field 1998.

amiable, humorous, self-sacrificing woman.²

This article seeks to overcome the common romanticizing picture of *babushka*. A re-reading and contextualizing of Breshko-Breshkovskaia's autobiographical materials will present in detail Breshko-Breshkovskaia's radicalism regarding both the concept of a revolutionary life and the question of political violence. Furthermore, the article touches upon analytical problems that occur when dealing with the autobiographies of Russian radicals of that time. The autobiographies of Petr Kropotkin, Vera Figner, Sofia Perovskaia, and others present a quite uniform picture of the Russian revolutionary movement and of each pathway into radicalization. The autobiographies of

women revolutionary terrorists in particular imitate role models found in Christian legends and in revolutionary literature (Rindlisbacher 2011: 99-115; Maier 2004; Patyk 2009). However, based on the assumption of a narrative construction of their autobiographical statements, the question arises to what extent revolutionaries formed their life according to the role model or rather adjusted their autobiographical narrative accordingly. Long before the 'narrative turn' started to influence social sciences, researchers from different scientific backgrounds have stressed the constructed nature of autobiography. Not only in the written form but also in day-to-day stories about the self, each individual consciously or unconsciously shapes her/his identity (Eakin 2008). These stories of the self bring experiences, episodes, and mental developments into a connected and comprehensible entity. Moreover, the narration of the self and of identity is essentially shaped by time, language, culture, and social relationships. Last but not least, autobiographical stories have an ethical dimension suggesting a moral perspective (Vassilieva 2016: 16-17).

The broad autobiographical material left behind by Breshko-Breshkovskaia allows us to pre-

² One could easily assign Barbara Evans Clements criticism on Jane E. Good's and David R. Jones' approach to the biography of Breshko-Breshkovskaia to other authors: Often enough they "stay very close to her voice and to the bland reverence for Breshko-Breshkovskaia that they have found in other revolutionaries' memoirs". See her review in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Winter, 1992): 816-817. Vera Broido confessed that she had a "romantic picture" of Breshko-Breshkovskaia and other "heroines of the revolutionary movement" (Broido 1978: personal note). See also Kelly/Boutilier 1978: 139-140. More recent publications equally miss a critical approach as for example Frolova 2004.

sent in detail the various influences on her life story. Rather than recounting Breshko-Breshkovskaia's biography, this article will show how her autobiographical narrative was construed according to a general pattern of revolutionary autobiographies, cultural and literary models of that time, and the propagandistic and self-assuring tendency of the author. This will help us to understand the self-perception of Russian radicals and to classify Breshko-Breshkovskaia's autobiographies as an exculpatory narrative intended to legitimize the pathway chosen and to restructure the personal development with all its decisions and turning points according to a linear and thus inevitable path.

Contextualizing Babushka's autobiographical writings

Katerina Breshko-Breshkovskaia has left us with a huge variety of oral and written statements that are connected in one way or another to the story of her life (Field 1998: 321-323). All of these autobiographical materials can be divided into two categories: stories about her personal history and memories about other prominent figures of the revolutionary movement both inside and outside of Russia. To the second category belong articles

published in Russian describing her acquaintance with, among others, Nikolai Kibalchich (Breshkovskaia 1906), Nikolai Ishutin (Breshkovskaia 1905), Nikolai Chaikovskii (Breshkovskaia 1929), Petr Kropotkin, Johan Most, and Louise Michel (Breshkovskaia 1921). While these articles provide us with only limited details of Breshko-Breshkovskaia's life as a revolutionary, they give some insight into her ideas of the revolutionists' way of life and her vision of the ideal revolutionary.

The first category of the autobiographical material is the main source for those interested in Breshko-Breshkovskaia's biography. Daniel Field, Jane E. Good, and David R. Jones have already emphasized the problems of autobiographical writings in general and Breshko-Breshkovskaia's in particular. Field exposed content-related differences between her various writings, thus pointing to the interdependence of memory and time (Field 1998). Good and Jones stressed the growing propagandistic intention of most of Breshko-Breshkovskaia's reminiscences (Good/Jones 1991: vii). Similarly, while the earlier pieces seem to be more reliable because of the proximity in time to the actual experiences, they are at the same time the most af-

fectured by propagandistic efforts. Most of the non-Russian publications are connected to a sort of public relations campaign by the Socialist Revolutionary Party, benefiting from the widening interest in Western countries. One of the first to write broadly about the Russian revolutionary movement for a non-Russian audience was Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinskii, who wanted to influence a Western readership in favor of the Russian revolutionary cause. His *Underground Russia* was published first in Italian in 1882. An English version appeared in 1883 and was followed by translations into various European languages (Patyk 2009: 768). In the United States, *Underground Russia*, the publications and lectures of George Kennan, and the Journal *Free Russia* sow the seeds for a broadening interest in the Russian revolutionary movement. Although the interest had cooled down by the turn of the century, the newly founded Socialist Revolutionary Party sent two emissaries, Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia and Chaim Zhitlovskii, to the United States in order to agitate Russian émigrés and the American public.³

