Russia’s First Female Crime Writer, Aleksandra Sokolova (1833–1914): Gender, Authority and Agency

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The post-Soviet boom in crime fiction in Russia has been notable for the prominent role played by female authors. In the years since 1991, during which crime and detective novels have been read in their hundreds of millions of copies, writers such as Dar’ia Dontsova, Aleksandra Marinina, Polina Dashkova and Tat’iana Ustinova have repeatedly featured on bestseller lists.¹ The seeming parity in the popularity and visibility of male and female authors of crime fiction in the post-Soviet period stands in stark contrast to the situation in the late imperial era, at the inception of the genre in Russia. As previous scholarship has demonstrated, Russia’s crime fiction tradition dates back to the early 1860s and, in subsequent years, numerous writers published scores of works that were extremely popular with readers.² A roll call of these early authors is, however, overwhelmingly

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² A. I. Reitblat’s Ot Bovy k Bal’montu i drugie raboty po istoricheskoi sotsiologii russkoi literature, Moscow, 2009, includes research into the most-read fictional works in the years
dominated by men: Nikolai Sokolovskii, Fedor Dostoevskii, Nikolai Timofeev, Semen Panov, Aleksandr Shkliarevskii and Andrei Zarin, to name just a few. Nevertheless, approximately one hundred years before post-Soviet writers like Marinina and Dontsova rose to fame, one notable female writer was breaking the male hegemony of late imperial Russian crime fiction: Aleksandra Ivanovna Sokolova (1833–1914).

This article represents the first attempt in any language to consider Sokolova’s work and, specifically, her contribution to this popular, but non-canonical, literary genre in the late nineteenth century. To write about Sokolova and her crime fiction is to confront and endeavour to redress multiple layers of marginalization. The orthodoxy in Russian studies regarding the pre-eminence of the realist novels of Ivan Turgenev, Fedor Dostoevskii and Lev Tolstoi in nineteenth-century Russian literature has long relegated a consideration of other popular genres, including crime fiction, to the margins. The fact that the pantheon of great nineteenth-century Russian writers has been constructed as an overwhelmingly male edifice means that female writing in any genre during this period has been largely overlooked. Even when the existence of crime fiction is acknowledged, the story tends to be overshadowed by references to *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (*Crime and Punishment*) to the detriment of the myriad other writers who enjoyed just as much popularity as Dostoevskii with readers, if not critics, in the late imperial period. And the fact that almost all imperial Russian crime writers were men means that no space has been made for the study of the contribution of a female author. The need to shine a more sustained light on the work of Aleksandra Sokolova — with the twin aims of bringing her name to greater prominence as well as sketching, thanks to her contribution, a more nuanced picture of the history of Russian crime writing — is, therefore, long overdue.

In attempting to recover a nineteenth-century female Russian writer from obscurity, the present article aligns itself with work previously undertaken by scholars including Barbara Heldt, Mary Zirin, Jehanne Gheith, Wendy Rosslyn, Alessandra Tosi and Hilde Hoogenboom.\(^3\) In

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the field of crime fiction studies, it complements work by Lucy Sussex, Elizabeth Carolyn Miller and Joseph Kestner who have each sought to establish the female lineage of Anglophone crime fiction, the nineteenth-century history of which is dominated by a focus on Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories. Work in both of these fields frequently appears keen to place a premium on the ways in which women’s writing is distinct from the dominant male practice in terms of genre, theme and style. Although this article is wary of the assumption that literary fiction authored by writers identifying as female need necessarily be distinct from that authored by men, it would nevertheless be remiss not to acknowledge that Sokolova’s status as one of only two female crime writers in the period 1860–1917 extends the possibility that her fiction is different in certain ways. Russian crime fiction written by male-identifying authors during the late imperial era was far from uniform in nature; it was, however, a genre that quickly established certain conventions that held firm over a number of decades. The discussion presented here, therefore, considers Sokolova’s works of crime fiction not only as autonomous textual objects, but also as narratives in dialogue with these established generic conventions.

Aleksandra Ivanovna Sokolova (née Denis’eva) was born to a wealthy gentry family in Riazan’ in 1835. She gained a government stipend to attend the Smol’nyi Institute in St Petersburg where she excelled, although her recollections of her schooling, published as Iz vospominanii smolianki (From the Reminiscences of a Smol’nyi Girl) in 1901, suggest this was not a particularly happy period. Upon her graduation in 1851, she was taken in by a maternal aunt in Moscow owing to her father’s death in 1847 and the fact that her mother had lost contact with the family prior to that date. During this time, she visited the literary salon hosted by the playwright, poet and


5 The other is Kapitolina Valer’ianovna Nazar’eva (1847–1900), who is known to have used at least fifteen pseudonyms, and who also deserves more critical attention.

6 Sokolova appears in M. Ledkovsky, C. Rosenthal and M. Zirin (eds), Dictionary of Russian Women Writers, Westport, CT, 1994, pp. 338–39, although it erroneously gives her year of birth as 1836. She also has a briefer entry in Iu. A. Gorbunov’s Pisatel’ nitsy Rossii (materialy dlia biobibliograficheskogo slovaria), see <http://book.uraic.ru/elib/Authors/Gorbunov/sl-17.htm> [accessed 30 August 2021]. The most extensive biographical account of Sokolova’s life and work is to be found in N. A. Prozorova’s article, ‘K biografii A. I. Sokolovoi (Sinee Domino), Russkaia literatura, 2000, pp. 159–73.
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journalist, Nikolai Sushkov, as well as the home of the censor, Dmitrii Rzhevskii, where she is said to have met Nikolai Gogol’ and Mikhail Pogodin, amongst others. Sokolova became romantically involved with a bohemian writer, Sergei Sokolov, and in January 1865 had a child who would grow up to be the journalist Vlas Doroshevich. For reasons that remain unclear, she gave up her son when he was seven months old and signed over her maternal rights to a civil servant, Mikhail Doroshevich and his wife Natal’ia, and undertook not to visit him without their permission. In 1876, however, Sokolova successfully petitioned the courts for the return of Vlas, against his wishes, and he lived with her for a few years before leaving as a minor and launching his own successful career. Sokolova had married Vlas’s father sometime after his birth but, according to Prozorova, by 1875, she was signing herself ‘the widow of a Moscow merchant, Aleksandra Urvanovna Sokolova’. By then, she had had two further children with Sokolov: another son, Trifon, and a daughter, Mariia.

Although Sokolova’s family had enjoyed some wealth in the past, it appears that, by the time she left the Smolnyi, the money had all disappeared and she therefore had to work for a living throughout her life. She began her journalistic career in 1868 after the feuilletonist Nikolai Panovskii, with whom she was acquainted through her father, put her in touch with Mikhail Katkov, who gave her work for the journal he edited, Moskovskie vedomosti. According to Prozorova, Sokolova’s first publication was the piece, ‘Moskovskie bul’vary’ (‘Moscow Boulevards’), which appeared in

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8 Louise McReynolds suggests that Sokolova might have given up her son ‘because of poverty, professional ambition, or pressure to flee abroad for dabbling in left-wing politics in the 1860s’. See Louise McReynolds, ‘V. M. Doroshevich: The Newspaper Journalist and the Development of Public Opinion in Civil Society’, in Edith W. Clowes, Samuel D. Kassow and James L. West (eds), Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia, Princeton, NJ, 1991, pp. 233–47 (p. 235). However, it has been impossible to verify these claims.
9 Vlas Doroshevich became a well-known journalist and feuilletonist and actually worked alongside his mother at the journal Novosti dnia, although colleagues were apparently unaware of their relationship. Whilst initially frosty, relations between the two eventually warmed and correspondence makes clear that they were on cordial terms in the later years of Sokolova’s life. Doroshevich anonymously wrote the obituary for his mother which appeared in Russkoe slovo on 11 February 1914 (no. 34), remembering her 45-year literary career as well as her intelligence and sarcasm.
10 Although Urvanovna was Sokolova’s given patronymic, she began using Ivanovna in the late 1880s for reasons unknown.
11 In her memoirs, Vstrechi i znakomstva (Meetings and Acquaintances), Sokolova recalls a visit in the early 1850s to the Nizhnii Novgorod region where her mother’s family had owned an estate with some 4,000 serfs. On her father’s death in 1847, he left a legacy of only 162 roubles and some family silver.
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the journal’s Sunday supplement, Sovremennaia letopis’, on 14 July 1868. Thereafter, Sokolova wrote theatre reviews for the same journal in the 1868–69 season before becoming the critic for all of Moscow’s theatres for Russkie vedomosti two seasons later, writing under the pseudonym ‘X-z’. Like many such writers of the time, given the frequently short-lived existence of journals and the instability of employment, Sokolova worked for many different journals over the remainder of her career, including Golos, Russkii mir, Russkii listok (for which she briefly owned the publishing rights in 1875–76),12 Russkaia gazeta, Novosti dnia and Moskovskii listok. Having moved to St Petersburg at the end of the 1880s, Sokolova then wrote for the newspapers Svet, Luch, Istoricheskii vestnik, Rodina, Vsemirnaia nov’ and Niva. It is no exaggeration to claim that Sokolova was not only one of the first, but also one of the most prominent, female journalists working in Russia in the late imperial era.13

