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‘I Became a Man in a Military Camp’: Negotiating a Transmasculine Identity in Aleksandr Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Durova)’s Personal Documents and Literary Fiction

Notes of a Cavalry Maiden [Zapiski kavalerist-devitsy, 1836], an autobiographical narrative by Aleksandr Aleksandrov (born Nadezhda Durova) (1783-1866), a Russian-Ukrainian hero of the Napoleonic wars, has been popular with readers since its first publication in 1836. Despite the obvious gender ambiguity of the narrator in this text, most adaptations and biographies interpret ‘Nadezhda Durova’’s grammatically female gender as proof that her army service was a brief instance of military cross-dressing in the otherwise conventional life of a patriotic woman. However, Aleksandrov’s legacy includes not just *Notes* and other published fiction, but also a substantial corpus of personal documents, some of which have only recently been recovered from the military archives. These texts form a record of Nadezhda Durova’s documented transition to Aleksandr Aleksandrov and, I argue, testify that from 1808 Aleksandrov consistently identified as a man until his death in 1866. In this article, I focus on Aleksandrov’s military and civil correspondence, to compare his transmasculine voice in personal documents to the more ambiguously gendered voices of his narrators in fiction. Using the narratological category of ‘autofiction’, I argue that even though Aleksandrov had to choose between two binary gender identities in everyday life, literary fiction created a space for him to inhabit the personas of both ‘Nadezhda Durova’ and ‘Aleksandr Aleksandrov’.

Notes of a Cavalry Maiden [Zapiski kavalerist-devitsy, 1836], an autobiographical narrative by Aleksandr Aleksandrov (born Nadezhda Durova) (1783–1866), a Russian-Ukrainian hero of the Napoleonic wars, propelled its author to instant fame when it was first published in 1836.[1] That year, an extract from *Notes* appeared in *Contemporary* [Sovremennik], accompanied by a foreword by the journal’s founder and editor, Aleksandr Pushkin. These ‘curious notes’ (Pushkin 1836: 54) introduced an

[1] An autobiographical novella *A Year of Life in St Petersburg, or the Trouble with Third Visits* [God zhizni v Peterburge, ili nevygody tret'ego poseshcheniia, 1838] recorded Aleksandrov’s first-hand experience of literary fame after publication in *Contemporary*.

DOI: 10.25430/2281-6992/v11-004
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unconventional first-person narrator: 'Nadezhda Durova', who used the feminine endings of Russian verbs, adjectives, and participles to tell her story. But, once the protagonist joined the army, he successfully presented the transmasculine identity of 'Aleksandr Aleksandrov', prompting others to address him as 'sir' and gender him as male in their speech. Despite – or because of – the protagonist's obvious gender ambiguity, *Notes* has maintained an important place in Russian culture and popular military history for over two centuries.

Still, most adaptations and biographies resolve this gender ambiguity of the text in favour of a heteronormative reading. In these interpretations, the grammatically female gender of the narrator in *Notes* is seen as proof that 'Nadezhda Durova''s army service was a brief instance of military cross-dressing in the otherwise conventional life of a patriotic young woman.[2] However, Aleksandrov's legacy includes not just *Notes* and other published fiction, but also a substantial corpus of personal documents, some of which have only recently been recovered from the military archives.[3] These texts form a record of Nadezhda Durova's documented transition to Aleksandr Aleksandrov and provide a unique glimpse at the wide spectrum of contemporary reactions to Aleksandrov's transmasculinity. I argue that they also

[2] For a comprehensive list of adaptations of *Notes*, see Zirin 1988: xxviii–xxix. Since 1988, this list has been expanded by another film adaptation *Now a Man, Now a Woman* [To muzhshchina, to zhenshchina, 1989, dir. A. Nagovitsyn], a bestselling historical novel *The Girl Who Fought Napoleon*, by Linda Lafferty (Seattle: Lake Union Publishing, 2016) and an Austrian opera (Die Kavalleristin, comp. Adriaan de Wit, Marianne Figl, 2011). Most adaptations present Aleksandrov as a cross-dressing young woman, who dons military uniform to find an acceptable outlet for her patriotism. Two Soviet adaptations, the Stalin Prize-winning play *A Long Time Ago* [Davnym davno, 1940] by Aleksandrov Gladkov and the 1962 musical *The Hussar Ballad* [Gusarskaia ballada, 1962, dir. E. Riazanov], based on this play, are an indicative example of such popular reinterpretation of *Notes*. For a recent example from popular military history, see Begunova 2011.

[3] There has a been a surge of archival investigations into Aleksandrov's life in Russia since 2012, because of the statewide celebrations of the 200th anniversary of victory over Napoleon in 1812. The most notable documents that would have been unavailable to scholars previously include records and letters from the Russian State Archive of Military History and local Russian archives, first published by A.I. Begunova in 2011; and reviews and encyclopaedia entries, collected and published by V.N. Belov in 2014.

testify that, since 1808 at the latest, Aleksandrov identified and lived as a man until his death in 1866.

In this article, I focus on Aleksandrov's correspondence and personal documents from the period of 1808 to the 1860s, to compare his biographical transmasculine voice to the more ambiguously gendered voices of the narrators in his published fiction. In view of Aleksandrov's consistent self-representation as male, mapped out below, I use masculine pronouns to refer to him and his work. Following critical theories of transgender presentation (Butler 1990; Valentine 2007; Stryker 2017), I rely on the term 'transmasculine' to describe Aleksandrov as a person 'assigned female at birth who has some degree of masculine identification or expression' (Stryker 2017: 36).[4] Deliberately inclusive, this term allows me to consider Aleksandrov's entire oeuvre, employing 'methodologies [that are] sensitive to historical change but [are] influenced by current theoretical preoccupations' (Halberstam 1998: 46) and to trace the dynamic of his gender presentation over the years. Ultimately, it brings nineteenth-century Russian literary studies in dialogue with other disciplines that are engaged in reassessing historical sources to answer 'a call for privileging the gender expression and identity asserted by a person over the sex or gender they were assigned at birth' (Manion 2020: 13)

The fact that *Notes* is a fictionalised, rather than an accurate, account of Aleksandrov's life was established as early as 1887. N.N. Blinov, a priest and amateur historian, discovered two major discrepancies between this text and the facts of Aleksandrov's biography, recorded in the church register of his hometown, Sarapul. *Notes* listed an incorrect

[4] Other terms used in this article are similarly informed by these studies: gender expression (performance of 'sense of self through how we comport our bodies to express our gender' (Stryker 2017: 20)); gender presentation ('to present yourself in such a way that you make you gender non-conformity visible' (Stryker 2017: 25)); gender identity ('subjective sense of fit with a particular gender category' (Stryker 2017: 21)). For recent scholarship and recommendations on using gendered pronouns in Russian, see Kirey-Sitnikova 2001: 143–58; for an example of popular guidance on the sensitive use of gendered pronouns in Russian, see Kazantseva 2020. To avoid confusion when referencing Aleksandrov's works, I follow the established bibliographies which credit the author of most nineteenth-century editions as 'Aleksandrov' and most posthumous editions as 'N.A. Durova', as published. All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise indicated.

