

In the Name of Freedom: Suicide, Serfdom, and Autocracy in Russia

SUSAN MORRISSEY

THE date was 1 September 1828.* The place was Russia's first private art school in Arzamas, a small town about 100 kilometres south of the provincial capital, Nizhnii Novgorod. The day began as usual. That morning, Grigorii Miasnikov was painting his teacher, the school's founder and director, Aleksandr Stupin. At midday, the sitting broke for lunch, and Stupin laid down afterwards to rest. Ready to resume in the afternoon, Stupin sent for Miasnikov, but nobody knew where he was. On his bed, however, a note had been found: 'Forgive me, my most beloved friends. Do not reproach me for my act — I am showing you how one must oppose the superciliousness of ambitious men [kak dolzhno postupat' protiv nadmennosti chestoliubtsev]. My dear friend Vasilii Egorovich — write on my tomb that I died for freedom [napishi na moei grobnitse, chto ia umer za svobodu]. Forgive me.' A book entitled *Oproverzhenie na Volterovy zabluzhdeniia* ('The Refutation of Voltaire's Delusions') had also been found. With growing concern, Stupin ordered a full search of the premises. When a wing of the school was found unexpectedly locked, Stupin ordered it opened, entered the courtyard, and peered through the windows. Miasnikov had been found: he was lying in a pool of blood on the floor of the School's Gallery of Antiquity. He was dead, shot in the head, and a pistol lay next to him. Stupin went immediately for the sheriff (*gorodnichii*), on whose report to the provincial administration (*gubernskoe pravlenie*) my

Susan Morrissey is Lecturer in Modern Russian History at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London.

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account has been based.¹ It was a clear-cut case of suicide; the doors had been found locked from the inside.

The official reaction was swift and really quite extraordinary. On 2 September authorities in Arzamas notified the provincial procurator, Andrei Bestuzhev, who, in a letter dated 12 September, informed Prince Aleksei Dolgorukov, the Justice Minister, in St Petersburg.² The 'unusual nature of the [suicide's] causes' ('po neobyknovennosti sei prichiny') prompted Dolgorukov to contact the Third Department of His Majesty's Personal Chancellery, the secret police, which, in turn, initiated a covert inquiry.³ Tsar Nicholas I himself was briefed, and he ordered an official investigation by local authorities as well. In January 1829, the chief of the Third Department, Count Aleksandr Benckendorff, finally closed the case with a report presented in the Committee of 6 December 1826, the body charged with discussing governmental reform and the actual power centre during the early years of Nicholas's reign.⁴

While suicide was a felony in Russia, it was usually considered a criminal rather than a political offence.⁵ However, Miasnikov had constructed his death as a public gesture with political meaning. Although he had not provided any specific motive in his note, he had evoked 'freedom', choosing the word *svoboda*, which referred to the abstract principle of individual or political freedom. Furthermore, Miasnikov had described his suicide as a form of protest and, as such, a model of behaviour. Similarly, his method was deliberately selected not just for its practical advantages but also its symbolic value. The pistol had long exemplified an honourable death, and it was favoured by officers and noblemen; the noose, in contrast, connoted the dishonour

¹ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Nizhegorodskoi oblasti (hereafter, GANO), f. 5, 1828g., op. 45, d. 202, ll. 2–3. This letter states only that Miasnikov's body had been found in a room located in a wing of the school. A memoir written by a fellow student recalls that he was found in the Gallery of Antiquity (which was located in this wing). This has not been confirmed by other sources but seems probable due to the way in which Miasnikov carefully constructed his suicide. For the memoir account, see I. K. Zaitsev, 'Vospominaniia starogo uchitelia I. K. Zaitseva, 1805–1887' (hereafter, 'Vospominaniia'), *Russkaia starina*, June 1887, pp. 663–91 (p. 669).

² For the letter of the *striapchii*, see GANO, f. 180, op. 640, 1828, d. 15, l. 1. For the letter sent to the Ministry of Justice, see l. 3, and Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi federatsii (hereafter, GARF), f. 109, 4aia Eksped., 1828g., op. 168, d. 139, l. 2.

³ GARF, f. 109, 4aia Eksped., 1828g., op. 168, d. 139, l. 1. Results of the investigation were collected in this file.

⁴ For the report, which is dated 9 January 1829, see Rossiiskoi gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (hereafter, RGIA), f. 1167, op. XVI–1826, d. 183, ll. 1–5; for the decision of the Committee, see its official Journal (vol. 5, pp. 101–04) in d. 142d, ll. 280–83. On the committee, see Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Russian Empire 1801–1917*, Oxford, 1967, pp. 202–06.

⁵ On suicide as a criminal offence in Russia, see N. S. Tagantsev, *O prestupleniakh protiv zhizni po russkomu pravu*, 2 vols, St Petersburg, 1871, 2, pp. 401–46.

of the death penalty as well as the ignoble suicide of the lower classes.⁶ Finally, the setting in the school's Gallery of Antiquity was suggestive of classical models, especially, as we shall see, of Cato.

Whether Miasnikov anticipated the extent of his notoriety is unknown, but the question remains pertinent. Why had he garnered the attention of the Tsar? The timing is not insignificant. Just three years had passed since the Decembrist revolt, and governmental ministers remained highly vigilant against any sign of political dissent. Furthermore, his act evoked a tradition of 'heroic' death that had developed in Russia since the 1790s, when suicide had first been represented as a form of protest, an affirmation of self-sovereignty against the claims of both religious and secular authorities.⁷ Yet this case was disquieting for another reason as well. Miasnikov was not simply an art student making a political gesture in some provincial backwater; he was also a serf. With his claim to freedom, this serf had violated the fundamental rules of social and political governance in Russia.

None of the investigators actually explored how Miasnikov staged his death. Its exact setting was not mentioned in any official document but only in a subsequent memoir, and we do not know where Miasnikov had been found in the Gallery of Antiquity.⁸ Had he chosen a spot next to a particular figure from ancient Greece or Rome? Similarly, the book on Voltaire is mentioned without any further information. Had he left it open at a particular page? Such missing details can be plausibly explained as mere oversight due to either a hasty investigation or ignorance of their potential significance. I would like to propose an alternative perspective. Though contemporaries were well aware of Miasnikov's general aspiration to a 'noble' death (if not necessarily the relevance of certain details), to describe it as such was possibly too risky in the political climate of these years and certainly too disruptive of cultural norms. During the investigation, Miasnikov's act would instead be rewritten into a different but equally conventional idiom, that of the

⁶ On honourable and dishonourable forms of punishment, see Richard J. Evans, *Rituals of Retribution: Capital Punishment in Germany, 1600–1987*, London, 1996, pp. 53–56. In France, the introduction of the guillotine was seen as a social equalizer; see Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class, and Political Culture*, New Haven, CT, 1989 (hereafter, *Body and the French Revolution*), pp. 106–10. For a fascinating discussion of method and suicide, see Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, vol. 2: *The Curse on Self-Murder*, Oxford, 2000 (hereafter, *Curse on Self-Murder*), ch. 13 and *passim*.

⁷ I am referring here to a secular tradition which I will describe in more detail below. A different tradition dating to the late seventeenth century is associated with the mass self-immolation of Old Believers, and this too had political connotations. See Georg Michels, *At War with the Church: Religious Dissent in Seventeenth-Century Russia*, Stanford, CA, 1999, and Robert O. Crummey, *The Old Believers and the World of the Antichrist: The Vyg Community and the Russian State, 1694–1855*, Madison, WI, 1970.

⁸ On the history of the school, see P. Kornilov, *Arzamasskaia shkola zhivopisi: pervoi poloviny XIX veka*, Moscow and Leningrad, 1947 (hereafter, *Arzamasskaia shkola*).

common suicide. The final report of Count Benckendorff deserves special attention for it juxtaposed several contradictory explanations for Miasnikov's death. At issue was less its political significance, however, than its aspiration to nobility. By reframing it as ignoble, Benckendorff changed its political meaning as well.

