The trouble with queer celebrity: Aleksandr Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Durova)'s *A Year of Life in St Petersburg* (1838)

Margarita Vaysman

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'Let my tale be a warning to anyone whose only claim to society's attention is some kind of anomaly in their lives', wrote Aleksandr Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Durova) (1783–1866) in the foreword to his novella *God zhizni v Peterburge, ili Nevygody tret'ego poseshcheniia* (*A Year of Life in St Petersburg, or the Trouble with Third Visits*, 1838).[1] The chief anomaly of Aleksandrov's own life—that in 1806 he left his life as Nadezhda Durova, the daughter of a provincial civil servant, and crossed gender to join the Russian army and serve as a cavalry officer Aleksandr Aleksandrov—provided material for his best-selling memoir *Zapiski kavalerist–devitsy* (*Notes of the Cavalry Maiden*, 1836) and turned him into a literary celebrity.[2] In this later novella, Aleksandrov offered his readers another kind of narrative: an account of early nineteenth-century Russian queer celebrity and its pitfalls.

[1] N.A. Durova, 'God zhizni v Peterburge, ili Nevygody tret'ego poseshcheniia', in *Izbrannye sochineniia kavalerist–devitsy*, ed. by V. Murav'ev (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1983), pp. 391–447, p. 391. All translations from Aleksandrov's texts and other sources are mine unless otherwise indicated. On 'crossing', or 'transing', gender as a category of analysis of historical non-conforming gender expressions, see Jen Manion, *Female Husbands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 10–12. For a wider framework on analysing gender retrospectively, see Joan F. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *The American Historical Review*, 1986 (91/5), pp. 1053- 1075.

[2] Crediting 'Nadezhda Durova' as the author of *Zapiski kavalerist–devitsy* is a posthumous invention: in Aleksandrov's lifetime, his texts, except for the very first excerpt from *Zapiski* (N.A. Durova, 'Zapiski N.A. Durovoi, izdavaemye A. Pushkinym', *Sovremennik*, 2 (1836),

Despite Aleksandrov's successful military career, biographers and literary scholars agree that his celebrity did not rest on the achievements on the battlefield: he was famous primarily for transgressing the culturally accepted gender norms.[3] As a famous author, known both as

53–132), were published under the name 'Aleksandrov' or 'Aleksandrov (Durova)' (for full bibliography, see E.E. Prikazchikova, *Divnyi fenomen nravstvennogo mira: zhizn' i tvorchestvo kamskoi amazonki Nadezhdy Durovoi* (Ekaterinburg-Moscow: Kabinetnyi uchenyi, 2018), p. 573). Following recent scholarship on transgender representation (see Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2017), pp. 36–7; David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 105–37; Rachel Mesch, *Before Trans: Three Gender Stories from Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), p. 8–11, 24; Leah Devun, Zeb Tortorici, 'Trans, Time, and History', *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2018 (4), 518–39), in this article I am guided by Aleksandrov's own consistent use of pronouns and masculine endings in his biographical documents, correspondence and curriculum vitae, compiled and published in A.I. Begunova, *Nadezhda Durova* (Moscow: Veche, 2011), pp. 365–97. For recent scholarship on the use of gendered pronouns in Russian, see Yana Kirey-Sitnikova, Yana, 'Prospects and Challenges of Gender Neutralization in Russian', *Russian Linguistics*, 2021 (45): 143–58; for popular guidance on the use of gendered pronouns in Russian, see Sasha Kazantseva, *Kak pisat' o transgendernosti i ne oblazhat'sia* (St Petersburg: T-deistvie, 2020). To avoid confusion when referencing Aleksandrov's works, I follow the established bibliographies which credit the author of most nineteenth-century editions as 'Aleksandrov' and most posthumous editions as 'N.A. Durova', as published.

[3] Irina Savkina, *Razgovory s zerkalom i zazerkal'em: avtodokumental'nye zhenskie teksty v russkoi literature pervoi poloviny XIX veka* (Moscow: NLO, 2007), p. 198; E.E. Prikazchikova,

Nadezhda Durova and under his 'cavalry' name 'Aleksandrov', he joined the ranks of the most prominent literary figures of the time. In 1839, when the influential literary publisher Aleksandr Smirdin undertook to print a collection of works by 'the most famous Russian writers', 'Aleksandrov' was at the top of his list.[4] What set Aleksandr Aleksandrov apart from the other established litterateurs featured in Smirdin's collection, was that, before becoming famous as a writer, he already had an established reputation as a 'curiosity' because of his gender identity.[5] In *God zhizni v Peterburge*, an almost forensic examination of the specific challenges of queer celebrity became Aleksandrov's main subject, establishing this novella as a unique

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Zhenshchina na fone napoleonovskoi epokhi: sotsiokul'turnyi diskurs memuarno–avtobiograficheskoi prozy N. A. Durovoi (Ekaterinburg: Ural University Press, 2015), pp. 74–77).

[4] Smirdin's volume *Sto russkikh literatorov. Izdanie knigoprodavtsa A. Smirdina* (St Petersburg: Tipografiia Aleksandra Smirdina, 1839) also included specially commissioned lithographs of the authors. Aleksandrov's portrait was created by Aleksandr Briullov, based on a sketch by the prominent artist Woldemar Hau (1815–1895), a member of the Russian Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, famous for his portraits of socialites, celebrities, and minor royals. He was appointed as an official Russian Imperial Court Painter soon after, in 1840.

[5] Discussing the marketing potential of Aleksandrov's manuscript, Pushkin has variously referred to the circumstances of his military service as a 'curious thing' [liubopytna], a 'riddle' [zagadka] (A.S. Pushkin, 'Letter to V.A. Durov from 16 June 1835', in *Izbrannye sochineniia kavalerist–devitsy*, p. 453), or a 'mystery' [taina] (A.S. Pushkin, 'Zapiski N.A. Durovoi, izdavaemye A. Pushkinym', *Sovremennik*, 2 (1836), 53).

account of non-heteronormative literary fame in early nineteenth-century Russia. This article will employ studies in historical celebrity as a theoretical framework to analyze Aleksandrov's accounts of his lived experience of queer celebrity in St Petersburg and beyond.

