

Blood in the Air

Everyday Violence in the Experience of the Petersburg Poor, 1905-1917

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The object of force is to impose a certain social order in which the minority governs, while violence tends to the destruction of that order.

(Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 1908)

In 1913, a popular newspaper columnist in the Russian capital observed with dismay that “newspapers are printed on white paper, but, really, in our times its pages seem covered with blood”¹. Many commentators shared this view, often emphasizing the point with dramatic metaphors. Both typical and often repeated was a phrase that the physician and public health activist Dmitrii Zhbakov often used in talks, reports, and newspaper columns: a “traumatic epidemic of blood and violence” was raging in everyday city life, especially in the capital city St. Petersburg.² For newspapers, it was “everyday” violence that was the main concern. Certainly, there was a great deal of political violence in the years between 1905 and 1914 – ranging from government repression to revolutionary terrorism, not to mention the wars and revolutions that bookend these years.³ But this story has a different focus, at least ostensibly: more local, more ubiquitous, and more troubling in both its everydayness and its seeming absence of

1 SKITALET, 1913(2), p. 3.

2 He used this phrase in many of his writings, for example, ZHBANKOV, 1910(1), p. 2.

3 Cf., for example, HOLQUIST, 2003, p. 627–652.

purpose. Such everyday violence included bloody “epidemics” of street knifings, robberies with weapons, rape, bar-room fights ending in bloodshed, and suicide.⁴ These stories unfolded mainly in the neighborhoods and lives of the city’s poor.

Like all stories, these were told as embodying larger meaning. Perhaps precisely because they were so disturbing, they became powerful signs to interpret and to interpret with, especially about the “spirit of the age” and the meaning of “these times” (both frequent phrases in these discussions). These were city stories – present throughout the empire but most widespread, and worrisome, in the imperial capital, St. Petersburg. Cities are often viewed as symbols in European cultures, not least because they are the biggest and most enduring creations of human society. St. Petersburg has been a symbol, from the time of its foundation on newly conquered land, of Russia’s forceful turn away from its past and toward the modernity of the West. Stories of ubiquitous and growing city violence ran counter to the civilizing march of modern progress. So, too, did other ubiquitous stories of urban degeneration and moral disorder, to which the epidemic of violence was often linked, especially the sexual “bacchanalia” (a metaphor of debauchery used, in turn, to speak of a “bacchanalia”⁵ of violence) and suicide. Together, these stories were interpreted as signs of a “monstrously ugly” “spirit of evil”⁶ in the air, the presence of “something fatal”⁷ in contemporary life, some deep and ubiquitous “sickness”⁸. And the interpreting did not stop there. Numerous commentators read this evidence, especially the stories that “covered” the newspapers with so much “blood,” as defining the experience of modernity as heavily marked by “tragedy,” “catastrophe,” and “trauma,” producing dark feelings ranging from “melancholy” to “despondency.”⁹

The question is, can we do more to understand urban violence in Russia than describe how these stories were narrated and interpreted by contemporaries? Can we understand the actual experience of violence, especially from the perspective of the perpetrators themselves? We know the difficulties. That it is impossible to disentangle the experiences and meanings of the most excluded from the narrating language of those with the power to most shape public dis-

4 Cf. among the few historians who have emphasized this everyday violence, especially MORRISSEY, 2006; STEINBERG, 2011; McREYNOLDS, 2012.

5 For example, SKITALETS, 1913(2), p. 3.

6 VADIM, 1913, p. 3.

7 PODPISCHIK ZHURNALA ZHIZN’ DLIA VSEKH, 1913, p. 1289f.

8 AZ., 1908, p. 4.

9 Cf. STEINBERG, 2011.

course and thus the very vocabulary of available interpretation. That we have little access to unmediated experience in the past, for the only *evidence* of experience we have is so imbricated with language and culture and desire that it is (as the historian Joan Scott famously argued) “always already an interpretation”¹⁰. In other words, to adapt a famous question, “can the knife-wielding subaltern speak” outside the construction of their voice by others?

One solution is suggested by the recent “descriptive turn” among literary scholars who have warned against overriding and overwriting past texts with our own voices, whether through critical readings shaped by the “arrogance” of heavy theory or forcing everything into the box of “context”: what is needed, they argue, is more “intimacy” with texts, readings that are more “susceptible” and “attentive,” reading more “with the grain” than “against” it.¹¹ For historians, this is a welcome methodological critique: we love to revel in the archive, to wander through past texts listening for past lives. And a particularly good text for this is the daily press. I will travel a way down this path myself, with newspapers as my main source. But I also find this path to be too seductive. To understand the past, we also need to escape its interpreting grip and view the past from outside its own perspectives. Attentively, yes, with receptivity to possibilities. But also with critical questions and suspicions. In other words, through the voices of theory – in this case, theories of violence and theories of emotion – not constrained by the mediation of interpreting contemporaries.