date of birth (1788 or 1790, rather than the actual 1783) and omitted any mention of the 'cavalry-maiden's' marriage (in fact, by the time Aleksandrov joined the army, he had been married and given birth to a son) (Blinov 1888: 414–20). From this first publication to the latest academic studies, Durova/Aleksandrov scholarship has been defined by an impulse to 'recreate the [historical] truth' (Prikazchikova 2018: 25). Striving to establish their subject's accurate age, and marital and military status, scholars paid close attention to the many inconsistencies between Aleksandrov's literary narratives and the documents that have been uncovered over the years.[5]

My contention in this article is that the difference in gender representation between the voice of Aleksandrov's personal documents and his fiction is another such discrepancy, which has not been fully investigated until now.[6] Examined closely, it illuminates Aleksandrov's active efforts in negotiating his public transmasculine identity. Importantly, it foregrounds a discussion of his agency and self-determination in a discipline that has traditionally focussed on reconstructing the circumstances that might have led to his gender non-conformity. It also offers some answers to questions that have long puzzled scholars of this author's life and work: why has this discrepancy occurred? And why has the largely fictional persona of 'Nadezhda Durova' eclipsed that of its author, Aleksandr Aleksandrov, in the Russian cultural imagination?

To address these issues, the first part of this article reconstructs the bureaucratic record of Aleksandrov's transition by analysing the corpus of his military correspondence. I read letters, memos, and reports by Aleksandrov's superiors, such as military ministers and generals Christopher von Lieven, Aleksei Arakcheev and Michael Barclay de Tolly, to collate the Russians army's formal responses to Aleksandrov's transition.[7] I examine

[5] For a similar epistemological trajectory in a recent study, see Prikazchikova 2018: 24–111.

[6] This discrepancy has not gone unnoticed by scholars, even if the lack of historical sources has made an investigation into its causes almost impossible. For an informed discussion of this discrepancy that predated the publication of archival materials and therefore framed it as a question that 'one will never be able to answer definitively', see Schoenle 2001: 56.

[7] Aleksandrov's letters are addressed to 'Grafu Kh. A. Livenu', but I am following the custom of English-language scholarship in using this original spelling of the general's Baltic German name.

these documents alongside Aleksandrov's own official requests and statements, to showcase the dialogic nature of this negotiation of a public transmasculine identity between a private individual and one of the most rigidly conservative Russian governmental institutions.

The second part of my article focuses on Aleksandrov's correspondence with his editors, Aleksandr Pushkin at *Contemporary* and Andrei Kraevskii at *Notes of the Fatherland* [Otechestvennye zapiski]. I examine the gendered grammar of Aleksandrov's messages to both editors alongside Pushkin's preface to the excerpt from *Notes*, titled '1812', that he prepared for publication. Shifting the habitual focus of discussion from Pushkin's letters to his edits of Aleksandrov's original text, I argue that his framing of Aleksandrov's narrative has been influential in two important ways. Firstly, Pushkin's concerns about the financial success of *Sovremennik* led him to present '1812' as a playful narrative of military cross-dressing, in keeping with the audience's literary tastes as he understood them. The success of this publication has thus established 'Nadezhda Durova' as the implied author of *Notes*, a reading of the text that persist to this day. Secondly, Aleksandrov's respect for Pushkin's literary judgement – and the evidence of its accuracy in the popularity of *Notes* – convinced the aspiring author that this framing would be instrumental for a successful literary career, leading him to continue using gender ambiguous narrators in his fiction in contrast to the sustained transmasculine identity of his personal documentation. Using the narratological category of 'autofiction', I suggest that even though Aleksandrov had to choose between two binary gender identities in everyday life, literary fiction created a space for him to safely inhabit the personas of both 'Nadezhda Durova' and 'Aleksandr Aleksandrov'.[8]

The final part of my article examines a document from a later stage of Aleksandrov's life, a short curriculum vitae from 1860. Composed more than twenty years after his literary debut, this

[8] The term 'autofiction' refers to a form of fictionalised biographical writing, in which the protagonist, usually also a first-person narrator, shares either the first name, or first name and surname, with the writer themselves. For theory and history of autofiction in French and English, see Dix 2018. For a discussion of theory of autofiction in Russian, see Levina-Parker 2010: 12-40. On recent Russophone autofiction, exploring the linguistic and cultural 'otherness' as an example of trauma and marginalisation, see Wanner 2015:141–151.

document demonstrated that the autofictional impetus of Aleksandrov's literary works allowed him to carve out a niche in nineteenth-century Russian literary culture where his re-writing of his own life had assumed a status of an authentic biography.

This article proposes a new integrative framework, that combines insights from narrative theory, queer history, and historical documentation to approach Aleksandrov's legacy in a way that centres his transmasculinity. It builds, however, on an established critical tradition of examining the author's oeuvre through the lens of narrative analysis. The initial period of Durova/Aleksandrov studies in the late nineteenth century and the early Soviet period was shaped primarily by archival research (Nekrasova 1890: 585–612; Prikazchikova 2018: 9–12). Later on, however, scholars focused on Aleksandrov's literary works, aiming to contextualise them in the history of autobiographical narratives, military memoir and gothic literature in Russia (Savkina, 2007: 193-225; Prikazchikova 2015; Goller 1996: 75–92; Schoenle 2001: 55–71). Moreover, although the history of autofiction in Russia has been traced back only to modernist experiments of the early twentieth century (Rubins 2015: 39–46), such autofiction-adjacent phenomena as semi-autobiographical narratives, auto-documentary prose, memoirs, and even the modern multimedia narratives of the digital self, have been productively explored in Slavic studies, some in relation to Aleksandrov's writing.[9]

The prevailing approach to Aleksandrov's oeuvre across disciplines, however, has been, with very few exceptions, that of feminist historiography, foregrounding 'Durova''s achievements as one of the few successful 'women

[9] For a comprehensive overview, see Savkina 2007: 24-63. Prikazchikova's 2015 study *Zhenschina na fone...* is fully dedicated to the problem of contextualising *Notes* in the Russian military memoir tradition (Prikazchikova 2015). On the theory of autobiographical writing and *Notes*, see Renner-Fahey 2009: 191–93. On memoirs and gender in Russia more broadly, see Holmgren 2007, especially Jane Gary Harris on Ginzburg (Holmgren 2007: 5–34); Helena Goscilo on Elena Bonner (Holmgren 2007: 53–69) and Gitta Hammerberg on Dolgorukaia (Holmgren 2007: 93–127). On genderqueer Russian life-writing, see also Van Buskirk 2016: 109–61. On gender and digital self-representation, see Rutten 2017: 239–56; Howanitz, 2020: 191–224. Many historical autobiographical Russian narratives can be read as autofiction, and the recent introduction of this methodology to Russian studies will hopefully pave the way for a productive engagement with this narrative category.

writers' in nineteenth-century Russia.[10] As Oona Renner-Fahey pointed out in her insightful 2009 article, productive readings of Aleksandrov's work in the context of the history of transvestism in Russia were rare and often contested within the field (Renner-Fahey 2009: 190). Recent archival discoveries, revealing the extent of Aleksandrov's consistent transmasculine self-presentation, allow us to revisit the problem of his gender presentation in a way that builds on this existing body of scholarship and includes his entire oeuvre.

