

Marina Balina, Claudia Criveller, Andrea Gullotta

Introduction to the Special Issue *Russian Autobiographical Writing in the Twenty and Twenty-First Centuries – Part 1*

AvtobiografiЯ. Journal on Life Writing and the Representation of the Self in Russian Culture was founded in 2011 as part of the research project *The Refraction of the Self. Autobiographical Forms and Genres and Memoirs in Russian Culture of 19th and 20th C.*,¹ funded by the University of Padua and led by Claudia Criveller. It was the first academic project to be entirely devoted to the study of auto/biographical writing in Russian culture. A team of eighteen scholars – from Russia, Italy, France, the UK and Austria and specializing in several areas of Russian studies – was created to work on different aspects of Russian auto/biographical writing over the centuries. During the first meeting of the research team, Criveller and Andrea Gullotta, the research fellow hired for the project, proposed creating an international journal to root this field of study in the international academic communi-

¹ More detailed information about the project is available at the project's website (Refractions n.d.).

ty of scholars. The proposal was endorsed by the research team, and most of its members decided to become part of the editorial board. At the same time, several internationally renowned scholars agreed to become part of the advisory board of the journal. In 2012 the journal's first issue was published: it contained the articles derived from the papers presented at the first of the two conferences of the project.

AvtobiografiЯ over time grew more structured and became a reference point for the scholarly community for what concerns the study of auto/biographical writings in Russian culture. The growing interest in Russian auto/biographical studies both in Russia and abroad has testified for the timeliness of the journal;²

² Of the many projects and initiatives in the field of Russian Life Writing, the *Nauchno-uchebnaia gruppа mezhdistsiplinarnykh issledovaniĭ avtobiografii* [Research Group for Interdisciplinary Studies of Autobiography] of the Higher School of Economics (HSE) led by Yuri Zaretsky and Elena Karpenko deserves

yet, the vast majority of studies published elsewhere on Russian Life Writing seem to ignore the Western tradition of auto/biographical scholarship (and some terms now rooted in that tradition have not even been ever mentioned with regards to Russian texts and authors).³ Concurrently, Western scholars still lack the necessary knowledge and access to the Russian tradition of auto/biographical studies.

For this reason, while reflecting upon the work done in the first decade, the editors of the journal decided to focus again on what was felt to be one of the most important promises of the journal, i.e., that of becoming a

mention for its longstanding contribution to the study of Russian auto/biography. While the group is no longer formally active, its page on the website of the HSE is still available (HSE n.d.) and its Facebook page is still active (Gruppa n.d.). Of interest are also a series of social projects which were centered on the recovery and holding of egodocuments (diaries, autobiographies, biographies) – apart from the projects of Memorial and the Sakharov Centre, of particular interest are Prozhito (Prozhito n.d.) and Bessmertnyi barak (Bessmertnyi barak n.d.)

³ Just to quote an example, the whole area of disability studies, which in western academia is thoroughly investigated as part of the study of Life Writing, is not considered in Russian studies a part of auto/biographical studies.

theoretical bridge between the Russian and western traditions of investigation of auto/biographical texts. The original plan aimed to launch a series of conferences throughout the second decade of the journal's existence devoted to studying Russian auto/biography from a broader perspective and publishing collective volumes derived from these conferences. These volumes, in the editors' intention, had the potential to become reference points for the academic community for what concerns the study of Russian auto/biographical texts. The authors who were invited to the conferences and collected volumes had the task of opening new perspectives for scholarly research studies and/or diversifying the approaches implemented to study Russian Life Writing, drawing from both the Russian and Western auto/biographical studies' traditions.

The first conference and volume were devoted to twentieth and twenty-first-century Russian autobiographical writing. For this purpose, the editors invited two of the scholars who had most enthusiastically supported the work of the journal since its creation, Marina Balina and Evgeny Dobrenko. Work started for the

newly formed team right away: after the choice of topics and selection of authors of the papers/chapters, and after the entire editorial team of scholars was formed, work started for both the organization of the conference and the preparation of the volume. The plans were abruptly interrupted by the invasion of Ukraine perpetrated by the Russian army on 24 February 2022. The new scenario caused far too many obstacles to realize the original plan, which was eventually abandoned. Still, the organizing team felt that some of the work done needed to be salvaged, albeit in a different form from the originally planned one. As a result, it was decided to publish some of the articles initially intended to be included in the collected volume in two separate special issues of the journal, the first of which comprises the three articles presented in this 2023 issue.