Her first literary-fictional publication was the story ‘Sam’ (‘Oneself’), in the journal Beseda in 1871, which recounts the tale of the despotic head of a merchant family and the difficulties he causes for his daughter and her lover.14 Sokolova’s early self-belief is evidenced by the fact that, having initially presented the story to Katkov for publication in his Russkii vestnik, she disagreed with his suggestion of cutting one chapter that was critical of the administration and opted instead for publication of the story in its entirety in Beseda.15 Over the next forty years, Sokolova wrote numerous works across a range of genres. These included society tales and novels — ‘Svoei dorogoi’ (‘One’s Own Way’), Sovremennaia drama (A Modern Drama, 1884), Bezdna: roman iz sovremennoi zhizni (The Abyss: A Novel from Contemporary Life, 1890) — historical novels — Tsarskoe gadanie:

12 The mid-1870s were a period of relative financial stability for Sokolova thanks in part to the good rates of pay at Russkii mir. Sokolova signed away ownership of Russkii listok in March 1876 after the journal ran into trouble with the censors regarding an unflattering depiction of the police.

13 In Dictionary of Russian Women Writers, Mary Zirin describes Sokolova as being ‘among the first women in Russia to earn a living as a journalist’ (p. 352). Sokolova appears in the appendix of Barbara T. Norton and Jehanne M. Gheith (eds), An Improper Profession: Women, Gender and Journalism in Late Imperial Russia, Durham, NC, 2001, but is not discussed in any detail.

14 Both the title and subject matter of this work are likely nods in the direction of Aleksandr Ostrovskii who popularized the theme of the despotic merchant (and coined the term ‘samodur’ for this figure) in his drama, beginning with V chuzhom piru pokhmel’e (Hangover at Someone Else’s Feast) from 1856. I am grateful to Margarita Vaysman for the suggestion of this link. Sokolova returns repeatedly to the theme of family despotism over the course of her literary career, including in her 1891 novel, Iz-za mogili (From Beyond the Grave).

15 Prozorova, ‘K biografii A. I. Sokolovoi (Sinee Domino)’, p. 168.
istoricheskii roman iz epokhi tsarstvovaniia Nikolaia I (Royal Divination: An Historical Novel from the Time of Nicholas I, 1909), Taina tsarskosel’skogo dvortsa: iz epokhi Anny Ioannovny (The Secret of the Royal Palace: From the Time of Anna Ioannovna, 1911), Na vsiu zhizni: istoricheskii roman iz zhizni imperatora Aleksandra I (For Life: An Historical Novel from the Life of Emperor Alexander I, 1912) — and a number of crime fiction stories and novels — ‘Na dne propasti’ (‘At the Bottom of the Abyss’), ‘Poslednii vizit’ (‘The Final Visit’), ‘Verdikt’ (‘Verdict’), ‘Ne pod silu (Byl’’) (‘Impossible (A True Story)’), ‘Prigovor: iz zapisok sudebnogo sledovatelia’ (‘The Sentence: From the Notes of a Judicial Investigator’), Bez sleda: ugotovnyi roman (Without a Trace: A Crime Novel, 1890) and Spetaia pesnia: iz zapisok starogo sudebnogo sledovatelia (The Song Has Been Sung: From the Notes of an Old Judicial Investigator, 1892). She began publishing her memoirs, Vstrechi i znakomstva (Meetings and Acquaintances) in 1909, and they were serialized in Istoricheskii vestnik over the next four years. In spite of these numerous publications, and her popularity amongst readers, Sokolova’s writing never guaranteed financial security and correspondence reveals that she repeatedly applied to the Writers’ Commission for help for herself and her family. In the latter years of her life, Sokolova suffered from ill health but continued to work from her bed, with publications appearing right up until her death. She died in St Petersburg on 10 February 1914 and her body was then taken to Moscow where she was buried in the Piatnitskoe Cemetery.

From amongst these numerous works, this article focuses on two of Sokolova’s most substantial and interesting crime fiction novels: Spetaia pesnia (1892) and Bez sleda (1890). The discussion below will consider how these works engage with the conventions of crime fiction that had been established by this time both in Russia and in other national traditions, especially in terms of their exploitation of voice, focalization, authority and agency. Underpinning this analysis is a preoccupation with how Sokolova illustrates the relative position of male and female characters in the story world. Unlike some of her counterparts in the Anglophone tradition at the time, Sokolova does not upend the generic status quo by introducing a female detective figure into her novels. However, both

16 Prozorova reports that the Writers’ Commission paid Sokolova a monthly stipend of twenty roubles between 1910 and 1913 and that she had petitioned for money to help pay for her son, Trifon’s, funeral in 1909.
17 Her final novel, Bez rulia i vertil was published in Peterburgskaia gazeta between September and December 1913 and her final story ‘Gadanie’ appeared in Svet on 29 December 1913.
18 Catherine Louisa Pirkis published The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective
Spetaia pesnia and Bez sleda showcase her success in finding more oblique ways to use crime fiction to critique the position of women in a patriarchal society, to interrogate the role of family in restricting women’s freedom and capacity for self-determination and to demonstrate how the judicial system in Russia, in spite of significant reform in the 1860s, continued to repress women and deny them justice. Sokolova’s pessimistic attitude to the position of women in late imperial Russia will be shown to stand in contrast to the more positive portrayal found in certain (non-crime) works authored by women during a similar period. The first section of the article will look at Spetaia pesnia and argue that it is a work which simultaneously upholds and subverts generic crime fiction conventions in ways that demonstrate the relative impotence of the legal system when confronted by other social structures that exert greater control over the fate of women. The second part will then move on to the more unconventional Bez sleda and will examine how Sokolova’s use of a female focalizer ensures a more subversive examination of the brutalization of women by a society and legal system designed by and for men.

‘Spetaia pesnia: iz zapisok starogo sudebnogo sledovatelia’ (1892)
Both Spetaia pesnia and Bez sleda were published as stand-alone novels under Sokolova’s own name in Moscow and St Petersburg respectively.

in the Ludgate Monthly in 1893; Anna Katherine Green, author of The Leavenworth Case (1878), introduced the character of Amelia Butterworth, an elderly spinster detective, who aids Ebenezer Gryce of the New York Metropolitan Police Force in That Affair Next Door (1897), Lost Man’s Lane: A Second Episode in the Life of Amelia Butterworth (1898) and The Circular Study (1900); and L. T. Meade wrote The Detections of Miss Cusack between 1899 and 1901.

William G. Wagner explains the nature of women’s subjugation in nineteenth-century Russian society thus: ‘Based on unlimited patriarchal authority and the patrilineal kin-group, family, property and inheritance law discriminated severely against them. Reflecting traditional practices and Orthodox doctrine, family law defined marriage as a religious institution based on patriarchal authority, unquestioning obedience, and unequal status. A woman was obliged to obey and live with her husband, who was proclaimed head of the family. She also needed her husband’s consent to enter employment, to undertake higher education, to execute a bill of exchange, or to receive a separate passport […]. Unmarried women, too, felt the strictures of patriarchal authority. The law subordinated daughters to their parents’, especially their fathers’, authority, which was only limited but not terminated by marriage.’ See ‘The Trojan Mare: Women’s Rights and Civil Rights in Late Imperial Russia’, in Olga Crisp and Linda Edmondson (eds), Civil Rights in Imperial Russia, Oxford, 1989, pp. 65–84 (pp. 67–68).

The decision to discuss these two novels out of chronological order is informed by the fact that this article is primarily interested in questions of narratology and gender rather than in a more historicist approach.