This article seeks to illuminate the cultural frame of reference for both Miasnikov's act and its subsequent reception. I will first outline the tradition of noble suicide in Russia, which arose as a direct consequence of Westernization in the eighteenth century and reached a highpoint with the Decembrist movement. My goal here is not to claim that Miasnikov had specific Russian models in mind, but rather to illuminate the pattern of his own heroic feat. I will then turn to the rereadings of his death by the two police investigations, before shifting once again to their broader cultural context — the reception of suicide among both elites and commoners in this period. Finally, I will address Benckendorff's concluding report and suggest why this case study provides unique insight into Russian political and cultural history.

The Noble Death

In remarks made upon his reading of Tacitus (in a French translation), Aleksandr Pushkin noted that suicide had been just as frequent in ancient Rome as the duel was in contemporary Russia.⁹ For Pushkin, who especially admired Seneca's suicide, the juxtaposition of these perhaps distinctive acts seemed natural, for both could fulfil a similar ritual function: the restoration of individual honour. When a duel was not possible, suicide could even function as an *ersatz*. The most famous such case occurred in 1816, when five Polish officers shot themselves in Warsaw following a perceived insult by the Grand Duke Constantine. As a member of the royal family, he could not be challenged to a duel.¹⁰

Both the duel and the noble suicide depended upon a concept of honour which, as Iurii Lotman and Irina Reyfman have shown, was relatively new to Russia. Indeed, the duel only arrived in the eighteenth century, for Russia possessed neither a tradition of chivalry nor a historically-grounded code of honour for the nobility.¹¹ The great popularity of the duel — which would reach its high point in the first

⁹ Aleksandr Pushkin, 'Zamechaniia na annaly Tatsita', *Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh*, 10 vols, Moscow, 1962, 7, p. 235.

¹⁰ On the overlap between the duel and some suicides as well as Pushkin's own thoughts on committing a suicide of honour, see Irina Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence Russian Style: The Duel in Russian Culture and Literature*, Stanford, CA, 1999 (hereafter, *Ritualized Violence*), pp. 16–17, 126 and *passim*, and A. V. Vostrikov, 'Ubiistvo i samoubiistvo v dele chesti', *Smert' kak fenomen kul'tury*, Syktyvkar, 1994, pp. 23–34.

¹¹ See Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence*, and Iurii Lotman, *Besedy o russkoi kul'ture: Byt i traditsii russkogo dvorianstva (XVIII–nachalo XIX veka)*, St Petersburg, 1994 (hereafter, *Besedy*), pp. 164–79. On earlier notions of honour, see the excellent study by Nancy Shields Kollman, *By Honor Bound: State and Society in Early Modern Russia*, Ithaca, NY, 1999.

third of the nineteenth century and count Pushkin among its victims — was not the result of centuries-old aristocratic customs (as many contemporaries firmly believed) but a completely new phenomenon tied to the changing self-consciousness of the elite. Not only did the duel allow nobles to defend themselves against many (if not all) forms of perceived arbitrariness; it also allowed them to claim honour and dignity as the innate and natural characteristics of nobility.

In comparison to the duel, the noble suicide was certainly less common, but it too was predicated on ideas of honour, both individual and civic. As a heroic way to die, it could function as an affirmation of one's dignity and autonomy as well as a form of political protest. The glory of self-sacrifice in the name of the people and nation thus formed a central theme in the writings and rhetoric of the officers and nobles associated with the Decembrist Revolt. The poet Kondratii Ryleev, who enjoyed tremendous popularity among his comrades and was later to be executed, elevated martyrdom to one of life's primary tasks. In his poem 'The Citizen', he thus designated a heroic death in the name of freedom as the only goal for honourable men. At a meeting held the evening before the uprising, Ryleev likewise spoke of the patriotic duties of the citizen and the certain death awaiting them all. In his enthusiasm, Prince Aleksandr Odoevskii supposedly shouted that they were all to die, to die gloriously.¹² As Lotman has shown, the Decembrists modelled themselves as romantic heroes, as men of action, for whom the virtues of honour, dignity, and courage possessed absolute value in both life and death. Indeed, they were so concerned with life's final act that they pondered death incessantly and thereby transformed their life stories into tragedies.¹³

In the following weeks, several Decembrists would choose suicide. Their acts subsequently became an integral part of the Decembrist mythology, glorified as heroic feats. Captain Ivan Bogdanovich shot himself one day after the revolt because, it was said, he had missed the chance to join his comrades on Senate Square and thus thought that he had done too little for the cause.¹⁴ Ryleev's school friend Colonel Bulatov smashed his head against his cell wall in the Peter and Paul

¹² See Patrick O'Meara, *K. F. Ryleev: A Political Biography of the Decembrist Poet*, Princeton, NJ, 1984. For an overview of the movement, including a reference to this scene, see A. Mazour, *The First Russian Revolution, 1825: The Decembrist Movement, its Origins, Development, and Significance*, Berkeley, CA, 1937, p. 164.

¹³ See Iurii Lotman, 'The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Eighteenth-Century Russian Culture' (hereafter, 'The Poetics'), and 'The Decembrist in Daily Life. Everyday Behavior as a Historical-Psychological Category', *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, ed. and trans. Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, Ithaca, NY, 1985, pp. 67–94, 95–149 (pp. 86–87).

¹⁴ M. V. Nechkina, *Dvizhenie dekabristov*, 2 vols, Moscow, 1955 (hereafter, *Dvizhenie*), 2, p. 266. See also A. E. Rozen, 'Iz zapisok dekabristov', *Pisateli-dekabristy v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*, 2 vols, Moscow, 1980 (hereafter, *Pisateli-dekabristy*) 1, pp. 143–205 (p. 155).

Fortress, because he believed that he had missed an opportunity to shoot Nicholas I.¹⁵ Ryleev's poetic appeal likewise echoed among some of the exiled Decembrists. For his role in the revolt, Ivan Sukhinov was sentenced to forced labour in Siberia, where he attempted to organize a rebellion. Condemned not to an honourable death by firing squad but to beating, branding, and hanging, Sukhinov resolved to escape this humiliation and affirm his honour: his third attempt at suicide proved successful.¹⁶ Heroic suicide could thus link personal honour and autonomy with political freedom and the rejection of imperial power.

The linkage between suicide and imperial power was first made in Russia by Peter the Great, whose reforms helped to transform not only Russia's military and bureaucracy but her political culture as well. Before his reign, suicide had been in the sole jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church which, like its Latin counterpart, regarded wilful self-killing as a most grievous sin, requiring the ritual expulsion of the victim from the community of Christians by profane burial. One marginal aspect of Peter's reforms was the introduction of suicide into criminal law and a secular jurisdiction. According to the criminal codes of his military and naval charters, which were extended to the civilian population and remained in force until 1835, premeditated suicide was punishable by the desecration of the body and profane burial; attempted suicide was to be punished by the death penalty, followed by desecration and profane burial.¹⁷ One reason for the criminalization of suicide was Peter's importation of Western political structures and principles.¹⁸ Equally important was his concept of the imperial service state. While his authority had initially been confirmed and consecrated by the Orthodox Church, he formally subordinated the church to the state and assumed the secular title of all-Russian emperor. With the legitimacy of the new order henceforth to be based on concepts of the public good and guardianship, Peter's system made service and

¹⁵ Nechkina, *Dvizhenie*, 2, pp. 285, 398.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 435–36. Sergei Gessen, *Zagovor dekabrista Sukhinova*, Moscow, 1930, esp. pp. 46–48. See also *Pisateli-dekabristy*, 1, pp. 119, 155, 189, 395.

¹⁷ The death penalty was subsequently replaced by penal servitude, and I have found no evidence that desecration was widely practised. For the articles on suicide in the Military and Naval Regulations, see *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, first series, St Petersburg, 1833 (hereafter, *PSZ*), 5, p. 370; 6, p. 77. On the formation and jurisdiction of the Regulations, see Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*, New Haven, CT, 1998 (hereafter, *Russia in the Age*), ch. 3.

¹⁸ Despite many variations in law and enforcement, suicide was a felony offence in most parts of Europe at this time. Peter based his statutes on a Saxonian model. On the legal status of suicide in Western Europe, see R. Weichbrodt, *Der Selbstmord*, Basel, 1937, pp. 76–98. On the history of suicide in general, see A. Bayet, *Le Suicide et la morale*, Paris, 1922; George Minois, *Histoire du suicide*, Paris, 1995 (hereafter, *Histoire*); Michael MacDonald and Terence Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England*, Oxford and New York, 1990 (hereafter, *Sleepless Souls*).

obedience into fundamental principles, applicable to noble servitors and their peasant-serfs alike.¹⁹ In this system, the free decision to take one's life was an offence against both God and secular authority.²⁰ Peter was, of course, building on a well-known and oft-cited classical model: suicide was akin to a soldier deserting his post. Even after the liberation of the nobility from obligatory service in 1762, suicide continued to possess political connotations: the right to take life remained a prerogative of the absolute monarch.