³ Interestingly, the members of the American branch of the Socialist Revolutionary Party were initially less enthusiastic about their guests. They would

When Breshko-Breshkovskaia arrived in the United States in the fall of 1904, she quickly came into contact with American socialist and progressive circles. They supported her lecturing tour which was accompanied by broad media coverage in both immigrant as well as non-immigrant newspapers. The progressive magazine «The Outlook» published one of the longest features on Breshko-Breshkovskaia on January 7, 1905. Under the title *Katherine Bereshkovsky: A Russian Revolutionist*, Ernest Poole reproduced at length an interview he had conducted with Breshko-Breshkovskaia in 1904 (Poole 1905). Although we do not know how much Poole edited the narrative and whether the translation influenced the message, it becomes clear that the main aim of this text was to introduce the American reader to the objectives of the Russian revolution-

have preferred Osip Minor and Nikolai Chaikovskii or Dmitrii Khil'kov. Their argument was that Zhitlovskii had no "sensational past" (сенсационное прошлое), while Breshko-Breshkovskaia ran into danger of being arrested and expelled. See the letter of the American committee "To the committee of the Socialist Revolutionary Party abroad", 7 Oktober 1904, Partiiia Sotsialistov-Revoliutsionerov (PSR), Folder 163, p. 4, Archive of the International Institute for Social History (IISH), Amsterdam.

ary movement and to contrast the cruel and despotic tsarist regime with the picture of the self-sacrificing, humanistic revolutionary. The text of the interview was reprinted in different versions over the course of the following decade. A French version, published in 1910, presented an almost identical reprint of the interview as an autobiographical article of Breshko-Breshkovskaia (Ekaterina 1910). Seven years later, the suffragette Alice Stone Blackwell, who had become a close friend to Breshko-Breshkovskaia during the latter's stay in the United States, edited her old friend's reminiscences and letters. The 'reminiscences' were based mainly on Poole's interview and an interview Breshko-Breshkovskaia had given to Abraham Cahan for the Jewish daily «Vorwärts» (*Forward*) in 1904.⁴ The book therefore repeated Breshko-Breshkovskaia's self-presentation of 1904/05. The letters, written to her American friends from her Siberian exile, added to the picture of Breshko-Breshkovskaia as a caring and selfless person, and, indeed, the grandmother of the revolutionary movement (Blackwell 1918).

In 1917, Breshko-Breshkovskaia wrote the first Russian version of her life-story. It was published several times entitled either as *Avtobiografiia* or as *Babushka E.K. Breshko-Breshkovskaia o samoi sebe*. Breshko-Breshkovskaia wrote this account shortly after the February Revolution of 1917 had brought the annulment of her sentence to life long exile. This account presented an authoritative description of the revolutionists involved in the 'Going to the People' movement. In the French version of the Poole article and in this Russian version of her memoirs, Breshko-Breshkovskaia omitted the terroristic activities of the revolutionary movement. While the mention of terrorism could have worried a French audience that had experienced a violent wave of terrorism itself, for a Russian readership the reputation of the Fighting Organization of the Socialist Revolutionary Party had been shattered by the escalating violence of the First Russian Revolution as well as by several spy affairs.⁵ Additionally, given the revolutionary situation during the spring of 1917, Breshko-Breshkovskaia may have wished to stress the positive traits of the revolutionary movement. Over-

⁴ According to Field the original text has not survived (Field 1998: 331 FN 8).

⁵ On terrorism in France see for example Merriman 2016. On the effects of the spy affair for the PSR see Geifman 2000.

all, it makes a much more conciliatory impression. The problematic relationship with her mother is omitted while the Christian and humanitarian roots of her decisions and the educational tendency of her activities are emphasized (Bereshkovskaia 1917: 5).

The most extensive version of Breshko-Breshkovskaia's memoirs appeared in 1931. For this book, Breshko-Breshkovskaia complemented materials she had already written in 1918 with more recent writings concerning the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the peasants, and other broader and philosophical topics (Breshkovskaia 1931: xiii-xiv). *Hidden Springs* connects both categories of her autobiographical writings as reminiscences about her revolutionary comrades are added to the story of her personal history. The book is exceptional in two ways: first, it skips Breshko-Breshkovskaia's early life and her pathway into radicalism. Second, Breshko-Breshkovskaia gives herself a far more radical attitude than presented in earlier writings. She purports to having been involved in terrorist assaults, at least in a preparatory stage, and underlines her friendship or acquaintance with other renowned figures of the revolutionary movement involved in

terrorism.⁶ Aged over 70 and after the collapse of tsarism, Breshko-Breshkovskaia had neither to hide her affirmation of political violence nor her contacts to other revolutionaries. Statements about fellow revolutionaries had no further consequences for them anymore. Thus, in *Hidden Springs*, Breshko-Breshkovskaia could be more open than in earlier writings. At the same time, due to her age, she was less accurate concerning details (Field 1998: 326-331).