In the context of recent scholarship on the history of queer celebrity, Aleksandrov's texts, with his focus on performing a public transmasculine identity, conform to the characteristics expected of such narratives: historical accounts of celebrity underscore its gendered nature, showcasing the importance of considering gender politics a part of celebrity's apparatus.[6] Drawing on this rich body of work, I also aim to employ 'methodologies [that are] sensitive to historical change but [are] influenced by current theoretical preoccupations'.[7] I begin by outlining Aleksandrov's rise to fame from an amateur diarist to a published author, tracing the development of his transmasculine public persona through personal documents and correspondence. I then move on to a close reading of the novella *God zhizni v Peterburge, ili Nevygody tret'ego poseshcheniia*, looking for an explanation of Aleksandrov's 'troubles' during his visit to the capital, such as falling out with the polite society and failing to capitalise on the initial success of his book. Ultimately, I argue that these troubles were caused by the difficulties of managing a very particular, and by then still unusual, kind of fame—queer celebrity.

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[6] I use the term 'transmasculine' to describe a person 'assigned female at birth who has some degree of masculine identification or expression' (Stryker, *Transgender History*, p. 36). On gender norms, transgression, sexual difference, and the problem of historicising celebrity culture, see Leonard R. Berlanstein, 'Historicising and Gendering Celebrity Culture: Famous Women in Nineteenth-Century France', *Journal of Women's History*, 16.14 (2004), 64–91; and Mole, 'Introduction', p. 4.

[7] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 46.

From Cavalry Maiden to Celebrated Author

Aleksandrov's rise to fame was propelled, as he pointed out in his reflections on the nature of celebrity in 1837, by an 'interesting, brilliant, even great' but single 'anomaly' of his life: the ten-year service in the Imperial Russian Army first as 'Aleksandr Sokolov', and then as 'cornet Aleksandr Aleksandrov'.[8] In 1817, Aleksandrov retired from the army with the rank of *shtabs–rotmistr* (captain–lieutenant) and settled in St Petersburg. After four years in the capital, he moved back to Sarapul, a provincial town 630 miles east of Moscow, in 1822, and then a year later to nearby Elabuga to live close to his family. After Aleksandrov was discharged from the army, he continued to wear male clothes and lived under his 'army name'. Public records, including military pension accounts, Aleksandrov's will and record of death, indicate that 'Aleksandrov' was his legal name of choice, ever since his received official permission to use it from the highest authority in Russia: Emperor Aleksander I.[9] It was not unusual for noble men and women in Russia at the time to petition the Emperor directly for money, or to resolve long–standing legal disputes, and this privilege was not reserved for those at court. As described in *Zapiski*, and corroborated by correspondence and military records, in 1808 Aleksandrov had a private audience with the Tsar, who, intrigued by this unusual story, granted Aleksandrov a permission to use his 'cavalry' name and promised financial support. Over the

[8] Durova, 'God zhizni v Peterburge', p. 391.

[9] Copies of the register, noting down 'Aleksandrov''s death are held in the collection of Durova's house museum in Elabuga, Russia. Some of the records were published alongside newly discovered archival material in Begunova, *Nadezhda Durova*, pp. 365–96, and some have been digitized for the museum's website (<elabuga.com/durova/_durovaMuseumVideoTour.html> [Accessed 06 May 2021]).

years, Aleksandrov received several sums from the government, some of which, in recognition of his direct connection with the Tsar, were signed off personally by Aleksei Arakcheev, the Emperor's adjutant–general.[10]

Inspired by his own interest in reading, Aleksandrov recorded and revised his unusual experiences for many years in the form of a diary. This manuscript remained unpublished until 1835, when his brother Vasilii Durov finally suggested that Aleksandrov's extraordinary life would make for a good story. Vasilii then approached his chance acquaintance Aleksandr Pushkin, who was at that time, coincidentally, looking for submissions that would boost income from his new literary enterprise, *Sovremennik*. Vasilii Durov's original letter has not survived, but Pushkin's reply, as well as his ensuing direct correspondence with 'Aleksandrov', forms a corpus of eleven letters sent over a period of sixteen months in 1835–36.[11] These letters, exchanged before Aleksandrov's manuscript was published, offer a fascinating glimpse into early nineteenth-century negotiations of a queer public literary identity and its marketing value.

Using the hard–won male name in everyday life and in print meant a lot to Aleksandrov but was at odds with Pushkin's marketing strategy for his manuscript. In his letters, Pushkin repeatedly emphasized that, as a publisher, he believed that the success of Aleksandrov's manuscript directly depended on the 'curious' mismatch between his private and public gender

[10] For a reading of this meeting as portrayed in *Zapiski*, see Andreas Schoenle, 'Gender Trial and Gothic Thrill: Nadezhda Durova's Subversive Self-Exploration', in *Gender and Sexuality in Russian Civilization*, ed. by Peter I. Barta (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 55–71 (p.67–70). In 1838, Aleksandrov also presented two copies of self–published *Zapiski* to the Tsar, and received a diamond ring from him, in return (Begunova, *Nadezhda Durova*, p. 328).

[11] For a discussion of gendered aspects of private and public biographical narratives, based on an analysis of this corpus, see Savkina, *Razgovory*, pp. 193–95.

identities and the interplay between the two in his narrative. Pushkin's initial response to Vasilii Durov, dated 16 June 1835, indicates that the poet-turned-publisher was ready to accept Aleksandrov's manuscript sight unseen, based solely on Aleksandrov's already significant scandalous fame: 'the life of the author is so curious, so well-known and so mysterious, that the reveal of this secret would make a strong general impression',[12] he wrote. In *God zhizni v Peterburge*, Aleksandrov later described a conversation with his brother that shows that Vasilii shared Pushkin's assessment of his narrative's commercial potential:

> 'Вы представьте себе, – говорил он, – что я, по какому–нибудь случаю, надел в юности женское платье и оставался в нем несколько лет, живя в кругу дам и считаясь всеми за даму. Неправда ли, что описание такого необыкновенного случая заинтересовало бы всех, и всякий очень охотно прочитал бы его. Всякому любопытно было бы знать, как я жил, что случалось со мною в этом чуждом для меня мире, как умел так подделаться к полу, которого роль взял на себя?.. Одним словом, описание этой шалости, или вынужденного преобразования, разобрали б в один месяц, сколько б я ни напечатал их... А история вашей жизни должна быть несравненно занимательнее'.[13]

[12] Pushkin, 'Letter to V.A. Durov from 16 June 1835', p. 453. In the full text of *Zapiski*, Aleksandrov would self-consciously trace the emergence of this celebrity first in the closed world of high-ranking officers in the Russian army before the French Invasion in 1812, then among Tsar Aleksander I's courtiers, and finally in the polite society of St Petersburg, where he lived from 1817 to 1821.

