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Narrating Political Imprisonment in Tsarist Russia: Bakunin, Goethe, Hegel

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How have modern cultures of dissent learnt to narrate the experience of political imprisonment? From 1851 to 1853, M. A. Bakunin was incarcerated in St Petersburg's Peter and Paul Fortress. Here, the "father of Russian anarchism" wrote what has become known as his Confession: an account of his personal and political development, penned in the most notorious prison of the Russian autocracy at the behest of the tsar. Previous scholarship has focused entirely on the content of this peculiar text. The present article is the first to mobilize extensive archival research—on its carceral conditions of production and intellectual conditions of possibility—in order to understand the form of Bakunin's Confession. Doing so reveals the text as one of the first Russian Bildungsromane: the birth of a genre whereby the imprisoned self became legible through a new epistemology of self and history between Goethe and Hegel. Excavating the nature and afterlives of this novel political aesthetics provides original insights into the "politicization" of state incarceration in European history, the origins of modern Russian autobiographics, and the construction of the radical self.

I. Introduction

"In the city there is perfect quiet, and, thank God, everything is alright. May God keep you well." Thus begins a dispatch from the chief of staff of the Russian gendarmes to Prince A. F. Orlov, the head of the Third Section of His Majesty's Own Chancellery—the tsarist secret police—on 9 May 1851.

It was spring in St Petersburg, the ice had broken on the Neva three weeks before, and the most feared opponent of the Russian autocracy was being transported to the capital in chains. The letter goes on to read, "I notified Nabokov [the commandant of the Peter and Paul Fortress] regarding the imminent delivery of Bakunin, and asked that everything be prepared for his arrival. In the meantime, I sent four more hands so that this bandit could be taken directly to the fortress."¹ This "bandit" was Mikhail Bakunin, the father of Russian anarchism. Arrested in

¹GARF f. 109, op. 3a, d. 3209 ("Zapiska dlia svedeniia' o privoze Bakunina iz-za granitsy i zakliuchenii ego v Alekseevskom raveline ..."), ll. 2–2ob. The mentioned letter to Nabokov, commanding him to take "all necessary precautions" with this dangerous prisoner, can be found at RGIA f. 1280, op. 5, d. 326 ("Delo kantseliarii komandanta po Alekseevskomu Ravelinu. Po Vysochaishemu povelenniu o zakliuchenii prestupnika *Bakunina* v Alekseevskii Ravelin"), l. 2. Note that this I. A. Nabokov—Commandant of the Peter and Paul Fortress from 1849 to 1852, during the imprisonment of F. M. Dostoevsky, M. A. Bakunin, and others—was the great-uncle of writer Vladimir Nabokov.

Dresden in 1849 and handed over to the Romanov Empire a year and a half later, he would spend six years in solitary confinement in the autocracy's carceral fortresses before being granted the mercy of Siberian exile.

It is clear from the above dispatch that even as Bakunin was being escorted in chains to the Peter and Paul Fortress in the spring of 1851, there was still a sense of anxiety—indeed, incomprehension—surrounding this notorious political offender. The use of the term “bandit” (*razboinik*) by the tsarist security apparatus is especially out of joint: it locates Bakunin within the tradition of early modern peasant revolts, an anachronistic term for this itinerant European revolutionary.

These high tsarist officials were still grasping for the words through which to understand the new threat Bakunin represented to the Russian autocracy. Little did they know that this “bandit” had already assembled a new language capable of narrating the experience of modern subjecthood-in-revolt—and that he would soon put this novel machinery into practice in the most notorious prison of the tsarist regime, by the very invitation of the emperor himself.

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This article is a reconsideration of the history of modern political imprisonment and radical self-narration through the figure of M. A. Bakunin.

When and how did imprisonment first become “political”? Only recently have studies of state incarceration begun to shift away from structuralist, top-down discussions of disciplinary regimes to examine the cultural and intellectual histories of modernity's carceral spaces.² Key to this turn has been a renewed interest in agency: the ways in which imprisoned subjects have directly shaped their experiences of confinement. In this new approach, the historical politicization of the prison is not merely the result of state classification and interpolation.³ Imprisonment became political through the development of “a politics *of* and *in* the prison”—that is, when dissident actors first learned to see carceral sites as stages for the continuation of their struggles, when they learned to “produce politics in the cell.”⁴

From the beginning of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth, no government in the world incarcerated state offenders at a magnitude approaching that of the Romanov autocracy.⁵ We lack, however, sustained inquiries into the development of radical Russian practices of imprisonment: how revolutionary political cultures first learned to contest the space of the imperial cell.

²Pivotal works here include Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862–1940* (Berkeley, 2001); and—in the field of Eastern and Central European history—Anna Müller, *If the Walls Could Speak: Inside a Women's Prison in Communist Poland* (New York, 2018); Padraic Kenney, *Dance in Chains: Political Imprisonment in the Modern World* (New York, 2017); and Judith Pallot and Laura Piacentini, *Gender, Geography, and Punishment: The Experience of Women in Carceral Russia* (Oxford, 2012).

³That is, the optics classically pioneered in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1995).

⁴Kenney, *Dance in Chains*, 3, 11, original emphasis.

⁵Aryeh Neier, “Confining Dissent: The Political Prison,” in Norval Morris and David J. Rothman, eds., *The Oxford History of the Prison* (Oxford, 1995), 390–425, at 394–6.

But we must be careful in choosing our starting point for such a history. While the recent “turn to agency” in carceral studies is surely aided by cataloging dissident prison practices, this must be coupled with an analysis of the underlying *conceptual terrain* that allowed these subversive repertoires to grow and flourish. That is, in order for the prison cell to host radical politics, it first had to be understood as a space capable of doing so. Our carceral histories must engage not just with the concrete subversion of modernity’s prisons, but also with the larger discursive shifts that made this possible. Just as modern state disciplinary practices possess particular genealogies, so too do radical contestations of political imprisonment hold their own intellectual histories. Following this thread, the necessary corollary to the question “when did imprisonment become political?” is “when did the modern experience of imprisonment first become *politically legible*?”

With this in mind, let us note that the first mass political arrest in modern Russian history—following the failed Decembrist Revolt of 1825—possessed no genre through which to understand state incarceration. Yuri Lotman noted that the Decembrists’ greatest tragedy was their lack of “literary models”: their inability to represent the imprisoned self in their Peter and Paul Fortress cells.⁶ However, by 1924, Maxim Gorky would remark, “every Russian who has spent a month in a political prison ... considers it their sacred duty to gift Russia with a book of memoirs.”⁷ In the intervening century, something had radically changed. The tsarist prison cell had been transformed from a space of illegibility into a site of radical autobiographics.

Indeed, in the nineteenth century the political prisons of the Russian autocracy became thoroughly semanticized spaces for revolutionary political cultures. In my research, I have collected and analyzed over one hundred accounts of Peter and Paul Fortress imprisonment alone from this period. Although widely varying in their modes of production and distribution—from private notes and curtailed accounts during brief thaws in the tsarist censorship regime, to the widely translated memoirs of V. F. Figner and P. Kropotkin—they share a set of common characteristics.

They comprise a distinct narratological genre—each partakes in a common rhetorical fund, with shared tropes, images, and structures. They speak with one another—each does not undertake to write the prison anew, but tackles state confinement through the examples of past revolutionaries and their memoirs. And finally, they elevate an active, heroic narrator—each rejects an image of passive victimhood by locating the experience of incarceration within a larger story of personal growth and a larger terrain of historico-political struggle. If our new carceral histories seek not only to document subversive practices but also to grasp the wider discursive and intellectual changes that made contestation possible, then it is clear that the development of the prison memoir genre in the nineteenth century was a crucial element in making confinement politically legible.

In studies of modern incarceration, prison memoirs have not been overlooked. However, they have been used primarily as raw material—sources of empirical

⁶Ju. M. Lotman, “The Decembrist in Everyday Life,” trans. C. R. Pike, in Ann Shukman, ed., *The Semiotics of Russian Culture* (Ann Arbor, 1984), 71–123, at 96.

⁷Maksim Gor’kii, “V. I. Lenin,” in Gor’kii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Moscow, 1952), 17: 5–46, at 24.

information or funds of narrative color. If we instead recognize them as forming a distinct politico-aesthetic genre whose mid-nineteenth-century appearance was crucial to dissident experiences of imprisonment, then a set of important new questions appears. What were the concrete and conceptual conditions through which the memoir first entered the tsarist prison? What was it about this novel genre that lent it so well to the narration of political confinement?

And with these questions, we regain step alongside M. A. Bakunin. There is no worthier Virgil to guide us through the early history of the modern prison memoir. Incarcerated in the Alekseevskii Ravelin of the Peter and Paul Fortress in 1851, Bakunin would pen one of the most curious texts in the history of European prison letters. Given the opportunity to write in solitary confinement, he enacted a startling new genre of self-narration predicated upon a novel political epistemology of self and history. In doing so, he was instrumental in demonstrating how modern dissident actors could read and write their lives within the cell.