In the first article of the cluster, Leona Toker – having devoted part of her career to the study of Gulag literature – turns her focus from the repressed to the non-repressed. The author of seminal works such as *Return from the Archipelago. Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (Toker 2000) and *Gulag Literature and the Literature of Nazi Camps: An Inter-*

contextual Reading (Toker 2019) analyses the memoirs written by four authors who escaped the purges during the Great Terror and wrote about those times of repression. While the memoirs of Il'ia Ehrenburg and Nadezhda Mandelstam are widely studied and analyzed, the texts of Emma Gershtein and Raissa Orlova are less known even among specialists. Toker analyses them comparatively and brings to the surface not only their interconnections (for instance, the author analyses how Gershtein integrates Mandelstam's text), but also their commonalities against the backdrop of what Lidiia Ginzburg called “points of compatibility” (Ginzburg 2011: 281–82), i.e. aspects of Soviet life that the memoirists, even if harsh critics of the Soviet reality, agreed with or made compromises with. Thus, Toker offers a new perspective on life writing about the Great Terror and provides a model for further work on similar texts about the era of the “elitecide”, as Toker puts it.

In the second article, Maria Mayofis provides a groundbreaking analysis of the memoirs cycle *Story of a Life* by Konstantin Paustovskii by reading it through the lenses of Jens Brockmeier's notion of “memory episteme” (Brockmeier 2015) as

well as Karl Mannheim's concept of "historical generations" (Mannheim 1952: 276–320). In Mayofis's view, these concepts allow us to have a more nuanced understanding of the receptive context of Paustovskii's memoirs as well as of their interactions with the socio-cultural context. Mayofis reconstructs a series of memory epistemes (which she defines as "the whole of local and societal practices, technologies, and objects of remembering and forgetting; the ideas, concepts, and theories about what it is and what people do when they remember and forget; and the values and norms that regulate, within a given community or political system, which memory stories are permissible and which are not and hence ought to be excluded and prohibited"), such as the "Restoration of the Lost World" or "requiring the portrayal of a human as part of and alongside Big History, not just as a backdrop, but with active participation in memorable historical events", and provides an analysis of how the publication of Paustovskii's memoirs occurred within these epistemes, which influenced the reception of Paustovskii's relationship with the changing context in which they were published.

The last article of the cluster provides a refreshed perspective on a thoroughly studied subject, i.e. that of Russian women's writing.⁴ Basing her work on a solid tradition of studies on women's writing both in the Anglo-Saxon and Russian contexts, Irina Savkina proposes a detailed analysis of twelve "egotexts" (as Savkina puts it) written in Russian by women in different ages with the specific aim of identifying their gender-specific characteristics. Through a varied spectrum of texts written by women from different eras and backgrounds – from renowned to scarcely accessible texts, from officially-sanctioned Soviet writers to Soviet dissidents, from late nineteenth-century students to 1990s feminists – Savkina outlines different specifically gendered modes and variants of autobiographical writing, thus providing an entirely renewed idea of gender writing based on textual analysis.

These three contributions will be complemented by the articles of the second part of this special issue, which will be published in the 2024 issue of *AvtobiografiЯ*. Altogether, they will provide a body of research aimed at start-

⁴ Among the many works devoted to the topic, see Barker, Gheith 2002.

ing new lines of scholarship on
twenty and twenty-first –
centuries Russian autobiograph-
ical writing.

Bibliography

Barker, Gheith 2002: Barker, Adele Marie and Jehanne M. Gheith. 2002. *A History of Women's Writing in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Bessmertnyi barak n.d.: 'Bessmertnyi barak'. n.d.

< <https://bessmertnybarak.ru/> > [accessed 30 December 2023]

Brockmeier 2015: Brockmeier, Jan. 2015. *Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative, and the Autobiographical Process* (Oxford; N.Y.: Oxford University Press)

Ginzburg 2011: Ginzburg, Lidiia. 2011. *Zapisnye knizhki. Vospominaniia. Esse* (Sankt-Peterburg: Iskusstvo-SPB)

Gruppa n.d.: 'Gruppa mezhdistsiplinarnykh issledovaniy avtobiografii'. n.d.

< <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1548871545438490> > [accessed 30 December 2023]

HSE n.d.: 'Nauchno-uchebnaia gruppa mezhdistsiplinarnykh issledovaniy avtobiografii'. n.d.

< <https://phc.hse.ru/autobio/> > [accessed 30 December 2023]

Mannheim 1952: Mannheim, Karl. 1952. 'The Problem of Generations'. In: *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. by Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 276–320

Prozhito n.d.: 'Tsentr Prozhito'. n.d.

< <https://prozhito.org/> > [accessed 30 December 2023]

Refractions n.d.: 'La rifrazione del sé: forme e generi autobiografici e memorialistici nella cultura russa del XIX e XX secolo'. n.d. < <http://www.maldura.unipd.it/rifrazionedelse/en/> > [accessed 30 December 2023]

Toker 2000: Toker, Leona. 2000. *Return from the Archipelago. Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press)

Toker 2019: Toker, Leona. 2019. *and the Literature of Nazi Camps: An Intercontextual Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press)