[13] Durova, 'God zhizni v Peterburge', p. 391.

('Just imagine', he [Vasilii] said, 'if I had, when I was young, on some occasion, put on female clothes and continued wearing them for a few years, living among women and being treated by everyone as a woman. Is it not true that a description of such unusual occurrence would interest everyone, and that everyone would be very eager to read it? Everyone would like to know how I lived, what happened to me in this alien world, how I could imitate so well the sex, whose role I have assumed? In short, a description of this kind of mischief, or of this necessary transformation, would fly off the shelves in a month, no matter how many copies were printed…But the story of your life would be incomparably more entertaining'.)

When a part of Aleksandrov's manuscript appeared a year later in *Sovremennik*, under the title *Zapiski N.A. Durovoi, izdavaemyia A. Pushkinym* (*Notes by N.A. Durova, published by A. Pushkin*), it was prefaced with a short note from the publisher. This briefly recounted Aleksandrov's success in keeping his gender identity assigned at birth a secret for the duration of his military service:

В 1808 году, молодой мальчик, по имени Александров, вступил рядовым […] отличился, получил за храбрость солдатский Георгиевский крест, и в том же году произведен был в офицеры в Мариупольский Гусарский полк […] и продолжал свою службу столь же ревностно, сколь и начал.[14]

(In 1808 a young boy by the name of Aleksandrov enlisted as a private […], distinguished himself, was awarded a soldier's Cross of St George for bravery, and that same year was promoted to officer with the Mariupol'

[14] Pushkin, 'Zapiski N.A. Durovoi, izdavaemye A. Pushkinym', p. 53.

> Hussars Regiment […] and continued to serve as zealously as when he first joined.)

This, Pushkin noted further, was an ordinary military career. However, at a certain point

> […] это самое наделало много шуму, породило много толков и произвело сильное впечатление от одного нечаянно открывшегося обстоятельства: корнет Александров была девица Надежда Дурова.[15]
>
> ([…] it created a stir, provoked a lot of gossip and made a big impression on the public because of one circumstance that became known accidentally: cornet Aleksandrov was a maiden, Nadezhda Durova.)

The reasons that compelled this 'молодую девушку, хорошей дворянской фамилии, оставить отеческий дом, отречься от своего пола, принять на себя труды и обязанности, которые пугают и мужчин'[16] ('young woman from a good, noble family, to leave her father's house and to denounce her sex, to take on labours and responsibilities that intimidate even men'), were a point of great interest to society when the story first became public. Finally, *Sovremennik* was able to offer its readers a first–hand account of these extraordinary events:

> Ныне Н.А. Дурова сама разрешает свою тайну. Удостоенные ея доверенности, мы будем издателями ея любопытных записок. С неизъяснимым участием прочли мы признания женщины, столь необыкновенной; с изумлением увидели, что нежные пальчики, некогда

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., p. 54.

сжимавшие окровавленную рукоять уланской сабли, владеют и пером, быстрым, живописным и пламенным.[17]

(Now, N.A. Durova herself is exposing this secret. Honoured by her trust, we will be publishing her curious notes. It is with utmost sympathy that we have read the confessions of a woman so unusual; it is with wonder that we have seen her tender fingers, which once grasped the bloody hilt of a sabre, also guiding a swift, picturesque, and fiery pen!)

Pushkin's preface clearly identified the scope (well-known not just in the army but also to the general public), timescale (well-known at the time when his identity was revealed and still of interest now) and the basis for Aleksandrov's fame (his successful assumption of male identity for a prolonged period of time). It demonstrates that by the time an extract from *Zapiski* was first published in *Sovremennik*, Aleksandrov was already a celebrity, famous for leading a life that transgressed the established boundaries between genders. The language of Pushkin's descriptions of Aleksandrov's nimble fingers and his ability to grasp both a pen and a sabre underscored the erotic undertones typically associated with narratives of cross–dressing. Here, the ambiguous nature of Aleksandrov's public representation (*kavalerist* (cavalry officer) as male, and *devitsa* (maiden) as female) 'create[d] a transgender spectacle that provoke[d] a crowd–pleasing shock effect'.[18] Marketing Aleksandrov's text, Pushkin was cleverly exploiting the basic mechanism of celebrity which relies on negotiating the balance between private and public identities, here amplified by the emphasis on the vulnerability of a 'female'

[17] Ibid.

[18] Sherry Velasco*, The Lieutenant Nun: Transgenderism, Lesbian Desire and Catalina de Erauso* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), p. 72.

biographer presenting 'her' private story to the public.[19] Aleksadrov's ambiguous gender identity began to be framed as a 'brilliant anomaly' that both produced his literary fame and made it troublesome.

As rare first–hand accounts of queer celebrity and the lived experience of a 'gender deviant'[20] lifestyle in early-nineteenth-century Russia, Aleksandrov's texts are already exceptional. [21] In addition, although Russian queer history has gained momentum in recent years and many new texts are now available to readers, no other early-nineteenth-century Russian text that directly

[19] Zirin, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

[20] Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 21.

[21] As such, these texts have been a subject of a sizable body of research in Russian and other languages. For the two most recent biographies, see Begunova, *Nadezhda Durova*; Prikazchikova, *Divnyi fenomen*. For readings of *God zhizni v Peterburge*, see Savkina, *Razgovory*, pp. 195, 198, 200; Prikazchikova *Divnyi fenomen,* pp. 368–85; Prikazchikova, *Zhenshchina na fone*, pp. 19, 241; Begunova, *Nadezhda Durova*, pp. 304, 315–17, 334–36. For notes specifically on Aleksandrov's celebrity, see Begunova, *Nadezhda Durova*, pp. 304–44; P.A. Boiarinova, 'Nadezhda Durova: fenomen gendernogo bespokoistva v Rossii v pervoi polovine XIX veka', *Zhenshchina v rossiiskom obshchestve*, 2.79 (2016), 57–68, (pp. 61–66); M. Goller, 'Nadezda Andreevna Durova in ihren autobiografischen Prosa. Einordnung eines Phenomens', in *Frauenbilder und Weiblichkeitsenwurfe in der Russchen Frauenprosa*, ed. by Christina Parnell (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1996), pp. 75–92, p. 80; Ann Marsh-Flores, 'Coming out of His Closet: Female Friendships, Amazonki and the Masquerade in the Prose of Nadezhda Durova', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 47.4 (2003), 609–30 (p. 614, 622); Savkina, *Razgovory*, pp. 25–37, 63–68; Andreas Schoenle, 'Gender Trial and Gothic Thrill', pp. 62–70; Prikazchikova, *Divnyi fenomen*, pp. 112–40; Zirin, 'Introduction', pp. x–xii.