In what follows, I explore the political imprisonment of Bakunin with two goals in mind. The first is to engage with his fortress writing as a crucial moment in the development of a new genre of the self—to explore the particularities of his textual labor alongside a genealogy of the original conceptual constellation that made it possible. From here, I widen the lens to broader histories of dissident self-narration and prison legibility, exploring what Bakunin's early carceral autobiography tells us about larger stories of prison agency and radical selfhood. Thus this study is intended not only as a corrective to the curious lack of scholarly attention given to Bakunin's role in European intellectual history.⁸ It also seeks to offer a new vision of the history of modern political imprisonment, the origins of modern Russian autobiographics, the afterlives of Goethe and Hegel, and the nature of nineteenth-century dissident subjectivity: how an intelligentsia-in-becoming first claimed carceral spaces as legible stages of radical selfhood and revolutionary history.

II. M. A. Bakunin's *Wanderjahre*

The early life of Bakunin is well known. Born of a wealthy landowning family in the province of Tver', his young years were a foment of intellectual activity among the philosophical circles of Moscow.⁹ He first came to the attention of the tsarist regime in 1844 for his failure to return to Russia after a period of study in Berlin.

⁸For all the global significance of his words and deeds, the figure of Bakunin has been strangely peripheralized by the historical discipline. In the Soviet Union, Bakunin studies became ideologically impossible from the 1930s onward—the most exhaustive historical work on Bakunin remains his *Collected Works and Letters*, edited by old Bolshevik Iu. M. Steklov and published by the All-Union Society of Former Political Prisoners and Exiles from 1934 to 1935. Indicatively, only four of the thirty planned volumes were released before the project was halted and the society purged in 1935. See M. A. Bakunin, *Sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, ed. Iu. M. Steklov, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1934–5). The majority of Anglo-American scholarship tends towards political biography. One exception is the work of John Randolph, whose groundbreaking study of Bakunin's early years is also a highly original spatio-intellectual history of Russian Idealism. See John Randolph, *The House in the Garden: The Bakunin Family and the Romance of Russian Idealism* (Ithaca, 2007).

⁹See Randolph, *The House in the Garden*; Aileen Kelly, *Mikhail Bakunin: A Study in the Psychology and Politics of Utopianism* (New York, 1982), 1–75; and E. H. Carr, *Michael Bakunin* (New York, 1937), 3–93.

Remaining illegally in Central Europe, Bakunin's revolutionary political commitments found embodiment in the growing discontent of the urban classes and the rising nationalist energies of Slavic minorities. Upon the outbreak of revolution, Bakunin chased the tide of 1848 across Europe: attending meetings, delivering speeches, and mounting barricades from Paris to Prague. It was after a failed uprising in Dresden that the Prussian authorities arrested Bakunin in May 1849. Following a period of incarceration in the fortress prison of Königstein (the "Saxon Bastille"), the Prussians sentenced him to death—however, in June 1850 the Austrian Empire also demanded his extradition. With "his head disputed by two emperors," he soon found himself facing another execution, this time by the Hapsburgs.¹⁰

In the last act of this theatre of trans-European gendarmerie (cruelly mirroring Bakunin's own radical internationalist ambitions), the prisoner was now demanded in turn by the Russian tsar. In the spring of 1851, the viceroy of the kingdom of Poland was able to secure the handing over of Bakunin from the Austrian to the Russian Empire in Krakow.¹¹ By direct order of Tsar Nicholas I, Bakunin was placed in chains and transported over the border by six gendarmes and one gendarme officer.¹² On the afternoon of 11 May 1851, Bakunin arrived in St Petersburg and was immediately taken to the Peter and Paul Fortress. The emperor was promptly informed by letter: his triumphant scribble—"Finally!" (*Nakonets!*)—is preserved in the epistle's margins.¹³ Fortress commandant Nabokov placed Bakunin in cell number five of the secret prison of the Alekseevskii Ravelin, where the radical would spend the next three years of his life in solitary confinement.¹⁴

Recorded in the archives of the Alekseevskii Ravelin is a long inventory of Bakunin's possessions, taken immediately upon his arrival.¹⁵ From its scattered materials, we can glean a few impressions of this moment of fortress imprisonment. Besides items of clothing and personal comfort—a black frock coat and tailcoat with silk linings, twelve white handkerchiefs, 125 cigars—we also find artifacts of the meandering geographical and intellectual journey that had brought him to his prison cell. His possessions are studded with a hodgepodge of foreign currencies: fifty-five Prussian thalers; złoty and groshen; dozens of guilder and kreuzer from the Austrian Empire.¹⁶ This small international horde is a prime material manifestation of what I call the "perverse cosmopolitanism" of the Peter and Paul Fortress: the fact that the dark interior of the most notorious tsarist dungeon

¹⁰This turn of phrase comes from Victor Serge, "La confession de Bakounine," quoted in Bakunin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 4: 420–21.

¹¹For the arrangement of this transfer, see GARF f. 109, op. 18 (1843)(1st Expedition), d. 116, ch. 2 ("Ob otstavnom Praporshchik Mikhaile Bakunine. Chast' 2-ia. O peredache ego Avstriiskim Pravitel'stvom v nashi predely i o zakliuchenii v krepost'"), ll. 3, 3ob, 4.

¹²On shackling Bakunin see *ibid.*, ll. 3, 3ob, 4. His military escort would be decorated for their service; see *ibid.*, ll. 27, 28, 29, 29ob, 30, 31, 31ob, etc.

¹³*Ibid.*, l. 22.

¹⁴RGIA f. 1280, op. 5, d. 326, ll. 3, 4, 4ob; GARF f. 109, op. 18 (1843)(1st Expedition), d. 116, ch. 2, ll. 21, 22.

¹⁵RGIA f. 1280, op. 5, d. 327 ("O zakliuchenii v onyi: Bakunina, Sinitsina, i Grebnishchogo i o zakliuchennom Leonov"), ll. 3, 3ob, 4a.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, ll. 4b, 4b ob, 4v, 4v ob.

existed in practice as one of the most outward-looking spaces of the Russian Empire.

We also find recorded a few tantalizing hints of his intellectual life at the time. Towards the bottom of his inventory are listed a series of foreign-language books: six in German, six in French, four in English, and a French Bible.¹⁷ Unfortunately, due to the monolingualism of the warden, the titles of these works are not recorded.

However, this does not mean that we lack knowledge of the textual life that Bakunin carried within himself. An extraordinary event from the earliest days of his imprisonment gives us remarkable insight into the ideas that Bakunin smuggled into the space of the Peter and Paul Fortress—intellectual coordinates that would, I will argue, revolutionize the experience of political incarceration in tsarist Russia.

III. The Confession

In the first months of his imprisonment—most likely at the beginning of July—Bakunin received an unlikely visitor in his cell: Prince Orlov, head of the Third Section. Orlov was there to relate a request from Tsar Nicholas I himself. Many years later, Bakunin would describe this extraordinary encounter in a letter to Aleksandr Herzen: “Two months or so after my arrival, Count [*sic*] Orlov appeared before me in the name of the tsar: ‘the Sovereign sent me to you and has ordered me to say: ‘tell him to write to me, as a spiritual son to his spiritual father.’” Would you like to write?”¹⁸ Thus arose one of the most curious textual productions in the history of the modern prison. Given ink and paper, Bakunin spent the next month furiously writing what is known as his *Confession (Ispoved’)* to the tsar.¹⁹ Densely composed on ninety-six pages in Bakunin’s small, messy hand, upon completion the document was given to a gendarme scribe who copied it in the clear script of the imperial bureaucracy.²⁰ On 13 August 1851 this was passed on to the emperor, who read it with great avidity: his extensive marginal notes have been preserved in the archives of the Third Section. After finishing Bakunin’s *Confession*, Nicholas I immediately presented it to Prince Orlov to read, recommending it to the head of the Third Section as “highly curious and instructive” (*ves’ma liubopytno i pouchitel’no*).²¹

“YOUR IMPERIAL MAJESTY, MOST GRACIOUS SOVEREIGN!” begins this strange text. “What shall I say to the terrible Russian Tsar, to the dread

¹⁷Record as: “German-language books—4 ... Unbound French-language books—3; Unbound English-language books—2; French-language books in their binding—3; English-language books in their binding—2; German-language books in their binding—2; A French-language Bible—1.” See *Ibid.*, ll. 4a.

¹⁸M. A. Bakunin to Aleksandr Herzen, 8 Dec. 1860, in Bakunin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 4: 359–69. Orlov’s request is confirmed in an internal report from 1856, held in the archives of the Third Section. See GARF f. 109, op. 18 (1843)(1st Expedition), d. 116, ch. 2, ll. 282–286ob.

¹⁹While Bakunin’s letter to the tsar is not itself titled a “confession,” this is the term with which both autocratic officials and Bakunin himself would later refer to it.

²⁰Both the original text and the scribal copy are preserved in the State Archive of the Russian Federation: the former at GARF f. 825, op. 1, d. 297 (“‘Ispoved’” Bakunina M.A. Nikolaiu I. Podlinnik, kopia s pometkami Nikolaia I, mashinopisnye kopi, granki”), ll. 2–49ob, the latter at *ibid.*, ll. 51–207ob.