'Your Devoted Servant, Aleksandrov'

Throughout his life, the author of *Notes* was known under at least four different names. He was christened Nadezhda Andreevna Durova in 1783. In 1801, Nadezhda married Vasilii Chernov and, as was customary, took Vasilii's surname.[11] In 1806, Nadezhda Chernova joined a Cossack regiment quartered in Sarapul under the name of Aleksandr Sokolov.[12] In 1808, by a special decree signed by Tsar Aleksandr I, Aleksandr Sokolov was officially assigned to the Mariupol' Hussar Regiment as Aleksandr Aleksandrov. He was given the lowest rank of cornet and permitted to merge the service record he has acquired as Sokolov with this new appointment.[13] The sheer number of

[10] Two major recent studies can serve as examples here: Savkina followed Zirin's earlier suggestions and read *Notes* as one of the first published Russian autobiographies by a woman writer (Savkina 2007: 196–98); whereas Prikazchikova defined *Notes* as 'an example of a memoir written by a woman' (Prikazchikova 2018: 23). Two exceptions that seem to prove this overall rule include an innovative reading of Aleksandrov's gender presentation as performance in Boiarinova 2016: 57–68 and an exploration of gender fluidity in Aleksandrov's later fiction in Marsh-Flores 2003: 614, 622.

[11] For a copy of the marriage record, see Begunova 2011: 365. Aleksandrov's father, Andrei Durov, also referred to him as 'Nadezhda po muzhu Chernova' in his letters (cited in Prikazchikova 2018: 52). A son, Ivan Chernov, was born in 1803, but the marriage was not a happy one. One of Aleksandrov's novellas, *Elena, A Beauty from T-sk* [Elena, T-skaia krasavitsa, 1837] is a fictionalised account of this marriage. By 1825, Nadezhda Chernova was listed in Andrei Durov's list of dependants as a widow (Begunova 2011: 59–60).

[12] The first record of Sokolov's military service, from November 1807, noted that no identity documents were provided upon joining. The regimental records stated: 'Tovarishch Aleksandr Vasil'ev syn Sokolov' [Soldier Aleksandr son of Vasilii Sokolov], and further 'did not present any proof of nobility' [dokazatel'stv o dvorianstve ne predstavil] (Begunova 2011: 366).

[13] After Aleksandrov enlisted in 1806, his father tried to bring him home. Through his brother, Nikolai Durov, Andrei

different names – some acquired conventionally by marriage, and others through extraordinary military orders – meant that although this progression seemed 'necessary' (Durova 1983: 456–57) to Aleksandrov, it has also created confusion in official records documenting his life. The names 'Durova', 'Chernova', 'Sokolov' and 'Aleksandrov' crop up with various regularity in military and civil records, correspondence, and medical reports up until 1808. After that, however, most available sources indicate that 'Aleksandrov', or 'Aleksandrov (Durova)', became, for all intents and purposes, Nadezhda Chernova's official name.

The name 'Aleksandr Aleksandrov' was consistently used throughout most of the surviving post-1808 documents, from those produced to accommodate the bureaucratic demands of Aleksandrov's army service by the Russian Imperial and Military Chancelleries to contemporary bibliographic records.[14] Military and medical reports switched from 'Sokolov' to 'Aleksandrov' in 1808 and used the latter name consistently until Aleksandrov retired in 1817.[15] Both army and civil pension records listed two

managed to submit a request directly to the tsar's chancellery to return 'Sokolov' home. Intrigued, the tsar arranged for a private meeting with Aleksandrov and agreed to allow the unusual officer to continue his service under a new name. The two meetings with Alexander I were described in *Notes*, and, although no record of this meeting in the tsar's chamber registry survived, it is corroborated by the correspondence regarding this meeting between the tsar's chancellery, military campaign chancellery, and Aleksandrov's direct commanders (for reprints of these letters, see Begunova 2011: 367–70). For an insightful analysis of the description of these meetings in *Notes*, see Schoenle 2001: 67–70. Among other things, the description of this meeting in *Notes* indicates that Aleksandrov saw the new name given to him by the tsar as a kind of symbolic re-birth, with the tsar, as Schoenle suggests, as his notional new father.

[14] The original documents are spread across several archives in Moscow (The Russian State Archive of Military History), St Petersburg (M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin State Library), Sarapul (local and state and museum archives) and Elabuga (Durova House Museum Archive). Some documents (for example, the correspondence between Andrei Durov and the tsar's chancellery) have not survived in their original form but have been preserved in reprints and quotations in late nineteenth-century Russian periodicals and early biographies, such as A. Saks's *Cavalry-Maiden: shtabs-rotmistr A.A. Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Andreevna Durova) (*Kavalerist-devitsa: shtabs-rotmistr A.A. Aleksandrov *(Nadezhda Andreevna Durova)*, 1912*)*, although the authentication of these documents is problematic.

[15] After Aleksandrov's retirement the publication of *Notes* produced some confusion: in 1837, the tsar's chancellery primarily referred to the author as 'maid [devitsa] Durova' (Begunova 2011: 327–28).

names from 1817 onwards, referring to their recipient as 'N.A. Durova (A.A. Aleksandrov)'.[16] The documents produced by Aleksandrov himself after 1808 (reports, letters, requests, explanatory notes, a short curriculum vitae) are also consistent in the use of his 'army' name. Most are signed 'Your devoted servant, Aleksandrov', or simply 'Aleksandrov', and use masculine endings for verbs, adjectives, and participles throughout.

In Aleksandrov's lifetime, his publishing credits also reflected the 1808 name change. After the initial publication in *Contemporary* as 'Notes of N.A. Durova, published by A.S. Pushkin' [Zapiski N.A. Durovoi, izdavaemye A. Pushkinym], subsequent editions of *Notes* as well as other texts published before 1866 were signed either 'Aleksandrov', or 'Aleksandrov (Durova)', or sometimes 'Aleksandrov (kavalerist-devitsa)'. Historically, it is of course not unusual for writers to use pseudonyms that do not correspond to the gender that they themselves identify with. For example, in the second half of the nineteenth century in Russia, it was common for women writers, especially novelists, to publish their work under male pseudonyms, following the example of popular European writers like George Sand.[17] However, Aleksandrov's signature indicates a different relationship 'between the authorial gender and narrative voice', underscoring the presence of a 'voice that is textually ambiguous, or subverts the conventions of sex, gender, or sexuality' (Lanser 2018: 926–27). It foregrounds a refusal, where possible, of the name 'Durova' and a commitment to the name 'Aleksandrov'.