addressed queer experiences has been as enthusiastically adopted by popular culture.[22] From the time of its publication to the present, the story of Aleksandrov's life has been adapted for several children's books, journals, plays, radio dramas and films, including an iconic Soviet musical *Gussarskaia ballada* (*The Hussar Ballad*) (1962, dir. Eldar Riazanov). At the same time*, Zapiski* and Aleksandrov's later texts join a long list of narratives of cross–dressing people assigned female at birth, often in military employ, who navigating the perils of gender ambiguity at their risk: from 'Lieutenant Nun' Catalina de Erauso in seventeenth-century Spain

[22] For Russian queer history, see Irina Roldugina, '"Why Are We the People We Are?" Early Soviet Homosexuals from the First–Person Perspective: New Sources on the History of Homosexual Identities in Russia', in *Soviet and Post–Soviet Sexualities*, ed. by Richard Mole (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 2–22; Irina Roldugina, 'Otkrytie seksual'nosti: transgressiia sotsial'noi stikhii v seredine 18 veka v Sankt–Peterburge: po materialam Kalinkinskoi komissii (1750–1759)', *Ab Imperio*, 22 (2016), 29–69; Francesca Stella, *Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post–Soviet Russia: Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexualities* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self and the Other* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999). For a comprehensive list of adaptations of *Zapiski*, see Zirin, 'Introduction', pp. xxviii–xxix. Since 1988, this list has been expanded by another Russian film adaptation (*To muzhshchina, to zhenshchina* (*Now a Man, Now a Woman*), dir. Aleksandr Nagovitsyn, 1989), a bestselling historical novel *The Girl Who Fought Napoleon* by Linda Lafferty (Seattle: Lake Union Publishing, 2016) and an Austrian opera (*Die Kavalleristin. Eine musikalische Bühnendichtung in vier Akten,* composed by Adriaan de Wit, Marianne Figl, 2011).

and Spanish America to Sarolta/Sándor Vay in nineteenth-century Hungary.[23] Approached as a case study, the story of Aleksandrov's rise to fame functions as one example of how queer celebrity was conceptualized in nineteenth-century Russia specifically, and showcases individual experiences of celebrity in any historical and cultural context more generally. Although the number of Russian case studies remains relatively small, historical studies of celebrity are by now an established field.[24] . In *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750–1850*

[23] For more on Erauso, see Sherry Velasco*, The Lieutenant Nun*; on Vay, see Zsuzsa Török, '"Notorious Beyond Any Other European Woman of Her Generation": The Case of Count(ess) Sarolta/Sándor Vay', *Slavonica*, 23.1 (2018), 53–68; for a fin de siècle Russian example, see Christa Binswanger, *Seraph, Carevič, Narr: Männliche Maskerade und weibliches Ideal bei Poliksena Solov'eva (Allegro)* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2002).

[24] For examples of historical studies of celebrity in Russia, see Anna Fishzon, 'The Operatics of Everyday Life, or, How Authenticity Was Defined in Late Imperial Russia', *Slavic Review*, 70.4 (2011), 795–81; Anna Fishzon, 'Confessions of a Psikhopatka: Opera Fandom and the Melodramatic Sensibility in Fin–De–Siècle Russia', *Russian Review*, 71.1 (2012), 100–21; Julie A. Cassiday, 'The Rise of the Actress in Early Nineteenth-Century Russia', in *Women in Nineteenth-Century Russia: Lives and Culture*, ed. by Wendy Rosslyn and Alessandra Tosi (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012), pp. 137–60; Andrew B. Wachtel, 'The Cult of the Author', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 60.2 (2016), 280–83; Lynn Ellen Patyk, 'Remembering "The Terrorism": Sergei Stepniak–Kravchinskii's "Underground Russia"', *Slavic Review*, 68.4 (2009), 758–81. For a recent state of the field overview, see the special issue of *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*. *Supplement: Celebrity's Histories: Case Studies & Critical Perspectives*, 32 (2019), 7–16; Robert van Krieken, 'Celebrity's Histories', in *Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies,* ed. by Anthony

(2009), Tom Mole convincingly argued for a 'longer view of celebrity culture's history'.[25] Similarly to Mole, I approach celebrity as a 'varied but coherent cultural apparatus, with both material and discursive elements',[26] paying specific attention to its gendered nature. Despite their focus on Britain, Mole and the volume's contributors offer a valuable framework that can

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Elliott (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 26–43. Studies of celebrity in Russia, in Russian or other languages, tend to focus on the twentieth and twenty–first centuries, mirroring their counterparts in other academic traditions (see Alexandra Harrington, 'Literary Celebrity and Late Style: Anna Akhmatova's Unfinished Cinema Scenario about Pilots and Poem Without a Hero', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 95.3 (2017), 458–503; *Celebrity and Glamour in Contemporary Russia: Shocking Chic*, ed. by Helena Goscilo, Vlad Strukov (London: Routledge, 2011); Helena Goscilo, *Putin as Celebrity and Cultural Icon* (London: Routledge, 2013)). Of course, the history of celebrity in Russia is not a new endeavour: it builds on an established tradition of studies of literary fame, that go back to the Soviet period examinations of 'literary reputations' (for a brief history of this discipline, see L.F. Mashkovtseva, 'Istoriko–kul'turnye istoki i problemy izucheniia poniatiia "literaturnaia reputatsii"', *Diskussiia*, 2. 20 (2012), 174–76) and post–Soviet studies of 'sociology of literature' and canon–formation (see Boris Dubin, *Klassika posle i riadom* (Moscow: NLO, 2010).

[25] Mole, 'Introduction', p. 3. Notable works theorising the history of celebrity since then include: Wendy Graham, *Critics, Coteries, and Pre–Raphaelite Celebrity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), a special issue *Celebrity, Fame, Notoriety*: *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 126.4 (2011), and Antoine Lilti, *The Invention of Celebrity*, trans. by Lynn Jeffress (London: Polity, 2017), first published in French as *Figures publiques. L'invention de la célébrité (1750–1850)* in 2015.