²¹GARF f. 825, op. 1, d. 297, l. 50. A copy was also given to the chairman of the State Council and the viceroy of Poland; see Bakunin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 4: 418; and GARF f. 109, op. 18 (1843)(1st Expedition), d. 116, ch. 2, ll. 75–75ob.

Guardian and zealous Upholder of the laws?”²² Bakunin begins by announcing his intention to make a full, spiritual confession—but one uncoated by flattery or supplication. After this opening *captatio benevolentiae*, Bakunin goes on to narrate the story of his life.

What is the historian of modern Russia to make of this “highly curious” document? We should note that its format was not entirely unprecedented: the early modern Russian legal system had fostered an informal system of petition writing, often used by incarcerated subjects to narrate their past actions and intentions.²³ However, as we shall see, Bakunin brought something entirely novel to this practice: a traditional format was imbued with very modern conceptual concerns.

These fissures are first felt in the text’s surface dualism. The anarchist’s style is rooted in formal deference—however, constantly present is a refusal to obfuscate, and in this rests a willful possession of thought and deed. Bakunin uses the ceremonial forms required when addressing the tsar, but just the same does not hesitate to tell Nicholas I of his intention to overthrow the autocracy.

There is only one thing that Bakunin refuses to relate—the names and activities of his compatriots—and there are only two things he asks; that he be allowed to see his family, and that “if a criminal’s plea can touch the heart of YOUR IMPERIAL MAJESTY, SIRE, do not order me to rot in eternal fortress imprisonment!”²⁴ Bakunin’s approach to the practice of “confessing” was met with great disapproval from Tsar Nicholas I. In the margins he wrote “precisely by this he destroys all confidence: if he feels all the weight of his sins, then only a *pure*, complete confession [*ispoved’*], and not a *conditional* one, can be considered a confession.”²⁵ The emperor found something unpalatable about Bakunin’s text; there was something that did not quite satisfy the expectations of a carceral petition. This “conditionality” informed the tsar’s responsiveness to his prisoner’s requests: while the emperor did authorize strictly controlled visits from Bakunin’s family, he decided that the rebel was too dangerous to be released from the Peter and Paul Fortress. Thus would Bakunin remain in his Alekseevskii Ravelin cell for a further three years. Upon the outbreak of the Crimean War, the threat of a British and French military incursion from the Baltic Sea led to the removal of political prisoners from the Peter and Paul Fortress. On 11 March 1854 Bakunin was transported to a cell in the more remote grounds of Shlissel’burg Fortress, where he would spend another three years imprisoned.²⁶ It was not until the spring of 1857—after the death of

²²M. A. Bakunin, *The Confession of Mikhail Bakunin*, trans. Robert C. Howes (Ithaca, 1977), 31–2. All citations from this translation have been checked and altered when necessary with the original text and the authoritative Russian edition: M.A. Bakunin, “Ispoved’ ot iulia-avgusta 1851,” in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 4: 99–207.

²³For discussions of the textual life of the pre-reform tsarist legal system see Nancy Kollman, *Crime and Punishment in Early Modern Russia* (New York, 2012); Richard S. Wortman, *The Development of a Russian Legal Consciousness* (Chicago, 1976); and the late eighteenth-century carceral autobiography of Nikolai Smirnov recently translated in John Mackay, ed., *Four Russian Serf Narratives* (Madison, 2009).

²⁴Bakunin, *The Confession*, 149–50; Bakunin, “Ispoved’,” 4: 206.

²⁵Bakunin, *The Confession*, 33; Bakunin, “Ispoved’,” 4: 101, original emphasis.

²⁶See RGIA f. 1280, op. 5, d. 326, ll. 35, 35ob, 36, 37, 38, 40; GARF f. 109, op. 18 (1843)(1st Expedition), d. 116, ch. 2, ll. 168, 169, 171–172ob, 173–4.

Nicholas I—that Bakunin was granted the “clemency” of Siberian exile, from which he would quickly escape to Western Europe.²⁷

* * *

Besides a brief comment in one of his letters, Bakunin’s *Confession* was never publicly discussed during his lifetime. Its existence was only made known after the fall of the Romanov regime and the opening of the Third Section archives. First discovered by A. Il’inskii in 1919, it provoked an immediate sensation both in the Soviet Union and abroad.²⁸ Then—as until now—scholarly and popular attention was primarily focused on the question of sincerity: did Bakunin really mean what he wrote in his *Confession*?

The political significance of this document is difficult to untangle. While it is unnecessary here to outline the entire history of its reception, we can note that opinions immediately fell into two warring camps: those who took the *Confession* as a sign of capitulation or even a betrayal of the revolutionary cause, and those who saw it as a piece of strategic dissemblance, a “Machiavellian masterpiece.”²⁹ The debate was fanned by the political climate of the 1920s, where the question of Bakunin’s legacy and moral character was turned into a referendum on the viability of a European anarchist tradition increasingly finding itself in conflict with ascendant Bolshevism. While positions have nuanced with time, scholarly interest in the *Confession* continues to revolve around what Bakunin may or may not have intended, and how this reflects on his psychological and political biography.³⁰

But are there more interesting questions we can ask of Bakunin’s *Confession*? Curiously, the *structure* of this prison document—the formal nature of this text—has been almost entirely overlooked in speculations on its underlying intentionality. However, I will argue that the historical significance of Bakunin’s *Confession* lies, in fact, in its form—in its aesthetics. Let us turn now to an analysis of the *Confession*’s genre, bracketing the question of reception until the end of the present inquiry.

IV. Political imprisonment and the *Bildungsroman*

What is the genre of the *Confession*? Perhaps investigation into the form of this text has been prematurely halted by its title. The idea of a confession—written by a

²⁷GARF f. 109, op. 18 (1843)(1st Expedition), d. 116, ch. 3 (“Ob otstavnom Praporshchik Mikhaile Bakunine. Chast 3-ia. Ob osvobozhdenii ego iz kreposti i ob otravlenii v Sibir’ na poselenie”), ll. 8, 8ob, 37, 37ob, 45.

²⁸A. Il’inskii, “Ispoved’ M. A. Bakunina,” *Vestnik Literatura* 10 (1919). Note that Il’inskii’s initial piece only contained selections from the text. Complete versions were published in 1921 and 1923; see V. Polonskii, ed., *Ispoved’ i pis’mo Aleksandru II* (Moscow, 1921); and Polonskii, ed., *Materialy dlia biografii M. Bakunina*, 3 vols. (Moscow and Petrograd/Leningrad, 1923–33), 1: 100–248. The existence of Bakunin’s *Confession* was first brought to the awareness of non-russophone readers by Victor Serge in 1921; see Victor Serge, “Bakunins ‘Bekennitnis,’” *Das Forum* 9 (June 1921), 373–80; and Serge, “La Confession de Bakounine,” *Bulletin communiste*, 22 December 1921, 941–3.

²⁹V. Polonskii, “Michael Bakunin und seine ‘Beichte,’” in Kurt Kersten, ed., *Michael Bakunins Beichte aus der Peter-Pauls Festung an Zar Nikolaus I.: Gefunden im Geheimschrank des Chefs der III. Abteilung der Kanzlei der früheren Zaren zu Leningrad* (Berlin, 1926), xix–xxviii.

³⁰See, for example, Kelly, *Mikhail Bakunin*, 140–46.

“spiritual son to his spiritual father”—easily shrouds itself in a theological veil: casting this document as a timeless, inner effusion rather than a historical and aesthetic artifact.

However, upon closer reading, what strikes us is the essential “timeliness” of the *Confession*. It is clear why this document did not satisfy the tsar: Bakunin is far more interested in the question of history—both personal and political—than he is in a traditional enumeration of sins. After his introductory appellation, Bakunin immediately sets out to narrate the path that had led him to the position of a political renegade in a tsarist dungeon. Beginning with the education of his youth, he relates to the emperor the arc of his personal, political, and intellectual development. It is, in fact, a narrative of Russian and European history from the early 1830s to the end of the 1840s, as experienced by and mediated through the life of one of its actors.

The content of the work itself has been well covered; what we are interested in here is its form.³¹ Structurally, the work is constructed around a series of stages. A particular mode of life arises out of inner impetus and outer stimuli, flowers, and then falls into conflict with the circumstances of the world. Through their clash, both terms are sublated—Bakunin as striving subject is forced to reconsider the ways in which both the individual and the world act upon one another, and new pathways of activity and thought spring into being. It is through this dynamic that Bakunin narrates to Tsar Nicholas I the major turning points of his life: his initial exuberance towards German metaphysics, his first travels abroad during which he “abandoned philosophy and threw [himself] into politics,”³² his dawning national consciousness and involvement with pan-Slavism, and his activities during the European revolutions of 1848–9. The driving motor of Bakunin’s *Confession* is the relationship—contradictory, yet productive—between the individual and history. “I realized,” he philosophizes at one point, “that history has a mysterious movement of its own [*svoi sobstvennyi, tainstvennyi khod*]. This movement is logical, although it is often at variance with the logic of the world; it is salutary, although it does not always correspond to our personal wishes.”³³

It is no wonder that Tsar Nicholas I found something “highly curious” in this text. The outward garb of a confession hides a tale of both personal and world-historical development, as Bakunin mediates between his individual growth and the sociopolitical questions of his moment. Herein lies the key to the genre of the *Confession*. I argue that it must be viewed as a *Bildungsroman*: the genre of personal and historical development that was only beginning to work its way into Russia during this period. The traditional vehicle of a prisoner’s petition to the state was made to carry within itself a radically modern narrative form.