In fact, Bez sleda first appeared in Rodina in January 1890 in serialized form before being published separately by the journal’s owner, Kaspari, later that same year. It is likely
The presence of this name, indicating the author as female, is significant because it represents a break not just with all previous Russian crime fiction, but also with Sokolova’s earlier practice of publishing her crime stories under the non-gendered pseudonym ‘Sinee domino’ ('Blue Domino'). This decision is even more intriguing in the case of *Spetaia pesnia* given the novel’s subtitle: ‘iz zapisok starogo sledovatelia’ ('from the notes of an old investigator'). Variations of this formulation, placing an emphasis on ‘notes’, had proved to be a popular choice in many early works, including Nikolai Sokolovskii’s *Ostrog i zhizn’: iz zapisok sledovatelia* (*Prison and Life: From the Notes of an Investigator*, 1866) and Petr Stepanov’s *Pravye i vinovatye: zapiski sledovatelia sorokovykh godov* (*Innocent and Guilty: Notes of an Investigator*, 1869). As I have discussed elsewhere, the knowledge that Sokolovskii and Stepanov both worked as criminal investigators, combined with the first-person narrator construction of their ‘zapiski’, leads to some productive confusion about the factual or fictional status of their works. However, in *Spetaia pesnia*, which declares its author as someone whose gender would have excluded her from occupying any such position in the Russian judicial system, the use of this subtitle, as well as the presence of an autodiegetic narrative voice belonging to a male investigator, throws the issue of the author-narrator relationship into interesting relief. Sokolova borrows the convention of crime fiction as male-authored and male-narrated memoirs whilst overtly declaring the impossibility of that reality in the case of her novel.

That *Spetaia pesnia* had a similar publication history but it has been impossible to verify this fact due to restrictions on archive access during the Covid-19 pandemic.

* Bez sleda actually includes this pseudonym in brackets underneath Sokolova’s name. Sokolova also first published her novel, *Iz-za mogili*, under the moniker ‘Starozhil’ ('Old-Timer').

* The subtitle ‘zapiski’ is used in a number of other early works of Russian crime fiction but had rather fallen out of fashion by the 1890s. For a more in-depth discussion of the implications of this term for the genre, see my *The Poetics of Early Russian Crime Fiction, 1860–1917: Deciphering Stories of Detection*, Oxford, 2018, pp. 20–23. In the context of 1890s Russian literature, it is also worth noting that the term ‘zapiski’ enjoyed considerable popularity during this period owing to a boom in the publication of popular personal histories in monthly magazines such as *Russkaiia starina* and *Russkii arkhiv*.

* Early Russian crime fiction furnishes numerous examples of such male first-person narrator-investigators. In addition to Sokolovskii and Stepanov, this narrative construct is to be found in Nikolai Timofeev’s *Zapiski sledovatelia* (*Notes of an Investigator*, 1872), Semen Panov’s *Ubiistvo v derevne Medveditse* (*Murder in Medveditsa Village*, 1872) and many of Aleksandr Shkliarevskii’s crime stories.

* Although Sokolova’s Anglophone counterparts employed female investigators in their fiction, their works were not autodiegetic narrations, preferring instead the use of either an unidentified third-person narrator or a narrator who is not the central protagonist (e.g. Baroness Orczy’s *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard*, 1910).
Indeed, Sokolova’s narrator-investigator in *Spetaia pesnia*, Mikhail Vasil’evich, shares various similarities with his generic predecessors. Like so many of his forebears, he is one of the new breed of judicial investigators, a role only introduced in Russia in 1860, and of whom Dostoevskii’s Porfiri Petrovich is the best known fictional example. He reveals that he has been stationed in the provincial capital of K. in 1864, just as the wide-ranging reforms to the legal system are coming into effect. Sokolova’s temporal location of the action during this transitional period furnishes her narrator with the motivation, again familiar from earlier examples, to comment explicitly on certain characteristics of his role. At an early point, for instance, Mikhail Vasil’evich notes the weight of responsibility he experiences because of the novelty of his position. He also frequently feels the need to explain the nature of his role to the locals in an effort to dispel their scepticism. Equally, he resembles earlier judicial investigator-narrators by noting his dissatisfaction with the local police force which, unlike him, is open to bribery. Sokolova’s cultivation of such points of similarity can be seen as an attempt to imbue her narrative with the authority of generic convention. In any genre, the imitation of established practice represents an attempt to encourage a sense of belonging; in a work authored by a woman in a genre as male-dominated as was crime fiction in Russia in the 1890s, such adherence to norms assumes potentially greater significance. Sokolova’s decision to employ a male autodiegetic narrator functions here not merely as a realist strategy but as an attempt to borrow established male diegetic authority for her female-authored work.

Alongside such recognizable generic features, Sokolova builds more unusual elements into *Spetaia pesnia* that suggest an originality of approach worth exploring. One significant distinction concerns the temporal location of the crime in the narrative. Unlike many detective stories, in which the crime has either already occurred before the opening of the story, or is reported in the very early pages, *Spetaia pesnia* does not reveal the crime at its heart until approximately a quarter of the way through. In spite of its title and the narrator’s identity, therefore, for some thirty-five pages, *Spetaia pesnia* reads more like a provincial or

26 Such overt commentary on the role of the judicial investigator is encountered in works such as Sokolovskii’s *Ostrog i zhizn’,* Stepanov’s *Pravye i vinovatye* and Panov’s *Ubiistvo v derevne Medveditse.*

27 I have written previously on the implications on the temporal location of the crime vis-à-vis the opening of the diegesis in *The Poetics of Early Russian Crime Fiction;* see pp. 129–31.
family novel, with notable Gothic overtones, than a crime novel.\textsuperscript{28} The lack of educated company available to Mikhail Vasil’evich in his new surroundings prompts him to make the acquaintance of the local grandee, Count Anton Krhistianovich Osinskii.\textsuperscript{29} Osinskii’s striking estate some seven versts from town is described in some detail and its name, ‘Chernyi omut’ (‘Black Pool’), can be seen to portend the tragic events to come. Details of setting are accompanied by information regarding the Osinskii family history, also rich in Gothic complication and tension, that reaches back to a time long before the narrator’s arrival. We learn that Osinskii’s second wife, Rozaliia Vikent’evna, to whom he has been married for seven years, is the daughter of a friend and that he initially took her in as her guardian following the friend’s death. Rozaliia is two years younger than Osinskii’s own daughter, Izabella (Bella), and, although Bella was in favour of Rozaliia’s adoption into the family, like everyone else she is shocked when they marry. The narrator notes that, in his experience, although Bella and Rozaliia are outwardly courteous to each other, it suffices to be in the house for only a short time to understand the deep enmity that exists between the two women. Relations between Bella and her much younger half-brother, Kazimir, are also distant, with the family endeavouring to keep the two apart as much as is possible, and Kazimir is most often in the company of his tutor, Apollon Sergeevich Bazhlanov. The delayed revelation of the crime in \textit{Spetaia pesnia}, combined with this plethora of details about family relations, places the reader in the unusual situation of suspecting that any one of these characters (with the exception of the detective himself) might turn out to be either victim or perpetrator. And, whilst family enmity frequently serves as the trigger for crime in the genre, the extended attention that Sokolova pays here to the Osinskii family history and relationships suggests a notable difference in emphasis.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} The Gothic notes in \textit{Spetaia pesnia} are more than mere decoration or intertextual reference; they function as an implicit nod to the tension that exists between the role of the judicial investigator (as an embodiment of Enlightenment ideas) and Russia’s feudal history as represented by the Osinskii family. See Valeria Sobol, \textit{Haunted Empire: Gothic and the Russian Imperial Uncanny}, Ithaca, NY, 2020, for more details on the role of the Gothic in expressing imperial anxieties.

\textsuperscript{29} The depiction of the investigator’s isolation and alienation is also a common generic feature of early Russian crime fiction and is encountered in works such as Panov’s \textit{Ubiistvo v derevne Medveditse}.

In spite of the hints at tensions between Bella and Rozaliia in the opening pages of the novel, which assume greater significance on a second reading, *Spetaia pesnia*’s primary focus, as in so much other crime fiction of the time, is on the relationships of power between male characters in the patriarchal society of the fictional world. The pivotal relationship is between Mikhail Vasil’evich and Count Osinskii: the contrast between the two men and the struggle for supremacy that plays out between them injects much of the tension into the novel. While the judicial investigator represents the ‘new’ and ‘progressive’ direction in post-reform Russian society, Osinskii embodies the ‘old’, more ‘retrograde’ forces still in operation, and the depiction of such a conflict would have been familiar to seasoned readers of Russian crime fiction. Osinskii is characterized as a man of considerable influence, who commands the trust and respect of all those around him, not just his family members: the narrator refers to him as a ‘boyar’, whilst acknowledging the anachronistic nature of that label. Indeed, Mikhail Vasil’evich himself is not immune to Osinskii’s sway: he is aware of rumours in the town that the Count’s permanent presence at ‘Chernyi omut’ might not be entirely voluntary but, because Osinskii never talks about it himself, the narrator does not have the courage to raise the subject with him.