[26] Mole, 'Introduction', p. 4.

be usefully extrapolated to the study of other cultures. The transnational spread of early technologies (colour printing, lithographs, and, later, photographs and early sound recordings) that underpinned the material culture of nineteenth-century celebrity makes such an extrapolation only logical. In Aleksandrov's case, for example, the portraits of literary celebrities for Smirdin's collection were printed in England.[27] Mole dates the 'emergence of a recognizably modern celebrity culture' back to the period of Romanticism in England (1750–1850), the time that 'witnessed a slow, diffuse, but significant shift in the nature of fame' (Mole 2).[28] In the anglophone cultures, this turning point can also be identified through dating a linguistic transition of the word 'celebrity' from abstract to concrete noun. A similar case can be made for Russian *znamenitost'*, with the wide usage of this word already in the 1820s as both abstract and concrete nouns testifying to similarities in this process.[29] As a subset of general studies of celebrity, queer celebrity studies now also extend to the past, engaged in recovering transnational histories of its pre-twentieth-century subjects. Such studies carefully

[27] Smirdin, 'Foreword', in *Sto russkikh literatorov,* p. n/a.

[28] For an exploration of the earlier history of celebrity in Ancient Greece, Rome, Middle Ages and Renaissance, see Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), pp. 55–315.

[29] The first examples of the transliterated *selebriti*/*селебрити* can be traced back to 1997 (see National Corpus of Russian Language, <ruscorpora.ru/new/> [Accessed 27 September 2021]. *Slava* (fame), *populiarnost'* (popularity), or *izvestnost'* (being well-known) were historically used as the Russian equivalent of 'celebrity' as an abstract noun, and *znamenitost'* as a concrete noun. For a discussion of the use of this word in relation to one of the first literary celebrities in Russian history, Aleksandr Pushkin, see A.I. Reitblat, *Kak Pushkin vyshel v genii* (Moscow: NLO, 2010), pp. 51–53, 60–68.

investigate the lives of their subjects, aiming to reconstruct and analyze their lived and literary mediated experience without imposing anachronistic readings onto their narratives.[30] I was guided by the same principles in the close reading of Aleksandrov's novella, offered below.

A Year in St Petersburg

God zhizni v Peterburge, ili Nevygody tret'ego poseshcheniia was published in 1838, soon after Aleksandrov, with help from his cousin Ivan Butovskii, had arranged for *Zapiski* to be published in full.[31] If Aleksandrov's correspondence with Pushkin and the poet's own letters to friends and family provide factual information about their working relationship, this literary text gave Aleksandrov an opportunity to tell his own story of their friendship. In January 1837 Pushkin died at the age of thirty-eight, mortally wounded in a duel. A proliferation of biographical accounts followed, and *God zhizni v Peterburge* joined this larger corpus of texts, whose popularity with readers was ensured by Pushkin's own celebrity and the sensational circumstances of his tragic death.[32] In this text, Aleksandrov recast the story of their

[30] In addition to studies quoted above, see also Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), specifically pp. 60–77; Michèle Mendelsson*, Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

[31] Butovskii's 1836 edition was titled *Kavalerist–devitsa. Proisshestvie v Rossii* (*The Cavalry Maiden. An Incident in Russia*). For full publication history of *Zapiski*, see Zirin, 'Introduction', p. xi.

[32] Pushkin was shot by Georges d'Anthès, an alleged lover of his wife, Natalia. For a comprehensive account of the events in English, see T.J. Binyon, *Pushkin: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), pp. 474–637.

relationship, retrospectively focussing on the scenes that showed them in a good light: for example, exhibiting character traits that he saw as admirable, such as commitment to his male identity and courage in the face of adversity. The kind of adversity he experienced now was not something that Aleksandrov's military past had prepared them for and he discovered that finer, more subtle strategies were needed to navigate the landscape of high–flying society life in St Petersburg.

After the full text of *Zapiski* was published in 1836, Aleksandrov attempted to launch a literary career in earnest—that is, to earn money with his 'fiery pen'. The kind of difficulties he had experienced when managing the publication of his manuscript in *Sovremennik* (postal misfortunes, lack of control of the editing process, delays) clearly showed that a successful career cannot be managed from afar, and so Aleksandrov came out of his early retirement in the provinces. He moved back to Moscow, and then to St Petersburg, where he worked on writing, publishing, and promoting his literary texts. As one contemporary reviewer pointed out, the public was interested in Aleksandrov himself at least as much as in his writing: 'В сочинениях г. Александрова есть предмет любопытнейший для наблюдения, неистощимый для занимательных рассказов: этот предмет – сам автор, герой всех повествований г. Александрова'[33] ('There is a subject most peculiar and worth observation, inexhaustible for entertaining anecdotes: and that subject is the author himself, the protagonist of all narratives by Mr Aleksandrov'). Prompted by Pushkin's framing of his narrative, Aleksandrov continued to rely on the public's fascination with his unusual persona, and most of his fictional texts, ranging from Gothic tales of unhappy marriages to pseudo–ethnological

[33] P.A. Pletnev, 'God zhizni v Peterburge, ili Nevygody tret'ego poseshcheniia. Sochineniia Aleksandrova', *Sochineniia i perepiska P.A. Pletneva*, vol. 2 (St Petersburg: Tipografiia Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauк, 1885), pp. 267–68.

forays into Baltic folklore, featured a female narrator in male disguise. These fictional narratives themselves were often framed as stories, recounted by this ambiguously gendered narrator, often a female cavalry officer.

This narrative framing functioned both as an attempt to authenticate the narrative voice through its connection with the biographical author, Nadezhda Durova/cornet Aleksandrov, but also as a constant reference reinforcing the author's queer celebrity status. At least some of Aleksandrov's motivation for building a literary career was financial, and his correspondence with Pushkin showcases how carefully he considered the issues of marketing, distribution and took the public's literary tastes into account.[34] The novella's subtitle—*Nevygody tret'ego poseshcheniia* (*The Trouble with Third Visits*)—refers to a peculiar pattern of behaviour that Aleksandrov observed while socialising in the Russian Imperial capital. Soon after he arrived and visited a few balls, Aleksandrov noticed that people who were at first fascinated by his status as a celebrity were often disappointed that his real persona did not match their expectations. The remnants of the public's initial interest were enough for Aleksandrov to receive invitations for second and third visits, but on each successful occasion the hosts would pay their unusual guest less and less attention, until the experience became so unpleasant that Aleksandrov preferred to stop his visits altogether rather than be an unwanted guest. For a writer who relied on interest in his personality to promote book sales this was an alarming development. In this context, the original Russian of the same subtitle became symbolic: this decline of interest was so painful because it cancelled the profits (*vygody*), of literary celebrity. But what had really caused it?