Aleksandrov's official military correspondence with his superiors was, chronologically, the first corpus of sources in which he consistently articulated a sustained transmasculine gender

[16] Pension records of the Russian Literary Fund list 'A.A. Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Andreeevna Durova)', and 'Nad. Andr. Durova (ona zhe sht.-rotmistr Aleksandr Andreev. Aleksandrov – izvestnaia devitsa-kavalerist)' (cited in Iudina 1963: 132).

[17] For a discussion of this type of 'narrative transvestism', see Vaysman 2021: 229–45. An interesting example of the many ways in which nineteenth-century Russian authors handled their pseudonyms is Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaia. Having published as 'V. Kresotvskii' for years, once another writer with the same name became prominent, she switched to 'V. Krestovskii-pseudonym' [V. Krestovskii-psevdonim]. For Aleksandrov's full bibliography, see either Begunova 2011: 400–02; or Prikazchikova 2018: 573–74.

identity. This correspondence started in February 1808 with a letter to adjutant general Count Christopher von Lieven, signed 'Your excellency's most obedient servant [pokorneishii sluga] Aleksandr Aleksandrov' (Begunova 2011: 369–70). In this letter Aleksandrov was requesting funds to pay for his new uniform with the Mariupol' regiment. In March and April of the same year two letters to the military minister Aleksei Arackheev reported receipt of 500 roubles from the treasury and were similarly signed 'Aleksandrov' and 'Cornet Aleksandrov' (Begunova 2011: 372–73). The same signature reappeared in 1809 and 1811, in two letters to the same addressee, requesting more funds, and in 1815 in a letter to the military minister, M.B. Barclay de Tolly (Begunova 2011: 376–77; 382). Formal responses to these letters give some idea about how Aleksandrov's situation was perceived by the army officials. Approving the newly minted hussar's request for money, von Lieven wrote to Arakcheev:

Last year, the daughter of the collegiate councillor Andrei Durov having concealed her sex [pol], enlisted into the Polish Uhlan regiment as an ordinary under the name of Sokolov and served all through the previous campaign with distinction, for which she was promoted to non-commissioned officer and awarded the St George medal. (Begunova 2011: 371).

The same letter explained the use of the name 'Aleksandrov' in all subsequent records: Lieven points out that the decision to enlist 'Durova' as 'Aleksandrov' had been taken by the tsar in order to 'to conceal her real status, because her family is not aware of this new assignment' (Begunova 2011: 371).

In March 1816, Aleksandrov retired from the army, but was quickly disillusioned with civilian life. Nine months later, he attempted to rejoin, generating several official letters in response to his formal request. His first application was refused in a reply addressed to 'Aleksandrov', but no reason for rejection was provided (Begunova 2011: 385). In March 1817, Aleksandrov attempted to appeal this decision, requesting a copy of his dismissal report. This request was also refused, but an internal memo from the army headquarters provided an explanation: 'a new report needs to be commissioned, to see if we can indeed supply this record, because the applicant [prositel'] is not of male but of female gender and is perhaps in possession of a husband' (Begunova 2011: 385). A further

internal report from March 1817, titled 'Regarding the issue of the dismissal report requested not by a woman Aleksandrova, but shtabs-rotmistr (staff captain) Aleksandrov' [O vydache Svidetel'stva Prositel'nitse Dat' ukaz ob otstavke ne zhenshchine Aleksandrovoi, a Shtabs-rotmistru Aleksandrovu] addressed this administrative confusion directly:

> The lady [dama] who served [sluzhivshaia] in the Lithuanian Uhlan regiment as shtabs-rotmistr under the name Aleksandrov, dismissed [uvolennaia] from service on 9 March 1819, is requesting to be provided with a copy of her [ee] dismissal. However, this is an unusual case for the Department of Inspections, and therefore they have deemed it necessary to inform your Excellency and to await your decision as to fulfilling this request, reporting that the department believes it more appropriate to issue the applicant [prositel'nitsu] with a record of service and campaigns, rather than with the record of dismissal. (Begunova 2011: 386).

At first, it might seem that from the perspective of the army bureaucrats, once Aleksandrov retired, the inconsistences of his multiple names and gender identities could no longer be overlooked.[18] However, once the question of Aleksandrov's retirement was settled, his correspondence with the army authorities responsible for his pensions returned to the established formula of 'retired [otstavnoi] shtabs-rotmistr Aleksandrov', as well as the use of masculine pronouns, suggesting that, despite a few snags like the one quoted above, the use of this name in official military correspondence went on well beyond the years of his service (Begunova 2011: 387). The tone and actions of the Russian government in its dealings with Aleksandrov suggest a lenience, even a lack of interest, in the sexual determination of its military celebrities. Aleksandrov's correspondence with his literary editors, on the other hand, demonstrated that the Russian literary institutions and their representatives played an

[18] For a discussion of the circumstances of Aleksandrov's retirement, see Prikazchikova 2018: 75–84. Prikazchikova also suggests that the reason for Aleksandrov's failure to obtain reinstatement was that tsar Aleksander I had by then withdrawn his personal support of Aleksandrov's case.

active role in shaping his public gender expression.

'Durova's Notes'

Another part of the corpus of Aleksandrov's personal documents consists of exchanges with the editors and publishers of the literary journals that printed his work. His main literary correspondent was Aleksandr Pushkin, with whom Aleksandrov exchanged eleven letters sent over a period of sixteen months in 1835–36. As Aleksandrov recounted in his autobiographical novella *A Year of Life in St Petersburg, or the Trouble with Third Visits* Pushkin was an acquaintance of his brother, Vasilii Durov.[19] Vasilii, always looking for ways to boost the family's income, approached the poet and offered him Aleksandrov's manuscript. Once the publisher's interest was secured, Aleksandrov wrote to Pushkin directly to discuss editorial matters and Vasilii stepped in to discuss finances, when needed.

These letters have benefited from the high literary status of their addressee throughout the twentieth century and have often been reprinted in modern editions of *Notes* as a kind of a paratext, contextualising Aleksandrov's prose (Durova 1983; Durova 2012). Despite this sustained critical attention (Zirin 1988: xii–xiv; Savkina 2007:193–95), the gendered grammar of Aleksandrov's responses has often gone unnoticed by scholars and general readers alike and would benefit from the closer examination offered below.