Many decades would pass before a secular form of political suicide would develop in Russia. The precondition for this development was cultural Westernization during the eighteenth century, when Russia's elites encountered the culture and history of Europe — often mediated through multiple (and hardly rigorous) translations. This was not a systematic study of selected texts but an uneven process, in which new scientific and technical discoveries, philosophical ideas, literary images, models of 'civilized' behaviour and forms of expression were all equally of interest.²¹ If not a central element within Enlightenment thought, suicide was a question addressed by practically every major philosopher — Montesquieu, Hume, Voltaire and Rousseau. Few philosophers defended an absolute right to suicide, but most did attack what they considered the barbaric punishments and the superstitions propagated by the Church. Suicide thus became a pawn in the larger controversy over religion, atheism, and human freedom. In this context, the rational suicide — the result of physical infirmity or patriotic duty — was often lauded as a potentially heroic public act, the ultimate expression of individual liberty.²²

¹⁹ On the reign of Peter the Great, see Hughes, *Russia in the Age*. On the representations of power, see Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, Princeton, NJ, 1995, esp. pp. 42–78.

²⁰ The link to political rebellion was made explicit in a 1722 decree directed at schismatics. For the synodic decree, *PSZ*, 6, pp. 742–46; for the version, which includes a preface relating the tsar's order and the admonition to read it monthly, see *Polnoe sobranie postanovlenii i rasporyazhenii po vedomstvu pravoslavnogo ispovedaniia rossiiskoi imperii: Tsarstvovanie gos. imp. Petra I*, St Petersburg, 1872, no. 588, pp. 232–35.

²¹ J. G. Garrard (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century in Russia*, Oxford, 1973, and Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*, New Haven, CT, 1981, chs 21, 33, 34 (hereafter, *Russia in the Age*); Gary Marker, *Publishing, Printing, and the Origins of Intellectual Life in Russia, 1700–1800*, Princeton, NJ, 1985; Marc Raeff, *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia: The Eighteenth-Century Nobility*, New York, 1966; Douglas Smith, 'Freemasonry and the Public in Eighteenth-Century Russia', in Jane Burbank and David L. Ransel (eds), *Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 1998, pp. 281–304, and Catriona Kelly, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin*, Oxford, 2002, ch. 1.

²² On the philosophical and literary debates over suicide during the Enlightenment, see John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment: Changing Attitudes to Death among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-century France*, Oxford and New York, 1981, ch. 12; MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, chs 5, 9; and Minois, *Histoire*, chs 8–10.

Though shaped by the discussions in Western Europe and evolving in tandem with them, the Russian debate about suicide was not a carbon copy of a European model. Indeed, it could not be, considering the accelerated and selective absorption of Western culture over the course of just several decades. Among the most influential treatments were fictional works, including Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, Voltaire's Roman tragedies, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, and Rousseau's *The New Héloïse*. These texts were read in Russia, either in the original language or in translations.²³ Journals published translations on the death of Socrates and the suicide of Cato (drawn from both classical and Western European texts),²⁴ as well as excerpts from Rousseau.²⁵ Finally, suicide was a standard trope in sentimental literature, most importantly, Karamzin's *Bednaia Liza* ('Poor Liza', 1792).²⁶ Noteworthy in Russia, though largely peripheral to this article, was in fact the intermingling of highly diverse genres and paradigms.

The primary exemplar of heroic suicide in Russia, as in Western Europe, was Cato, the republican and patriot, who chose liberty in death over tyranny in life.²⁷ His heroism exercised a peculiar fascination on Russia's male elite. 'I would rather die than humiliate myself' ('Umru, a ne unizhus'), the young officer Sergei Glinka claimed to have proclaimed in 1793, when he refused to apologize for a minor

²³ Educated Russians were often proficient in several languages, and translations were also abundant. *Werther* appeared in two complete translations in 1781 (reprinted 1794, 1796) and 1798 (reprinted 1816). See V. Zhirmunskii, *Gete v russkoi literature*, Leningrad, 1937, pp. 46–47. Most of Rousseau's works (except *Social Contract*) and Voltaire's Roman tragedies were likewise translated. See de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age*, pp. 330, 338–39, 626 n. 14, 537.

²⁴ Accounts of Socrates appeared frequently in journals beginning as early as the 1760s. See, for example, 'O smerti Sokratovoi', *Sochineniia i perevody, k pol'ze i uveseleniiu*, April 1760, pp. 362–67; 'Smert' Sokrata', *Rastushchii vinograd*, July 1786, pp. 23–36, and 'O sokratovoi smerti', *Novyia ezhemesiachnyia sochineniia*, pt 71, 1792, pp. 55–67. For pieces on Cato, see 'Pis'mo Katona k Iuliiu Tsesariu', *Sobesednik liubitelei rossiiskago slova*, pt 8, 1783, pp. 34–39; 'Monolog. Iz tragedii Katon, sochinennoi g. Adissonom', *Novyia ezhemesiachnyia sochineniia*, pt 25, July 1788, pp. 74–76; 'Katon v Livii. Perevod iz Lukanovoi Farsalii', *Panteon inostranoi slovesnosti*, pt 1, 1789, pp. 79–92 (untitled translation from Lucan); *St Peterburgskii Merkurii*, pt 3, 1793, pp. 35–37; 'Smert' Katona, ili Rozhdenie rimskago edinonachalii', *Ippokrena*, pt 8, 1801, pp. 90–229, and *Katon, tragediia*, trans. Aleksei Kolmakov, St Petersburg, 1804. More rare were also such pieces as 'Epigramma na smert' Liukretsii', *Novyia ezhemesiachnyia sochineniia*, pt 2, August 1786, p. 64.

²⁵ Rousseau's passage on suicide was especially popular. See 'Samoubiistvo', *Pokoishchusia trudoliubets*, pt 4, Moscow, 1785, pp. 193–95; *Odnaia dama*, 'O samoubiistve: Iz sochinenii Zh. Russo', *Priatnoe i poleznoe preprovozhdenie vremeni*, pt 2, 1794, pp. 117–21, and 'Samoubiistvo', *Chto nibud' ot bezdel'ia na dosuge*, 1800, pp. 257–62.

²⁶ Many of these stories, including *Bednaia Liza*, are reprinted in P. A. Orlov (ed.), *Russkaia sentimental'naia povest'*, Moscow, 1979.

²⁷ As Dorinda Outram (*Body and the French Revolution*, chs 5, 6) has shown, a stoic ideal as embodied by Cato would form a primary model for the wave of political suicides during the French Revolution. Cato's death has inspired extensive commentary, both positive and negative. See the extensive discussion in Murray, *The Curse on Self-Murder*, esp. pp. 116–18, 400–42, 309–15, and *passim*.

misunderstanding with another officer. Although Glinka did not act on this impulse, he later recalled in his memoirs how Cato's image filled his imagination, making suicide seem the only honourable path of action.²⁸ Patriotic suicide on this model also formed the theme of Iakov Kniashnin's play *Vadim Novgorodskii* ('Vadim of Novgorod').²⁹ Written in 1789 and published after Kniashnin's death in 1793, the play had the misfortune of appearing at the height of the French Revolution. Though its political message was not without ambiguity, contemporary events shaped its reception, and Catherine the Great ordered it to be burned. The play depicts the fall of the Roman republic in an invented account of Russian history based on a brief chronicle reference: the victory of Riurik in 864 (now presented as the founder of the imperial state), over Vadim (the symbol of the free city-republic of Novgorod). It concludes with both Vadim and his daughter stabbing themselves in the name of republican freedom. The legend of Vadim as the defender of the republic against the empire would later form a theme in the writings of the Decembrist poets Ryleev and Raevskii.³⁰ Similarly, the Decembrist Nikita Murav'ev recalled being 'obsessed with the limitless love of Cicero, Cato and others for the fatherland'.³¹ Cato's act could be appropriated as a heroic gesture in defence of personal honour, patriotism and civic virtue.