[34] Despite their father's career in the civil service, the Durovs were not rich and Vasilii was well-known for his gambling and outlandish money–making schemes: see A.S. Pushkin, 'Table–Talk', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 8 (Moscow: Nauka, 1978), pp. 64–83.

The novella as a whole details Aleksandrov's unique experience of not just general, but specifically queer celebrity. After a short introductory passage stating the purpose of the narrative—to forewarn those who expect to maintain a celebrity status based on 'one anomaly'—the protagonist proceeds to discuss the particular dynamics of queer celebrity. Spurred on by his brother's faith in the market value of his unusual narrative, Aleksandrov sets out for St Petersburg, and, once there, the narrative assumes the structure of a diary. Each subsection is titled with a date that marks a significant event in the protagonist's life, such as meetings with Pushkin, his patron and publisher. Although it is tempting to read the descriptions of Pushkin's normative success as a foil to Aleksandrov's own queer failures, it is more likely that his main function in the narrative is to legitimize Aleksandrov's status as a serious published author.[35] Pushkin is mostly portrayed in private settings—a late night visit,

[35] On the role of Pushkin's patronage in the development of Aleksandrov's career, see N.A. Durova, 'Avtobiografiia', in *Izbrannye sochineniia kavalerist–devitsy*, pp. 447–52, p. 450. Although the development of Pushkin's own celebrity followed a different pattern, he was well aware of the commercial potential of scandalous fame, such as one enjoyed by Byron, a poet whose career Pushkin followed closely (for more on Byron's specific kind of fame, see Clara Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). In another study of Byron's fame, Mole explores economics of celebrity, pointing out the influence of the rapidly developing industrial culture in British publishing on the resulting commodification of literature in the Romantic period. This reading runs parallel to Reitblat's analysis of Pushkin's literary enterprises but is not entirely applicable to Aleksandrov's situation. Mole's observation that in the Romantic period celebrity becomes conceptualised as in inferior type of fame (Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity*, p. xii) goes some way towards

a family dinner—that underscore the closeness of his relationship with Aleksandrov. At the center of these intimate encounters are awkward moments, caused by the ambiguity of Aleksandrov's gender presentation. As in Aleksandrov's other texts, the first–person narrator (ostensibly, 'Nadezhda Durova') uses feminine verb endings when referring to herself, but masculine endings are used in reported direct speech. Everyone, including Pushkin and old friends he visits once in St Petersburg, address the protagonist as Aleksandr Andreevich, or 'barin' [sir] in case of servants and mail coach station employees. During his first visit to Aleksandrov's lodgings, Pushkin showers his author with praise for his manuscript, but is also visibly confused by Aleksandrov's manner of referring to himself as male in his speech:

> Я не буду повторять тех похвал, какими вежливый писатель и поэт осыпал слог моих записок, полагая, что в этом случае он говорил тем языком, каким обыкновенно люди образованные говорят с дамами. Впрочем, любезный гость мой приходил в приметное замешательство всякий раз, когда я, рассказывая что–нибудь относящееся ко мне, говорила: 'был, пришел, пошел, увидел'. Долговременная привычка употреблять 'ъ' вместо 'а' делала для меня эту перемену очень обыкновенною, и я продолжала разговаривать, нисколько не затрудняясь своею ролею, обратившеюся мне уже в природу. Наконец Пушкин поспешил кончить и посещение и разговор, начинавший делаться для него до крайности трудным.[36]

explaining the inherent differences between the kinds of popular appreciated experienced by Pushkin and Aleksandrov, socially and economically.

[36] Durova, 'God zhizni v Peterburge', p. 399.

> (I am not going to repeat the praises with which the polite writer and poet has showered the style of my notes, as I suspect that in this case he used the expressions that educated people usually use to address the ladies. However, my courteous guest was visibly disconcerted every time I, mentioning anything about myself, said [govorila]: 'was [byl], arrived [prishiol], went [poshiol], saw [uvidel]'. My long–time habit of using 'ъ' instead of 'a' meant that I was very much used to this change; I continued [prodolzhala] to talk, in no way obstructed by my role that has by now become natural for me. Finally, Pushkin brought both his visit and our conversation to an end as it was becoming increasingly difficult for him to continue.)[37]

Bearing in mind Pushkin's earlier playful references to Aleksandrov's gender ambiguity in his letters to his brother, this description suggests that the famously flirtatious poet was surprised by Aleksandrov's commitment to his male identity in everyday life. Perhaps he had previously perceived his masculinity as nothing more than a literary masquerade, rather than a lived identity that Aleksandrov had maintained for the most part of his adult life. At the end of their meeting, Pushkin, following the contemporary etiquette, also kissed Aleksandrov's hand, something that he would only do to a woman. This, as the text testifies, provoked much embarrassment on Aleksandrov's part: he blushed, snatched away his hand and informed Pushkin that he was not used to such behaviour anymore. Afterwards, Aleksandrov was left contemplating whether the famous poet was mocking them throughout, already rehearsing an

[37] In Russian, verbs have gendered endings in the past tense. In this quotation, Aleksandrov uses feminine ending 'a' as a first-person narrator, but also an obsolete nineteenth-century 'ъ' for masculine endings in reported speech.

amusing anecdote he would later share with his friends. Aleksandrov had a chance to—perhaps inadvertently—embarrass his patron in turn, when he attended a dinner at Pushkin's apartment. There, Aleksandrov reports, it was Pushkin who turned red in the face, when, in response to his teasing, his youngest daughter refused to consider Aleksandrov as a potential husband. As this passage shows, the gender of the protagonist remains ambiguous throughout the novella, and this ambiguity does not only confuse Aleksandrov's famous patron but defines his experience of literary celebrity as markedly different from Pushkin's.