The very first letter from August 1835 informed Pushkin that the author of *Notes* was happy to sell their manuscript and willing to accept any edits suggested by their future publisher. Throughout the letter, Aleksandrov used masculine verb endings ('I would like [zhelal] to sell my notes to you', 'there is more I would like [khotel] to say') and ended the letter with his by then customary signature 'your devoted [predannyi] servant Aleksandrov' (Durova 1983: 456). His next letter from September the same year updated Pushkin about postal delays with the manuscript and was similarly signed 'Aleksandr Aleksandrov'. Importantly, it included a full postal address 'Aleksandrov at Elabuga',

[19] Pushkin called Vasilii 'an old, pleasant acquaintance' to his face (Durova 1983: 453-54) but also described Durov as a strange, eccentric character in his collection of gossipy essays *Table Talk* published in 1835–36 (Pushkin 1949: 167–68).

indicating that this name was used for local residency records. The letter itself has survived, but its attachments did not: Aleksandrov wrote that he included with his missive a portrait of himself 'made when I was sixteen years old'. This portrait has now been lost, but Aleksandrov's description of it provides an indicative example of his own attitude to the change in his gender expression ('[the portrait] looks and reflects, obviously, the way it was necessary for me to look then' (Durova 1983: 456–57) as something that required little further explanation.

Pushkin was undoubtedly aware of this change but might have misunderstood its nature, believing it to be an instance of playful literary cross-dressing. Writing directly to Aleksandrov, Pushkin followed his correspondent's lead and addressed his replies to 'Dear Sir [milostivyi gosudar'], Aleksandr Andreevich', using masculine pronouns and endings throughout. Pushkin's letters to Vasilii Durov were more varied: for example, in his initial reply to Vasilli's first letter, Pushkin referred to the 'author of *Notes*' as male throughout. Although 'author' [avtor] has until very recently been used in Russian to refer to authors of any gender, the pronouns used in this letter were also masculine.[20]

In another letter from March 1836, negotiating payment terms, Pushkin first referred to Vasilii's 'brother', but as the letter progressed and its tone became more playful, 'brother' [brat] turned into 'little brother' [bratets] (Durova 1983: 459). Pushkin signed off with an ironic allusion to Aleksandrov's gender ambiguity: 'Farewell, be happy and may God let you become richer with the help of Aleksandrov's lucky little hand, which little hand I entrust you to kiss on my behalf' (Durova 1983: 459). In discussion with others, Pushkin would invariably call the manuscript he was editing 'Durova's notes' [zapiski Durovoi], and this was how the text finally appeared in *Contemporary*, prefaced by the publisher's introduction that highlighted the 'mystery' of the author's gender identity.[21] Subtitled '1812', this excerpt was just under eighty pages long and formed part of a bigger manuscript that Aleksandrov was

[20] 'If he [on] decides to sell his manuscript while it is still unpublished, let him define the price himself' (Durova 1983: 453–54).

[21] In March 1836, Pushkin wrote in a letter to his wife: 'What about Durova's *Notes*? Has the censor approved them? I need them – I am in big trouble without them' (Durova 1983: 459).

hoping to print as a standalone edition.
Originally, Aleksandrov hoped that Pushkin would arrange the publication himself, using his connections at court to ease the manuscript's progress through the literary censorship committees. Pushkin's sudden death in January 1837 meant that Aleksandrov could not count on his patron's support, but even before the poet's death Aleksandrov decided to self-publish.[22] One of the factors that contributed to this decision was a disagreement between author and editor over the title of the upcoming publication. In five letters, exchanged between him and Pushkin in summer 1836, Aleksandrov attempted to negotiate a change in credits from 'Durova's Notes' to another title that would be more in keeping with his transmasculine gender presentation.
In a letter from June 1836, he implored Pushkin to find a way to avoid the 'misfortune' [gore] of the previous title and to credit the author as 'Aleksandrov'. Previously reserved and business-like in his correspondence with the famous poet, here the author of *Notes* proclaimed that the name 'Durova' made him 'shudder', and once again signed off as 'Aleksandrov'. Aleksandrov suggested a solution that would have preserved the name 'Aleksandrov' while still maintaining the sensationalist air of the manuscript and underscoring the 'female masculinity' (Halberstam 1998: 2-45) of its author: 'Personal Notes of a Russian Amazon, Known under the Name Aleksandrov' [Svoeruchnye zapiski russkoi amazonki, izvestnoi pod imenem Aleksandrova]. Apologising for the directness of his tone, Aleksandrov reminded his correspondent: '...remember, I was born, grew up and became a man in a military camp' (Durova 1983: 463).
In her reading of these well-known letters, one of Aleksandrov's first English-language translators and biographers, Mary Zirin, argued that his hesitation to see the name 'Durova' in print was a result of an internalised conviction that women

[22] The first standalone edition of Aleksandrov's memoirs came out in November 1836, published with the help of his cousin, Ivan Butovskii. It was titled *Cavalry-Maiden. An Incident in Russia* (Kavalerist-devitsa. Proisshestvie v Rossii, 1836) and included an introduction by Butovskii, which framed Aleksandrov's story as a heroic adventure. This framing, as well as the title, added an even more sensationalist aura to the publication and, according to Aleksandrov, made his life in St Petersburg high society increasingly difficult (Durova 1983: 450).

should not publish personal accounts of their lives (Zirin 1998: xii–xiv). Irina Savkina's reading of *Notes* developed Zirin's argument further, comparing the memoirs to other auto-documentary texts by women in her study (Savkina 2007: 198–99) (both Savkina and Zirin read *Notes* as proto-feminist narrative). Although well-grounded in the literary history of period, I believe this explanation misreads Aleksandrov's gender expression in his letters and, with the appearance of the new sources published by Alla Begunova, is no longer convincing.[23] It seems more likely that Aleksandrov was invested in maintaining his public transmasculine identity, for personal but perhaps also for bureaucratic reasons: by 1836, the military pension was his main source of income, issued based on 'Aleksandrov''s record of service. Aside from emotional distress caused by public misgendering, a return to the use of the name 'Durova' in print threatened to revive the kind of administrative investigations that Aleksandrov had had to contend with in 1808 and 1817, analysed in the first part of this article.

As far as Pushkin was concerned, the argument that ensued in the next three letters suggests that he did indeed misunderstand Aleksandrov's commitment to his transmasculine identity. The poet's reply to Aleksandrov's plea was brisk and dismissive: *Notes* are already in print, but even if it were possible to make changes, he would object to the new title on the grounds of style. Deliberately or not, Pushkin ignored Aleksandrov's requests and emphasised the importance of marketing for a new writer's literary debut instead. Echoing the change in his correspondent's tone, Pushkin's own replies became increasingly patronising: first he advised Aleksandrov to be 'brave – and enter the literary profession with the same courage with which you have entered the profession that has brought you fame', called his letter 'sweet' [milo] and then emphasised his inexperience as a writer ('you have achieved fame in one profession, and now you are entering another one, still new to you') (Durova 1983: 461–63).