It also became a model for at least one real suicide. In 1792, Mikhail Sushkov, the author of a novel in verse called *Rossiiskii Werther* ('The Russian Werther'), killed himself citing in his suicide note not so much Werther's sentimental act as Cato's heroism and Voltaire's rationalism — both of which had also been important themes in his rewriting of the Werther story. For him, suicide was a logical act, a rational response to the ultimate meaninglessness of life. As he ironically noted, even Voltaire had failed to convince him of the immortality of the soul. Sushkov thus claimed no particular cause or goal, be it honour or patriotism. His act was predicated on pure reason: 'I can only say that Cato is of course greater than the convict who chooses to suffer and live', he wrote, 'I am free to throw off the burden [of life] even if I can't pick it up again, especially as we are destined to drop it sooner or later

²⁸ *Zapiski Sergeia Nikolaevicha Glinki*, St Petersburg, 1895, pp. 102–03.

²⁹ See the reprinted version, V. Savodnik (ed.), *Vadim Novgorodskii: Tragediia Ia. Kniashnina*, Moscow, 1914. See also the discussion in V. Ia. Stoiunin, 'Kniashnin-pisatel', *Istoricheskii vestnik*, 2, 1881, 7, pp. 425–54, and 2, 1881, 8, pp. 735–64.

³⁰ Hans Lemberg, *Die nationale Gedankenwelt der Dekabristen*, Köln and Graz, 1963, pp. 95–98.

³¹ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 100.

anyway.³² The prominent place of Voltaire in the contemporary understanding of suicide must be emphasized, for his name would become practically a synonym for free-thinking and atheism which, as we shall see, were standard tropes in the enlightenment-era condemnation of suicide.³³

It would fall to Russia's first well-known radical and most famous suicide of this era, Aleksandr Radishchev, to develop a philosophical justification for political suicide, and he too found his primary model in Cato. Arguing that the world — particularly in Russia — had fallen into abject slavery, a condition which contradicted the nature of man, he posited that the task of the enlightened philosopher was not just to proclaim the truths of freedom and citizenship but to translate them into life. To effect the transition from slavery to freedom it was necessary to awake the people to their enslavement and their ability to grasp man's inherent liberty. This was perhaps his central goal in his most famous work, *Puteshestvie ot Peterburga v Moskvu* ('A Journey from Petersburg to Moscow', 1790). In one chapter, he also defended a form of heroic suicide as the last preserve of human dignity, a symbol of freedom amidst despotism, and an appeal to future generations — even a form of immortality.³⁴ 'When your virtue can no longer find any shelter on earth, when you have reached your ultimate limit, when nothing more protects you from exploitation, then consider that you are a man [. . .]. Die. As my bequest, I leave you the words of the dying Cato.'³⁵

Yet even in Radishchev's text, political suicide belongs to the visionary, the man possessing true nobility of character. Indeed, in one chapter of his *Journey*, Radishchev accuses a serf footman of not

³² Though I disagree with some aspects of his interpretation, the best discussion of Sushkov (including copies of his suicide notes) is the well-researched article by M. G. Fraan'e [Martin Fraanje], 'Proshchal'nye pis'ma M. V. Sushkova. (O probleme samoubiŭstva v russkoi kul'ture kontsa XVIII veka', *XVIII vek*, 19, St Petersburg, 1995 (hereafter, 'Proshchal'nye pis'ma'), pp. 147–67. For a brief discussion but penetrating analysis, see also Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky's Russia*, Ithaca, NY, 1997 (hereafter, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution*), pp. 13–14. Finally, see V. M. Zhirmunskii, 'Rossiiskii verter' (hereafter, 'Rossiiskii verter'), *Sbornik statei k sorokaletiiu uchenoi deiatel'nosti akademika A. S. Orlova*, Leningrad, 1934, pp. 547–56.

³³ On the reception of Voltaire in Russia, see P. R. Zaborov, *Russkaia literatura i Vol'ter XVIII-pervaia tret' XIX veka*, Leningrad, 1978. Another example of a suicide influenced by Voltaire is that of Ivan Opochinin, a Iaroslavl' nobleman, who justified his 1793 act on purely rational (atheistic) grounds. For his suicide note, see L. N. Trefolev (ed.), 'Predsmertnoe zaveshchanie russkogo ateista', *Istoricheskii vestnik*, 1883, 1, pp. 224–26. For a fascinating analysis of 'unbelief' in Russia that discusses the image of Voltaire, see Victoria Sophia Frede, 'The Rise of Unbelief Among Educated Russians in the Late Imperial Period', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, CA, 2002, pp. 1–44.

³⁴ On Radishchev and his attitude toward suicide, see Lotman, 'The Poetics', pp. 87–94, and his *Besedy*, pp. 258–69, and Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution*, pp. 15–16.

³⁵ Aleksandr Radishchev, *Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Moskvu*, Moscow, 1981 (hereafter, *Puteshestvie*), p. 103.

knowing how to die, of being a slave in spirit as well as in life.³⁶ Would a serf also be capable of nobility? Within the genre of sentimental literature, the answer was clearly positive. In Karamzin's *Poor Liza*, the virtue of the peasant girl may have led to the tragedy of her suicide, but Liza was clearly capable of noble feeling, despite her simple background. The sentimental representation of suicide often followed this pattern, with numerous stories depicting the virtue of non-nobles, including serfs, that is, their ultimate spiritual nobility. Yet the political suicide was a different matter. Like the servant or slave in antiquity, a serf could not claim any right to suicide in part because his or her life belonged to the serf owner. More fundamentally, noble suicides depended on concepts of honour that were explicitly tied to estate identity in this era.

As judged from the staging of his act, Miasnikov's models were not drawn from sentimental but rather neoclassical and enlightenment traditions. The true radicalism of his act was not simply to protest the lawful claims of his owner but to assert his dignity, autonomy, and freedom or, to paraphrase Radishchev, to demonstrate that he did indeed know how to die. The political system of service and guardianship set up by Peter the Great as well as the asymmetrical liberation of the nobility (but not the serfs) from service under Peter III could conceivably allow the transfer of political suicide to the context of serfdom. The patriarchal structure of governance was in fact predicated on analogous exchanges of guardianship for obedience: the tsar and his servitors, the father and his family, the officer and his soldiers, the landowner and his serfs.³⁷ The prerequisite for the appropriation of patriotic suicide was education, and Miasnikov had received a very special one in Arzamas.

Rereading Miasnikov's Act

It is possible to reconstruct the events leading up to Miasnikov's suicide. Indeed, the motive seems almost self-evident from our distant perspective. This story would begin with the Arzamas school, founded in 1802 by Aleksandr Stupin, the illegitimate son of a noblewoman raised as an artisan. Stupin's own perseverance and talent had helped him to found the school and ultimately win for it the official sponsorship of the Imperial Academy of Art in St Petersburg. Although students included both free men and serfs, whose owners hoped to profit financially from the skills taught at the school, the curriculum did not distinguish between students of various legal and estate categories. With its

³⁶ This is a reference to a serf who was also the accomplice of his cruel master and not simply to a serf as such. See Radishchev, *Puteshestvie*, p. 157.

³⁷ This issue is discussed extensively in my 'Patriarchy on Trial: Suicide, Discipline, and Governance in Imperial Russia', *The Journal of Modern History*, 75, 2003, 1, pp. 23–58.

specialization in academic painting, the school possessed an extensive collection of art, mostly reproductions. Miasnikov would have thus studied the many dramatic images of noble death in the classical tradition. In addition, the school provided a general education in history, geography, arithmetic, and religion, and the library contained hundreds of volumes of historical and philosophical works as well as contemporary periodicals.³⁸ Consequently students possessed both the skills and resources necessary for them to pursue their own independent intellectual and artistic interests.