Such a claim is supported not only by literary analysis, but also by Bakunin’s own words. In the winter of 1860, after his release from fortress imprisonment, he posted a letter from the Siberian city of Irkutsk to his friend and intellectual

³¹For summaries of the narrative content and events described in Bakunin’s *Confession* see Polonskii, “Michael Bakunin und seine ‘Beichte’”; Iu. M. Steklov, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin, ego zhizni i deiatel’nost’*, 3 vols. (Moscow, 1926–7); and Kelly, *Mikhail Bakunin*.

³²Bakunin, *The Confession*, 35; Bakunin, “Ispoved’,” 4: 103.

³³Bakunin, *The Confession*, 86; Bakunin, “Ispoved’,” 4: 149. Tsar Nicholas I marked the margins of this section in pencil.

interlocutor Aleksandr Herzen. Having been unable to communicate with him since their last meeting in Paris over a decade ago, Bakunin briefly narrates the recent years of his life. When he arrives at his incarceration in the Peter and Paul Fortress, he describes the production of his *Confession*—the only mention of this text that Bakunin would ever put into writing. Recounting the tsar’s request, he relates,

I thought for a bit and reasoned, that before a *juri*, before an open judicial process I would need to sustain my role to the end, but in these four walls, in the claws of the bear, I could temper my form without shame. I thus demanded a month of time, agreed, and actually wrote a sort of confession [*rod ispovedi*], something along the lines of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.³⁴

The text Bakunin refers to here is the memoir of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth*—an “autobiography of development” by the founder of the modern European “novel of development.”

What does it mean for us to recognize this direct inspiration of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*—the irruption of *Bildungsroman* self-narration in 1851 within the secret political prison of the tsarist regime? In itself, this represents a pivotal moment in the intellectual life of Bakunin, as well as in the history of the Peter and Paul Fortress as a site of textual production. However, its significance goes even further. To understand the radical novelty of this act, let us now move to locate the *Confession* within a genealogy of the Russian *Bildungsroman* and its new conception of the historical subject. Doing so reveals a prehistory of intelligentsia *Bildung* in Russia, in which a pre-imprisonment Bakunin personally played a central role. While elements of this story are known, taking Bakunin’s prison writing as a starting point allows us to make a series of new interventions into the intellectual history of this period. I will argue that the *Confession* was one of the earliest appearances of modern *Bildungsroman* self-narration in Russia: one of the first texts to embody the original articulation of Goethean apprenticeship and Hegelian phenomenology that I see as the genre’s core. Following these threads gives us a new history of how Bakunin helped inaugurate a novel political aesthetics—possessing a new epistemological terrain of self and history—that would go on to revolutionize both the experience of imprisonment and the very notion of the dissident subject in nineteenth-century Russia.

V. The subject of *Bildung* in modern Russia

Goethe’s *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811–33) is a *Bildungs*-memoir—the author’s tale of his own youth, which traces his emotional, spiritual, and intellectual growth from childhood to budding maturity. In this way, it is a companion text to his earlier *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795–6) and *William Meister’s Journeyman Years* (1821–9). These novelistic depictions of a modern individual’s personal and social development are widely recognized as the origin of the European *Bildungsroman*.

³⁴M. A. Bakunin to Aleksandr Herzen, 8 Dec. 1860, in Bakunin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 4: 366.

While Goethe's wider writings were passionately received in Russia—starting from the first Russian-language translation of the tragic drama *Clavigo* in 1780, passing through a period of “Werther fever,” and continuing with the lasting influence of *Faust* through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—his tales of development were limited to a select audience.³⁵ *Dichtung und Wahrheit* was published in Russian only in 1878, as part of a ten-volume edition of his collected works.³⁶ *Wilhelm Meister* was also translated relatively late: although small extracts were variously published in Russian periodicals, a complete version did not appear until 1870.³⁷

Thus, for more than a half-century after their publication, Goethe's *Bildungs*-texts were only available in the original German, limiting their consumption primarily to university students and the nobility. However, its restricted reception in Russia was more than made up for by its passionate readership—which included, in the 1830s, a young Mikhail Bakunin. It is clear that in his youth Bakunin read both *Wilhelm Meister* and *Dichtung und Wahrheit* in German, and was greatly affected by them. Goethe appears in Bakunin's letters as early as 1835, when the twenty-one-year-old was taking his first independent intellectual steps in the philosophical circles of Moscow.³⁸ Over the next few years, Bakunin's youthful interlocutor V. G. Belinskii had cause to mention how Bakunin “was in raptures over *Wilhelm Meister*,” seeing in it a “life revelation” (*otkrovenie zhizni*).³⁹

What was it about these narratives that inspired such a passionate reception? It was, in a word, *Bildung*: the concept of development in Goethe's prose entailed a revolutionary new articulation of the modern subject in the world.

I see the conceptual history of *Bildung* in Russia as having been first articulated along two separate trajectories. The term entered the Russian intellectual lexicon at the end of the eighteenth century through the works of Johann Gottfried Herder and his followers.⁴⁰ Herder popularized the idea of human peoples not as entities organized abstractly across a static geographical and temporal plane, but rather as dynamic communities following organic pathways of development along a historical continuum. This represented a fundamental shift in the way in which European Romanticism viewed the lives of nations and peoples. Indeed, the Russian term *obrazovanie* (“development” or “education”) was coined by analogy with Herderian *Bildung*, with both words rooted in the term for “form” or “image”

³⁵See V. M. Zhirmunskii, *Gete v Russkoi literature* (Leningrad, 1982), 30, 23–41, 410–32; and Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky's Russia* (Ithaca, 1997), esp. 1–19.

³⁶Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sobranie sochinenii Gete v perevoде russkikh pisatelei*, ed. I. V. Gerbert, 10 vols. (St Petersburg, 1878–80); as described in Zhirmunskii, *Gete*, 433.

³⁷See Zhirmunskii, *Gete*, 378–9.

³⁸In a letter to his sister from March 1835, Bakunin first relates that he has moved in with Nikolai Stankevich, and then, “We are reading German writers together: Goethe, Jean Paul Richter, Hoffman, etc.” Quoted in Zhirmunskii, *Gete*, 181–2.

³⁹V. G. Belinskii to M. A. Bakunin, 10 Sept. 1838, in V. G. Belinskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 13 vols. (Moscow, 1956), 11: 291. This circle even discussed producing a complete translation of the novel for the journal *Otechestvennie zapiski*. See V. G. Belinskii to V. P. Botkin, 16 April 1840, in *ibid.*, 507.

⁴⁰See Lina Steiner, *For Humanity's Sake: The Bildungsroman in Russian Culture* (Toronto, 2011), 4–5.

(*obraz/Bild*).⁴¹ Thus was the thought of Herder responsible for the first articulation of the concept of *Bildung* in Russia: development writ large, in the sphere of the political and the world-historical.⁴²

The second trajectory along which the concept of *Bildung* was first articulated in Russia was less grandiose, but just as radical—that of individual, subjective development. The major impetus here was from the sphere of belletrism: early *Sturm und Drang* Romanticism and the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (especially *Julie, or the New Heloise*, *Émile, or On Education*, and *Les Confessions*). In these texts' focus on the development of the inner subject, they represented "a generally new conception of self" possessing an inner, emotive momentum.⁴³ As such, they were instrumental in effecting a sea change from the Enlightenment's more static visions of individual character to an early Romantic vocation for sentiment and cultivation.⁴⁴

Thus did two understandings of *Bildung*—as world-historical and as personal development—enter the conceptual paraphernalia of Russian thought in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, as of yet these threads were still disarticulated. The radical innovation of the Goethean *Bildungs*-text lay in uniting these two strands.

* * *

In the short preface to *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe explicates his philosophy of writing the human self:

For the chief goal of biography appears to be this: to present the subject in his temporal circumstances, to show how these both hinder and help him, how he uses them to construct his view of man and the world [*wie er sich eine Welt- und Menschenansicht daraus gebildet*], and how he, providing he is an artist, poet, or author, mirrors them again for others.⁴⁵

⁴¹Ibid., 4 n. 7. The concept of *Bildung/obrazovanie* was held apart from *vospitanie* (a concept also commonly translated as "development") in nineteenth-century Russia, with the latter term signifying a more formal terrain of education that lacked the former's sense of organic totality. The classic nineteenth-century essay on this difference is L. N. Tolstói, "Vospitanie i obrazovanie," in Tolstói, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, ed. V. G. Chertkov, 90 vols. (Moscow, 1936), 8: 211–46.