Pushkin's reaction might be seen as an attempt to make sure his publication did not contradict the binary gender categories

[23] A more recent analysis of the publication history of *Notes* suggests that the question of gender would have been secondary, in any case: the authors of the new *Oxford History of Russian Literature* consider *Notes* to be the first Russian biography to be published while its author was still living (Kahn et al. 2018: 388).

typical for the mid-nineteenth-century Russian society. And yet, Aleksandrov's correspondence with other literary editors, for example, Andrei Kraevskii, shows no such insistence on excluding the name Aleksandrov from the publishing record. Kraevskii invited Aleksandrov to become a staff writer in *Notes of the Fatherland* in 1838; Aleksandrov accepted and worked there for about a year. The letters between editor and writer discussed deadlines, negotiated payments and, importantly, were addressed to and signed by 'Aleksandrov' throughout. The pieces published in this journal were signed 'Aleksandrov (Durova)', in a compromise similar to the one Aleksandrov suggested to Pushkin in 1836 (Iudina 1963: 130-35).

My contention is that, more likely, Pushkin's insistence on keeping the title 'Durova's Notes' was a result of his conviction that this would make the text easier to market as a conventional narrative of a female cross-dresser in military service. An unusual, but by no means unprecedented story, this was also a recognised trope of the early nineteenth-century literary culture, from the popular adaptations of Shakespeare's plays to Vasilii Zhukovskii's 1821 translation of Friedrich Schiller's *The Maid of Orleans* [Die Jungfrau von Orleans, 1801].[24] Crediting 'Aleksandrov' as the author of a story told by a first-person narrator grammatically gendered as female would have undermined such a reading. The suggested title – 'Personal notes of a Russian Amazon, known under the name Aleksandrov' – would also draw attention to the fact that 'Durova' continued to 'renounce her sex', as Pushkin put it in his foreword (Pushkin 1836: 54) even after 'her' retirement from the army twenty years prior.

Stylistic considerations were also important: as Hilde Hoogenboom demonstrated, one of Pushkin's aesthetic bugbears was 'Kotsebiatina' – sentimental prose in the manner of the prolific German novelist and playwright August Kotzebue (1761–1818) (Hoogenboom 2015: 553–

[24] These nineteenth-century tropes were in themselves a continuation of an earlier transnational cultural trend: 'the popularity of the theme of female cross-dressing' as 'a general European phenomenon', 'not limited by national boundaries', with many translations circulating from and into Dutch, French, English and Italian (van de Pol et al. 1989: 93). For more historical case studies, see van de Pol et al. 1989. I am grateful to Philip Bullock for drawing my attention to the publication date of Zhukovskii's translation.

74). Pushkin's literary reputation depended on establishing a distance between his own writing and the 'German novels', to which, as he argued in one of the letters to Aleksandrov, the 'too sophisticated, pretentious' title *Personal Notes of the Russian Amazon* would necessarily allude to (Durova 1983: 461). Instead, he chose to foreground other elements of Aleksandrov's original text, through the use of the foreword, an epigraph, and the composition of the excerpt itself.

The foreword did not just remind the readers about the facts of Aleksandrov's biography but framed it specifically as a sensationalist cross-dressing narrative. As scholar of a similar phenomenon in Spanish culture Sherry Velasco puts it, in framings like Pushkin's, quoted below, 'a private experience of the transgenderist is shifted to the public sphere and thereby marketed as a hybrid spectacle for the curious gaze of the general audience' (Velasco 2000: ix). Pushkin writes:

> In 1808 a young boy by the name of Aleksandrov enlisted as a private [...], he distinguished himself, was awarded the Soldier's Cross of St George for bravery, and that same year was promoted to officer with the Mariupol' Hussars Regiment [...] and he continued to serve as zealously as when he first joined. This might seem to be a regular course of action, and a fairly ordinary occurrence, but this same case created a stir, provoked a lot of gossip and made a big impression on the public because of one circumstance that was accidentally revealed: Cornet Aleksandrov was a maiden, Nadezhda Durova (Pushkin 1836: 53).

The epigraph played a similar role, setting a playful tone: a quotation from Ovid, 'Modo vir, modo foemina' [*sic*] ('Now a man, now a woman'), had cropped up in Pushkin's writing before, as an epigraph to his poem 'Little House in Kolomna' [Domik v Kolomne, 1830]. This light-hearted riff on a cross-dressing narrative (the inhabitants of the little house hire a cook, Mavrusha, who turns out to be a man wearing a dress), written during Pushkin's residence in Boldino, had little connection to Aleksandrov's narrative of military adventures in

1812, but was well-known to Pushkin's readers.[25]

The composition of the excerpt offers another glimpse of Pushkin's editing process. Because the original manuscript of *Notes* has not survived, and since Aleksandrov repeatedly stated his preliminary agreement with any edits (Durova 1983: 456, 458), it is difficult to reconstruct the extent of Pushkin's changes to '1812'. One of the first scenes of the excerpt depicted the protagonist's struggles to find a discreet place to bathe during a short break in fighting. In contrast to later editions, in which this section was expanded, meaning this scene was preceded by two other subchapters (Durova 1983: 143–54), this excerpt literally undressed its protagonist on the first few pages, underscoring the erotic undertones of this cross-dressing adventure.

Pushkin must have judged the audience's tastes correctly: the publication was a success. Moreover, his marketing ploy meant that cross-dresser 'Nadezhda Durova', rather than retired shtabs-rotmistr Aleksandr Aleksandrov, was now considered to be the implied author of *Notes*, an assumption that persists to this day. This reading remains influential partly thanks to Aleksandrov's own efforts in marketing his later fiction: a comparative analysis of the protagonists in Aleksandrov's literary texts suggests that the success of 'Durova's Notes' convinced its author that maintaining the ambiguity of his gender presentation was indeed the best way to present his work to the reading public.

Aleksandrov's Autofiction

For a twenty-first-century reader, *Notes* read less as a cross-dressing story and more as an account of a lived experience of a person with a non-binary or fluid gender expression. The first-person narrator used feminine endings of the verbs, adjectives, and participles to tell her story, but once the protagonist joined the army, most other characters addressed him as 'sir' [barin] and used masculine pronouns in reported speech. This discursive 'gap' (Savkina 2007: 196) between the narrator and the protagonist

[25] 'Little House in Kolomna' had been published twice, in 1833 in an almanac *Housewarming* [Novoselie] and two years later in a collection *Poems and Novellas* [Poemy i povesti] (1835). Pushkin's other treatments of the topic of cross-dressing (for example, the social cross-dressing in *The Squire's Daughter* [Baryshnia-krest'ianka, 1831] suggests that he saw this practice as a form of a practical joke rather than a serious statement of gender difference.

underscored their transitional status between two very gendered worlds: a young provincial woman's parlour and the barracks of the junior army officer, neither of which was particularly welcoming. However, the autofiction of *Notes* seemed to have offered a safe narrative space, in which the protagonist did not need to make a choice between either a masculine or a feminine identity and could successfully inhabit both.[26] I believe that this, in addition to Aleksandrov's desire to capitalise on the success of *Notes*, explains why narrators in his later fiction continued to be gendered as female in the first-person and male in reported speech, in contrast to the consistently masculine voice of his private documentation.
As the critic Hywel Dix points out, autofiction

> offers to fill the gap created when more traditional forms of autobiography are rendered sociologically unavailable by the status of the writer [...]. It is, moreover, a form of autobiographical writing that permits a degree of experimentation with the definition and limits of the self, rather than the slavish recapitulation of known biographical facts (Dix 2018: 3).