Grigorii Miasnikov studied for some seven years in Arzamas and turned out to be a highly talented artist. By 1825, his paintings had awoken such interest in St Petersburg that the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts had offered to purchase his freedom in order to permit his further study at the Imperial Academy of Art, which only accepted free men. Such a development was not unprecedented. Serf owners did occasionally free their educated serfs outright or allow them to purchase their freedom, and such cases also occurred among the students of the Arzamas School.³⁹ The price offered for Miasnikov was quite generous: 2,000 rubles. Though he had initially agreed, Miasnikov's owner, a certain Mr Gladkov, withdrew his permission. From this point accounts vary slightly.⁴⁰ Some versions describe how Miasnikov was taken from the school and forced to perform a range of humiliating tasks — such as removing and cleaning his master's shoes. He supposedly ran away several times, back to Arzamas, but was always returned to this 'tyranny'.⁴¹ Another version highlights a personal angle: Miasnikov had fallen in love with Stupin's daughter, a match favoured by Stupin himself, but the marriage depended on Miasnikov's release from serfdom.⁴² Despite such variations, the moral of the story seems clear: serfdom had pushed Miasnikov to his limits, and his suicide was 'a sign of protest against the landowner's despotism'.⁴³

³⁸ On the school, including an overview of its holdings, see Kornilov, *Arzamasskaia shkola*, esp. pp. 163–64.

³⁹ Some well-known artists had been born serfs, including V. A. Tropinin. Cases from the Arzamas School were quite common and included Ivan Gorbunov, Miasnikov's close friend Ivan Zaitsev, and Vasilii Raev. See Kornilov, *Arzamasskaia shkola*, pp. 63–64, 100–06.

⁴⁰ See the account in Stupin's 1847 memoirs, 'Sobstvennoruchnye zapiski o zhizni akademika A. V. Stupina', *Shchukinskii sbornik*, Moscow, 1904, no. 3, pp. 309–482 (pp. 406, 409).

⁴¹ A. S. Gatsiskii, *Liudi nizhegorodskogo povolzh'ia: Biograficheskie ocherki*, Nizhnii Novgorod, 1887 (hereafter, *Liudi*), p. 153. Kornilov (*Arzamasskaia shkola*, pp. 9–10) paraphrases this version.

⁴² While Gatsiskii (*Liudi*, p. 153) mentions Stupin's hopes in this area, Zaitsev ('Vospominaniia', p. 669) privileges this aspect beyond all others.

⁴³ L. A. Kogan, *Krepostnye vol'nodumtsy (XIX vek)*, Moscow, 1966, p. 71.

For contemporaries, however, and especially the two police investigations, the causes and context of Miasnikov's death looked very different. Indeed, most of the information summarized above comes not from the archives but from accounts — memoirs and local histories — written much later and usually judged by historians to be less reliable. It is thus worth taking a closer look at the 'facts' of the case as they were seen in Arzamas during that autumn of 1828.

In a report dated 25 October 1828, the local Arzamas police presented its final conclusions on the suicide of Grigorii Miasnikov.⁴⁴ 'From the statements of pupils, the causes of this despairing act are not apparent [ne vidno], except' — the report continued with rather awkward syntax — 'for the freedom promised him earlier by his master; as the pupils testify, his master Mr Gladkov at first flattered him that he would give him his freedom [nachal'no l'stil dat' emu svobodu], but then, during a trip through Arzamas to Moscow in August, refused Miasnikov [ot onoi Miasnikovu otkazal], as Miasnikov himself said in conversation with pupils of Academician Stupin.' Additional information on this situation is not provided, and the account turns at this point to another issue altogether. How then should we interpret this peculiar sentence? Its author was clearly distancing himself from the information related in it. He cites his source — the testimony of fellow pupils — three times; the rest of the report, in contrast, refers to no specific source at all. Furthermore, he prefaces the sentence with a negative conclusion. By stating outright that the causes of Miasnikov's act remain unknown, he relegates this testimony to the margins; its relevance is unacknowledged. The awkward syntax simply underlines the writer's discomfort. He wanted to provide this information without, however, claiming authorship. Statements about the inequities of serfdom were not to be made lightly.

The report goes on to exclude a second possible cause of the suicide and to propose a third one. Miasnikov's behaviour was thus described as good: he was abstinent (from alcohol) as well as industrious and diligent in his work. Evidence of Miasnikov's industry was found in his portraits, which were 'drawn with adequate proficiency' ('s dovol'nym iskustvom pisannykh'). Indeed, this Arzamas police officer (cum art critic) then argued that the key to the entire mystery lay in one particular self-portrait that he described in some detail. In its foreground was a figure holding a book. Behind him to the left was a stream; an urn stood on its banks, and a passer-by approached. The meaning was (apparently) self-evident: Miasnikov had painted his melancholic and criminal ideas. According to the local police, the cause of his suicide thus lay within Miasnikov's own psyche — not in his

⁴⁴ GANO, f. 5, op. 45, 1828, d. 202, ll. 6–7.

personal experiences or in the institution of serfdom, and especially not in the Arzamas school. In an attempt to protect the school, which was a local asset, the report particularly stressed the strict order reigning there. The twenty-seven pupils were well supervised and kept busy with their studies and other useful tasks; they likewise applied their skills for the good of the community. Shortly after this report had been sent, the Arzamas police ruled that Miasnikov had shot himself due to unknown causes.⁴⁵ His body was buried in an unknown and unmarked grave.

For the secret police, in contrast, Miasnikov's suicide was neither a riddle nor a product of melancholic ideas, but the clear result of immorality and debauchery. In his final report dated 12 December 1828, the head of the regional branch of the Third Department, Lieutenant Colonel Iazikov, first explained how he had organized the clandestine investigation by sending two undercover agents and then arranging a fictional pretext to account for his own visit to Arzamas. He then located the causes of Miasnikov's act in the Arzamas school itself, particularly in the disruptive influence of Stupin's son Rafail. Not only had Rafail encouraged Miasnikov's passion for reading by supplying him with (presumably inappropriate) books, he had also infected him with free-thinking and insubordination. This had led directly to the suicide as well as to two prior cases of disorderly conduct, in which Rafail together with pupils from the school (though not Miasnikov) had committed various 'outrages' (*bezchinstva*). Rather than prosecute these 'pupil-vagrants' (*ucheniki-brodiagi*) for their insolence, the local authorities had always sought a peaceful resolution, or what Iazikov saw as an attempt to hide their own inactivity and weak supervision. Finally, Iazikov presented one last titbit for his superiors: Miasnikov's suicide was functioning as an actual model for fellow pupils. The serf of Mr Ul'ianin, a certain Ivan (whose depravity [*isporchennost'*] and complete disrespect for religion were especially noteworthy), had been found hiding five bullets. Stupin had promptly sent him home.⁴⁶

In his report, Iazikov came to a very different conclusion than had the Arzamas police. Stressing that the school brought more harm than good, he advocated its closure. His explanation for Miasnikov's suicide referred not to Miasnikov himself, but to his environment, which seethed with insolence, insubordination, depravity, free-thinking, and atheism. Iazikov thus recognized the political ramifications of Miasnikov's act without, however, acknowledging Miasnikov's self-representation. Instead, his report carefully rewrote the act into a recognized and

⁴⁵ GANO, f. 5, op. 45, 1828, d. 202, l. 8.

⁴⁶ GARF, f. 109, 4aia Eksped., 1828, op. 168, d. 139, ll. 5-6.

less-threatening idiom: as we shall see below, debauchery, insubordination, and atheism were common explanations for suicide, particularly but not solely among serfs. Moreover, Iazikov had not even mentioned the prehistory about Miasnikov's chance for freedom and the refusal of his owner, for it was irrelevant to him. The serf's duty lay in unquestioning obedience and submission, precisely what Miasnikov had rejected.

Suicide has been likened to a black hole: it creates a void that demands to be filled with meaning. Because there is no ultimate meaning (and certainly no explanation), the hole can never be filled.⁴⁷ In this sense, the rewritings of Miasnikov's act — including my own — are quite typical. They are never sufficient in themselves, they always demand further elaboration and interpretation. It is to these patterns of interpretation and their cultural context in late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Russia that I now turn.