The subjugation of women that is a consequence of the superiority granted to men in this noble family is eloquently expressed in Sokolova’s description of relations between Bella and Kazimir. It is Bella herself who recounts to Mikhail Vasil’evich how, when her half-brother was only four years old, he physically attacked her for inadvertently disturbing his carefully arranged military toys as she walks through a room. As he rips at her clothing, he repeatedly shouts: ‘ty ne smeeshʼ!… Ia sam graf!… ne smeeshʼ!…’ (‘don’t laugh!… I am the Count!… Don’t laugh!…’). Although surprised by Kazimir’s reaction, Bella readily backs down in the face of his aggression, even admitting to being impressed by his display of emotion and self-confidence. Supplementing such punctual illustrations of male supremacy, across its whole length *Spetaia pesnia* characterizes both treatment of the role of women in *Spetaia pesnia* will be discussed in more detail below.

31 Albeit using a somewhat earlier temporal setting, Petr Stepanov’s story ‘Khoteli predatʼ sudu i vole bozhiei’ in the 1869 collection, *Pravye i vinovatye: zapiski sledovatelia sorokovykh godov*, St Petersburg, sees the investigator battling the local landowner who perverts the course of justice by suppressing the identification of culprits in the murder of one of his serfs.

32 A. I. Sokolova, *Spetaia pesnia: iz zapisok starogo sledovatelia*, Moscow, 1892, p. 15. All subsequent page numbers in the text refer to this edition of the novel.
Bella and Rozaliia almost solely in terms of their relationship to Osinskii: their initial friendship when both were ‘daughters’ of the Count is ruined when Rozaliia becomes his wife and mother to the new Count; the dénouement of the novel portrays both women as remaining in thrall to Osinskii and suggests a deeply disturbing consequence of his dominance. Their depiction is quite distinct from that of the more emancipated women encountered in other women’s writing of a similar, or even earlier, period.\textsuperscript{33} The lack of a sense of autonomous self-worth ascribed to both women is further underlined by the narrator’s assertion that their enmity only increases when Rozaliia reaches the age of 30 and realizes that she has aged badly whilst Bella has retained all of her youthful beauty. The belief communicated here that women’s principal value lies in their physical appearance gives voice to their diminished status both in \textit{Spetaia pesnia}’s fictional world and in society more broadly.

The peripheral position occupied by female characters in \textit{Spetaia pesnia} is, however, primarily a consequence of the novel’s focus on the conflict that erupts between Mikhail Vasil’evich and Osinskii once Bazhlanov is found murdered outside his pavilion on the estate and the narrator’s investigation begins. Kazimir’s tutor, who has previously confided to the narrator his conviction that he is doomed to die at ‘Chernyi omut’, a place he describes as if it were a malign Gothic entity, is found with a gunshot wound to the head and with evidence of a struggle on his body. Rather surprisingly, given Osinskii’s earlier expression of support for the recent legal reforms and the responsibility of judicial investigators, as soon as the murder is discovered, he repeatedly refuses to abide by the law and to respect Mikhail Vasil’evich’s authority. For example, when the investigator is first summoned to the estate following the murder, he is outraged to learn that Osinskii, in spite of knowing the illegality of his instructions, has ordered Bazhlanov’s body to be moved from the spot where it was found. His suspicions are raised further when he finds Osinskii in Bazhlanov’s lodgings standing by a fireplace containing newly burned papers; when challenged, Osinskii baldly states that ‘the end justifies the means’ (‘tsel’ opravdyvaet sredstva’, p. 43). In terms that make clear the antagonistic relationship that will characterize the two men’s interactions for the remainder of the novel, the Count explains to the narrator: ‘ta tsel’, kotoruiu presleduiu ia, ne imeet nichego obshchego s vashei tsel’iu!… Ia

\textsuperscript{33} As will be discussed in more detail later, the fates of both Bella and Rozaliia have little in common with Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaia’s protagonist, Lelen’ka, in \textit{Pansionerka} (The Boarding-School Girl, 1860).
ne ubitsu ishchu zdes’, ia ishchu ubitogo’ (‘the end which I am pursuing has nothing in common with your aim!… I am not seeking the murderer here; I am looking for the murdered’, p. 44). Osinskii acknowledges the enigmatic nature of his words but defends himself by telling Mikhail Vasil’evich that, whilst Bazhlanov’s murder is just one of many such cases for the investigator, for Osinskii it is unique and might well have more fateful consequences.

In spite of the assurance Osinskii gives that he will not impede the investigation, there are numerous subsequent occasions on which he demonstrates his disregard for the law. In fact, his behaviour is such that almost as much mystery surrounds the question of Osinskii’s motivation as concerns the identity of the murderer. For instance, he orders one of his servants to interrupt the interrogation of a suspect for no apparent reason and, more seriously, Mikhail Vasil’evich learns that he has removed other evidence from the crime scene, including scraps of paper, pieces of lace and lengths of ribbon. As noted above, what Sokolova depicts here is a battle between two systems of power: the reformed judicial system represented by the narrator and the age-old feudal system which, Osinskii continues to believe, makes him the ultimate authority on his own estate. The two men’s antagonism overshadows the length of the investigation and finally comes to a head during the narrator’s official interrogation of Osinskii himself. The Count is outraged that Mikhail Vasil’evich should extend his legal activities to invade his family mansion (a manifestation of the state’s intervention into the private sphere) and responds by treating the investigator with contempt. He suggests that Bazhlanov’s death might have been the result of suicide and, when the investigator dismisses this claim as patently absurd and pushes on with his questioning, Osinskii’s anger rises further. Such conduct makes abundantly clear Osinskii’s refusal to accept the post-reform reality that he, like any other citizen, noble or otherwise, is subject to the rule of law and that family intrigues that lead to crimes can no longer escape public scrutiny and accountability.

Such depictions of judicial investigations as the site of a conflict between sparring male actors who possess different degrees or types of authority are a commonplace of late imperial-era Russian crime fiction.34 However, Sokolova’s treatment of the role played by one woman — Bella — in the dénouement of Spetaia pesnia is rather less conventional and is intriguing...

34 Examples of similar conflicts between judicial investigators and other male characters are found in Sokolovskii’s story, ‘Nabolevshie’ (‘The Long-Suffering’), in Ostrog i zhizn’, Panov’s Ubiistvo v derevne Medveditse and, in an original fashion, Dostoevskii’s Prestuplenie i nakazanie.
in its complexity. In the early stages of the narrator’s investigation, Bella is almost invisible: we are told that she reacts to the news of Bazhanov’s murder with her usual calmness, promising to take care of Kazimir so that his education is not interrupted. Thereafter, she disappears entirely from view as the narrator pursues a number of different leads and interviews a variety of suspects in his efforts to unmask the killer. In the climactic scenes of the novella, however, Bella moves centre stage when, whilst being questioned by Mikhail Vasil’evich, she unexpectedly confesses to the murder. The shifting dynamics of their interview are worth examining in some detail as they see Sokolova challenge the orthodoxy surrounding gender roles during such scenes. It begins in typical fashion with the male investigator holding the upper hand, as is to be expected in this situation of coerced dialogue: his point of view informs the account as he notes how Bella is summoned into a room he already occupies; his skills of observation are to the fore as he records his ability, thanks to their prior acquaintance, to discern the slightest signs of agitation in her face and body; and how, in spite of the playful tone she adopts with him, he addresses her with utter seriousness.

However, the first indication of a potential shift in the usual power dynamic between male investigator and female witness comes when Bella imposes one condition on their continued conversation: that the narrator promise they will remain friends whatever the outcome of the case. She extends her hand to him so that they can shake on their agreement, a gesture more usually encountered between two men of similar status. The investigator persists in trying to exert his superior authority by confronting Bella with testimony from other witnesses about her whereabouts when Bazhanov’s body was discovered and, more questionably, by falsely suggesting that her maid, Agafiia, is strongly suspected of the murder. His method appears to pay dividends when Bella’s previously confident demeanour drains away when he, firstly, asks what she was wearing on the night Bazhanov was killed and, secondly, reveals that her father is suspected of removing items of material evidence from the crime scene. Indeed, the trigger for Bella’s confession is his revelation that he intends to seek Osinskii’s permission to bring Bazhanov’s body into the house for a more in-depth discussion of the conditions of forced dialogue that pertain in such judicial interrogation scenarios, see my Poetics of Early Russian Crime Fiction, pp. 97–102.