In thinking about newspapers and other periodicals as evidence of “experience,” I find suggestive Walter Benjamin’s remark in 1939, in his attempt to explain his own effort to make sense of city stories in the *Arcades Project*, that “to seize the essence of history, it suffices to compare Herodotus and the morning newspaper”¹². One way to understand this is to view the newspaper as *Erlebnis*-history, using the distinction, explored by Benjamin among others, between the two German words for “experience,” *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. The newspaper points toward the immediate, particular, personal, and discontinuous – in other words, it is grounded in “life” (*Leben*), it is “lived experience.” This stands in apparent contrast to a history that is narratively integrated, whole, continuous, shared, and directional – the “journey” at the etymological heart of *Erfahrung*.¹³ The problem, and necessity, is how to bring into dialogue the daily news and

10 SCOTT, 1991, p. 797. Cf. also JAY, 2005.

11 Cf. FELSKI, 2011, p. 573-91; BEST AND MARCUS, 2009, p. 1-21; LOVE, 2010, p. 371-391.

12 BENJAMIN (1939), 1999, p. 14.

13 Cf. especially JAY, 2005.

the long narration, the discontinuous present of experience and the coherent experience of living in meaningful time. This requires a perspective from both inside and outside the local and the particular. This shifting dialogue between perspectives – between the rawness of described violence, interpretations by contemporaries, and a critical reading of both – is my aim in this paper, hoping to open up the possibility of deeper interpretation.

Describing violence

We begin with these stories in their first narrating drafts – echoing the popular self-description of American journalists as writing “the first draft of history.” A great many stories of urban public life in Russia between 1905 and 1917 did indeed cover the pages of newspapers with “blood.” News reports of accidents, ranging from fires to workplace deaths (both of which earned the headline of “epidemics”) were an almost daily accompaniment of urban life and a reminder of its precarity. Especially disturbing were accidental deaths of unsupervised children (mostly working-class children, of course), which, according to a reporter for the mass-circulation paper *Peterburgskii listok* (Petersburg Sheet) in 1913, had “in recent years become an epidemic phenomenon in the capital.” On a single day in May of that year, for example, he counted unsupervised children drowning in a canal, toppling off an apartment balcony, falling under the wheels of a cart, being run over by an automobile, and being crushed by a tram.¹⁴

But by far the greatest dangers to life came from the deliberate actions of other people, often strangers. Most common were stabbings in the course of a robbery, mostly on the street and especially in rougher neighborhoods. The narratives were simple and similar: a perpetrator, individually or with a group, approached a victim and demanded money, becoming violent when rebuffed. Much of this violence, though, lacked the purposefulness of robbery. Newspapers reported numerous stories like that of the man at a café who quarreled for no clear reason with other customers and then stabbed several;¹⁵ or the brawl in a bar that started with an argument among strangers after a professional wrestling match and ended in a knife fight;¹⁶ or the man who chased down and repeatedly stabbed a woman who ignored his “degrading suggestions”¹⁷ as she walked

14 Cf. PETERBURGSKII LISTOK, 27.05.1913, p. 4.

15 TROINOE UBIISTVO, in: Peterburgskij listok, 14.01.1913, p. 3.

16 Cf. PETERBURGSKII LISTOK, 20.04.1909, p. 4; 09.05.1910, p. 5; 27.05.1913, p. 4.

17 IBID., 13.01.1910, p. 5.

along a street. As a rule, both perpetrators and victims were young males. Lower-class men were more likely to carry knives and to rob and quarrel violently. Women, we shall see, were more likely to kill themselves – or be victims of male violence, including sexual violence. Hans-Christian Petersen, in his chapter in this volume, identifies a subculture of male violence in the city’s poorer neighborhoods. Indeed, these stories implied a violent masculinity that was a troubling story about both gender and class.

Beside violent attacks by strangers, public violence among friends seemed also to have become epidemic, often erupting at the slightest provocation, especially when alcohol loosened self-restraint (heavy drinking, of course, was viewed as a characteristically male). When weapons were at hand, and they often were, these fights could be lethal. Many men, it seems, carried concealed knives when out in public (although one could beat a man to death with fists and boots as well). The papers were full of accounts of degenerating arguments, often in bars or on the street, frequently over “trifles,” often presumed insults, ending in spilled blood and sometimes death.¹⁸ To give one example out of hundreds, a couple of working-class friends were sitting around drinking vodka when one decided he needed to go home to get some sleep before work the next morning; angry, his drinking buddy shouted “I will show you how to treat a friend”¹⁹ and stabbed him in the side. Not all violence was so public, of course. But even the most private violence, notably domestic violence, was regularly turned into a public spectacle by the newspapers.²⁰

Sexual violence was yet another “epidemic.” The papers regularly reported women and girls raped (and then sometimes killed) by men, usually strangers, in dark streets or squares in the poorer parts of town.²¹ This “bacchanalia” of sexual violence was said to have never before reached “such a colossal extent”²², nor taken such exceedingly “disgusting and beastly forms.”²³ Today, we recognize

18 Cf. GAZETA-KOPEIKA, 02.07.1908, p. 3; PETERBURGSKII LISTOK, 09.04.1909, p. 6; 04.02.1910, p. 5; 10.02.1910, p. 5; 08.08.1910, p. 7; SKITALETS, 1913(1), p. 3.

19 GAZETA-KOPEIKA, 26.06.1908, p. 2.

20 Cf. for example, ZHESTOKOE ISTIAZANIE REBENKA, 1910, p. 6; NOVOE VREMIA, 06.07.1909, p. 2.

21 GAZETA-KOPEIKA, 22.07.1908, p. 2; 07.03.1909, p. 3; 09.08.1908, p. 2f.; 28.09.1908, p. 2; 24.03.1909, p. 5; 27.06.1910, p. 4; 21.08.1911, p. 4; 31.07.1913, p. 3; PETERBURGSKII LISTOK, 09.08.1910, p. 3; 04.01.1913, p. 4; 25.01.1913, p. 4; SKITALETS, 1910, p. 3. Cf. also OBERLÄNDER, 2011.