⁴²This new Herderian vision of history gained widespread purchase in Russia in the 1830s, filtering into official culture through Nicholas I's nationalities policy and the concept of *narodnost'*. See Nathaniel Knight, "Ethnicity, Nationality, and the Masses: *Narodnost'* and Modernity in Pre-Emancipation Russia," in David Hoffman and Yanni Kotsonis, eds., *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices* (London, 2000), 41–66; and Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, "'Nationality' in the State Ideology during the Reign of Nicholas I," *Russian Review* 19/1 (1960), 38–46.

⁴³Huck Gutman, "Rousseau's *Confessions*: A Technology of the Self," in Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self* (London, 1988), 99–120, at 100. For more on the narrated subject in Rousseau see Lydia Ginzburg, *On Psychological Prose*, trans. Judson Rosengrant (Princeton, 1991), 153–94.

⁴⁴Rousseau's novel vision of the human subject as site for continuous, reflective self-cultivation found a steady stream of admirers upon its appearance in Russia. See Steiner, *For Humanity's Sake*, 10–11; Priscilla Meyer, *How the Russians Read the French: Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy* (Madison, 2008); and Thomas Barran, *Russia Reads Rousseau, 1762–1825* (Evanston, 2002).

⁴⁵Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth*, trans. Robert R. Heitner (Princeton, 1987), 17.

For Goethe, the site of the self is a stage of subjective and historical development, where both the individual and the world act upon one another in tandem. In *Wilhelm Meister* and *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, the Herderian and Rousseauian concepts of *Bildung* were wedded in the figure of the historical individual—Goethe represents both the subject and their concrete world as terrains of development, composing (*bilden*) one another in dialogue.⁴⁶

One cannot overstate the radically innovative nature of this aesthetic and epistemological moment. As Erich Auerbach argued, Goethe's work should be seen as "a first attempt to make an individual destiny echo the fullness of contemporary reality."⁴⁷ For Mikhail Bakhtin, "behind the whole of [*Wilhelm Meister*] stands the large, real wholeness of the world in history" for the very first time.⁴⁸

It is thus as a vehicle for a radically original vision of the self in the world that we can understand how Goethe's prose occasioned a "life revelation" for the young Bakunin, and through which we can begin to grasp the new philosophical commitments underlying Bakunin's own prison self-narration.⁴⁹ But there is more to this story. As a Goethean concept of *Bildung* and its novel narrations of the historical

⁴⁶In a lecture at the University of Dorpat in 1819, Karl Morgenstern coined the term *Bildungsroman* precisely in order to understand this new vision of the self in Goethe's literary works: "The task of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*," he remarked, "appears to be nothing else than to depict a human being who develops toward his true nature by means of a collaboration of his inner dispositions with outer circumstances." See Karl Morgenstern and Tobias Boes, "On the Nature of the 'Bildungsroman,'" *PMLA* 124/2 (2009), 656–7.

⁴⁷Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. William Trask (Garden City, 1953), 388.

⁴⁸M. M. Bakhtin, "The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)," in Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin, 1986), 10–59, at 45.

⁴⁹We have clear evidence that the pivotal works discussed here were familiar to Bakunin from his early *Lehrjahre* in Moscow. However: were any of these texts available to Bakunin during his imprisonment? The correspondence between the Third Section and the Peter and Paul Fortress administration reveals that Bakunin was permitted to read "French and German novels; mathematical, physics, [and] geographical [works]; and the newspaper 'Russian Invalid'." RGIA f. 1280, op. 5, d. 326, ll. 38, 40. To which "French and German novels" might Bakunin have had access during his time in the Peter and Paul Fortress? The earliest surviving catalogue of the Alekseevskii Ravelin library dates from 1864. It lists 455 volumes, divided into three categories—those of "Spiritual Content" (189), "Secular Content" (128), and "Various Content" (138). It is the third category that is the most tantalizing for the historian—under this final category is listed simply "[Works] in the German Language—28/In French—105/In English—4/in Hebrew—1." RGIA f. 1280, op. 8, d. 752 ("Delo o sostoiashchikh veshchak i knigakh pri dome Alekseevskogo ravelina"), ll. 60b–80b. Unfortunately, we are thwarted again by the monolingualism of the prison warden. However, we can make some educated guesses regarding these volumes based upon later archival evidence. We know that radical author N. G. Chernyshevsky read many non-Russian texts during his Ravelin imprisonment at the start of the 1860s, including *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. RGIA f. 1280, op. 5, d. 108 ("O zakliuchenii v Alekseevskii raveline raznykh lits"), ll. 300, 300ob. By the early 1880s—just before its closure—the Alekseevskii Ravelin carried a host of foreign belletristic works in Russian translation. This included large collections of Byron, Dickens, Hugo, Dumas, Schiller, and Goethe—the last of these being the recently published ten-volume *Collected Works*, carrying the first complete Russian translation of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. RGIA f. 1280, op. 5, d. 213 ("O vysylke iz Departamentu Gosudarstvennoi Polititsii knig dlia chteniia izvestnomu prestupniku"), ll. 6–9, 24, 30. Thus, during his time in the Alekseevskii Ravelin from 1851 to 1854, it is quite likely that Bakunin had access to some early European tales of development—most likely Rousseau's *Confessions*, and perhaps copies of Goethe in the original as well.

subject flashed upon the Russian intellectual life of the 1830s, the concepts of both “subject” and “history” were under an intense level of scrutiny from a second direction. Goethe’s prose subject was made to labor alongside a new mode of philosophical inquiry sweeping Russia at this time.

The second figure in this changing terrain of historical subjecthood was G. W. F. Hegel, who was being simultaneously discovered by a generation of Russian thinkers. It was in this climate that the *Bildungsroman* immediately suggested itself as the proper attendant aesthetic regime for an ascendant German metaphysics.

VI. Russian Hegelianism: the *Bildungsroman* between metaphysics and prose

The development of Hegelian thought in Russia is well documented in the memoir literature.⁵⁰ In the mid-1830s, an informal philosophical circle developed in Moscow around the aristocrat N. V. Stankevich. In impassioned study of Romantic Idealist philosophy, these young noblemen not only found solutions to the contradictions of Kantian metaphysics—they also found an arena for alternative forms of elite sociability and intellectual exploration outside the reactionary sociopolitical constraints of the Nicolaevan public sphere.

In 1837, Hegelian texts first found their way into the hands of this Stankevich circle, and they were immediately devoured. As Aleksandr Herzen later recalled, “Every insignificant pamphlet published in Berlin or other provincial or district towns of German philosophy was ordered and read to tatters and smudges, and the leaves fell out in a few days, if only there was a mention of Hegel in it.”⁵¹

What Hegel represented for these young thinkers was not only a further refinement of the post-Kantian Idealist project, but also a return to reality from the speculative heights of Fichte and Schelling. These two earlier philosophers had placed immense faith in the ability of the thinking subject to grasp the Real—envisioned by the former as the unbounded activity of an infinite Ego, and by the latter as the organic totality of Nature actualized as Spirit and manifested through human activity. However, Hegel was the first to posit reality as unfolding at the juncture of the developing individual and the developing world. His metaphysical project is thus both deeply personal and grandly world-historical, tracing the dialectical movements of Absolute Spirit as it develops over time in the space of mediation between self and history. For Russian intellectuals of the 1830s, Hegel’s philosophical project was read as a *Bildungsroman* of consciousness, through which for the first time they could trace their own lives entwined within Russian sociopolitical reality.

The early Russian Hegelians took “reality” as the watchword of a new conception of the historical subject: a re-embeddedness in the world after the hermetic activity of earlier German Idealist thought. And while the Stankevich circle became the seedbed for this new philosophical moment, its torchbearer was not

⁵⁰See Aleksandr Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, trans. Constance Garnett, 4 vols. (New York, 1968); and P. V. Annenkov, *The Extraordinary Decade*, trans. Irwin R. Titunik (Ann Arbor, 1968). The best scholarly work on Russian Hegelianism continues to be D. I. Chizhevskii, *Gegel’ v Rossii* (St Petersburg, 2007; first published 1939). For more recent scholarship see *Hegel in Russia*, special issue of *Studies in East European Thought* 65/3–4 (2013).

⁵¹Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 2: 398.

N. V. Stankevich, who by 1837 had left Russia to treat the tuberculosis that would end his life just three years later. The popularizer of Hegelian thought amongst the student circles of Moscow at the end of the 1830s—the first Russian Hegelian—was none other than Mikhail Bakunin.

It was the young Bakunin who first introduced Hegel's "reconciliation with reality" to this circle, and who produced some of the philosopher's earliest Russian translations. In 1838, Bakunin's rendering of Hegel's "School Addresses" was published in the journal *Moskovskii nabliudatel'* and accompanied by a short foreword. Called "the first manifesto of Russian Hegelianism," this was also Bakunin's very first text to ever see publication.⁵² In his introductory remarks, Bakunin traces a history of Western thought whose *telos* is German metaphysics and the philosopher who wields it. In his understanding, the play between materialism and idealism in the past had foreclosed the possibility of organic communion between individual consciousness and actuality. Hegelian thought is held aloft as the solution to this impasse—both insofar as it provides a concept of reality that brings the subject and the world together as a developing unity, and as Hegelianism itself sublates and rises above past knowledge orderings. The preface ends with a call to truly inhabit this position of mediation between the particular and the universal, between subjective will and objective world: "Reconciliation with reality in all respects and in all spheres of life is the first task of the age. Hegel and Goethe were the leaders in this process of reconciliation, in the return from the state of death to life."⁵³

Bakunin's role in the reception of German Idealist thought in Russia is known—however, the present study is an attempt to anchor it in the question of "development" for the first time: to sift this history with an eye for its radical new vision of the historical self between both Hegel and Goethe.⁵⁴ For Bakunin, Hegelian philosophy would provide the theoretical framework through which to understand the subject at the juncture of the individual and history—and Goethe's concept of *Bildung* would offer the genre through which to tell it.