All these publications provide insight into Breshko-Breshkovskaia's world-view. The richest sources in regards to her pathway of radicalization and her concept of the ideal revolutionist are the interview given to Poole, her *Avtobiografiia* from 1917 and *Hidden Springs*. The following analysis concentrates mainly on these three texts and provides the reader with reference to her other writings.

*Exculpation and counter-
accusation:
explaining radicalization*

In general, the autobiographical statements of Russian revolutionaries are seldom reminiscences in the purist sense but explanations of the path chosen. The state and the revolutionar-

⁶ See in more detail below.

ies fought over the prerogative interpretation of the revolutionary movement. While the government tried to expose the revolutionaries as ruthless criminals, the revolutionaries used pamphlets, court proceedings and autobiographical writings to present themselves as victims of state terror (Wurr 2017). Breshko-Breshkovskaia's autobiographical statements and articles are no exception. The intention to justify the development of Russian radicalism is obvious, especially in the statements which address a foreign audience. In her autobiographical materials Breshko-Breshkovskaia gave five reasons for her gradual transition into a radical life. These reasons or factors are connected to personal experiences, external influences, as well as to personal traits. In the interviews with Poole and Cahan and in her *Avtobiografiia*, Breshko-Breshkovskaia roots her revolutionary mindset in her early youth. She presents herself as a rebellious child, often coming into conflict with the conventions of her time. The relationship with her mother symbolized this conflict (Good/Jones 1991: 3-4). Her rebellion was fueled by a deep sense for justice and equality explained by her Christian upbringing. According to her memoirs she realized at a

very young age – in *Avtobiografiia* she mentions the age of five – the harsh contrast between her life and that of the peasants, between Christian teachings and the reality of injustice and discrimination (Breshkovskaia 1917: 5; Poole 1905: 78). While her mother in particular and the Russian state in general were denounced as hypocritical, her educational and revolutionary activities were presented as the genuine Christian way of life. Breshko-Breshkovskaia selflessly shared her belongings with the poor and tried to overcome social separation (Poole 1905: 78). The reference to a religious background – also found in the memoirs of other revolutionaries of that time (Rindlisbacher 2011; Maier 2004) – had a legitimate function. At the same time, it served to depoliticize the revolutionary cause. By emphasizing that Christian values urged her to sacrifice her energy for the sake of the poor and oppressed, Breshko-Breshkovskaia pushed the political idea of revolution aside.⁷ Even those political demands Breshko-Breshkovskaia brought forward were re-

⁷ This interpretation is reinforced by Breshko-Breshkovskaia's *Istoriia moei dukhovnoi zhizni* she wrote in 1923. As this work was never published I must rely on the comments of Good/Jones 1991: vi.

duced to more general, though libertarian issues: “Freedom to think and speak! Freedom to work! Justice for all!” (Poole 1905: 88). In her interview with Poole, Breshko-Breshkovskaia never mentioned for example, a planned overthrow of the existing political system, a democratization and federalization of the regime, the socialization of land.⁸

Christianity was, of course, not the only source for Breshko-Breshkovskaia’s development. Both literature and personal contacts had an influence on her radicalization. Depending on her audience Breshko-Breshkovskaia cited different sources of influence. *Hidden Springs*, written in Russian but published in English, lists the common literary canon we find in many memoirs of Russian revolutionaries. Besides Nikolai Chernyshevskii, Breshko-Breshkovskaia mentioned Nikolai Dobroliubov, Petr Lavrov, and Dmitri Pisarev, who were prominent authors close to the Russian rev-

olutionary movement (Breshkovskaia 1931: 29). In the interview with Poole, Breshko-Breshkovskaia highlighted her liberal and – perhaps even more important – Western upbringing as being fundamental for her rapprochement with the revolutionary cause. Her father introduced her to travel and science literature. She herself read the literature of the enlightenment: Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot. She read and spoke French and German. She thus presented herself as a well-educated individual, versed in Western European culture, who “could hardly be called an ignorant fanatic” (Poole 1905: 78). While *Hidden Springs* pointed to Breshko-Breshkovskaia embedding herself in the Russian revolutionary movement, the interview given to Poole presented a common cultural basis for the American audience. Indeed, to a certain degree, Breshko-Breshkovskaia’s life and personal development as described in the interview, echo the résumés of American progressives Breshko-Breshkovskaia had met in the United States. As educated women, they had left the path traditionally predetermined for women in their society. Although Breshko-Breshkovskaia was never able to obtain a higher education legally, she shared, with her American