22 D., 1909, p. 3.

23 ZHBANKOV, 1910(2), p. 69.

that all rape is violence. But at the time it seemed a sign of something new that, as Dr. Zhbankov wrote, “normal rape,” which he believed reflected unrestrained sexual desire, was being replaced by “pathological” rape, which was nothing but “cold”²⁴ violence.

In reporting these “epidemics,” the newspapers made a point of describing the precise location of incidents: mapping violence into a social and moral map of the city that distinguished certain urban spaces as dangerous and sick. The map of “bloody Petersburg,” as it was called, covered most of the industrial outskirts (in Russian, *okrainy*, a term also used for the borderlands of the empire). Neighborhoods like Okhta, on the right bank of the Neva to the east of the city center, or the industrial district known as “Beyond the Nevskii Gate” (*za Nevskoi zastavoï*), along the left bank of the Neva below the Obvodnyi canal (the gate was already long gone, but its memory recalled that this district was outside the entrance to the city proper), or parts of the “Petersburg Side” across the Neva to the north of the city center were described as so rough as to seem to be located in a different time and place morally and culturally. Typically (not only in Russia, of course), class otherness was translated into moral and even racial otherness. Okhta, for example, was described as a “Petersburg Mexico or Peru,” where the primary occupation for young people is “fist-fighting and bloodletting”²⁵. A report on Donskoi Street, a particularly rough alley on Vasilevskii Island, observed that “mores there are such that you don’t know whether you are in Petersburg or Babylon or among some North African savages”²⁶.

The map of “bloody Petersburg” also included social spaces closer to the center and less visibly marked as “other” by the physical boundaries of river or canal – especially the district known as “Ligovka” surrounding Ligovskaia Street, which ran from the main Nikolaevskii railroad station at Nevskii Prospect across the Obvodnyi canal (generally considered the boundary of the central city) into the southern margins of the city. This notoriously rough neighborhood, especially Ligovskaia Street itself, was the subject of regular and frequent press reports about both grizzly crimes and colorful characters (though often of a debauched and criminal sort). Even at high noon, one reporter observed, the people in this district, both men and women, seem to have stepped right out of the stories of Maxim Gorky, for this was a sort of “Petersburg lower depths” filled with down-and-out “former people” (both phrases Gorky made famous).²⁷ The

24 IBID., p. 88f.

25 OKHTENSKIE ‘REBIATA’, 1908, p. 5.

26 ZERKALO STOLITSY, 1914, p. 3.

27 Cf. V. T., 1909, p. 3.

lowest depth of Ligovka was the neighborhood known by its old name Iamskaia sloboda (Coachmen's settlement), around the intersection of Ligovskaia Street and Chubarov Alley (close to the railroad tracks and the canal), a district known for its heavy concentration of brothels and criminal "dens"²⁸. At night and well into the morning, journalists reported, it was impossible to walk on Ligovskaia Street near the Obvodnyi canal without risk of robbery and violence.²⁹

Children were said to have been dehumanized by everyday life in poor districts – a life described in an editorial in *Peterburgskii listok* in 1910 as "chaotic disorder and ruin, abnormal family and social relationships, rising destitution, alcoholism, and degeneration [*vyrozhdienie* – a common term]"³⁰. Because children in such neighborhoods, it was said, "grew up on the street," they were deformed by the street. "The street" was a keyword laden with as many interpretations as "the city." As a material and social space of public interaction, and as definably urban, the street was often a metaphor and symbol of the most worrisome aspects of human society and personality, including desire, spontaneity, disorder, danger, and violence.³¹ It also often denoted spaces closest to the lives of the poor. Children and the street were viewed as a lethal combination.³² Typical was the 1909 report about a twelve-year-old boy who fatally stabbed his mother with a kitchen knife when she refused to let him go play in the streets. "Who is to blame?" the reporter asked. He answered his own question: "the street" itself to which the boy was so passionately attracted and which had ruined him.³³

The "hooligan" had a special place in these stories of the street and violence, for hooligans seemed to embody the sense that life among the urban poor was more and more a story of pathological excess. Joan Neuberger, in her important study of hooliganism in St. Petersburg, showed how this term was applied widely to all sorts of aggressive and transgressive behaviors in public spaces, ranging from stabbings in back streets to mocking harassment of respectable citizens in the center of the city (such as unscrewing park benches and laughing

28 SLEDOPYT, 1914, p. 4.

29 Cf. MASSOVIYE BUISTVA KHULIGANOV, 1905, p. 4.

30 DETSKII SUD, 1910, p. 1. Cf. also LIUBOSH, 1910, p. 2; KHOLMSKII, 1914, p. 4; FROMMET, 1914, p. 696-700.

31 Cf. for example BENJAMIN, 1928 and ÇELİK, et al., 1994.

32 Cf. for example, NOVIKOV, 1914, p. 526-532.

33 Cf. GAZETA-KOPEIKA, 02.01.1909, p. 3.

when someone fell, or pulling ribbons from women's hair).³⁴ Most hooligan acts, though, were violent.