* * *

It is clear that a novel constellation of Hegel and Goethe was crucial to the intellectual history of this period. But how natural was this union? It has often been remarked that Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* can be read as a *Bildungsroman* of consciousness, as it progresses from immediate sense-certainty to absolute knowledge. Indicative here is Franco Moretti's remark that the *Bildungsroman* "is

⁵²See D. I. Chizhevskii, *Gegel' v Rossii*, 115–17.

⁵³Quoted in Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism*, trans. Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka (Stanford, 1979), 119.

⁵⁴The most sophisticated work on the emergence of Russian Hegelianism continues to be that of Lydia Ginzburg, who was the first to recognize the 1830s–1840s as the period when "the question of personality as a historical phenomenon and as an individual psychological unity was first posed in earnest." However, we should note that it is the latter term that receives more attention than the concept of history in Ginzburg's analysis. Furthermore, this rich study of the shift from "romantic consciousness" to psychological realism does not take into account the *Bildungs*-labors of the *Confession*, thus leading Ginzburg to identify Bakunin solely with a pre-Hegelian concept of the subject. See Ginzburg, *On Psychological Prose*, 27–106.

the narrative equivalent of Hegelian thought.”⁵⁵ But if Hegel’s metaphysical practice was truly tied to the novel of development—a connection, we have seen, immediately made by his Russian readers—then the philosopher himself was reticent to admit it. Hegel personally had very few words to spare on the genre of the novel, and those that he did were far from complimentary. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel assigns a trivial place to prose in the development of the arts. For him, the novelistic protagonist seeks “to change the world, to improve it, or at least in spite of it to carve out of it a heaven upon earth” in their period of “apprenticeship.” However, these early conflicts dissolve into resignation—by the story’s end, the subject falls

into harmony with subsisting relationships and their rationality, enters the concatenation of the world, and acquires for himself an appropriate attitude to it. However much he may have quarreled with the world, or been pushed about in it, in most cases at last he gets his girl and some sort of position, marries her, and becomes as good a Philistine as others.⁵⁶

As such, for Hegel the modern novel was a lesser form of art, far below drama in his aesthetic philosophy.

I bring this up here not to charge Bakunin with a misappropriation of Goethe and Hegel in his union of the two. Rather, Hegel’s ambivalence towards the novel already demonstrates some of the fault lines in his conception of the subject, the political, and the world that would condition his further reception in the nineteenth century. Understanding this tension sheds a final ray of light onto our understanding of how the nascent Russian intelligentsia found a new regime of self-narration in the thought of Hegel and Goethe.

VII. Developing the subject: the political aesthetics of Right and Left Hegelianism

The novelistic “philistinism” that Hegel disdainfully described bears a striking resemblance to a particular strand of his reception in mid-nineteenth-century Europe, namely that of what became known as “Right Hegelianism.” In the first decades after Hegel’s death in 1831, the dominant trend in Idealist thought was politically conservative in nature. The dialectic was understood as already accomplished in the present—as a “closed” fact—and contemporary political regimes were to be embraced as rational expressions of the Absolute.⁵⁷

Indeed, this is precisely the way in which young Bakunin first read Hegel alongside Goethe. In its first years, Russian Hegelianism was a Right Hegelianism. In the dictum “the real is the rational and the rational is the real,” Bakunin and Belinsky found an imperative to reconcile themselves with the realities of tsarism.⁵⁸

⁵⁵Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London, 1987), 7.

⁵⁶G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1975), 1: 593.

⁵⁷See John Edward Toews, *Hegelianism: The Path toward Dialectical Humanism, 1805–1841* (Cambridge, 1980), 203–54.

⁵⁸G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. Alan White (Newburyport, 2002), 8. This is especially evidenced in Belinski’s journalistic works from 1839 and 1840, such as V. G. Belinskii, “Borodinskaia

Did the *Bildungsroman* also necessitate a politics of accommodation? It is certainly true that Goethe's works are, in the last instance, conformist in nature. Auerbach recognized as much when he drew attention to the "conservative, aristocratic, and anti-revolutionary views" that caused Goethe to idealize harmonious development—and, ultimately, a calm reconciliation with reality—while being unable to represent this self-same development as it occurred in sharp moments of rupture and revolution.⁵⁹ Does this mean, however, that there is something essentially conservative to the political aesthetics of the *Bildungsroman*? Is "development" always destined to end in "resignation"? Moretti believes so: he identifies "compromise" as the essence of the genre.⁶⁰ The present study, however, proves this view to be incorrect. Nineteenth-century narratives of development were just as politically malleable as Hegelianism itself. Indeed, after a brief period of "reconciliation with reality," the young Moscow thinkers quickly jettisoned any political commitment to the existing tsarist order—without, crucially, rejecting the Hegelian–Goethean notion of development that had led them there.

At the beginning of the 1840s, both Bakunin and Belinsky pivoted from Right to Left Hegelianism. Influenced by thinkers such as Strauss and Feuerbach, they sought to preserve the dialectic—its novel vision of the developing subject, mediating between the personal and the world-historical—while jettisoning the absolute horizons that held its energies in check. A pivotal moment in this shift is the 1843 essay "Dilettantism in Science" by Aleksandr Herzen. It describes how his acceptance of a Hegelian metaphysics-of-becoming led him to develop *beyond Hegel*. Herzen argues that Hegelian metaphysics both successfully depicts and is itself the fruit of a truly scientific understanding of humankind in the world. However, in a move prefiguring that made by Marx two years later in his "Theses on Feuerbach," Herzen claims that this same philosophical framework must *itself* be overcome in a further stage of development—having attained science, the individual must now return to the world as a terrain for active political practice.⁶¹ Beyond static resignation, the subject needed to grasp the dialectic as an immanent, "open" process operating in the landscape of secular history. As Herzen would famously phrase it in his memoirs, "the philosophy of Hegel is the algebra of the revolution."⁶²

Thus Left Hegelianism allowed Bakunin and his contemporaries to free an image of the developing historical self from the prison houses of statist *teloi* and conservative irony. With the dialectic unchained, Hegelian metaphysics and Goethean aesthetics together formed a dynamic motor of self and world perfectly suited to narrating the upward momentum of subjecthood-in-revolt.

godovshchina. V. Zhukovskogo. Pis'mo iz Borodina ot bezrukogo k beznogomu invalid," in Belinskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 3: 240–50.

⁵⁹Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 395.

⁶⁰Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 6–10, 15–17.

⁶¹Alexander Herzen, "Dilettantism in Science," in Herzen, *Selected Philosophical Works*, trans. L. Navrozov (Moscow, 1956), 15–96. Note that this first appearance of a Russian Left Hegelianism is actually headed by an epigraph from Goethe: "Nichts ist drinnen, nichts ist draußen, den was innen, das ist außen"—a recognition of the dialectical play of subjective interiority and external reality between Goethe and Hegel.

⁶²Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 2: 403.

VIII. Narrating the self in the cell

Thus Bakunin's penning of a *Bildungsroman* in the Peter and Paul Fortress in 1851 must be seen as the climax of an intense reconsideration of the subject's place in history that had occurred in Russia over the previous fifteen years—a process in which Bakunin had personally played a pivotal role. I argue that we must see him at the head of a novel synthesis of Hegelian thought and Goethean self-representation, with his *Confession* reflecting a new understanding of subjecthood dialectically acting upon and being acted upon by a historically dynamic reality. Furthermore, it was only through this constellation that incarceration became *politically legible* for modern revolutionaries. In bringing these intellectual coordinates into the Peter and Paul Fortress, Bakunin undertook the first Russian attempt to narrate the developing self in the cell: the first instance of a tsarist prison being used as a site of modern *Bildungs*-autobiographics.

Let us be clear: we cannot claim that the *Confession* was the first Russian “prison memoir.” The content of Bakunin's autobiography ends with the author's apprehension by the Prussian state, and does not encompass the experience of incarceration itself. Thus it is more accurate to think of the *Confession* as a “memoir in the prison.” However, it was not accidental that one of the first Russian *Bildungs*-texts appeared at this moment within a prison cell, nor that the mass of revolutionary prison narratives that appeared in the decades to follow would all adopt the Goethean–Hegelian framework first inaugurated by Bakunin. There was something specific about solitary confinement that lent itself to crafting life narratives in this new vein, as well as something specific to the genre that allowed it to become the primary politico-aesthetic medium for narrating political imprisonment.