35 The narrator actually tries to deceive both Bella and Rozaliia, whom he has questioned a little earlier, with this suggestion that Agafiia might be involved in the murder when he knows both from her own testimony and other evidence that this is not the case.
before the funeral. In response, Bella cries out that she will never allow this to happen because the tutor was ‘my enemy… the enemy of my father… of our whole family, the enemy of our ancient, utterly unsullied family crest!’ (‘vrag moi… moego otsa… vsego nashego semeistva, vrag nashego drevnogo, nichem nikogda ne zapiatnannogo gerba!’, pp. 139–40). In a relatively extended act of direct speech, Bella then confesses that she killed Bazhlanov, albeit in terms that suggest a certain dissociation from the act — ‘ubiistvo eto delo moikh ruk’ (‘the murder was committed by my hands’, p. 140) — and warns the investigator not to doubt her confession because, she says, no one would falsely confess to such a crime.

There is a striking irony in the fact that, at the very moment that the investigator appears to have prevailed by securing a confession, Bella is depicted in a more dominant and powerful pose: she speaks in a loud voice and stands over the narrator looking ‘beautiful, powerful and regal’ (‘krasiv[ai], moshchn[ai], tsarstvenn[ai]’, ibid.). When Mikhail Vasil´evich attempts to speak, she orders him to be silent, telling him that his role is at an end and that it is now her turn to talk. The significance of Bella seizing control of the dialogue at this point should not be overlooked. However, what she goes on to say ensures that both the conventional ambitions of the investigation, as well as the expectations of the reader, are thwarted. At an earlier stage of the novel, the narrative has ensured that mystery surrounds the precise circumstances of Bazhlanov’s murder by inserting a temporal ellipsis of some two days that covers the period of the crime: we are told that Mikhail Vasil´evich stays the night in Bazhlanov’s pavilion on what turns out to be the night of the murder and the narrative then skips forward to the point where he is informed of the crime. And, in spite of the testimony of various witnesses, the resultant temporal and epistemic gaps have not been entirely filled by the time of Bella’s interrogation. Given her confession, the investigator and reader now naturally anticipate that all of the significant missing information will be supplied so that a complete story of the crime can be constructed. However, Bella confounds this expectation by confidently informing the investigator that she has no intention of revealing either how or why she killed Bazhlanov. In demonstrating a sound knowledge of the law that permits her such a refusal, she appears to retain a certain degree of agency for herself:

Sudu i zakonu otdana svoboda cheloveka, ostatok ego uliki, ego gor´koe zemnoe ‘ia’, no dusha ego, ego vnutrennii dukhovnyi mir nikto vprave ni otniat´, ni narushit’! V sovershenii prestupleniia on obiazan soznat´sia,
prichiny zhe ego on vprave unesti s soboi v mogilu... v nikh on otdast otvet odnomu Bogu!...

A person’s freedom, the remains of their evidence and their earthly ‘I’ are surrendered to the court and the law, but no one has the right to take away or destroy their soul and their inner spiritual world. They are obliged to confess to the commission of the crime, but they have the right to take the reasons for that crime with them to the grave... they will answer for them only to God!... (p. 141)

The investigator has no response to Bella’s words and she accurately captures the reversal in their positions when she tells him: ‘ezheli-by kto vzglianul na nas izdali, to vas by priniali za prestupnika, a menia za sud’iu!...’ (‘if someone were to look at us from afar, then they would think you were the criminal and I were the judge!...’, ibid.). Bella underscores her dominance when she reminds the narrator of his earlier promise to remain friends and again extends her hand so that he can shake it. Her superiority continues as she reads Mikhail Vasil’evich’s thoughts and calms his fears over having to inform Osinskii of her crime. She reveals that her father already knows she is guilty because it was indeed him who removed the paper, lace and ribbons from the crime scene because he recognized that they would incriminate her. Although the fact of having a male judicial investigator outwitted by a female criminal was not without precedent in Russian crime fiction by the 1890s, the specific terms of Bella’s (and Sokolova’s) disruption of conventional practice here are significantly original. The optics of the confession scene between the narrator and Bella make clear that it is possible for a female subject to wrest diegetic control from a male authority figure. Moreover, her dominance during this scene is cognitive, as well as verbal and physical, as she demonstrates a knowledge of her legal rights that the investigator is powerless to contradict. Most important though, in both personal and diegetic terms, is that Bella and Sokolova thwart expectations by keeping the full details of the circumstances of the crime and its motive a secret.

It would be misleading to suggest, however, that Bella’s stance asserts the potential for a woman to rebel fully against either the judicial system

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37 See, for example, Shkliarevskii’s 1872 story ‘Rasskaz sudebnogo sledovatelia’ (‘Tale of a Judicial Investigator’) in which the culprit, Aleksandra Lastova, retracts her confession to the murder of another woman, swallows the only piece of material evidence (a signet ring) and rips her own clothing to accuse the investigator of molesting her. Lastova gets away scot free while the investigator is removed from the case, retiring in dishonour.
or patriarchal social structures. In fact, the fleeting power enjoyed here by Bella perhaps only serves to underscore even more starkly her ultimate disenfranchisement and brutalization. The details that she does reveal to the investigator correspond closely to the familiar trope of the woman who is prepared to sacrifice herself (as well as the murder victim) so as to protect men (specifically her father and brother). Throughout Spetaia pesnia, the horizon of Bella’s existence has been shown to extend no further than the boundaries of her father’s estate; she is part of no other community than her family and the motive for her crime is to be found equally close to home. What Bella does tell Mikhail Vasil’evich is that she murdered Bazhlanov as an act of vengeance for an insult to her family’s honour, and that she feels the greatest sympathy not for herself but for her father and half-brother. Although it is only ever alluded to, rather than stated categorically, the most likely explanation for the crime is that Bella killed the tutor because he was having an affair with her father’s wife, Rozaliia. Significant here is the sense that Bella assumes individual responsibility for avenging, or perhaps protecting, a sense of collective honour that belongs to her family name. Indeed, the possibility of reading Bella’s murder of Bazhlanov as a reversal of the structures of a more conventional honour killing provides an insight into how complicated the playing out of gender roles can be. The unmistakable irony here is that, in exercising agency by killing Bazhlanov, Bella can potentially be seen to be enacting the unspoken desire of her father (or at least what she thinks might be his desire) and is unmistakeably sacrificing herself as an individual to protect an institution — the noble family — that assigns her only a secondary role. And it is difficult to see Bella’s suicide on the day after she is remanded to prison as anything other than a further act of self-harm by an already victimized female character, an act that is facilitated by the family patriarch. Just as it is Osinskii who is suspected of providing her with the poison needed to kill herself, so it is her father and her family that Bella is seemingly conditioned to protect at all costs, albeit that, because of her gender, they do not view her as an equal member. So, whilst in the context of late nineteenth-century Russian crime fiction, Spetaia pesnia offers a degree of originality in terms of its presentation of Bella’s agency, it is very far from representing the type of ‘emancipation from familial despotism’ that might have been familiar to readers of other female, non-crime authors of the time.38 Any hopes for a

meaningful escape by the female characters from the repressive strictures of noble family life, as might have been encouraged by *Spetaia pesnia*’s early resemblance to a provincial novel, prove to be chimeric.39

‘Bez sleda’ (1890)

*Bez sleda: ugolovniy roman* (Without a Trace: A Crime Novel), published two years before *Spetaia pesnia*, sees Sokolova tackle similar issues regarding women’s relationships to institutions such as the law, family and marriage, but with greater originality. As such, the novel presents a more overt and sustained challenge to the conventions of male-authored crime fiction than *Spetaia pesnia*, whilst also offering a starker critique of the conditions of women in late imperial Russian society. As in *Spetaia pesnia*, the revelation of the criminal intrigue is delayed so that the opening chapters of *Bez sleda* read more like a society novel centring on the Kholin family, its history and prejudices. Count Platon Mikhailovich, an ‘old magnate’ has died two years previously, leaving behind a widow, Evdokiia, and two children, Grigorii and Lina, who live in the family’s dacha in Petrovskii Park in Moscow, despite Evdokiia’s antipathy towards the city. In the opening two chapters, the reader learns about the family’s social life, watches Evdokiia play numerous card games and hears characters compare the relative merits of Moscow and St Petersburg, as well as of Russia and other European countries. It is only in the third chapter that Lina is informed by her chambermaid that the body of a woman has been found on one of the lanes close to the house. And it is the case surrounding the murder of this woman, the intriguingly named Laura Grey, and the wrongful accusation of Grigorii Kholin as her killer, that drives the remainder of Sokolova’s novel.