As a form of violence, hooliganism was defined by the excess of its transgression: not just violating the bodies of others (with a knife, for example), but transgressing the presumed boundaries of reason itself. The press was full of stories like that of the young "hooligan" who demanded money for a beer from a nineteen-year-old man he came across and then stabbed the youth four times in the stomach when he refused,³⁵ or the story of a man stabbed in the neck and chest when he refused a demand for fourteen kopecks to buy vodka.³⁶ Worst of all were the hooligan knifers who, it was reported, skipped the preliminary demands and just attacked.³⁷ As an editorial in 1910 in the mass-circulation newspaper *Gazeta-kopeika* (Kopeck-gazette) concluded, "the hooligan knife [...] slashes and cuts without any reasons at all"³⁸. And even when attacks had an ostensible purpose, especially money or sex, these goals seemed secondary.

Reports emphasized the connection of hooliganism to the neighborhoods and lives of the poor. The typical hooligan was described as young man from the slums. The newspapers linked hooliganism to the "dark Petersburg" of the urban underclass,³⁹ the lumpenproletariat of the homeless and unemployed,⁴⁰ "tramps [*boziaki*], residents of flophouses, prostitutes [known often to associate with hooligans, who sometimes acted as pimps], and others of the Maxim Gorky type"⁴¹. The police agreed, organizing huge raids (800 people were rounded up in a raid in 1910, for example) on the places such types were believed to hole up: cheap teahouses and taverns, public parks on the city outskirts, and river barges, which housed a special lower-class subculture of its own.⁴² No less important, hooligans were seen to embody the presumed connection between poverty and moral degeneracy. As an editorial in *Peterburgskii listok* in 1910 put it, poor

34 Cf. NEUBERGER, 1993.

35 Cf. PETERBURGSKII LISTOK, 10.05.1913, p. 4. Cf. also PETERBURGSKII LISTOK, 03.04.1909, p. 1.

36 Cf. ZHIZN' ZA 14 KOPEEK, 1912, p. 3.

37 Cf. for example, O MUT ZHIZNI: KHULIGANY, 1908, p. 3; PODVIGI ULICHNYKH GRABITELEI, 1910, p. 3.

38 GAZETA-KOPEIKA, 06.10.1910, p. 1.

39 Cf. PETERBURGSKII LISTOK, 12.05.1910, p. 4.

40 Cf. IBID., 05.05.1907, p. 4.

41 ULICHNAIA SEKTANTSKAIA MISSIIA, 1908, p. 2.

42 Cf. GRANDIOZNAIA OBLAVA NA KHULIGANOV I BEZDOMNIKOV, 1910, p. 2.

children were driven toward hooliganism by “destitution, alcoholism, and degeneration [vyrozhdienie]”⁴³.

Violence against self was treated as part of the same story. The press recorded the almost daily toll of suicides – many of which occurred in public places, especially cafes, taverns, and streets – during the suicide “epidemic” in Petersburg between 1906 and the war.⁴⁴ Official statistics on the reasons for suicide placed poverty at or near the top; if it yielded pride of place, it was to drunkenness, also linked to lower-class life.⁴⁵ Newspaper reports were often headlined “Due to Hunger”⁴⁶. So common were these histories that the popular columnist Skitalets (“the wanderer”), writing in *Gazeta-kopeika*, observed that stories of “despairing” unemployed men committing suicide were so “ordinary” that they were often ignored by newspapers and readers looking for something more interesting and dramatic.⁴⁷ The essayist Vasilii Rozanov similarly concluded that the public found little of interest in suicides from poverty – or perhaps, we may elaborate, had grown morally numb to its traumatic ubiquity – for “of poor people there are always so many”⁴⁸.

Of particular interest to readers was the “epidemic” of suicide among prostitutes,⁴⁹ where stories of desperate poverty (the reason most often given for why women “fell” into prostitution) combined with experiences of subordination, humiliation, and physical abuse.⁵⁰ The archetypal report described prostitutes committing suicide together, perhaps in “some stifling and stagnant tavern amidst rowdiness and drunken intoxication,” toasting their escape from life with glasses of poisonous vinegar essence.⁵¹ That women were more likely to kill themselves, or be victims, than to assault others, reminds us of the intertwining of narratives of gender along with class in these histories of everyday violence.

43 Detskii sud, 1910, p. 1.

44 Cf. for other discussions of suicide in Russia in these years, MORRISSEY, 1995, p. 201-217; IBID., 2006, chaps. 10-11; PAPERNO, 1997, p. 94-104, 109f., 121f., 158f.; PINNOW, 2010, p. 25-42.

45 Cf. PREDVARITEL'NYI SVOD STATISTICHESKIKH DANNYKH PO G. S-PETERBURGU ZA 1909 GOD, p. 39.

46 For example, IZ-ZA GOLODA, 1909, p. 4; cf. also ZHBANKOV, 1910(1), p. 29.

47 GAZETA-KOPEIKA, 18.08.1910, p. 3.

48 ROZANOV, 1911, p. 50f.

49 Cf. OBYVATEL', 1909, p. 2; ZHBANKOV, 1910(2), p. 63; GORDON, 1910, p. 1f.

50 Cf. NE VYNESLI POZORA, 1909, p. 4. Cf. also V. T., 1909, p. 3; PETERBURGSKII LISTOK, 17.01.1913, p. 14; OMUT ZHIZNI, 1908, p. 3.