Suicide in the Public Eye

'What is going on in France?' wrote Nikolai Bantysh-Kamenskii, the influential director of the Moscow Archive of the Collegium of Foreign Affairs to his friend Prince A. B. Kurakin in a letter dated 8 (19) September 1792. He was referring to the insurrection in Paris leading to the suspension of Louis XVI. 'Is it possible that enlightenment can lead man into such darkness and delusion! [It is all] villainy to perfection. This example will serve everyone rejecting faith and authority. Speaking about foreigners, I will say a word about our own monstrosity [*urod*] Sushkov, who embraced [*oblobyzal*] the fate of Judas. Read his letter: how much cursing of the Creator! How much arrogance and vanity! Such is a large part of our youth, intellectually fervent and guided neither by the law nor their faith.'⁴⁸ Bantysh-Kamenskii was referring to the recent suicide of Mikhail Sushkov who, as I mentioned above, constructed his act around a complex set of references, including Cato, Werther, and Voltaire. Before his death, Sushkov had written several letters to his well-connected relatives, which had then circulated

⁴⁷ As Paperno shows, science cannot provide an explanation for suicide, which is instead best understood as a 'cultural institution: a practice associated with patterns of symbolic meaning adapted to the general ends of culture and specific needs of society'. See her *Suicide as a Cultural Institution*, pp. 2–3.

⁴⁸ N. N. Bantysh-Kamenskii, 'Moskovskie pis'ma v poslednie gody Ekaterininskogo tsarstvovaniia' (hereafter, 'Moskovskie pis'ma'), *Russkii arkhiv*, 1876, 11, pp. 257–84 (p. 274).

among influential members of government and society, including Bantysh-Kamenskii, Karamzin, and Catherine the Great.⁴⁹

In his correspondence from 1791–92, Bantysh-Kamenskii would mention seven cases of suicide, all involving members of the elite — a bishop, a retired brigadier, a nobleman, and four young men from prominent families. Though he exploited a range of cultural stereotypes in his accounts of these incidents, he consistently depicted suicide as an assault upon the very foundations of religious and secular authority. By linking Sushkov's suicide both to the revolution in France and to Judas, the penultimate traitor, he thus constructed the suicide as subversive of both monarchy and morality. It was thus rewritten into the pattern of insubordination, not unlike Iazikov's rewriting of Miasnikov's act. Both shared, moreover, the linked motifs of atheism and free-thinking. Other responses to Sushkov's suicide reproduced this pattern, accentuating as well its inherent debauchery. In his report to Catherine the Great, Moscow's Governor-General, A. A. Prozorovskii wrote, referring to the letter: 'Observe, if you please, the image of debauched judgement and lawlessness; it is evident that he was raised as a debauched Frenchman, for the forthright principles of a man were not established in him.'⁵⁰

In another case, Bantysh-Kamenskii instead focused on the story behind the suicide — the son of Aristarkh Kashkin had fallen in love with a German-Russian girl, the daughter of a lieutenant-colonel. When the father forbade the match, the son shot himself. However, he did not narrate this tale of misplaced love and parental 'cruelty' in a sentimental mode, to which it was particularly well suited.⁵¹ Rather, he condemned what he perceived as the corruption of morals in society, filial disobedience, extreme luxury, and a so-called 'enlightened'

⁴⁹ By one account, Catherine reputedly commented: 'What an education! Christian law was not inculcated [in him]' ('vot kakoe vospitanie! Ne vkorenen zakon khristianskii'). See N. Barsukov (ed.), *Dnevnik A. V. Khrapovitskogo, 1782–1793*, St Petersburg, 1874, pp. 405–06. According to another version, she later said to Sushkov's uncle and her personal secretary, 'I am sorry for the father and mother who lost such a son. But I pity him even more. If he had remained alive, we would soon have forgotten about Voltaire'. Cited in Fraan'e, 'Proshchal'nye pis'ma', p. 158. For Karamzin's response, including a reference to Sushkov's letter (a copy) in his possession, see Ia. Grot and P. Pekarskii (eds), *Pis'ma N. M. Karamzina k I. I. Dmitrievu*, St Petersburg, 1866, p. 30.

⁵⁰ For the report, see Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv drevnykh aktov (hereafter, RGADA), f. 16, d. 582, ch. 3, l. 132.

⁵¹ Actual suicides did sometimes provide the material for sentimental literature. A. I. Klushin's 'Neschastnyi M-v' (*Russkaia sentimental'naia povest'*, pp. 119–41) was apparently based on the suicide of two Vyubov brothers, which were mentioned as well by Bantysh-Kamenskii ('Moskovskie pis'ma', pp. 276, 277–78) with a reference to the 'English disease'. See Zhirmunskii, 'Rossiiskii Verter', p. 549.

education, which was leading children away from religion and God.⁵² Interestingly, the official report on this case, as with several others, lacked the passionate response generated by Sushkov's letter; they related the bare facts with little judgement. Indeed, causes were generally not found in many cases involving privileged members of society.⁵³ In other words, not all suicides were overtly politicized in official investigations, though the reaction of Bantysh-Kamenskii demonstrates that they could nonetheless be seen in that light.

That the suicides of noble youth were sometimes blamed on the rational and secular principles of the West is hardly surprising. While the elite had long been instructed to search there for positive models of behaviour and values, a 'corruption of morals' had become an increasing source of concern by the last decade of Catherine's reign. Furthermore, the French Revolution had shattered the blind faith of Europe's governing elites in the natural perpetuity of both absolutism and social hierarchy. Indeed, the overthrow of the French monarchy seemed ample confirmation of the radical threat inherent to much enlightenment philosophy. The sudden rash of youthful suicides had thus led Bantysh-Kamenskii and others to idealize an abstract historical landscape — where sons had obeyed their fathers, where faith was unquestioned and where, presumably, suicide had been a rarity. While space prevents further discussion of these cases, the point should be clear. The Russian public had become interested in actual suicides by the 1790s, and various modes of emplotment intermingled both in literature and in life. Yet, as Bantysh Kamenskii's letters demonstrate, the heroic feat, the rational act, and the sentimental death could all be rewritten into a different mode altogether: that of insubordination, debauchery, and atheism.

The association of suicide with vice would persist for many decades, but one more example should suffice in this context. In *Moi Peterburgskie sumerki* ('My Petersburg Twilight', 1810), the writer and critic Nikolai Strakhov explored the manners and morals of St Petersburg society from a variety of perspectives, from shopping to drunkenness. In a chapter on suicide, which he described as a 'terrible villainy' ('uzhasnoe zlodeistvo'), he joined the growing swell of voices throughout Europe that feared modernity — secularization and urbanization — as a threat to traditional values and social stability. Beginning with a 'bad

⁵² Bantysh-Kamenskii, 'Moskovskie pis'ma', pp. 258–59. The three cases involving established members of elite society were told with an ironic distance (pp. 271, 274): he comments on such issues as the decision to grant Christian burial and undermines official explanations (illness) with more practical ones (the separation from a mistress, failed investments).

⁵³ On Kashkin and the two Vyrubov brothers, see RGADA, f. 16, d. 526, ch. 6, l. 97, and f. 16, d. 582, ch. 3, ll. 78–79, 146.

upbringing' and concluding with unbelief, the causes of suicide read like a catalogue of moral failings. Indeed, suicide becomes the logical outcome of vice, whether the premature entrance into mixed society or the triad of luxury, extravagance, and idleness. Idleness thus led to gambling, and gambling to suicide: 'First they lose their money, and then their conscience; first they learn to hate virtue, and then life itself.' To combat the evil of suicide, Strakhov advocated the strengthening of morality and religious belief.⁵⁴

The discovery of suicide in this period was not restricted to elite society. Official Russia was also experiencing its first sustained bureaucratic encounter with ordinary suicides. In 1785, the governor of St Petersburg province, Petr Konovnitsyn, began to include cases of suicide in his official weekly digest on happenings in the province presented to Catherine the Great. Through the hundreds of such digests written over the next eight years until 1793, Konovnitsyn reported on food prices, crime, the weather, and 113 cases of suicide and attempted suicide.⁵⁵ The fact that these cases were reported at all points to significant changes in local administration, policing, and justice, changes which were more advanced precisely in the capital.⁵⁶ While Peter the Great had first made suicide the object of criminal law and hence transferred it to the jurisdiction of civil authorities, records are scarce before the late eighteenth century. Because a change in law may not find immediate enactment in practice, it is worth stressing that the investigation and prosecution of suicide most probably varied enormously at the local level.⁵⁷ By the early nineteenth century, however, reports on suicide began to be routinely incorporated into the

⁵⁴ Nikolai Strakhov, *Moi Peterburgskie sumerki*, St Petersburg, 1810, pp. 44–54.