⁸ For the political demands of the Socialist Revolutionary Party see Hildermeier 2000; Perrie 1977. Even in *Hidden Springs* Breshkovskaia hardly mentioned any political demands. Sketchily she described her revolutionary ambitions as an “attempt to overcome the obstacles which were rooted in the historical past of the Russian people” (Breshkovskaia 1931).

peers, the desire to improve the lives of the poor. As society did not offer them role models for fulfilling this desire, these women had to find their path and area of action alone.⁹

The average reader of the progressive magazine «The Outlook» could probably identify her-/himself with Breshko-Breshkovskaia and those other “men and women of noble birth and university training, doctors, lawyers, journalists, novelists, poets, scientists” who had joined the Russian revolutionary movement (Poole 1905: 78). Similar cultural roots and values encouraged both Breshko-Breshkovskaia and American progressives to stand up for the poor and discriminated. Breshko-Breshkovskaia fitted perfectly into “Victorian gender norms, the abolitionist temperament and the enlightened Protestantism” of American progressive circles of that time (Phillips 2016: 257). The presentation of Breshko-Breshkovskaia’s life story in the interview with Poole provided factors connecting her to an American liberal public, links that this public easily accepted: her European cultural origins and her familiarity with the literature of the enlighten-

ment, her educational work among peasants, as well as the discrimination of women in regards to higher education.¹⁰ The more progressive sections of American society in particular could compare their own activities and aims with those of Breshko-Breshkovskaia. The long-lasting interest in Breshko-Breshkovskaia’s fate and the lifelong contact she kept with her American friends support this deduction.

If American progressives could identify themselves with the Russian revolutionist up to this point of Breshko-Breshkovskaia’s personal development, it is of special interest how she explained the next step of her radicalization and her decision to become an outlaw. In the interview given to Poole the main turning point in her life was linked to the punishment of her husband, her father, and herself, provoked by their educational work among peasants (Poole 1905: 81). Although the punish-

⁹ As comparison see for example the biography of Jane Addams or Alice Stone Blackwell.

¹⁰ In the Russian version Breshko-Breshkovskaia did not omit the village school and her enlightening work among the peasantry but this is confined to a few sentences (Breshkovskaia 1917: 5): “Ten years I either worked in the school for peasants or I organized in the village a loans-savings-bank, mutual help, artels or I organized the peasants before the elections for courts, administration.”

ment was rather lenient as she and her husband were simply put under police surveillance while others were sentenced to Siberian exile, Breshko-Breshkovskaia presented this incident as emblematic of the government's barbarism:

Punished as criminals for teaching the peasants their legal rights, we saw the Government as it was, the System of Corruption [sic], watching jealously through spies and secret police, that their peasant victim might not be taught anything that could make him think or act as a man. (Poole 1905: 81)

Already at an earlier stage of the interview Breshko-Breshkovskaia had portrayed the government as a medieval and barbarian regime when describing the flogging of rebellious peasants even after the liberation of the serfs (Poole 1905: 80). The government was thus depicted as the exact opposite of the enlightened and compassionate revolutionaries. While the latter were portrayed as the most well-educated members of Russian society who were serious, peaceful, and hospitable, the government was presented as being corrupt, cruel, and the real fa-

natic (Breshkovskaia 1931: 8, 10). In this way, Breshko-Breshkovskaia brought accusations against the state – a formula used already by the lawyers of the Nechaev group and of Vera Zasulich (Wurr 2017: 47; Maier 2004).¹¹ In 1877, Zasulich had shot the governor of St. Petersburg, Fiodor Trepov. In the trial against Zasulich, Petr Aleksandrov skillfully presented Trepov as the real criminal because of his order to flog a political prisoner. Moreover, Aleksandrov pointed to the guilt of a state which had harshly punished Zasulich for her acquaintance with Nechaev (Barisova 2016; Siljak 2008). Correspondingly, Breshko-Breshkovskaia made the Russian autocratic regime responsible for her radicalization. The regime had shown its cruel nature in its handling with peasants; it had turned both women who sought for higher education and reformers who tried to educate the peasants into criminals. Breshko-Breshkovskaia's conclusion was that not reforms but radical means alone could change the system. This counter-accusation was successful in the trial against Zasulich, who was acquitted by the

¹¹ Daniel Field traces this method back to the Decembrists but ignores the resemblance to the cases of Zasulich and the Nechaevtsy (Field 1998: 329).

court.¹² Furthermore, Breshko-Breshkovskaia's American audience eagerly integrated this narrative into its prejudices towards tsarist despotism and Russian backwardness (Philipps 2016: 250).