51 NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO, 1910, p. 581-583. Cf. also BERNSTEIN, 1995, p. 78.

Interpreting violence

There is a naked reality to these stories: government statistics documented exceptionally high rates of violence and suicide in the Russian capital in these years.⁵² However, as can already be seen, the factual reporting of such “incidents” was never far removed from interpreting them, starting with the view that they were part of a common phenomenon. A key interpreting theme was “excess.” There was quantitative excess, emphasized by the metaphors used to frame and unite these different stories into one: a “bountiful harvest of death”⁵³, a “bacchanalia”⁵⁴ of death, an “atmosphere of death”⁵⁵, an environment where “pools of blood are on the floor, [and] the walls ooze pus”⁵⁶. Most troubling, though, was the qualitative excess. The stabbing of a stranger “for 14 kopecks” was emblematic. And this was not only a view of such people as definable “others” threatening the norms of “civilized” public life from without (as Joan Neuberger argued about hooligans, who exemplified these behaviors⁵⁷) but also something worse: a symptom of an ailing social body, of a sick self.⁵⁸

“Sickness” was a master metaphor for contemporaries. One of its worst symptoms was said to be the loss of value of life itself. Newspapers regularly headlined reports of violence with phrases like “life today is cheap,” “life has lost value!”⁵⁹ people today are “valued cheaper than trash”⁶⁰. The hooligan seemed to embody this spirit to dark perfection. The hooligan philosophy of life was “everything existing on this earth is rot [*ilia*] and people are shits [*gnidy*—literally, lice eggs]”⁶¹. The debased value for life, a *Gazeta-kopeika* columnist concluded, was the dark heart of “our terrible times”⁶², and made killing (and self-killing) easy.

52 Cf. N., 1909, p. 544-547.

53 N. V., 1908, p. 1.

54 SKITALET, 1913(2), p. 3.

55 ARNOVA, 1911, p. 476.

56 ENGEL’GARDT, 1908, p. 1.

57 Cf. NEUBERGER, 1993.

58 Cf. STEINBERG, 2011.

59 DUKH BANKO [The Ghost of Banquo], 1907, p. 1; GAZETA-KOPEIKA, 19.10.1909, p. 3; NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO, 1910, p. 581-590; FILENKIN, 1911, p. 3.

60 SKITALET, 1911, p. 5.

61 SVIRSKII, 1914, p. 253, 258-269. On Svirskii, cf. McREYNOLDS, 1991, p. 151f.

62 PODOL’SII, 1909, p. 3.

But why? Some writers blamed the government for nurturing this atmosphere: the aftershocks of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5 and especially of widespread repression, including a great number of executions, following the 1905 revolution. “Days without a death sentence and execution have been the exception” over the past year, a journalist noted at the end of 1909, and so “human life has lost value”⁶³. Other writers blamed the revolutionary movement, especially terrorist attacks on officials, which proliferated in these post-revolutionary years. In the wake of the execution of Prime Minister Petr Stolypin in September 1911, a liberal journalist offered a characteristic lament: “We are to blame, all of us, even the air we breathe and the thoughts and feelings we experience. For six years already we have been sowing seeds of violence, betrayal, and murder, and have been killing with knife, bullet, and bomb, and with soaped noose.”⁶⁴

But most writers, when looking for reasons and causes, blamed the modern city. If “these times” were sick, most journalists seemed to feel, the city was, as it were, the “epidemiological pump.” Statistics were available to confirm this: as a chronicler of Petersburg crime summarized the numbers, “the more urban, the more crime [...] including the most terrible bloody acts”⁶⁵. Explanations varied. Conservatives blamed modern secular individualism for eroding traditional values, especially respect for others and love of the good.⁶⁶ Liberals and socialists blamed the harsh conditions of social life (and, though they could not say this too loudly, the lack of political and civil rights and freedoms, which aggravated social hardships). But almost everyone agreed, in one way or another, that modern city life – indeed, modern progress itself, for which the city stood both socially and symbolically – had a paradoxical effect, especially on the lives of the poor: it made people into “savages,” “beasts,” and “animals” capable of the most “cruel” and “brutal” crimes – terms often used in newspaper crime reports.⁶⁷ Commentators wrote again and again of the harmful “atmosphere” of modern social life, especially in big cities and especially for those whose social lives were the most precarious.⁶⁸ To quote typical phrases from the press: the

63 BLANK, 1909, p. 1f.

64 TAN, 1911, p. 60f.

65 ABORIGEN, 1914, p. 43.

66 Cf. BRONZOV, 1912, p. 4-9.

67 Cf. TROFIMOV, 1909, p. 3; ZVERSKOE UBIISTVO, 1909, p. 3; POSSE, 1909, p. 83-85; NOVITSKII, 1909, p. 1; LIUDI-ZVERY, 1909, p. 3; DIKIE NRAYVY, 1908, p. 3; ENGEL’GARDT, 1910, p. 3.

68 Cf. ARNOVA, 1911, p. 482.

modern big city was a murderous “trap”⁶⁹, a devouring “stone monster”⁷⁰, a fatal “mirage”⁷¹. The fact that so many new arrivals to the capital – from small towns or the countryside – took their own lives was a symbol easy to interpret with.⁷²

So, to recall Walter Benjamin’s remark, we can see the work of “Herodotus” already in the “morning newspaper,” if “Herodotus” means a constructed narrative history of experience that explains and gives coherent meaning to the fragmentary and contradictory evidence of lived experience. These interpreting stories suggested solutions as well: for some, a revival of morality or religion; for others, social and political reform, perhaps revolution. Many worried, however, that there might be “no exit” (another frequent phrase in the press) from what one journalist gloomily called “the long, black, stinking corridor” of the present, its atmosphere “saturated with the exhalations of putrefying corpses”⁷³.