⁵⁵ 'Doneseniia gubernatora Petra Konovnitsyna po upravleniiu Peterburgskoi gubernii', RGADA, f. 16, d. 526, chs 1–7; here ch. 1, l. 5. The more or less regular inclusion of suicide — especially unextraordinary cases — was not typical for provinces other than St Petersburg in the late eighteenth century. I have found two earlier cases in Petersburg: a French merchant, who cut his throat, and an unknown fifteen-year-old peasant boy, who threw himself into the Neva; see RGADA, f. 16, d. 481, ch. 6, ll. 54–55 (report of the police chief Nikolai Chicherin, 16 October 1776); f. 16, d. 500, ll. 147–48 (report of Governor-General Aleksandr Golitsyn, 10–24 June 1783). In a random examination of administrative reports from other provinces during Catherine's reign, I also found material on several high-profile scandals from Moscow in the 1790s, but nothing similar to Konovnitsyn's reports.

⁵⁶ On administrative reforms under Catherine the Great, see J. P. LeDonne, *Absolutism and Ruling Class: The Formation of the Russian Political Order, 1700–1825*, New York, 1991; Marc Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600–1800*, New Haven, CT, 1983, pp. 181–250, and de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age*, chs 1, 3, 18, 19.

⁵⁷ While the statutes in the Military and Naval Regulations redefined suicide into a crime and thus shifted its jurisdiction from the church to secular authorities, actual practice lagged behind. In his study of crime in eighteenth-century Moscow, Christoph Schmidt used local archival collections and failed to find prosecutions for suicide. My own research confirms this as well. See his *Sozialkontrolle in Moskau: Justiz, Kriminalität und Leibeigenschaft 1649–1785*, Stuttgart, 1996.

official digests compiled by governors and sent to St Petersburg. In 1811, a special statistical agency began to analyse governors' reports, and the first published references to suicide as a social-statistical phenomenon appeared in the 1820s.⁵⁸ By the 1830s, the Ministry of Internal Affairs began to publish statistics on suicide alongside mortality rates and crime.

The analysis of administrative reports and the statistics derived from them confirms the importance of cultural patterns in the contemporary reception and judgement of suicide. At issue for our purposes is not the accuracy of our sources, which cannot be determined in any case, but the narratives they construct. Insolence, disobedience, debauchery, and drunkenness were thus among the most frequent ascribed causes of suicide for the lower orders, especially serfs.⁵⁹ When an unnamed serf girl of Baroness Natal'ia Stroganova hanged herself, the police investigation revealed that she had generally 'conducted herself indecently' ('byla ne poriadochnogo povedeniia') and had acted in drunkenness.⁶⁰ Fearing punishment for drinking and 'misbehaviour' ('durnye postupki'), a certain Leont'ev also hanged himself.⁶¹ The servant Filipov ruined an article of his master's clothing and threw himself into a canal to escape punishment.⁶² Although fear of punishment provides an important subtext in many of these cases, the act of suicide was consistently explained in terms of the immorality of the serf. Indeed, except for the last case, the specific reason why the serf feared punishment was not reported, for it was irrelevant. The authoritative interpreter of the suicide was precisely the serf owner, the person who had likely uttered such phrases as 'intemperate behaviour' and 'indecent conduct'. These suicides represented the ultimate disobedience, and the process of judging them re-established the proper relations of authority.

In a statistical study of Moscow suicides between 1826 and 1831, which was based on administrative reports, V. Androssov duplicated these patterns and thereby gave them a new veneer of legitimacy: 'The noose, the belt, the harness, sometimes the knife — these are the typical instruments of death in the hands of our simple folk, when dissipation or circumstances make life into a burden for them.' The language was often sweeping, as the explanation provided for twenty-nine cases

⁵⁸ To the best of my knowledge, the first mention of suicide in a statistical context was by Genrikh Liudvig fon Attengofer in his *Mediko-topograficheskoe opisanie Sanktpeterburga*, St Petersburg, 1820, p. 142.

⁵⁹ For further discussion of the relationship between suicide and drunkenness, see my 'Drinking to Death: Suicide, Vodka, and Religious Burial in Russia', *Past and Present* (forthcoming).

⁶⁰ RGADA, f. 16, d. 526, ch. 7, l. 23.

⁶¹ RGADA, f. 16, d. 526, ch. 6, l. 270.

⁶² RGADA, f. 16, d. 526, ch. 4, l. 181.

involving Moscow's 'simple folk' ('prostoi narod') illustrates: they had all been driven to their death by their 'debauched life' ('razvrashnoio zhizniiu').⁶³ A study of suicide in St Petersburg, published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1836, duplicated the moralizing language and patterns of causality. The largest category of cause — constituting more than one-third of the total — was 'impudent behaviour and drunkenness'.⁶⁴ Not all suicides were depicted in terms of moral behaviour. In the Moscow study, sixteen cases involving firearms were placed in a different light. Indeed, the fate of these (mostly) young officers prompted a more poetic comment and evokes the tradition of noble honour: 'The time of youth is also the time for the development of the passions; [it is] naturally that age in which more men have the reasons and the resolve to make an attempt on their lives.'⁶⁵ This observation was nothing other than an homage to these impetuous, determined, and somehow proper suicides. Nevertheless, these studies shared a similar conclusion. While Russia had comparatively few suicides due to the strength of religious faith, 'the majority of suicides occur among the simple folk, driven to despair by an ungovernable and dissolute life [buinoiu i rasputnoiu zhizniiu dovedennogo do otchianiia]'.⁶⁶

When suicide first became a topic of public and administrative interest in eighteenth-century Russia, it did so as a largely secular phenomenon: the educated elites were generally secular in outlook; and suicide — at least officially — stood in the jurisdiction of the police and courts as a crime.⁶⁷ While suicide was often understood in terms of secular motives and causes, it was also placed within a combined political and moral frame (as an immoral and/or amoral act) that points to the ongoing influence of religious categories. The overlapping representation of suicide as a form of insubordination and a result of debauchery illustrates this double political-moral meaning. Indeed, this pattern was perhaps the dominant one in cases involving serfs, on the one hand, and those few overtly ideological or political suicides on the

⁶³ V. Androssov, *Statisticheskaia zapiska o Moskve*, Moscow, 1832 (hereafter, *Statisticheskaia zapiska*), pp. 87–89.

⁶⁴ *Statisticheskie svedeniia o Sanktpeterburge*, St Petersburg, 1836 (hereafter, *Statisticheskie svedeniia*), pp. 191–92.

⁶⁵ Androssov, *Statisticheskaia zapiska*, pp. 87–89.

⁶⁶ *Statisticheskie svedeniia*, 196; Androssov, *Statisticheskaia zapiska*, p. 90. See also Aleksandr Bashutskii, *Panorama Sanktpeterburga*, St Petersburg, 1834, pp. 91–93.

⁶⁷ Some scholars have investigated the history of suicide as a case study in secularization (McDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*). In early-modern England, for example, suicide was often seen to have religious or supernatural causes; by the Enlightenment, however, perceived causes were often more secular (love, poverty), and public criticism of the criminal and religious penalties was quite high. However, secularization does not mean that religion was irrelevant, simply that it was not all-defining. I explore this issue in more depth in my article, 'Drinking to Death: Suicide, Vodka, and Religious Burial in Russia', *Past and Present* (forthcoming).

other hand. To be sure, the motifs varied, with serfs generally accused of drunkenness and insolence, and elites of free-thinking and atheism. Still, the two patterns shared a similar function: to shift the political significance of the act from an abstract or ideological level back to a moral and individual one. Insubordination was easily identified and understood in relation to an immoral and criminal personality. Further explanation was not necessary.