As studies of historical celebrity attest, some aspects of celebrity's apparatus are intrinsically gendered. One such aspect is the cultural practice of literary lionization, a 'quintessential mode of nineteenth-century literary celebrity',[38] where a famous author, or a 'lion', is 'hunted' by salon hostesses, competing for their presence on the guest lists. As Richard Salmon points out, literary lionization as a practice relies on the gendered contrast between the virile lion and the huntress of the salon: 'the lion evidently embodies a specifically masculine form of self–display, in relation to which women are cast as admiring or indifferent spectators'.[39] As a result, the 'para–social context of celebrity culture'[40] replaces the more common social interactions between hosts and their celebrity guests. In *God zhinzi v Peterburge*, Aleksandrov's first–person protagonist finds herself a part of a social circle that engages in similar practices, and even calls herself an 'old lion', referencing a popular fable:

> После всякого третьего посещения я бываю очень похожа на того устаревшего льва, которого приходит бить осел. Все те, которые в

[38] Richard Salmon, 'The Physiognomy of the Lion: Encountering Literary Celebrity in the Nineteenth Century', in *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750–1850*, pp. 60–78.

[39] Ibid., p. 70.

[40] Ibid., p. 69.

пылу первого и приятной теплоте второго визита оставались не замеченными мною, в третий раз убивали меня своими разговорами, нелепыми вопросами, неприятным и смешным вниманием, и все это с самым лучшим намерением занять меня, потому что обязательные хозяева, расточавшие мне ласки свои в первые два посещения, в третье совсем и не видали уже меня.[41]

(After each third visit I usually resemble that aged lion, who is beaten by an ass. All of those whom, in the fiery passion of the first and the pleasant warmth of the second visit, I have not even noticed, during the third visit killed me with their conversations, awkward questions, unpleasant and silly attentions, and all of this with the best of intentions to entertain me, because the dutiful hosts, who lavished me with affection during the first two visits, during the third visit would not have seen me at all.)

The highly gendered atmosphere of the salons and balls amplifies his sense of failure to fit in – dancing, in particular, becomes highly problematic:

Играть я не люблю, танцевать как–то не приводится, да и было бы смешно: я должна танцевать с дамою! Какая ж из них пойдет со мною

[41] Durova, 'God zhizni v Peterburge', p. 436. For Ivan Krylov's fable, see I.A. Krylov, 'Lev sostarevshiisia', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1945–1946), p. 176. For a first–hand account of Aleksandrov's public appearances in the 1830s from a host's perspective, see A.Ia. Panaeva, *Vosponimaniia* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1956), pp. 62–63.

> охотно? И в этом случае я тоже плачу им совершенною взаимностью. Нет, нет! На балах, вечерах не в своей тарелке я.[42]
>
> (I did not have many occasions to dance, and it would be funny if I did: I would have to dance with a lady! But which one of them would be eager to accompany me to the dance floor? And in this case, their feelings are absolutely reciprocated. No, no! At balls and at soirées, I am like a fish out of water!)

Unlike their brother, famous for his gambling, Aleksandrov did not play cards, and, with both gambling and dancing taken out of their social repertoire, he must have indeed felt out of place at society gatherings even without the burden of their scandalous fame. In *God zhizni v Peterburge*, Aleksandrov describes the St Petersburg salons and soirées as governed by the mechanics of celebrity: the subtle movements of crowds towards a person of interest, direct stares and covert glances, the whispers and the gossip. Aside from Pushkin, Aleksandrov's own social circle in St Petersburg mostly included old friends, whom he had met during his first visit to the capital—a period of his life when his celebrity first gained serious momentum.[43] One of these friends, a hostess of a modest salon, helps Aleksandrov to expand his social circle. One invitation leads to another, and at each social occasion, Aleksandrov has to succumb to what he calls 'wild' questions about his past. For St Petersburg society, Aleksandrov literally embodies his famous text:

[42] Durova, 'God zhizni v Peterburge', p. 410.

[43] For an attempt at a periodization of Aleksandrov's fame, see Prikazchikova 75. For Aleksandrov's own account of that period, see Durova, *Avtobiografiia*, pp. 448–49.

> […] всякий начинает и оканчивает разговор со мною не иначе, как о моих ‘Записках’; другой материи нет! Я – настоящее второе издание моих ‘Записок,’ одушевленное.[44]
>
> ([…] everyone started and finished conversations with me only by talking about my *Notes*, as if there were no other subjects for discussion! I am the actual second edition of my *Notes*, an animated one.)

The same friend, an experienced socialite, finally explains to Aleksandrov what might have caused his ‘troubles’: society’s interest waned because he looked too ordinary. His civilian clothes make Aleksandrov look just like any other man, perhaps even a clerk! Donning a military uniform, recreating the famous image of the Cavalry Maiden, would have helped, she maintains, if only Aleksandrov could see that this is how celebrity works:

> Вы странный человек, Александров! Почему хотите вы быть исключены из общей участи людей? А особливо тех, которые чем–нибудь привлекают к себе внимание публики? Она действует в отношении к вам так же, как действовала века тому назад в отношении ко всему, удостоившемуся ее ценсуры […].[45]
>
> (You are a strange person, Aleksandrov! Why do you want to be excluded from the common plight of all men? And especially those who, for any reason, attract public attention? The public treats you the same as it has for ages treated anything that had attracted its censure […].)

[44] Durova, ‘God zhizni v Peterburge’, p. 411.

[45] Ibid., p. 438.

A bitter realization dawns for Aleksandrov—celebrity guarantees society's interest, but it is not always benevolent:

> Если б я потрудилась обдумать, на что именно имею я право в обществе, то увидела б ясно, что имею его на одно только любопытство […] я, как и все, вышедшее из обыкновенного порядка вещей, возбуждаю какое–то участие, желание узнать лучше, сблизиться, разгадать и, наконец, показать свою находку друзьям, родным, знакомым […] но как достигнут цели позабавить друзей своих зрелищем существа, перешагнувшего за черту обыкновенности, тогда начнутся толки и рассказы…[46]
>
> (If I made some effort to consider, what exactly do I deserve, in society, then I would have seen clearly that the only thing I have the right to is curiosity […] because I, just as everything that is out of the ordinary, provoke some kind of sympathy, a desire to know me better, to get closer, to solve a mystery, and finally, to share their findings with their friends, family, acquaintances… […] but only until they reach the goal of entertaining their friends with a spectacle of a creature, who has crossed the boundary of ordinariness, and after that they start to gossip and tell stories….)