Theorizing violence

Can we do more to interpret this evidence? Can we see beyond a “susceptible” and “attentive” reading “*with the grain*,” beyond contemporaries’ own interpretations of their own lives? Most difficult, can we know anything of the experiences and motives, the subjectivities, of the subjects who enacted this violence? We have often been warned, especially by postcolonial theorists, of the danger of assuming transparency in voices from the past, of failing to recognize the inaccessibility and untranslatability of the discourses of others, of trusting our own constructions of (and desires for) the subaltern voice, of nostalgically recovering what seems lost – the danger of the “intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for they themselves,” as Gayatri Spivak wrote when suggesting that our knowledge that the “subaltern *cannot speak*” can serve as both a critical warning against epistemic violence and a path toward some understanding of social realities and experiences.⁷⁴ This warning must extend to local knowledge: contemporary interpreters, such as

69 GRIDINA, 1913, p. 3.

70 SHCHIGALEEV, 1912, p. 5.

71 GRIDINA, 1910, p. 3. Cf. also *IBID.*, 1911, p. 3.

72 Cf., for example, ZHERVA OBSHCHESTVENNOGO RAVNODUSHIA, 1908, p. 4; IZ-ZA GOLODA, 1909, p. 4; V. T., 1909, p. 3.

73 ENGEL’GARDT, 1908, p. 1.

74 Cf. SPIVAK, 1988, though I am using her insights and arguments somewhat differently than she intended.

we find in the press, are not necessarily closer to social realities and experiences than our own interpretations from afar.

A point of entry into this problem is the place that seemed to contemporaries most resistant to interpretation: irrational violence for violence's sake, with no other end or purpose.⁷⁵ When contemporary interpreters did find meaning in this, we have seen, it was to see symptoms of moral and spiritual illness. Perhaps less parochial voices can help us see further than they could, or were willing to, and open up a field of alternative interpretation.

Consider, for example, the perspective of the psychiatrist and radical philosopher Frantz Fanon in his 1961 book *Les Damnés de la Terre* (The Wretched of the Earth). His arguments were not merely theoretical, of course. They grew from his work among colonized North Africans, whose violence, he concluded, was a response to the material conditions and psychological effects of colonialism. Fanon described the world of colonialism – in terms, I think, that have uncanny suitability to the world of entrenched but fearful Russian autocracy and rapidly developing capitalism – as a “hostile, oppressive and aggressive world,” a world of “daily humiliations” and periodic repressive violence, that was simultaneously a “hell” from which the colonized dreamed of escape and a “paradise within arm’s reach guarded by ferocious watchdogs”⁷⁶. In such an environment, “the muscles of the colonized are always tensed” and “the colonized’s affectivity is kept on edge, like a running sore flinching from a caustic agent.” This produced what Fanon called “atmospheric violence”: a violence “rippling under the skin,” a tense “rage” ready to burst out in “periodic eruptions” of “bloody fighting” among themselves, including “the most brutal aggressiveness” and the most “impulsive violence.” “It is not uncommon,” Fanon wrote, “to see the colonized subject draw his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive look from another colonized subject.”⁷⁷ Other theorists of violence, examining other settings, have offered a similar perspective. Walter Benjamin, for example, in the wake of the terrible losses and brutalities of the Great War, described an “everyday” violence, where “man is impelled by anger” to the “outbursts of a violence that are not related as a means to a preconceived end” but are an expression of the conditions of “existence”⁷⁸, indeed, of experience.

Key to understanding this everyday, existential, atmospheric violence is what may be termed “blocked agency.” Hannah Arendt, for example, though

75 Cf., for example, IVANOV, 1914, p. 48.

76 FANON (1961), 2004, p. 16, 219.

77 IBID., p. 16-19, 31.

78 BENJAMIN, 1921, p. 248.

hostile to Fanon's justification of the violence of resistance (and especially Jean-Paul Sartre's advocacy of Fanon's arguments), nonetheless recognized that such violence emerges from conditions of modern "progress" that suppress freedom and creativity. As she wrote in her 1969 essay "On Violence," "the present glorification of violence is caused by severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world," such that "riots in the ghettos" make "people feel they are acting together in a way they rarely can"⁷⁹. More recently, James Scott similarly described a "latent sense of violence" produced when systems of domination block action and agency, when the "routine harvest of insults and injury to human dignity" cannot be answered with "reciprocal aggression," for these systems have the power to frustrate and deny the "natural impulse to rage, insult, anger, and the violence that such feelings prompt"⁸⁰.

It is important to emphasize the notion of self that is seen to drive the human desire for agency and become frustrated by its obstruction: a particular conception of human personhood as possessing natural human dignity and thus innate sensitivity to insult and humiliation and to constrictions of will. In Russia as in Europe, this notion has had a long and persistent history. An early and influential view of this is G. W. F. Hegel's notion of "recognition" (*Anerkennung*). Hegel defined "recognition" of "self," of "personhood," of "being," of "will," of one's "existence" as an individual, as essential human needs. Failure to be "recognized," "negation" of one's "self-expressive will," produces crime and violence, which can be understood to be an effort to "reinstate" one's "will to power," "to count for something, to be recognized"⁸¹. In Russia, arguments about harm to the natural "human personality" (the Russian keyword is *lichnost'*) caused by social conditions that degrade and injure the self were strongly developed among the nineteenth-century intelligentsia and became ubiquitous in public discourse, including in the daily press, by the start of the twentieth century.⁸²