The Final Report

When Count Benckendorff prepared his final report on the Miasnikov case in January 1829, he drew on various sources not all of which remain in the file. The result is a piecework, an almost dialogical text, in which different cultural patterns stand alongside one another, their contradictions largely unresolved. The first pattern is well known: suicide as insubordination, the result of an improper upbringing. After briefly summarizing the basic facts of the case (Miasnikov's suicide, the book, his note), he both paraphrases and expands upon the argumentation of his subordinate, Lieutenant Colonel Iazikov. 'This incident,' he thus wrote, 'was clear evidence of the harmful consequences of a half-education, especially for people from the lower estates, who, in acquiring knowledge without moral guidance, grumble about their fate, [who], considering themselves higher than their condition, do not willingly obey their elders, [and who], spreading false notions, often become the cause of calamitous adventures.'⁶⁸ The danger posed by educating the lower orders and particularly serfs, Benckendorff argued, raised the question of whether serfs should be allowed an education at all. This point provided a transition to the next section: a description of the Arzamas school, based not on Iazikov's negative assessment but on more neutral information. The report then returned to Miasnikov and offered a very different assessment of his act. 'As far as it is known, Miasnikov was one of the most gifted of Stupin's pupils. With all probability, his suicide likely had the same cause as other similar cases — despair [due] namely to the strange and inhumane idea of some landowners to educate their serfs but then to hold them in slavery.'⁶⁹ With this casual remark, Miasnikov was no longer represented as the agent of immorality and insubordination but rather the gifted victim of a greedy and inhumane landowner. Serfdom had seemingly been transformed from a patriarchal idyll into simple slavery. Or had it?

In an attempt to reconcile these two contrary narratives, Benckendorff then ruminated on the consequences of an artistic education for

⁶⁸ RGIA, f. 1167, op. XVI^m – 1826, d. 183, ll. 1–2.

⁶⁹ RGIA, f. 1167, op. XVI^m – 1826, d. 183, ll. 30b–4.

serfs: 'Such people are less able to bear the burden of their fate.' His reasoning touched upon art, sensibility, morality, and the system of social distinction. By 'studying from life, scrutinizing man with great attention as the sole image of tangible perfection, [they fall for] the appearance that nature distributes her physical gifts arbitrarily, indiscriminate to condition [*zvanie*]'. At the same time, they 'rarely have the chance [to attain] an adequate moral education for themselves because the study of art alone already demands tremendous labours while also refining one's sensibility [*chuvstvitel'nost'*] so that they are less able to judge the moral qualities of man and the distinctions recognized as necessary by civil societies'. Citing 'the good of art and humanity itself', Benckendorff thus concluded that only free men should be allowed to study the fine arts.⁷⁰

Benckendorff was well known for his critical view of public morals, and neither his open condemnation of Miasnikov's owner nor his general standpoint would have raised many eyebrows. While his arguments could have been cited by one opposed to serfdom, his concern was rather the failure of the paternalist principles supposedly underlying it and the role the state (and the Third Department) should play in maintaining and encouraging them. Social order would best be maintained, in his view, by banning an artistic education to serfs, a view his colleagues would not share. For our purposes, however, his report is interesting less for its attempted policy-making than for its cultural assumptions. While he explained the suicide in terms of insubordination, despair, and the cruelty of the serf owner, he also continually evoked it as a transgression of the social order: Miasnikov had considered himself 'higher than his condition' and confused physical appearance with moral qualities and social distinctions. Though Benckendorff was well aware of the political implications of Miasnikov's act (for serfdom formed the basis of the political order as well), he was most concerned with its inversion of the proper roles for noble and serf. Like his subordinates, he too recast the suicide into more congenial categories. Miasnikov, the serf and the craftsman, had aspired to nobility but had lacked the (artistic?) vision. In perceiving only the physical world, the world of bodies, he had failed to penetrate to deeper social and moral truths, a failure which had led to his suicide. He thus painted Miasnikov's death scene not as a classical tragedy but as farce, a failed attempt to copy that which he did not and could not understand.

⁷⁰ RGIA, f. 1167, op. XVIIm – 1826, d. 183, ll. 4–5. The view that education should be appropriate to one's social station underlay policy making on the highest levels in this period, and concerns were often raised about educating peasants. See Ben Eklof, *Russian Peasant Schools: Officialdom, Village Culture, and Popular Pedagogy, 1861–1914*, Berkeley, CA, 1986, ch. 1.

Conclusion

Rather than seeking a transparent explanation for the suicide of Grigorii Miasnikov, I have examined its various and contested meanings. In first assessing its intended message, I suggested that Miasnikov composed his death within a genre of heroic suicide that had emerged in conjunction with Westernization during Russia's long eighteenth century. Its most important sources were neoclassicism and philosophical rationalism, both of which affirmed the mastery of the self and the right to personal dignity. The resonance of this model points to broader developments within Russia's elite, especially to the emergence of a new notion of the autonomous individual. Heroic suicide also functioned within the broader political framework provided by the ideology of autocracy. Since the eighteenth century, the model of the well-ordered police state had combined compulsion with moral education, at least for the elites, who were deemed capable of some self-regulation. However, the metaphors and practices of autocratic tutelage left little room for individual autonomy, personal dignity, and initiative. Instead, the monarch was to lead by example, supervise, guide, instruct, and prescribe. 'To know how to die' was consequently a political statement. This claim to self-sovereignty undercut a central principle of autocratic governance: the exchange of guardianship for obedience. While only Radishchev and the Decembrists would develop an explicit concept of political suicide, the associations were already clear by the 1790s. Would an enlightened education result in a rejection of the patriarchal system of governance, of the sovereignty of God and tsar? Was suicide a product of enlightenment? For his part, Miasnikov transferred the model to the framework of serfdom. In demanding freedom, he thus laid claim to a personal autonomy and individual dignity that a serf was not normally thought to possess: only one who already possessed dignity could act to defend it.

The second part of this article then turned to the dynamics of reception. Having authored one's death, the suicide (like a writer or artist) loses control over its meaning. Two main explanatory paradigms for Miasnikov's act coexisted: first, as the product of his own psyche with references to either a 'melancholic and criminal idea' or the heightened 'sensibility' which comes from studying art; and second, as a form of insubordination and debauchery. While these paradigms sometimes overlapped, they represented distinctive strategies with distinctive goals. By focusing on a hidden inner world of the person, the first paradigm is depoliticizing — it directs attention away from the broader social and political environment. The second strategy serves instead to reframe the political significance of a suicide. By representing it as a form of insubordination, a product of a false or half education, it

undercuts the authorial intention — not dignity but depravity becomes the motive cause. In an important sense, therefore, this strategy cast the political suicide alongside those more common suicides, especially of peasants, that were defined in terms of insolence, disobedience, and debauchery. Such disruptive and disturbing suicides as Miasnikov's (and Sushkov's) were thereby disarmed, at least in principle.

Both of these strategies would evolve over the nineteenth century. On the one hand, medical and psychiatric approaches to suicide would look to organic and neurological processes, thereby denying suicide the conscious agency that makes it so disruptive. Is not the cold and logical decision to reject life perhaps its most disturbing aspect?⁷¹ On the other hand, the public condemnation would continue to link a series of vices — luxury, idleness, immorality, egoism, free-thinking, atheism — into a narrative of moral (and later social) degeneration. The linkage of suicide to both immorality and unbelief was a pan-European phenomenon, and it came to articulate anxiety about modernity together with nostalgia for an ordered and patriarchal world (that had, of course, never really existed).⁷² The genesis of this vision in Russia possessed several important particularities, however. One was an element of national stereotype, for suicide in Russia would long be associated with the importation of the secular ideas and materialistic ethos of Western Europe. In addition, the traditions of autocratic paternalism facilitated the politicization of suicide during the second half of the nineteenth century. By this time, Miasnikov's act would be rewritten yet again, this time as a heroic protest against the despotism of serfdom, which can also be understood as a metaphor for the tyranny of autocracy more broadly. The subversive dimension of suicide thus persisted, for the act of self-killing seemed to embody the conflict between the individual and the polity. Yet this reading is just as partial as the others. To lionize suicide as a heroic gesture of defiance obscures the personal and individual dynamics. It also denies the element of defeat. Miasnikov painted a powerful canvas of death, but he also died. Is that really what he wanted? We shall never know.

⁷¹ On the subversiveness of suicide as well as our own attempts to deny it, see Lisa Lieberman, *Leaving You: The Cultural Meaning of Suicide*, Chicago, IL, 2003.

⁷² For further discussion, see Howard I. Kushner, 'Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought', *Journal of Social History*, 1, 1993, pp. 461–90.