It seems rather unlikely that the forced closing down of her peasant school and police surveillance were the only triggers for Breshko-Breshkovskaia's step underground. Moreover, the question is, how harmless had her activities been in reality? Good and Jones argue that Breshko-Breshkovskaia's sole intention was to educate the peasants and to reform the political system and that only the interference of the government with her "perfectly legal reform project" in 1871 turned her into a revolutionist (Good/Jones 1991: 24). They give no plausible explanation as to why she had already been agitating among students in Kiev in 1869 (Ibid: 22). Breshko-Breshkovskaia herself confused the process of her radicalization in her various autobiographical writings. In *Avtobiografiia* as in «The Outlook» interview Breshko-Breshkovskaia legitimizes her radicalization by

the closing down of her school but adds:

This [the shutting down of the school] forced me to search for another path, another means to work for the benefit of my beloved people, and at the end of the 1860s I decided to travel through Russia to search for people to turn with them onto the path of an illegal, that is a by tsarist legislature forbidden, fight.

(Breshkovskaia 1917: 6)

Most probably, Breshko-Breshkovskaia had already turned to illegal activities by the end of the 1860s, perhaps even in the mid-1860s when she traveled to St. Petersburg and came into contact with radical student circles (Good/Jones 1991: 17-19). Seemingly, Breshko-Breshkovskaia was already illegally active before she experienced state repression. However, linking her radicalization to state repression provided her with a persuasive legitimizing narrative.

Some of Breshko-Breshkovskaia's other statements stress that she was far more radical than often maintained. She repeatedly presented herself as an adherent of the Bakuninist branch of Russian liberals. The

¹² Barisova denies any political dimension of the decision (ibid 2016: 228). The counter-accusation was also practiced in the trial against the 193 (Breshkovskaia 1931: 159).

Bakuninists favored revolutionary agitation by deed over the distribution of books and pamphlets (Poole 1905: 81; Good/Jones 1991: 35). Breshko-Breshkovskaia also admitted her dedication to Sergei Nechaev's ideas on revolutionary organizations and terror. In the interview given to Poole, Breshko-Breshkovskaia confessed that she had been influenced by the literature of the Nechaev circle (Poole 1905: 81). In *Hidden Springs* she adds personal contacts to Nechaev's followers. According to this version of her memoirs she traveled to St. Petersburg in 1873 in order to meet "members of the Nechaev organization" to discuss with them:

the use of nitroglycerine, its terrible effects when exploded, the possibility of concealing some of it in the Winter Palace, and the possible influence on the policy of the government which a successful explosion might have.

(Breshkovskaia 1931: 24)

At that time, the inner circle of Nechaev's organization and Nechaev himself had already been arrested and put on trial. However, their ideas on terror and revolution lived on among young Russian radicals (Wurr

2017: 45-46). "Members of the Nechaev organization" is thus probably a code for revolutionaries devoted to terrorism.

Breshko-Breshkovskaia also claimed that she took part in plans to carry out an act of terrorism in 1873 but was arrested before these plans materialized (Breshkovskaia 1931: 25). In 1878, Maria Kolenkina visited Breshko-Breshkovskaia in prison to discuss the assassination attempts on Trepov and the prosecutor in the trial of the 193, Vladislav Zhelikhovskii (ibid: 155). Furthermore, Breshko-Breshkovskaia was in contact with Valerian Ossinskii in Kiev, who reported his terroristic plans to her (ibid: 156). Indeed, one wonders how and if she could talk and correspond with revolutionary comrades about terrorist ambitions whilst incarcerated. Whether she was involved in any terrorist activities or not, these sequences stressed Breshko-Breshkovskaia's general willingness to include terrorism in the strategy of the revolutionary program and revealed her radicalism even within the revolutionary movement. She had been an advocate of terrorism at a time when the majority of Russian revolutionaries was discussing the issue but remained hesitant about the use of terror

(Saburova/Eklof 2016: 207-208; Ekaterina 1910: 2).

In «The Outlook» interview, the presentation of her radicalization process stops with the agitation among the peasants in the summer of 1874. Instead, a large part of the interview is dedicated to the description of Breshko-Breshkovskaia's life in prison and exile adding to the stories of George Kennan about the barbarous Russian exile system already familiar to the American public. Although Breshko-Breshkovskaia mentioned the terrorist branch of the Russian revolutionary movement in the interview, she distanced herself from its orientation. While she was quoted as saying "some believe in the efficiency of 'terror,'" her own view on this issue was omitted (Poole 1905: 87). The terroristic branch of the movement was marginalized ("few believe in assassination", *ibid*: 88) in contrast to its central position within the program of the Socialist Revolutionary Party in 1904, whose founding member was in fact Breshko-Breshkovskaia. Obviously, Breshko-Breshkovskaia adapted her life story to the American readership as she did not conceal her commitment to terror in face-to-face conversations. Statements of her

closer American friends show this.¹³

Overall, Breshko-Breshkovskaia's life story contains elements we find in most autobiographies of Russian revolutionaries, and in particular in memoirs of the more radical part of the revolutionary movement. The reminiscences of Petr Kropotkin (Kropotkin 1899), of Vera Zasluch, Vera Figner (Rindlisbacher 2014), and others who approved terrorism present a similar pattern of personal development (Engel 2000) that is largely consistent with the mechanisms of political activism and radicalization (Kelly/Boutilier 1978; McCauley/Moskalenko 2008:415-433). At the same time, this pattern reflects the individual's need to integrate their life path into a linear narrative and, thus, to make sense of it. Cultural and literary influences are added to the construction of the narrative as the following will show.