The idea that frustrated human agency can fuel violent rage has recently been developed by Slavoj Žižek (also a psychoanalyst and radical philosopher) in his 2008 book *Violence*. More than his predecessors, though, Žižek confronts head-on the epistemological and hermeneutic resistance of much violence to

79 ARENDT, 1969, p. 83 (the final quotation is Arendt quoting an essay by Herbert Gans on "ghetto rebellions").

80 SCOTT, 1992, p. 37-39.

81 HEGEL, 1805-1806, part II ("actual spirit"), section A ("recognition"), esp. section iii ("crime and punishment").

82 Cf. discussion and sources in STEINBERG, 2002, chap. 2; and STEINBERG, 2011, p. 151-153.

our desire and effort to read a meaningful message. He gives the example of the 2005 riots in the poor and immigrant *banlieues* of Paris: “what is most difficult to accept is precisely the riots’ meaninglessness,” that they are less “a form of protest” than “an impulsive movement into action which can’t be translated into speech or thought.” This meaninglessness, he argues, “bears witness” both to the “impotence of the perpetrators” and to their “inability to locate the experience of their situation within a meaningful whole.” Such violence resists translation into familiar narratives, whether the backwardness of class and racial others or the heroic resistance of the oppressed. And yet, Žižek does see interpretable signs and even a type of politics in these acts. He sees violence as an effort to acquire denied “presence,” to make oneself “visible,” “to create a problem” – even while “neither offering a solution nor constituting a movement for providing a solution.” In other words, these acts are a “sign” not a “meaning,” a “means” not an “end”⁸³. Or, as Arendt put it, drawing on Benjamin, violence is an “interruption” of processes in human history that otherwise seem “automatic,” predictable, and unyielding.⁸⁴

Recent work by theorists of affect and emotions reinforce such arguments. To be sure, most attention in recent scholarship on the relationship between violence and emotions has focused on collective and explicitly political violence, such as the role of emotions in stimulating nationalist and ethnic violence, or, closer to our case, the ways collective experiences of loss, moral hurt, resentment, and anger have fueled moral claims that produce defiant and retributive violence.⁸⁵ Some studies, however, notably the work of Sara Ahmed and Sianne Ngai, suggest an everyday and individual politics of emotion, especially in how people deal with social “pain,” “injury,” and “wounds.” Key here is what Ngai calls a “state of obstructed agency,” which means not only social and political oppression restricting collective action, but a deep incommensurability between the hurt and any available solution: what practical action, for example, is strong enough to undo the injuries of class subordination, poverty, or racism (the effects of symbolic violence, in Pierre Bourdieu’s important term)? These conditions can stimulate vehement emotions, often embodied in violence, which become a “sign,” a way to “speak out.” Such violence tends toward excess and attachment to what Ngai calls “ugly feelings,” such as envy, anxiety, paranoia, irritation, and disgust. But these vehement and sometimes violent emotions also contain “critical potential.” Not as simple or adequate resistance, much less mechanisms

83 ŽIŽEK, 2008, esp. p. 76f., 179, 185, 200-202.

84 Cf. ARENDT, 1969, p. 30.

85 Cf. STEINBERG/SOBOL, 2011.

of change, nor even as adequate catharsis, but as strong signs of disenchantment, disaffection, and refusal.⁸⁶

Returning to the evidence of the Russian press, these arguments resonate with the epidemics of excessive, “irrational,” “meaningless” violence without “end” or “reason” beyond the act itself, exemplified by what one journalist described as the “hooligan” stance of being “the enemy of each and everyone”⁸⁷. As this suggests, some contemporaries saw the hints of the political in this. The hooligan, a persona that had come to embody irrational and excessive violence among the poor, wanted to “outrage/offend/defile society” (*nadrugat’sia nad obshchestvom*), and if material damage could be added to this “moral harm,” all the better. The hooligan acted “as if to avenge himself on society for something”⁸⁸. More radical writers elaborated on this “as if” and “for something.” In 1913, the worker writer Aleksei Gastev argued that “today in Russia people label as ‘hooligans’ anyone who does not perform ‘cultured,’ which is to say lackey, duties for the large and small parasite masters”⁸⁹. Violence against the self could also be read as a sign of refusal, as a way to bear witness with one’s own life to (and literally interrupt) the tragic conflict in modern life between heightened desires and “empty” “reality,” as the regular *Gazeta-kopeika* columnist, Ol’ga Gridina, wrote in an essay titled “Death Answers”⁹⁰. Some went further and described the suicide epidemic as “a mass bloody protest against life as it is”⁹¹.