While a concrete history of Russian prison memoiristics after Bakunin—where we could see the carceral specificity of this genre fully take shape—demands a study of its own, we can touch upon how, structurally, Left Hegelian narratives of development could take root so firmly in spaces of confinement. Doing so will also allow us to gesture towards the significance of the *Bildungs*-memoir for the wider development of a Russian intelligentsia, as well as conclude with an examination of the broken pathway of reception that has caused the importance of Bakunin's *Confession* to escape our intellectual histories until now.

* * *

Bakunin's *Confession* was the first modern Russian “memoir in the prison.” It would not be the last. What was it, exactly, that made the prison cell so amenable to revolutionary autobiographics?

At its most basic level, the forced inactivity of incarceration has long made it congenial to the task of writing. “These were my best hours,” recalled L. D. Trotsky in his memoirs. “I left the hermetically sealed cell of solitary confinement in the Peter and Paul Fortress with a tinge of regret; it was so quiet there, so eventless, so perfect for intellectual work.”⁶³ Incarceration provides necessary time for written labors, as well as a removal from the world that engenders the distancing of novelistic narration. Bakunin himself informed the tsar that, after his capture by

⁶³Leon Trotsky, *My Life* (New York, 1970), 273.

Prussian gendarmes, “I was able to rethink many things, and I can say that never in my life did I think so seriously as during this time.”⁶⁴ Of course, the fact that incarceration lends itself to scholarly labor does not necessarily entail the writing of ego documents. However, once the conditions of possibility had been opened for the *Bildungs*-memoir, it rapidly became the dominant type of prison text in prerevolutionary Russia.

What was it about this new genre that would lend itself so well to grasping the experience of political imprisonment? Could we speak of a carceral specificity to the modern memoir between Goethe and Hegel?

Without the direct invitation of Tsar Nicholas I, it is impossible to say whether Bakunin would have tried his hand at a *Dichtung und Wahrheit* during his years of solitary confinement. However, when asked to produce a life account, a novel assemblage of Goethean historical subjectivity and Left Hegelian metaphysics immediately suggested itself. Indeed, this new genre proved to have an affinity with the space of the prison that went beyond the summer of 1851.

Above all, the *Bildungs*-memoir allowed Bakunin and those who followed to make sense of defeat. Political incarceration was no longer experienced as atomized, mute suffering, but rather was made legible through linkages between the individual self and what Bakunin calls “the logic of the world.”⁶⁵ In the Goethean–Hegelian narrative of development, contradictions and setbacks—be they socio-political (Russia’s backwardness, autocratic repression) or personal (arrest and imprisonment in a tsarist cell)—became comprehensible moments of a universal process. As one Peter and Paul Fortress prisoner from the end of the century would remark in his memoirs, “prison and exile are logical, natural stages in the life of a revolutionary.”⁶⁶ Conflict was inevitable, but so too was its resolution in a higher stage of individual and historical development. It became possible for radicals to identify their personal setbacks with world-historical impasses: to see in their political struggles the dialectical progression of history. The Peter and Paul Fortress was not only first made legible in this mode, but indeed appeared as *especially* comprehensible—for here, in the secret prison of the tsarist autocracy at the heart of the imperial capital, the skin separating the life of the individual and the life of world history was particularly thin.

For Russian radicals after 1851, prose held out new possibilities for representing incarceration as at once personal and historical. And while one could argue that the history of the novel has in some ways always occurred under the shadow of the prison, its mid-nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* form promised a new *political* aesthetics, capable of embedding experiences of hardship and defeat into grand narratives of future victory.⁶⁷ This radical potential was perhaps first recognized by Lukács:

⁶⁴Bakunin, *The Confession*, 86; Bakunin, “Ispoved’,” 4: 149.

⁶⁵Bakunin, *The Confession*, 86; Bakunin, “Ispoved’,” 4: 149.

⁶⁶V. N. Katin-Iartsev, “V tiur’me i ssylke,” *Katorga i ssylka* 15/2 (1925), 183–211, at 183.

⁶⁷The prison and the novel have always been intertwined—in both the genre’s earliest narratives (what is Robinson Crusoe’s island if not a prison?) and sites of production (it is no accident that Cervantes claimed *Don Quixote* to have been conceived in a cell). For further discussions of incarceration and the European novel see Sean Grass, *The Self in the Cell: Narrating the Victorian Prisoner* (New York, 2003); and Victor H. Brombert, *The Romantic Prison: The French Tradition* (Princeton, 1978).

If the author's action consists in disclosing buried meaning, if his heroes must first break out of their prisons and, in desperate struggles or long, wearisome wanderings, attain the home of their dreams—their freedom from terrestrial gravity—then the power of verse, which can spread a carpet of flowers over the chasm, is not sufficient to build a practicable road across it ... Only prose can then encompass the suffering and the laurels, the struggle and the crown, with equal power; only its unfettered plasticity and its non-rhythmic rigor can, with equal power, embrace the fetters and the freedom, the given heaviness and the conquered lightness of a world henceforth immanently radiant with found meaning.⁶⁸

It was prose—specifically, the novel of development—that allowed radical subjects to resignify individual tribulations into steps in a future history of liberation.⁶⁹ The prison cell was no longer a space of mute immobilization, but one capable of being integrated into an agency-laden life journey. The new politico-aesthetic format constructed by Bakunin would prove a “practicable,” dialectical road between self and world, fetters and freedom.⁷⁰

Furthermore, we should note that the amenability of Left Hegelian self-narration to representing the prison cell lay not only in its unique ability to narrate political struggle. The intellectual terrain first cleared by Bakunin proved capable of fostering an entire lineage of prison memoirs also through this narrative form's essential *reproducibility*.

The *Bildungs*-memoir is, conceptually, an astoundingly egalitarian genre. One of the major innovations of its theory of the self lies in its claims to organic totality. Once its conditions of possibility had been established and circulated, one did not need be an elite to craft a self-narrative of development. In fact, it was seen as a common model of human existence. As Friedrich Schlegel asserted in his reflections on *Wilhelm Meister*, “every human being who is cultivated and who cultivates himself contains a novel within himself.”⁷¹

Taking the democratic pretenses of the *Bildungsroman* into consideration allows us to understand the pedagogical imperative of the genre. As we saw earlier in our discussion of Bakunin's youthful introduction to the form, the novel of development was a remarkably contagious vehicle of self-narration. The *Bildungsroman*

⁶⁸Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, 1971), 58–9.

⁶⁹This new genre's ability to claim victory in defeat is one of the factors that would allow the Russian revolutionary tradition to develop such a robust discourse of political martyrdom—especially from the 1860s onwards, with A. Herzen's “invention” of the Decembrists and the further elaboration of a radical prison mythos. To assert Goethean–Hegelian roots for this phenomenon is thus also to take a particular stance on the perennial historiographical question of the religious origins of the Russian intelligentsia. While I do believe that theology contributed much to the cultural semiotics of revolutionary struggle in the long nineteenth century, I would argue that trans-European intellectual shifts such as those analyzed here bear far greater responsibility for the birth of the Russian intelligentsia than any Orthodox *Sonderweg*. This question is treated in more detail in further areas of my work.

⁷⁰In this way, one could argue that the relationship between self and history in the *Bildungs*-memoir was one of the necessary preconditions for European radical political cultures to find political sustenance in suffering and defeat. See Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York, 2016).

⁷¹Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis, 1991), 10.

contains a structural argument for readers to cast their own lives within its meta-physics and aesthetics; it teaches that one should understand one's selfhood in the world as an ongoing apprenticeship.

Highlighting the essentially pedagogical nature of the *Bildungsroman* genre allows me to briefly venture my own speculation on the reoccurring question of the "intentionality" behind Bakunin's *Confession*. I believe that Bakunin's immediate goal was to *teach* Tsar Nicholas I. Recall how the emperor circulated the text in his court as an "instructive document"—consciously or unconsciously, Bakunin held hope that the tsar would recognize his own subjecthood as belonging to the same times as his prisoner, would see himself as a site of development between the personal and world-historical, and would reimagine the role he could learn to play in the upwards striving of humanity towards freedom.⁷²

Such a moment of radical identification between tsar and anarchist, of course, never occurred—however, generations of future radicals would prove themselves eager pupils of the *Bildungs*-memoir's pedagogy of the self. For beyond inaugurating the reader into its particular epistemology, the genre also promised to guide its readers concretely through life. As Goethe himself claimed, the modern "autobiography of development" not only shows a single subject's struggles within the world, but also serves to "[mirror] them again for others."⁷³ Once a particular series of experiences had been made legible in a *Bildungs*-memoir, this first ascent provided the narratological anchors for future integration by other life writers.

We see this purpose frankly stated in the autobiography of G. A. Gershuni. Upon his escape from a Siberian labor camp in 1906, this leading SR terrorist decided to write a prison memoir—not for "the idle curiosity of idle people," but rather for his comrades facing incarceration:

It would be a great relief in those moments [of imprisonment] to know that it was not you alone who had to live through this ...