Ascetic martyr:

modeling the ideal revolutionary
Of course, Breshko-Breshkovskaia's autobiographical statements did not end with her turn to an illegal life. She also described her life in the under-

¹³ Alice Stone Blackwell spoke freely of Breshko-Breshkovskaia's affirmation of terrorism in her book about the latter (Blackwell 1918: 108).

ground and her experiences in prison and exile. In these descriptions we find traces of her concept of a revolutionary life. In several instances her own personal traits and lifestyle were interlaced with those of other revolutionists and presented as common for the revolutionary movement. According to Breshko-Breshkovskaia, the revolutionaries had disentangled themselves from all material and social amenities. They lived a spartan life whereby they sacrificed their lives and all of their possessions to the revolutionary cause (Poole 1905: 88).¹⁴ In Breshko-Breshkovskaia's account, Russian revolutionists had a strong character, an impressive strength of will and an exceptional capability for self-control. They were willing to leave family and friends as well as conventions behind (Poole 1905: 81; Breshkovskaia 1931: 4, 8, 23, 75, 96, 104, 112). They realized clearly "the dignity and responsibility of the duties they had undertaken" (Breshkovskaia 1931: 112). They were so con-

vinced of the righteousness of their chosen path as well as of their social and political aims that they did not even fear punishment or death (Breshkovskaia 1917: 7). In prison, the revolutionaries were "brutally treated" by the tsarist government. Some broke down but others "endured unshaken months of this brutality". They never lost faith and courage, no matter how badly they were treated by the regime, "for a Revolutionist must smile though the heart be torn" (Poole 1905: 83). To these general descriptions, Breshko-Breshkovskaia added an exposition of her personal traits: an uncompromising nature and a pronounced notion of honor and dignity (Breshkovskaia 1931: 75).

The characteristics of the revolutionists together with the schematic presentation of the pathway of radicalization resemble a pattern rooted in Christian hagiography. In the middle of the 19th century, stories of religious saints and martyrs had been secularized and adopted into the image of the ascetic hero (Morris 1993). This hero resembled in many aspects the religious martyr and was involved in a fight against evil. Chernyshevskii's novel *What is to be done?* introduced such a profane hero in one of his protagonists. The figure of

¹⁴ In a programmatic paper written in June 1904 for the foreign committee of the Social Revolutionary Party, Breshko-Breshkovskaia also emphasized the importance of putting aside one's own needs in favor of the interests of society as a whole. International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, PSR Archive, Folder 188.

Rakhmetov – as well as the heroine Vera Pavlovna – eminently influenced Russian revolutionaries of that time (Stites 1978: 89-114), as did the female version of Rakhmetov presented in Stepniak-Kravchinskii's *Underground Russia*. Here, the terrorist Sofia Perovskaia appeared as the “female incarnation of Rakhmetov” (Patyk 2009: 775): ascetic and tough, with a strong and fiery character (Stepniak 1883: 116). Perovskaia's and other revolutionaries' life stories depicted by Stepniak served as a kind of “manual for revolutionary self-fashioning” (Patyk 2009: 771).

When Stepniak wrote and published his *Underground Russia*, Breshko-Breshkovskaia and the first generation of *narodniki* had already encountered a revolutionary life. Therefore, his ‘manual’ had no influence on the life path of this elder generation of revolutionaries; rather this generation was the archetype of his profiles. This first generation of revolutionaries referred to role models prevalent in religious and secular literature (Rindlisbacher 2011; Boniece 2003: 580-581). Accordingly, Breshko-Breshkovskaia stressed the influence of Christian legends on her development. She was affected by “the biographies of great men” from which she learned, “that aspirations toward

high ideals always lead to cruel penalties.” Influenced by these biographies, her mind was “completely occupied with the thought of the sacrifice that I could yet place on the altar of the idealistic movement” (Breshkovskaia 1931: 104). The general outline of her life-path presented in her autobiographical statements followed the pattern of separation, initiation, and no-return prevalent in the examples of these “great men” and in Chernyshevskii's Rakhmetov (Morris 1993). Breshko-Breshkovskaia had separated herself from society: “I had burned all my old bridges and rejected conventionalities forever”. She had found initiation in the life as a revolutionary as she had “crossed from the old to the new life alone” (Breshkovskaia 1931: 8). She rejected any resumption of her contacts and of her former privileges (Breshkovskaia 1931: 95-96). She refused to return into society until her goal had been reached. Additionally, Breshko-Breshkovskaia almost schematically presented herself as self-sacrificing and austere, as renouncing any material goods, privileges, and social benefits and, thus, as an ascetic heroine (Breshkovskaia 1931: 23, 96, 104). In her self-representation as a martyr-like heroine of the revolutionary movement, Breshko-