*Bez sleda*’s most significant departure from previous crime fiction convention is to be found in its choice of narrator and focalizer. As noted in the discussion of *Spetaia pesnia*, the overwhelming majority of works of early Russian crime fiction are narrated in the first-person by a judicial investigator. The popularity of this diegetic set-up is explained by the fact that it allows the genre to achieve a number of its aims: it permits the reader seemingly direct access to, and understanding of, the post-1860 judicial landscape; it simultaneously allows them intimate but safe access to a relatively unknown criminal world; it serves to construct the figure

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of the judicial investigator as a new type of positive literary hero; and it helps to influence reader sympathy towards the pursuit of justice and truth to counteract the disruptive influence of criminality.⁴⁰ There are very few exceptions to this orthodoxy: notably, Dostoevskii’s *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* which uses an unidentified third-person narrator; Semen Panov’s ‘Pomoch’ (‘The Harvest Gathering’, 1872) in which the narrator is first-person but, crucially, not the judicial investigator but an amateur assistant; and Panov’s *Iz zhizni uezdnogo gorodka: iz zapisk sudebnogo sledovatelia (From the Life of a Provincial Town: From the Notes of a Judicial Investigator, 1876)* which, in spite of its subtitle, is actually narrated by a heterodiegetic voice. *Bez sleda* follows the example of *Iz zhizni uezdnogo gorodka* in being narrated by an uninvolved, third-person voice who, whilst displaying moments of self-consciousness about his storytelling role, is not an actor in the diegetic world.⁴¹

Sokolova’s decision to employ a heterodiegetic narrator is not just notable in and of itself, but also because it makes possible a more original use of focalization. *Bez sleda* is the only example in crime fiction from this period of the presence of sustained focalization through a female point of view.⁴² As evidenced by *Spetaia pesnia*, the use of a first-person male narrator-investigator need not lead to the suppression of female voices and points of view. However, it is an undeniable fact that works constructed in this way limit the influence and agency of female voices and perspectives by making them dependent upon the male voice and point of view that organizes the diegesis as a whole (the status of Bella’s voice in *Spetaia pesnia* is a case in point).⁴³ In *Bez sleda*, however, much, although not all, of the novel’s action is focalized through the perspective of the young Countess...

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⁴⁰ For a more in-depth discussion of the implications of autodiegetic narration for early Russian crime fiction, see my *Poetics of Early Russian Crime Fiction*, pp. 22–37 and 76–83.

⁴¹ The similarities between *Bez sleda* and Panov’s *Iz zhizni uezdnogo gorodka*, specifically in terms of how the decision not to employ a first-person narrator-investigator impacts on the presentation of the legal system, will be discussed below.

⁴² Sokolova’s decision to employ Lina as focalizer but not narrator distinguishes *Bez sleda* from a work such as Avdot’ia Panaeva’s *Semeistvo Tal’nikovykh (The Tal’nikov Family)* which, whilst not an example of crime fiction, does detail the brutalization of the female protagonist, Natasha, at the hands of her family.

⁴³ According to Rédouane Abouddahab and Josiane Paccaud-Huguet, ‘early or popular crime fiction […] is set within voyeuristic fantasies where the woman murderer or victim cannot have a voice because she is the object of attention and discourse’ (original italics). ‘Introduction’ to Abouddahab and Paccaud-Huguet (eds) *Fiction, Crime and the Feminine*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2011, p. viii. The role of focalizer in *Bez sleda* bestows upon Lina the status of a subject (rather than just an object) to a greater extent than is seen in other works of crime fiction of the time.
Lina. Intriguingly, the prominence of her point of view bestows a position on Lina within the narrative that is arguably superior to her agency and authority in her own biography. In the early chapters of the novel, before her focalization comes to the fore, Lina’s position and prospects are framed in familiar terms: while her brother has an army career and has an active social life in the city, she has a much more restricted sphere of existence and is rarely seen outside the family home; her mother’s male vint partners comment on her beauty and the likelihood that she will attract a good husband; and she is said to blush when friends quiz her about two possible suitors, Count Chuzhbinskii and Lord Anderson, although the narrator crucially does not reveal which of the two prompts this reaction. However, the novel moves into less charted waters as Lina’s point of view comes to the fore a little later on and informs much of the account of the investigation into the murder.

The use of Lina’s visual and emotional perspective, rather than that of the uninvolved narrator, has significant consequences for Bez sleda’s exploration not only of the ramifications of crime, but also of the nature and efficacy of the judicial system and its effects on people’s lives. The shift to Lina’s point of view occurs at the point that she is awoken one night by her chambermaid, Tania, to be told that ‘something unfortunate has happened’ (‘u nas neblagopoluchno’). Learning that a woman’s body has been found in the lane with a gunshot wound to the head, Lina sets out with Tania to take a closer look. The use of Lina’s visual perspective is revealed by the fact that, only when she moves through the dacha’s gates does the reader see the gardener, Grigorii, standing by ‘something white, broadly lit by the rays of the rising sun’ (‘chto-to beloe, shiroko zalitoe luchami voskhodiashchego solntsa’, p. 40). The indefinite pronoun, ‘something’, betrays Lina’s limited point of view rather than the heterodiegetic narrator’s omniscient privilege. Its dehumanizing effect, associating the dead body with an object, is counteracted by the description of Lina’s sense of ‘honest, almost awed compassion’ (‘iskrenn[oe], pochti blagogovein[oe] sozhalen[ie]’, ibid.) for the victim. As Lina leans down to examine the body more closely, greater detail is provided. This description does not eschew the sexualized objectification of the dead female body so frequently encountered in crime fiction, emphasizing as it does the statuesque beauty of the victim, her long thick hair, her half-open mouth, her ‘pearl-white

44 Vint is a Russian card game, similar to both bridge and whist, that involves four players and which was especially popular during the nineteenth century.

45 A. Sokolova, Bez sleda: ugolovnyi roman, St Petersburg, 1890, p. 37. All subsequent references to this novel in the text are to this edition.
teeth’ (ibid.), and the cloudless sky that is reflected in her open, but dead eyes. However, it is arguably tempered by the poetized description of how the dead woman’s gaze seems to Lina to appeal to the sky for an answer as to why she has been ‘prematurely and mercilessly’ killed (ibid.).

This empathy for the victim persists as Lina returns home but continues to observe activity at the scene as members of the local police force arrive: her discomfort is clear as she watches how the woman’s body is covered with a rough jute sack, her eyes are closed by an officer with sunburnt hands and, a little later, the ‘neschastn[aia] zhertv[a]’ (‘unfortunate victim’, p. 44) is placed into a pauper’s coffin and loaded onto the back of a carriage. She experiences acute heartache at the sight of a portion of lace and a length of ribbon that are left hanging out of the coffin in the men’s haste to fasten its lid. Her sympathetic attitude might in part be explained because, although she does not know her, she feels that she vaguely recognizes the dead woman. However, in its sharp distinction from the more professional and neutral attitude towards victims that is typical of the genre in Russia at this time, this empathy must also be ascribed to the use of a woman’s visual perspective to inform the description.46

The dismay that Lina experiences in response to the careless treatment of the victim’s body grows into a more stridently negative attitude during her subsequent dealings with other representatives of the judicial system. As noted above, almost every work of early Russian crime fiction depicts investigators and the reformed legal system in a positive light as the means by which criminals are unmasked, motives revealed and justice served. Bez sleda paints a different picture, however, and it is intriguing to observe how the use of Lina’s perspective sees conventionally positive attributes recast in a more negative light. At the close of Chapter Five, for instance, Lina is told that an unknown man has come to call on the family. The title of the following chapter, ‘Sovremennyi Lekok’ (‘A Modern Lecoq’), uses intertextual reference to the novels of Emile Gaboriau to suggest that this visitor is a detective of some kind.47 The description of the man, provided in the narrator’s voice but from Lina’s perspective, is dominated by references

46 The more humanized treatment of the victim’s body through Lina’s perspective is thrown into relief when her brother, Grigorii’s, point of view is employed in a description of his visit to the chapel where she is lying in order to provide a formal identification. In this passage, the emphasis on the smell of decomposition that pervades the space contrasts sharply with the description of her beauty provided by Lina and suggests a less empathetic and more abject attitude.