The trouble with third visits seems to stem from the conflict between the hosts' expectations—anticipating the appearance of the famous cross–dressed Cavalry Maiden—and the reality of Aleksandrov's much more ambiguous, and therefore unsettling, gender presentation. Rejecting

[46] Ibid., p. 443.

the 'lionized' cross–dressed identity of the Cavalry Maiden, and attending society functions as cornet Aleksandrov, he refused to 'выступить напоказ' ('perform on display').[47] Aleksandrov's refusal to perform his gender, rather than just live it, as he was accustomed to in his army days, meant he quickly lost his social currency – not underpinned by continuous performance, his status of 'curiosity' alone could not sustain his novelty past the third encounter. As theorist Majorie Garber points out, each occurrence of cross-dressing, or instances of transvestism, in social and cultural practice exposes the 'constructedness of [binary] gender categories', as well as their performative nature.[48] As an embodied reminder that gender categories are fluid, Aleksandrov's presence, unmediated by social performance of a carnevalesque *kavalerist-devitsa* persona, was too unsettling for the rigidly gendered spaces of the St Petersburg drawing rooms. The passages, quoted above, demonstrate that Aleksandrov's mere presence undermined the binary 'heterosexual matrix'[49] that structured the social life in the capital, dividing leisure activities and social duties between the two genders.

[47] Ibid., p. 414.

[48] Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (Routledge: New York, London, 1992), p. 5, 10. Garber discusses Aleksandrov case briefly in 'Notes', as the author of 'The Cavalry Maiden', the journal of a cross-dressed woman in the Polish army during the Napoleonic wars' (p. 395).

[49] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminist and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge: New York and London, 2006), p. 7. For a critique of Butler's approaches to queering sexuality in relation to transgender subjects, see Jay Prosser, 'Judith Butler: Queer Feminist, Transgender and the Transubstantiation of Sex', in Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality (Columbia University Press: NY, 1998), pp. 21-61.

Introspective and detailed, Aleksandrov's first-person account of the challenges of non-heteronormative fame gives us a unique opportunity to examine the mechanics of queer celebrity at a significant moment in Russian cultural and literary history. Aiming to build a literary career at a time when it was still almost impossible in Russia to earn a living through literary work, Aleksandrov relied on his reputation as 'curiosity' to increase the commercial potential of his writing. In the end, Aleksandrov's efforts and socialising, however troublesome, paid off. Building on the success of *Zapiski*, in 1837–1840 he published a few successful novellas in prominent Russian journals, among them *Biblioteka dlia chteniia* (*The Library for Reading*) and *Otechestvennye zapiski* (*Notes of the Fatherland*).[50] These were popular enough to be brought out as separate editions, including a reprint of an expanded version of *Zapiski kavalerist–devitsy* and a four–volume edition of collected works, both in 1839.[51] This was, however, a period of Russian literary history when even the most successful of authors often found themselves in dire financial straights,[52] and by 1840s Aleksandrov

[50] For more on the literary marketplace Aleksandrov was navigating at the time, see Melissa Frazier, *Romantic Encounters: Writers, Readers and 'The Library for Reading'* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 15–47.

[51] Aleksandr Aleksandrov (Durova), *Zapiski Aleksandrova (Durovoi). Dobavlenie k devitsy–kavaelrist* (St Petersburg: Tipografiia Nikolaiia Stepanova, 1839); Aleksandr Aleksandrov (Durova), *Povesti i rasskazy* (St Petersburg: Tipografiia shtaba otdel'nogo korpusa vnutrennei strazhi, 1839).

[52] For more on the history of commercialization of the literary profession in Russia, see Reitblat, *Kak Pushkin v genii vyshel*, pp. 191–204; or William Mills Todd III, *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin: Ideology, Institutions, and Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 45–106.

returned to Elabuga for good to live close to his family. Once there, he retired from public life and stopped writing fiction. The only surviving photograph, dating from the 1860s, shows Aleksandrov still in male attire and official records, such as the record of death, suggest he continued to live his life as cornet Aleksandrov.[53] This final documented transition suggests that, whatever the pitfalls of queer celebrity, Aleksandrov had found a way to reconcile the two sides of his identity that were split by fame—private and public.

Investigating the history of queer celebrity in Russia is by now a pressing issue, both academically and politically. In 2013, the Russian government passed a law 'against propaganda of homosexualism, lesbianism, bisexuality, [and] transgender', effectively banning any mention of non–heteronormative sexualities in public discourse.[54] Since then, the role of any queer celebrity in Russia is by necessity a political one since this 'gay propaganda law', as it is popularly known, literally prohibits their presence in the public cultural space. Another consequence of this law (and the conservative cultural discourse that it promotes) had been a recasting of Russian cultural history to demonstrate the enduring power of 'traditional values'. The significant discursive overlap between government–sponsored writings on this topic with the language of cultural policies of the late 1980s suggests that the 'traditional values' as they are now discussed in contemporary Russia have more in the common with late Soviet culture

[53] Reproduced in *Russkaia starina*, 8, 1891, p. 394; records cit. in I. Yudina, 'Zhenshchina-voin i pisatel'nitsa', *Russkaia literatura*, 2 (1963), 130–35 (p. 132).

[54] Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 2. On problematic translations of the title of this law into English, see specifically Healey, *Russian Homophobia*, p. 213. On recent legacies of this law, see a cluster of articles 'Illegal Queerness: Russian Culture and Society in the Age of the "Gay Propaganda" Law', ed. by Roman Utkin, *Russian Review*, 80.1 (2021), 7–99.

than with the actual history of sexuality in Russia.[55] Case studies of pre-twentieth-century queer celebrities like Aleksandrov illustrate the complex nature of social attitudes to sexuality, increase the visibility of non-heteronormative subjects in the history of Russian culture and correct a mistaken impression that queer narratives are erased from Russian history.

[55] On queer visibility in contemporary Russia and the discourse of 'traditional values', see Emil Edenborg, 'Russia's Spectacle of "Traditional Values": Rethinking the Politics of Visibility', *[Online] International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 21.1 (2019), 106–26; *Na pereput'e: metodologiia, teoriiia i praktika LGBT i kvir–issledovanii, Sbornik statei*, ed. by Aleksandr Kondakov (St Petersburg: Tsentr nezavisimykh sotsologicheskikh issledovanii, 2014), pp. 55–116.