Breshkovskaia could not only draw on Christian and literary models but also on a vast variety of role models which existed in Russian history. The examples of the Decembrists' wives (Holmgren 1994: 129; Engel 2000: 19) came after a century long tradition of oppositional autobiography in Russia. Moreover, the revolutionaries themselves perpetuated the image of the self-sacrificing hero(ine) before court, in their revolutionary periodicals, as well as in other statements in written or oral form, thus presenting "behavioral texts" (Engel 2000: 155; Boniece 2003: 573). Publications concerning the nature of the revolutionary movement followed, as in for example Sergei Nechaev's *Catechism of a Revolutionary*. Written in 1868, the *Catechism* was quickly circulated among the radical milieu and strongly influenced the revolutionaries of the 1870s – and beyond.¹⁵ The title of the document already hints at the fact that Nechaev's *Catechism* was rooted in Christian legends, as was Chernyshevskii's novel. Breshko-Breshkovskaia's narrative is, in the same vein, a fusion of the influences and role models presented in the Bible, in

What is to be done? and in the *Catechism of a Revolutionary*. Not all of Breshko-Breshkovskaia's autobiographical publications connect to the same literary and cultural codes to such an extent. While *Avtobiografiia* is less affected by these influences, as it is less apologetic, her interview with Poole pays credit first and foremost to her American audience and to its realms of experiences. *Hidden Springs* shows the most references to Chernyshevskii's novel and to Nechaev's *Catchism* in particular. Many sequences in part one of *Hidden Springs* resemble different paragraphs of the *Catechism* as for example, the renunciation of Breshko-Breshkovskaia's family and past life, the primacy of the cause over her own desires and aspirations – she even left her newborn child behind – (paragraph 1 and 6 of the *Catechism*), the shift in moral attitudes when legitimizing terror (paragraph 4), the indisputable suffering of poverty and confinement for the higher cause of revolution (paragraph 5).

Like Nechaev, although less ruthless, Breshko-Breshkovskaia was more radical than many of the other revolutionaries and often showed little understanding for those who did not share her radicalism. Wearing "shabby,

¹⁵ For an English translation of the *Catechism* see Dmytryshyn 1967: 241-247.

almost beggarly clothes” (Breshkovskaia 1931: 23, 63) herself, Breshko-Breshkovskaia was for example, dismayed when one of her fellow revolutionaries, Barbara Ivanova Vahovskaia (sic), dressed in smart clothes. For Breshko-Breshkovskaia this came close to a violation of the revolutionary code. Breshko-Breshkovskaia interpreted smart dress as symbolic of a fickle and non-revolutionary character although she was, in the end, convinced of Vakhovskaia’s sincerity. In Breshko-Breshkovskaia’s understanding, the revolutionary – as the ascetic hero in the novels and the Christian martyr – had to stand above material well-being and fashionable clothes for he/she was “pledged to higher, more spiritual things” (Breshkovskaia 1931: 112).¹⁶ All together the revolutionaries formed a kind of holy order. They recognized each other without words, only by their behavior, by their appearance, or, in Breshko-Breshkovskaia’s words:

¹⁶ In her article *Iz moikh vospominaniakh*, written in 1903, Breshko-Breshkovskaia appears in a similar way irritated by the fact that Nikolai Ishutin, who had been involved in Karakozov’s attempt on the Tzar’s life in 1866, still fancied theaters, beautiful girls and other worldly things (Breshkovskaia 1905: 189).

spiritual relationships produce spiritual signs and [...] people belonging to the same ethical plane can recognize each other without any special tokens. [...] Only those joined the organization [of revolutionaries] that felt themselves capable of paying the price for their audacity in entering into an open battle with the hundred-headed dragon whose teeth and claws were eternally renewed. (Breshkovskaia 1931: 103-104)