47 The French author, Emile Gaboriau, published Monsieur Lecoq in 1867 and it garnered considerable success; the character had already featured in his earlier novels L’Affaire Lerouge (1865) and Le Crime d’Orcival (also 1867).
to the ‘eagle-eyed [...] demanding, inquiring and somehow unwavering, almost intrusively questioning gaze’ (‘zorkii [...] trevozhnyi, pytlivyi i kak-to neotstupno, pochti nazoilivo voproshaiushchii vzgliad’, p. 55) that he turns on everything around him. From Lina’s point of view, the inquiring gaze of this man — characterized as a positive and even necessary quality in so many examples of crime fiction — becomes a feature that provokes her discomfort and anger. Still without identifying himself, the visitor asks a series of questions about her brother’s whereabouts and then shocks Lina by revealing that he knows she has received a note from Grigorii. Again, the man’s perspicacity is presented not as an advantage in the pursuit of truth but as an unwanted affront to the family’s privacy. He then identifies himself as Argunin, from the Moscow Detective Police and, on seeing Lina’s shock, reassures her that ‘syshchik’ (‘detective’) is not synonymous with ‘bezchestnyi chelovek’ (‘dishonourable man’, p. 60). Rather against her will, Lina feels a sense of growing trust in Argunin as he advises her to answer all of his questions honestly and to look on him as a friend. Nevertheless, his instruction to her that Grigorii should give himself up to the police who consider him the prime suspect in Laura Grey’s murder fills Lina with a deep sense of foreboding.

No such ambivalence surrounds the characterization of the local judicial investigator, Zav’ialov, who subsequently calls at the family dacha and immediately attracts Lina’s ire. Whilst the police chief, Evtiukov, bows to Lina and her mother in greeting, Zav’ialov is described ungraciously sitting down in an armchair, without having been invited to do so, almost as if he were the master of the house. His behaviour does not just surprise Lina, but also instils a degree of fear and she ‘measured him with a look full of suspicion’ (‘smerila ego vzgliadom polnym prezreniia’, p. 71). Zav’ialov’s desire to unsettle is evident when he responds to Evdokiia’s suggestion that he has come about the dead body by saying that the principal reason for his visit is to gain more information about Grigorii. As Zav’ialov moves to a more formal interrogation of the women, Lina’s point of view ensures that every one of his actions is presented in a critical light. The ostentatious way he spreads his papers out on a table (a trope used in other works to denote the investigator’s professionalism and erudition) is characterized here as a ‘bestseremonn[yi]’ (‘unceremonious’) attempt to intimidate Lina’s mother who is deeply naive about what is going on. Rather than appearing as a force for good, the judicial process is presented as an unknown, unexplained system that inspires trepidation in those subjected to it. The power differential between Zav’ialov and Evdokiia, especially,
is drawn in starkly critical terms as the investigator appears to relish his ‘illusory greatness’ (‘prizrachnoe velichie’) and she loses ‘the last trace of composure’ (‘poslednie iskru samoobladanii’, p. 73). Throughout, Zav’ialov is depicted as a cold and unresponsive bureaucrat slavishly devoted to process and utterly unwilling or incapable of demonstrating any humanity or empathy: he refuses Lina’s request to be questioned before her mother, so as to allow the older woman more time to collect herself; he threatens to remove Lina from the room if she persists in interrupting proceedings; he appears unable to lift his eyes away from the official document that he is transcribing; and he has no shame in exploiting the old Countess’s naivety so as to glean information about Grigorii’s background and whereabouts. This behaviour leads Lina to ‘measure him from head to toe with a look of [...] implacable hatred’ (‘smeri[t’] ego s nog do golovy vzorom [...] neprimirmoi nenanaviisi’, p. 79). Such a depiction of a judicial investigator is unlike almost any other work of Russian crime fiction of the period. Gone is the sense of this man as a humane and reasonable instrument of a reformed judicial process that treats all those it encounters, whether victim, witness or suspect, with empathy and professionalism. In its place, what Sokolova presents, thanks to Lina’s perspective, is a legal process that is obsessed with its own protocols and unhelpfully distracted by a sense of its own authority.

Crucially, however, this critical depiction of the investigative process in *Bez sleda* is not confined to those sections of the novel informed by Lina’s point of view. Sokolova’s critique of its inadequacies and injustices is significantly broadened by the role played by a male perspective, belonging to Count Chuzhbinskii, who attempts to persuade the investigator of Grigorii’s innocence. Lina’s brother is arrested by Zav’ialov and remanded to prison immediately after he returns home and reveals that he spent part of the previous evening dining with the victim. Like Lina, Chuzhbinskii, her former suitor, is convinced Grigorii is not guilty and vows to do all he can to exculpate him. What *Bez sleda* demonstrates, however, are the deleterious consequences of Zav’ialov’s readiness to believe the simplest version of the crime and the reader’s naivety in trusting that Chuzhbinskii’s efforts will succeed. In spite of the narrator’s description of how Grigorii’s honesty during his first interrogation sows doubt in the investigator’s mind as to whether he is in fact the killer, in spite of testimony that Laura Grey has frequently been seen in St Petersburg with a different man who speaks with an accent, and in spite of several witness statements that suggest Grigorii spent the night with another woman,
Dolganova, having left Laura Grey very much alive, Zav’ialov refuses either to reconsider his accusation or contemplate the possibility of a different culprit. Chuzhbinskii then visits Zav’ialov’s office to present him with information he has gathered during his own inquiries which would also appear to exonerate Grigorii. The point of view during this scene is aligned with Chuzhbinskii as, in a move similar to Bella’s performance in Spetaia pesnia, he demonstrates a knowledge of legal procedure superior to that of the investigator himself. When Zav’ialov objects to Chuzhbinskii’s claim that Grigorii did not commit the murder by saying that he should not adopt such an attitude to ‘the verdicts and decisions of the court’ (‘verdiktam i postanovleniiam suda’, p. 152), the Count reminds him that the case has not yet reached the court. The reader shares Chuzhbinskii’s sentiment when he explains that the reason for his visit is: ‘to correct those bitter and almost irreparable errors that you have made in this complicated case that you, apparently, do not fully understand’ (‘ispravit’ te gor’kie i pochti nepopravimye oshibki, kotorye vy sdelali v etom slozhnom, i, ochevidno, ochen’ ne tochno poniatom vami dele’, ibid.). The reversal of crime fiction convention portrayed here by Sokolova, as well as the two men’s antipathy, reaches a peak when Chuzhbinskii strongly objects to Zav’ialov’s reference to Grigorii as ‘the convicted man’ by saying: ‘not the convicted, but merely the accused, Mr Investigator! […] The convicted are not in the power nor at the disposal of the investigator!… Their fate is transferred to more responsible and serious places’ (‘Ne podсудимого, а тол’ко обвиняемого, господин следовател’! […] Подсудимье не состоят в власти и распоряжении следователя!… Их судьба передается в более ответственные и серьезные места’, p. 158). The use of Chuzhbinskii’s point of view in this scene is significant because the favourable light in which it casts his actions encourages the reader to trust in his success: indeed, Zav’ialov is said to be ‘apparently’ persuaded by the ‘strength and energy of [the Count’s] truthful speech’ (p. 161).

However, any hope that Grigorii might be freed and the real culprit found is utterly thwarted in the remainder of the novel. Zav’ialov does not, in fact, make any effort to follow up on the various information he is given: he does not pursue the lead of the other woman with whom Grigorii claims to have spent the night; he pays no attention to the figure of the foreigner Laura Grey is said to have dined with repeatedly in St Petersburg; and he does not give Grigorii himself a chance to explain further the circumstances of the night of the murder. Amongst examples of late imperial-era Russian crime fiction, there is only one other instance
of an author painting a judicial investigator in such a negative light: Semen Panov’s 1876 novella, *Iz zhizni uezdnogo gorodka: iz zapisok sudebnogo sledovatelia*. In this work, narrated like *Bez sleda* by an uninvolved third-person narrator, the judicial investigator, Vadim Polumordin, is depicted as a lazy and corrupt figure who actively works against the interests of justice. When a case of child abandonment occurs in his provincial town, he is initially disinterested in investigating it and only agrees to do so when someone bets him a case of champagne that he will not be able to solve it. Thereafter, he proves himself to be utterly unscrupulous in pursuing a clearly innocent suspect and even conspiring with the local doctor to garner false evidence against this person.48

Although Zav’ialov’s principal fault in *Bez sleda* is passivity in failing to pursue other lines of inquiry, rather than the more active corruption of Panov’s Polumordin, the consequences of his inaction are, in fact, far more destructive. Having been remanded to prison, Grigorii’s physical and mental state declines rapidly as it is revealed that, in his view, the simple fact of having been accused of the murder, rather than any potential conviction, constitutes a disgrace from which he will never recover. As in *Spetaia pesnia*, Sokolova depicts family honour as being the most valuable social commodity. During a meeting with Chuzhbinskii, Grigorii reveals his belief that he will soon die; a little later, he is diagnosed with suspected consumption and is said to spend all of his time silently lying in bed in the prison’s hospital ward. He accepts visits from Lina, although often cuts them short, and finds the presence of his mother, with her hysterical protests against the insult that his arrest has brought to their family name, almost unbearable. He has a final meeting with Lina during which he asks her to help him escape from his incarceration by means of suicide. As Bella does in *Spetaia pesnia*, he wishes to poison himself and asks his sister to bring him what he needs; when she refuses, he swears her to secrecy and promises to find another way to end his life. On the morning of his trial, and with the courtroom packed with curious onlookers, a rumour swirls that he has died, perhaps from a heart attack or possibly by his own hand. His suicide by poisoning is confirmed by his defence lawyer who goes on to announce that he remains convinced of Grigorii’s innocence and that his blood will one day flow onto the heads of those who have led him to this fateful end. This condemnation of the fatal consequences