The protagonist of *Notes* felt ill at ease in both worlds he belonged to, before and during their army service (Schoenle 2001: 59, Savkina 2007: 213–21). The first part of the full *Notes*, 'My Childhood Years' [Detskie leta moi], told of multiple situations in which the protagonist felt like a misfit, and not just because of the social expectations regarding gendered behaviour. The subsequent parts of the narrative, detailing the protagonist's time in the army, were also a catalogue of physical and psychological discomforts, some common for military service and some specific to the protagonist's situation, like an inability to bathe in public. The freedom of Aleksandrov's life away from his family came at a cost, but autofiction presented him with a way of narrating this traumatising experience.
The success of *Notes* meant that Aleksandrov used references to this text to promote his later publications: short stories and novels published first in literary

[26] On the significance of the choice of pronouns for protagonists in queer autofiction, see Pellegrini et al. 2020: 109.

journals, and then, to maximize profits, as standalone editions (Durova 1983: 451). The subjects of these texts ranged widely from a story about a dog with supernatural powers who sniffed out an underground production line of medicinal herbs to a tale of a young woman trapped in a loveless marriage. The settings were equally diverse and included not just the Russian empire but also neighbouring European countries. Relying on a popular structural trope of Romantic prose – an accumulation of nested narratives – most of these texts featured a narrative frame that explicitly set up a narrator identical to the protagonist of *Notes*. Aleksandrov's texts assumed their readers' familiarity with this unusual protagonist: aside from a casual reference to *Notes*, none provided either a backstory or an explanation for why both masculine and feminine endings and pronouns were used throughout the text. None of these published texts mentioned the name 'Durova' on its own, and, in most cases, credited the author as 'Aleksandrov (Durova)'.[27] The autofictional world of Aleksandrov's later fiction followed on from *Notes* in establishing a narrative space in which 'Durova' and Aleksandrov co-existed.

Most of Aleksandrov's later texts were published in two years, between 1837 and 1839. This relatively short period of intense literary activity might explain why the framing narratives are similar, if not identical, across these sometimes very different pieces. For example, the opening paragraph of *Pavilion* [Pavil'on, 1839], a story of a tragic love triangle between a Polish priest, a servant girl, and a young nobleman, featured a first-person narrator called Aleksandrov. Discussing housing arrangements with a fellow soldier, this Aleksandrov noted: 'I, however, did not overly trust [very davala] his words and praises' (Aleksandrov 1839: 2). The absence of any contextualisation of Aleksandrov's use of feminine endings to talk about himself soon after he was addressed as a man by another cavalry officer presumed the reader's familiarity with this narrator. Having established the setting and introduced a nested narrative – the story of the priest's deceased son – the narrator stepped back and did not play a key role in the story, seemingly important only for the framing itself.

[27] Some texts were evidently written by Aleksandrov years before and only revised for publication in this period.

Gudishki (1839), a novel in four parts set in Lithuania, also constructed an explicit frame. The text was preceded by a dedication to Princess Tat'iana Iusupova, from her 'loyal servant Aleksandrov' (Aleksandrov 1839: n.p). The opening of the novel presented it as a companion piece, or a follow-up, to *Notes*: the first-person narrator remained unnamed throughout the text but was recognisably the Aleksandrov of the dedication and *Notes*. The setting – a conglomeration of villages all called Hudzishki – was somewhere Aleksandrov's regiment was quartered a few years ago, and the locals remembered this young officer and his faithful horse, Alkid. As in *Pavilion*, the opening conversations about army housing arrangements established a frame for a nested narrative. This time, the overarching epic story was told by a rabbi rather than a Polish priest, and each of the four parts of the novel introduced their own nested narratives, but the overall framing structure remained similar to Aleksandrov's other texts.

In *Caprice of Fate, or Unlawful Love. A Real Incident that Happened at the Author's Homeland* [Igra sud'by, ili protivozakonnaia liubov'. Istinnoe proisshestvie, sluchivsheesia na rodine avtora, 1839)],[28] the framing formed part of the plot. The first-person narrator (the implied 'Aleksandrov (Durova)' of the title page) introduced the protagonist, Elena, as his childhood friend. Underscoring this connection, Elena's unhappy life and death were mapped onto the timeline of Aleksandrov's biography as presented in *Notes* (Durova 1983: 308). The novella *Count Mavritsii* [Graf Mavritsii, 1838] did not foreground the frame or feature Aleksandrov as a named character, but the narrator appeared in the last few lines, mentioning that he personally knew the characters.[29] In the journal publication of this novella in *Library for Reading* [Biblioteka dlia chteniia], this last paragraph was followed by a signature 'Aleksandrov (kavalerist-devitsa)', reinforcing the connection with the first-person narrator of earlier texts (Aleksandrov 1838: 192). Other texts, such as 'Sulphur Spring' [Sernyi kliuch, 1839] or 'Treasure' [Klad, 1840] also featured young cavalry officers or older hussars as characters, or as narrators, like in 'Werewolf'

[28] The same text was published earlier as *Elena, the Beauty of T-sk* [Elena, T-skaia krasavitsa] (1837), signed also 'Aleksandrov (Durova)'.

[29] *Count Mavritsii* was first published as part of *Notes* in the first standalone edition in 1836.

[Oboroten', 1840]. Some, like *Nurmeka* [1839], a historical novella set in the time of Ivan the Terrible, problematised gender ambiguity with plots centred on cross-dressing adventures (Marsh-Flores 2003: 615), and all established either overt or implied connections to *Notes* and their author.