At the same time, this order of revolutionaries followed a strict distinction between friend and foe. According to Nechaev’s *Catechism* for a revolutionary only “that individual is dear and friendly who truly supports the revolutionary cause as he himself does” (paragraph 8). Similarly, there was “no need to talk about solidarity among revolutionaries. In it centers the entire strength of the revolutionary cause” (paragraph 9). In all of Breshko-Breshkovskaia’s autobiographical writings we find these two paragraphs of Nechaev’s *Catechism* actively applied. She always spoke warmly of her fellow revolutionaries, emphasized their mutual trust, love, and un-

derstanding (Breshkovskaia 1931; Breshkovskaia 1921: 25). Separated from society, the revolutionaries replaced for each other family and friends. Obviously, Breshko-Breshkovskaia found shelter in the community of revolutionaries. Solidarity, hospitality, and freedom stood in contrast to the relationship she had experienced with her mother (Kelly/Boutilier 1978: 236). However, her affection and empathy were directed exclusively at her fellow revolutionaries and at the ordinary Russian population. Tsarist dignitaries, henchmen of the regime, and in particular police officers were subject to her contempt: "I felt degraded even when I had merely been in the same room with them or anywhere near them. I have maintained this attitude all my life" (Breshkovskaia 1931: 76).¹⁷ Here, the shift in moral attitudes, which in the end legitimized terrorist attacks, is already evident (Maier 2004: 329). It seemed a moral necessity to attack the "hundred-headed dragon," as it was "despotic and cruel" (Breshkovskaia 1931: 75). It fits into the image of revolutionaries that Breshko-Breshkovskaia had dis-

cussed. In particular, those revolutionaries who had accomplished terroristic acts: Sofia Perovskaia, Vera Figner, Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinskii, Ivan Kablits, Maria Kolenkina, Egor Sazonov, Ivan Kaliaev or Zinaida Konopliannikova (Breshkovskaia 1931: 25, 27, 154, 162-171, 344-347). Although Aleksandr Kerenskii stressed the fundamental difference between the "amoral tendency of hatred and destruction" of Nechaev and the love and devotion of *babushka* in his foreword to *Hidden Springs*, Breshko-Breshkovskaia clearly positioned herself within the most radical grouping of revolutionaries exactly by the references to Nechaev's *Catechism*.

Conclusion

The whole ambivalence of the Russian radical movement is personified in the personality of Breshko-Breshkovskaia. On the one hand, she appeared as an amiable, educated lady willing to help the poor and oppressed. On the other hand, she was a relentless adherent of political violence and of a strict revolutionary life away from society. In order to bring these two traits together, Breshko-Breshkovskaia drew on a vast variety of cultural and literary models prevalent in Russia at that time. Influenced both by her Christian roots and

¹⁷ At the same time, however, she describes herself as generally polite to other people and shows compassion for prison wardens who received little pay (ibid: 106).

by revolutionary literature, Breshko-Breshkovskaia constructed her life path according to the example of the ascetic martyr: she separated herself from society, lived a life sacrificed to a non-material, spiritual cause, and would only return into society if the goals of revolution, freedom, and equality were reached. Her radicalism was exculpated by this role model of the ascetic hero and by a counter-accusation against the tsarist regime. In her and in other revolutionaries' perceptions, the Russian radicals, thus, stood above morality because it was not them but the despotic regime that was to blame for their turn to political violence. Although this explanation is rather hypocritical, it was accepted by an audience far beyond the radical milieu of the revolutionists. As this case study has shown, autobiographies of Russian radicals must be seen, first and foremost, as exculpatory narratives directed at a wider audience but also at the radical self in form of self-legitimization. In line with behavioral texts already available, Russian radicals restructured their personal development with all its turning points in retrospective according to a linear and thus inevitable path. They gave meaning and structure to their lives. By draw-

ing on these models, Breshko-Breshkovskaia situated herself within the different spectra of the Russian revolutionary movement. She clearly positioned herself within the most radical part both regarding her concept of the ideal revolutionary that came extremely close to Nechaev's *Catechism* and regarding her affirmation of violence. Accordingly, her autobiography fits into the autobiographies of other women revolutionaries and in particular those who had committed acts of terrorism. Although she was never actively involved in the realization of a terrorist assault, Breshko-Breshkovskaia's autobiographical writings echo the pathways to radicalism and the self-legitimizing stories of Sofia Perovskaia and Vera Figner. Moreover, Breshko-Breshkovskaia's autobiographical statements are interlinked with influences from culture, literature, and personal relationships. In this regard, they are almost a prime example for narrative psychology.

Overall, Breshko-Breshkovskaia's and other Russian radicals' autobiographies should be seen and analyzed as products of the fight over the prerogative explanation for and interpretation of the Russian revolutionary movement. As in court or in ar-

ticles, revolutionaries used autobiographical statements to stage their life in order to explain the revolutionary movement in general and their life path in particular. With this constructed nature of radical autobiographies in mind, historians of the Russian revolutionary movement should question themselves about the innocent character of the revolutionaries presented. François Furet has warned his colleagues to uncritically incorporate the narrative of the revolutionaries when explaining the French revolution (Furet 1981: 3, 14). Regarding the Russian revolutionary movement, though, the martyr-like image of the revolutionaries painted in their autobiographies is reproduced by scholars even today.¹⁸

¹⁸ According to Lynn Ann Hartnett even in a post 9/11 world it is possible “to justify and understand the use of violence and murder by the People’s Will” (Hartnett 2014: xvii).

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