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48 I discuss Panov’s novella at greater length in *The Poetics of Early Russian Crime Fiction, 1860–1917* (see pp. 211–28) and label it a parody of the genre. Because Zav’ialov’s misdemeanours are not as extreme as Polumordin’s, and because their consequences are more tragic, I do not consider *Bez sleda* to be a parodic treatment of generic conventions.
of Zav’ialov’s misdirected investigation, as well as of the inability of the trial process to exonerate an innocent man, stands in striking contrast to the overwhelmingly positive view of the judicial system presented in most other works of Russian crime fiction. Sokolova here presents it not as an instrument of justice but as a flawed and corruptible institution entirely capable of killing an innocent man.

Sokolova’s criticism of the ineffectiveness of the judicial process is not only expressed, however, through the tragic fate of Grigorii Kholin. *Bez sleda* features an epilogue that is both temporally and geographically removed from the main action of the novel. The narrator announces that ten years have passed since Grigorii’s death and describes how an unnamed man and woman stand on the terrace of a luxurious villa in Nice. Initially described from a distance, both are said to be middle-aged, good-looking and of aristocratic bearing, although the man’s eyes betray a much colder, prouder and more severe personality than his female companion. When their conversation begins to be reported, the mention of his English accent, his servant’s address to him as ‘milord’ and the fact that the woman is Russian leads the reader to suspect that the couple are Lord Anderson and Lina, now his wife. Lina’s romance with the mysterious Anderson has been alluded to at various points throughout the novel: his is one of the names at which she blushes in a very early chapter; from prison, Grigorii warns Chuzhbinskii that Lina will never love him because she has vowed to marry Anderson; and in the closing chapters, she has a heated argument with her mother who is adamant that the Englishman does not truly love her. Lord Anderson has been identified as the younger brother of an English lord who, because of the laws on primogeniture that pertain in that country, will have no access to any inheritance and so, as is claimed by Evdokiia and others, he is only interested in Lina for her dowry. In spite of this unanimous opposition to their relationship, Lina has insisted that she trusts Lord Anderson completely and will honour her promise never to marry another man. Their conversation in the Epilogue opens with Anderson asking Lina whether she will accede to his request for a divorce. Although the point of view here belongs to the narrator, this voice is clearly more sympathetic to Lina than to her husband. It notes that Lina is a woman not accustomed to giving way to another’s will as she resolutely refuses to grant him his freedom; when he asks why, she replies: ‘simply because I see no reason to assume for myself the pitiful and laughable role of the abandoned wife!’ (‘edinstvenno potomu, chto ne vizhu ni maleishei prichiny brat’ na sebia zhalkuiu i smeshnuiu rol’
pokinutoi suprugi!’, p. 212). When he argues that the law permits him to divorce her on the grounds that she has not provided him with a living heir, she counters by telling him that she knows the real reason for his request is his greed and desire to marry another wealthier woman now that he has spent all of her money. Albeit in the terms of aristocratic pride similar to that of Bella, Sokolova’s heroine appears to be demonstrating the type of determination and self-possession familiar to readers of works such as Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaia’s *Pansionerka* (*The Boarding-School Girl*, 1860).

Ultimately, however, Lina’s defiance only renders the dénouement of the novel even more shocking. In the face of her resolute refusal, Anderson uses the ‘weapon’ he has at his disposal: he reminds her of events ten years previously and reveals that he murdered Laura Grey and deliberately framed Grigorii for the crime. The reader learns that both crimes were driven by a sense of male privilege and authority to decide the fate of women: Anderson has killed his sister because he considered her behaviour with various men to be bringing shame on their family; and he frames Grigorii as a means of removing him as an obstacle to his marriage with Lina. And his confession, if indeed this is the correct term for such a determinedly aggressive act, enacts further destruction on another female victim.  

Although they do not literally kill Lina, Anderson’s words do put an end to her life as she has known it: she grants him the divorce he desires and retreats entirely from society to live out the remainder of her years as a nun. Her promise to bring Anderson to justice and clear Grigorii’s name is seen to amount to nothing, just like Chuzhbinskii’s earlier efforts. By contrast, the male perpetrator of these various crimes is permitted to die a natural death many years later, having successfully enriched himself again by means of another marriage.

Sokolova’s decision in *Bez sleda* to grant Lina a prominent position in the narrative, not least by the repeated exploitation of her visual perspective, functions as a means of underscoring more strikingly her eventual victimization at the hands of various male actors, most notably

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49 Lord Anderson’s confession is sadistic, intended to inflict pain on Lina and to force her to accede to his demands. Sokolova’s presentation of confession as a form of aggression here recalls the conduct of Dostoevskii’s protagonist towards Liza in *Zapiski iz podpolia* (*Notes from Underground*, 1864). Certainly, there is no sense in which Anderson’s confession represents a stage in what J. M. Coetzee sees as a sequence towards ‘penitence and absolution’. For a discussion of various acts of literary confession, see J. M. Coetzee, ‘Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky’, *Comparative Literature*, 37, 1985, 3, pp. 193–232 (p. 194).
her husband. As with Bella in *Spetaia pesnia*, Lina’s sphere of existence and action is entirely delimited by her family relations: the family dacha in Petrovskii Park; occasionally the prison to visit Grigorii; and the villa in Nice with Lord Anderson. Unlike certain other writers of the period, Sokolova does not portray her female characters with a freedom of movement or action beyond the domestic sphere. Even though she is as convinced as Count Chuzhbinskii of her brother’s innocence, she is not permitted to play any active role in the search for exonerating evidence: whilst Chuzhbinskii travels across Russia and abroad in pursuit of a key witness, Lina remains at home, reliant on his letters for information. The relationship between Lina and Chuzhbinskii, therefore, in spite of their being allies, is governed by a similar power differential as the one between her and Zav’ialov the investigator. Her determination to defy her family’s wishes by honouring her vow to marry the mysterious Lord Anderson is shown to lead to an even more subjugated position at the mercy of her conniving and violent husband. Sokolova’s depiction of the abject failure of the judicial investigator to unmask the true culprit in the murder of Laura Grey clearly suggests that the legal system, far from protecting the rights of all citizens, is complicit in the continued brutalization of women at the hands of their more powerful male counterparts. Anderson’s ability to act with impunity leaves Lina with the sense not only that there is no place in society for her, but that her hopes for future justice are better placed in the hands of God than in those of the secular legal system.

**Conclusion**

Sokolova’s two novels from the 1890s resonate with contemporary international crime fiction in terms of what Sandra Tomc has identified as its ‘manifestation of problematic social and institutional mechanisms’. The genre of crime fiction proves itself, even at this relatively early stage of its development, to be an effective literary mode through which to examine the subjugation of women in a society that grants all of the authority and agency to men. Whilst earlier examples of Russian crime fiction do not shy away from a depiction of the violence to which women can be subjected in a variety of situations, they also suggest the male investigator figure as a potential bulwark against such victimization and the reformed legal system as a means of delivering justice on behalf of such women.

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Sokolova’s novels express no such confidence in a system that is entirely controlled by men and which, as she presents it, functions as yet another instrument for the marginalization of women in a patriarchal society. Even after writers such as Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaia and Avdot’ia Panaeva have illustrated possible routes for the improvement of gentry women’s fates in Russian society, Sokolova uses her female protagonists to argue that no such freedom of self-determination and action exists for those in noble families. Even when they are not themselves the immediate victims of a violent crime and, in the case of Spetaia pesnia, are instead the perpetrator of such violence, they are ultimately presented as being deprived of effective agency in the various social structures that surround them. Sokolova’s crime novels, therefore, represent a significant break from established, male-authored convention in the genre by emphasizing the violent consequences of the subjugation of women and the inadequacy of the legal system to offer appropriate protection against such brutalization and injustice.

51 This is a theme encountered in others of Sokolova’s works, including Iz-za mogili from 1891, in which the heroine is trapped on her father’s isolated estate and is almost entirely at the mercy of the men who surround her.