Despite direct references to Aleksandrov's literary debut, none of his later texts were as explicitly autobiographical as *Notes.* One exception to this rule was the 1838 novella *A Year of Life in St Petersburg*, which detailed Aleksandrov's uncomfortable experiences in St Petersburg high society after the success of *Notes.* Because of Pushkin's framing of *Notes*, the reading public expected to meet a dashing Cavalry Maiden, a cross-dressing military celebrity. But by 1838 Aleksandrov was fifty-three years old, retired from the army and long accustomed to his everyday transmasculine identity. He wore civilian male clothes, cut his hair short, smoked a pipe, and was not interested 'performing on display' [vystupit' na pokaz], contrary to society's expectations (Durova 1983: 414). The kind of transmasculine gender expression he portrayed in *Notes* relied heavily on the established conventions of military masculinity as reference points. However, such qualities as directness or courage in the face of immediate physical danger were no longer relevant in the highly gendered spaces of the capital's salons and ballrooms, and Aleksandrov's sojourn in the capital quickly turned sour.[30]

In a key scene in this novella, Aleksandrov described one of the few meetings he had with Pushkin in 1837. During his first visit to Aleksandrov's temporary lodgings in St Petersburg, Pushkin struggled to comprehend his contributing author's transmasculine presentation. Bewildered by Aleksandrov's grammatical masculine self-gendering in his speech, in the course of the meeting Pushkin attempted to kiss Aleksandrov's hand while taking his leave, to Aleksandrov's surprise and embarrassment. This scene, as well as the rest of the novella, was narrated by the first-person voice familiar to readers from *Notes* and Aleksandrov's other fiction: gendered as female in first-person, and as male in reported speech. The text did not offer any comments addressing

[30] I offer a detailed reading of this novella in 'The Trouble with Queer Celebrity: Aleksandr Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Durova)'s *A Year of Life in St Petersburg* (1838)', *Modern Language Review*, 118:97-113.

the obvious contradiction: the scene in which the protagonist argued for the importance of his presentation as male was narrated by a first-person voice gendered as a female. Paying attention to the dynamics of gender presentation in Aleksandrov's texts and thinking of them as a form of autofiction helps us understand how he constructed a narrative space in which these contradictions did not matter. Instead, they were a matter of course to the author who had by 1837 lived for more than twenty-five years as 'Aleksandrov (Durova)' and was used to the complications of an unconventional gender presentation.

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After two years spent in St Petersburg managing his literary career, in 1841 Aleksandrov retired to Elabuga, a town near his native Sarapul, where he lived until his death in 1866. A few years before that, in the summer of 1860, M.A. Mikhailov, editor of the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary, Compiled by Russian Scholars and Writers* [Entsiklopedicheskii slovar', sostavlennyi russkimi uchenymi i literatorami] (1861–63), commissioned Aleksandrov to provide an entry on his own biography. Aleksandrov agreed and produced an informal curriculum vitae that listed major events of his life in chronological order, accompanied by personal comments. In terms of gender expression, this *Autobiography* occupied a kind of a middle ground between Aleksadrov's personal documents and his autofiction. On the one hand, this text followed Aleksandrov's correspondence in using exclusively masculine pronouns and endings, from noting his date of birth ('I was born [rodilsia] in 1788') to describing his current circumstances ('In 1841 I said farewell [prostilsia] to Petersburg forever and since then have been living in my cave – in Elabuga') (Durova 1983: 452). On the other, Aleksandrov used this publication as an opportunity to reinforce the factual edits he made to the story of his life in *Notes* and other fiction, from a distance of almost forty years. *Autobiography* once again stated an incorrect date of birth, made no mention of marriage or children, and referred to *Notes* as a source of information about Aleksandrov's life up to the end of his army service.[31]

[31] The reasons why Aleksandrov decided to hide the fact of his marriage are unknown. My analysis of the documentation, presented above, suggests that

Written towards the end of Aleksandrov's life, the text was also remarkably frank in summarising the emotional toll of his non-conventional gender presentation through the years. *Autobiography* juxtaposed the periods of Aleksandrov's life when he lived as a private citizen (in the army and later in retirement) with the time he spent in St Petersburg as a literary celebrity. Despite all the hardships he endured, forty years later Aleksandrov nostalgically lauded the army for the uncomplicated sense of community it offered. His resignation in 1816 is presented as an experience more traumatic than military service, one that plunged Aleksandrov into 'despair' [otchaianie] and 'alienation' [otchuzhdenie] and complicated the already uneasy period of adjustment to unwelcoming St Petersburg society (Durova 1983: 447–48). By contrast, Aleksandrov's descriptions of his family life in the Russian provinces were almost bucolic. An evocative scene, in which Aleksandrov remembered his aunt making fun of his tanned face, more appropriate for 'simple peasant' rather than a 'young nobleman' (Durova 1983: 450), showed his family at ease with Aleksandrov's transmasculinity. Other contemporary sources, such as the articles published in the 1890s in popular historical periodicals like *Russian Antiquity* [Russkaia starina] or *Historical Messenger* [Istoricheskii vestnik] suggest that the public reception of Aleksandrov's transmasculinity was also not hostile. Whether out of respect for his achievements on the battlefield (Kutshe 1894: 788–93), his role in the local community (Lashmanov 1890: 657–64) or his extraordinary life (Nekrasova 1890: 585–612) his transmasculine public persona was acknowledged and respected by many in his immediate social circle – and, through the medium of their writings, by general readers also. Contemporary Russian audiences remain fascinated by Aleksandrov, both as a historical figure and as a writer. In 1993, the first memorial state museum opened in Aleksandrov's former home in Elabuga. A few years later, permanent exhibitions and guided tours were established in nearby Sarapul.[32] Several

avoiding misgendering might have been an important consideration.

[32] For a video tour of the museum, see 'Muzei-Usad'ba N.A. Durovoi <http://www.elabuga.com/durova/aboutDurovaMuseum.html> [Accessed 2 December 2021]. For a report on the 2016 Sarapul festival *Gorod Nadezhdy* [Nadezhda's City], see Gorod Nadezhdy 2016.

monuments depicting Aleksandrov at various stages of his life are now dotted around the two towns. In 2012, Aleksandrov's face appeared on the commemorative two-rouble coin in the series marking the 200th anniversary of the victory over Napoleon in 1812, alongside other 'generals and heroes' [polkovodtsy i geroi] (CBR 2012). Most recently, in 2021, the story of Aleksandrov's life featured in a video by one of the most popular Russian journalists and YouTubers, Iurii Dud', which has gathered over five million views (Dud' 2021). On the one hand, this ongoing engagement with Aleksandrov's legacy testifies to a continued public interest in his unconventional life. However, in stark contrast to nineteenth-century sources, these adaptations gloss over any issues of gender ambiguity, raised by Aleksandrov's biography — or, rather, ignore them as a curious footnote in a tale of heroic patriotic duty, presented in *Notes*, which remain Aleksandrov's most well-known text among scholars and general public alike.[33] Reading Aleksandrov's personal documents alongside his literary fiction does not just allow us to trace the emergence of different ways of gender presentation across his entire oeuvre. More importantly, it showcases Aleksandrov's agency and significant literary skill in using effective narrative strategies to convey his own understanding of his gender identity to his correspondents and readers.

[33] The infamous law 'against propaganda of homosexualism, lesbianism, bisexuality, [and] transgender' (Healy 2018: 2) passed by the Russian government in 2013, also means that public discussions of Aleksandrov's gender identity have become increasingly rare in Russia. A recent *Russia Beyond the Headlines* English-language article on Aleksandrov exemplifies the paradoxes of modern Russian discussions of his life: a click-bait-y title ('Nadezhda Durova, The First Transgender Officer in Tsarist Russia?') precedes a text that discusses 'the first female officer', who 'raised the topic of women in society' (Guzeva 2021: n.p.).

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