To translate this history through interpreting languages of other times, situations, and perspectives, we can argue that the “epidemic” of everyday violence among the urban poor in Russia – and here we can agree with contemporary commentators who treated robberies at knife point, barroom brawls, suicide, and domestic violence as a single phenomenon – reflected a psychological “affectivity” and “muscular tension” always on “edge,” a vague “rage” and “latent” violence that could “erupt” at the slightest provocation. At its heart were “pain,” “wounds,” and “injuries” that denied dignity and recognition, made more painful by structures of domination that blocked action and agency. This violence contained “critical potential” by “bearing witness” to political “impotence,” making oneself “visible” and “present” in the face of exclusion and marginaliza-

86 Cf. AHMED, 2004, esp. p. 33-34, 169, 193-194; NGAI, 2005, esp. p. 1-29, 161, 188.

87 IVANOV, 1914, p. 47-50.

88 IBID.

89 ZORIN, 1913, p. 1457.

90 GRIDINA, 1910, p. 3. Cf. also NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO, 1910, p. 584.

91 ABRAMOVICH, 1911, p. 113. Cf. also ZHERTVYA OBSHCHESTVENNOGO RAVNODUSHIIA, 1908, p. 4.

tion, “speaking out,” “interrupting,” and “creating a problem.” True, it “served no means” or end. So perhaps it is too strong to speak of resistance. But we can speak of “vehement” “disaffection” and “rage” as a political “sign,” as a form of refusal, even a form of “revenge” for so much wreckage. Differentiating between rational and irrational in these acts, as contemporaries did, helps little to understand them.

But how far should we go in viewing these acts as political? Can we find here the possibility, in Fanon’s terms, of translating atmospheric violence into revolutionary “violence in motion,” a violence that “cleanses,” changes, and liberates?⁹² Or, what Georges Sorel, writing at the same time as this Russian story, described as a violence that resists civilization’s barbarity and authoritative force, that is ultimately a violence of life, will, creativity, and virtue?⁹³ Or what Benjamin called the “divine violence” that can destroy the violence of power and “deliver justice” “for the sake of the living”⁹⁴? Or what Jean-Paul Sartre, in his preface to Fanon’s book, called the “violence, like Achilles’ spear, [that] can heal the wounds it has inflicted?”⁹⁵

We may desire such transfiguration, for there is hope and the appealing promise of redemption in it. But this optimism, and the encouraging voices of authoritative theorists, may be more seductive than real. Fanon himself recognized how “melancholy” and “suicidal” everyday violence among the oppressed tended to be: that the regular “release” of tension and rage by drawing one’s knife against another colonized person at the slightest vexation was ultimately “collective self-destruction [...] a death wish in the face of danger, a suicidal conduct that enforces the colonist’s existence and domination, and reassures him that such men are not rational”⁹⁶. Perhaps Russian journalists were right to see melancholy, hopelessness, and the “loss of taste for life.”

If we look ahead to 1917, we see an explicit translation of everyday social violence into directed political violence. But the affinity between what Fanon called self-destructive atmospheric violence and transgressive “violence in motion” means that the boundaries between them are porous and unstable. Perhaps because the wounds went so deep, the purposefulness of revolution could not remove the undirected rage that helped fuel this upheaval. “Excess,” again, was a telling sign. Witnesses to the February Revolution (which was relatively

92 Cf. FANON, 1961 (2004), e.g. p. 51.

93 Cf. SOREL, 1908 (1950).

94 BENJAMIN, 1921, p. 248-250.

95 SARTRE, JEAN-PAUL, preface to FANON, 1961 (2004), p. lxii.

96 FANON, 1961 (2004), p. 17f.

bloodless compared to the October Revolution and the Civil War that followed) described with dismay the epidemic of street violence that continually crossed the boundaries of reason: people in the streets shooting obsessively into the air or into the windows of apartment buildings, smashing store windows, looting (especially wine stores – a crime not without some instrumental purpose), and, at the extreme, stomping on the lifeless bodies of murdered policemen and officers. The Petrograd Soviet characteristically condemned all this as “hooliganism.” Echoing the same older tradition of interpretation, Maxim Gorky (then editor and columnist of a new independent left-wing newspaper in the capital) insisted that this was not revolutionary violence at all, but “Asiatic savagery”⁹⁷. In the months following, organized revolutionaries would repeatedly say the same about the epidemic of crowd violence against perceived enemies of the revolution: as one soldier-socialist declared after witnessing the brutal murder in the street of a dozen officers who had been arrested after the Kornilov mutiny, “this is a disgrace and a shame” and “no one will achieve anything doing it this way”⁹⁸. In other words, violence “under the skin” did not always change its nature when put in political motion. This was a “wound” that “would not heal” (borrowing the classic metaphor of decadence), a violence that could not bring change or redemption, or even consolation, a violence that was no more than a symbolic reminder of injury and rage.

Still, there was politics in this, though an “ugly” politics of ugly feelings and ugly actions. The same may be said of the “traumatic epidemic” of everyday “blood and violence” that the Petersburg press so fulsomely documented in the prerevolutionary years – a politics, yes, but ugly, unable to console, bringing no redemption. At best, this was a politics of disruption and interruption, of being a problem, of presence, of speaking out with physical signs. From a perspective of explicit and conventional politics, this was all terribly inadequate – inadequate for resisting injury and harm, inadequate for producing change. In a way, this violence was too symbolic. Nor did it help that it was shaped by a distorting culture of violent masculinity. Perhaps tragically, these emotions, vocabularies, and actions introduced an ugly politics into the revolution, a time when political and social change actually did become possible. One could argue, and contemporaries certainly did, that this was proof of the trauma and sickness of prerevolutionary society. But one could also argue that even the ugliest popular violence during and especially after 1917 was still political: a dark agency for the unorganized people of Russia’s “lower depths,” a way of being present in the

97 Cited in STEINBERG, 2001, p. 63f.

98 DELO NARODA, No. 147, 06.09.1917, p. 2.

face new postrevolutionary obstructions to plebeian agency, a way of baring and witnessing wounds being inflicted this time by “Soviet” and “socialist” forms of political domination and modernizing “progress.”

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