Of course, we revolutionaries do not consider ordeals in tsarist dungeons to be a misfortune, but rather a natural, inevitable consummation of our activity. Nevertheless, a tale of how one felt and lived through "the other side of life" might be useful for young workers.⁷⁴

Thus holding up the autobiography as a form capable of modeling the experience of confinement for other radical actors, Gershuni immediately launches into a detailed narrative of his fifteen months in the Peter and Paul Fortress.⁷⁵

⁷²Such an aim is hinted at in a few crucial sections of the *Confession*, where Bakunin relates fantasies of a tsar who would throw off the mantle of petty state affairs and lead a war for the emancipation of all Slavic peoples. The idea of the *Confession*'s instructiveness is also present in its author's letter to Herzen from 1860: Bakunin states how he "related to Nicholas all of my life abroad, with all of my plans, impressions, and feelings, and not without many instructive remarks [*pouchitel'nykh zamechaniï*] for him about his interior and foreign politics." See M. A. Bakunin to Aleksandr Herzen, 8 Dec. 1860, in Bakunin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 4: 366.

⁷³Goethe, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth*, 17.

⁷⁴Grigorii Gershuni, *Iz nedavnego proshlogo* (Paris, 1908), 6–7.

⁷⁵His dates of fortress imprisonment are recorded at RGIA f. 1280, op. 1, d. 1134 ("Alfavit sekretnym arestantam soderzhshchimsia v S. Peterburgskoi kreposti s 1900 g. po 1917"), l. 10ob.

It is this logic that allowed the memoir of development to fully saturate Russia's political prisons in the second half of the nineteenth century. Once true prison memoirs—and not just “memoirs in the prison”—began to see widespread circulation from the 1860s onwards, the tsarist cell was given lasting legibility. Each *Bildungs*-account of incarceration invited its revolutionary readers to “write” their own potential future imprisonment in this form. The genre thus auto-generated a lineage, with each prisoner reading their incarcerations not as solitary trials, but as linked with the larger politico-aesthetic tradition of all those who had come before.

This is well expressed in the self-narrations of Prince P. Kropotkin. Upon being immured within the walls of the Peter and Paul Fortress in 1874, the anarchist's thoughts immediately go to the ranks of his predecessors:

Here the Decembrists ... underwent their first experiences of martyrdom ... Here were imprisoned the poets Ryléeff and Shevchéno, Dostoévsky, Bakunin, Chernyshévsky, Písareff, and so many others of our best contemporary writers ...

All these shadows rose before my imagination. But my thoughts fixed especially on Bakúnin ... “He has lived it through,” I said to myself, “and I must, too; I will *not* succumb here!”⁷⁶

While his particular pathway to the fortress was all his own, the transmissible genre of incarcerated selfhood allowed Kropotkin to maintain a legibility in his story of development as it passes through its cells, to “mirror” the struggles of his predecessors. Indeed, Kropotkin's own later contributions to the prison memoir genre—*Memoirs of a Revolutionist* and *In Russian and French Prisons*—became touchstones for further life writings in this form.

Thus, through the reproducibility and transmissibility of the *Bildungs*-memoir, the tsarist prison cell ceased to be a space of mute discipline and incomprehension. Through the intellectual coordinate first assembled by Bakunin in 1851, not only could Russian revolutionaries make sense of political confinement through a dialectic of personal and world-historical development—but their own writings of the self could also be organically integrated into a larger intergenerational arc of carceral struggle.⁷⁷

⁷⁶P. Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 2 vols. (London, 1899), 2: 141–2, original emphasis. Internal documents relating to the moment of his imprisonment are held at RGIA f. 1280, op. 1, d. 383 (“O politicheskikh arestantov soderzhashchikhsia v S.P.B. kreposti”), ll. 187, 188, 188ob, 189, 190; d. 399, ll. 136b, 136b ob, 136v.

⁷⁷We can remark here that the classic radical *Bildungs*-memoir as first elaborated by Bakunin persisted even through the Stalinist period. As late as the 1930s, past experiences of political imprisonment in Russia were filtered through this politico-aesthetic lens. At a presentation given at the Leningrad division of the All-Union Society for Former Political Prisoners and Exiles in February 1934 on the topic “How to Write Historico-revolutionary Memoirs,” comments by the elderly audience constantly returned to Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* and Herzen's *Past and Thoughts*: how to negotiate a position between subjective experience and the world horizons of revolutionary progress. See TsGA SPB f. 506, op. 1, d. 582 (“Stenograficheskii otchet zasedaniia literaturnoi sektsii Leningradskogo otdeleniia obshchestva po dokladu Tynianova Iu. N. na temu: ‘Kak pisat’ istoriko-revoliutsionnye memuary”), esp. ll. 15, 19, 26, 30, 34.

It was the invention of the *Bildungs*-memoir that fostered the birth of a political culture of imprisonment in prerevolutionary Russia. Goethe and Hegel themselves—in their solidly bourgeois personal lives—would surely have been surprised to learn how a concept of “development” synthesized from their work could generate a highly communicable narrative genre of self and history that would crack open the prison cells of tsarist Russia to dissident legibility.

IX. Conclusion: Bakunin’s *Confession* and the Russian intelligentsia

And not just prison cells. The coordinates we see gathered in Bakunin’s *Confession* proved themselves remarkably capable of representing radical Russian selfhood in all its varied spaces and struggles. I argue that the birth of the *Bildungs*-memoir in this period—with its novel vision of development, its ability to narrate political struggle between self and history, and its essential reproducibility—formed the basis for an even wider community of meaning in Russia’s long nineteenth century: the radical intelligentsia.

A mature, transmissible concept of “development” was the necessary precondition for a group of educated young men and women to learn how to narrate Russian sociopolitical reality as *historical*, and thus politically changeable. The many dissident autobiographies that sprung up from the 1850s onwards—both within prisons and without—should be understood as products of what we could call, in Foucault’s terms, the *Bildungsroman* as a “technology of the self.”⁷⁸ They are artifacts of the new epistemological horizons within which the fledgling intelligentsia labored, and a testament to the centrality of political aesthetics in our attempts to understand them. In this approach it would appear that the Russian intelligentsia should be best grasped not as a static social class or a fleshless collection of ideas, but rather as a radical new narrative community that arose in mid-nineteenth-century Russia.

The question “what is the intelligentsia?” is one of the perennial specters of Russian historiography—one of those eternal windmills at which each new theoretical “turn” tilts. We can divide Western scholarship on the question into two major trends—mid-century intellectual history and the optics of social history.⁷⁹ Both lack satisfactory explanations for the birth of the Russian intelligentsia. The weakness of the former is that its disembodied catalogue of ideas too often reverts to an unconvincing thesis of what I call “ideational excess”: that the intelligentsia arose when a group of educated youths somehow accumulated “too many” ideas, became “too alienated.” The weakness of the latter is that it cannot explain why an intelligentsia arose without falling into normative developmental accounts or the idea of a Russian *Sonderweg*. Both, I believe, lack a sufficient understanding

⁷⁸See Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*. I thus believe that new histories of radical subjectivity and political incarceration must strike a particular relationship with Foucault: one that exorcises the Foucault of interpolating disciplinary power with the help of the Foucault of discursive subject construction.

⁷⁹For the former see Richard Pipes, ed., *The Russian Intelligentsia* (New York, 1961); Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism*; Allen McConnell, “The Origin of the Russian Intelligentsia,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 8/1 (1964), 1–16; Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*; Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (New York, 1978). The classic work of the latter tradition is Marc Raeff, *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia: The Eighteenth-Century Nobility* (New York, 1966).

of how human subjects engage in projects of self-fashioning whose conditions are shaped by the epistemological horizons of a historical period; how actors take up social practices, intellectual programs, and ways of life at the juncture of text and context.⁸⁰

This article has thus proposed that a new type of “intelligentsia subjectivity” arose from a novel relationship between self and history at the juncture of Goethe and Hegel.⁸¹ The intelligentsia could only appear when the burning questions of the Russian present could be posited as *historical* in nature, and a critical subjecthood rooted in this same history, diagnosing and contesting this reality, could be posited alongside it. The present article has sought to provide a new intellectual genealogy for this moment through the life and texts of one of its earliest adherents. This novel epistemological terrain and its attendant narrative forms quickly saturated the lives of Russia’s dissident actors, who found in it something uniquely powerful and modern.⁸²

If we thus recognize the centrality of the concept of development in Russian intellectual history, we are brought to a new idea of an *intelligentsia-in-becoming*. This term possesses two aspects: first, a sensibility for the lived, contingent appearance of the intelligentsia, as opposed to visions overdetermined by social relations or teleological endpoints; second, a recognition that the historical invention of an idea of development is key to understanding the intelligentsia’s origins and nature.⁸³ A novel philosophical tradition and regime of self-narration that arose in the mid-nineteenth century provided the necessary epistemological conditions for the birth of a new form of historical subjectivity. If the Russian intelligentsia is thus most productively viewed as a “collective representation,” then Hegel provided the structure and Goethe the genre for this practice of self-fashioning.⁸⁴ The structure of the *Bildungsroman* circulated contagiously around the Russian Empire—both within and outside the prisons that it found so habitable—and formed the basis for this new narrative community. Bakunin’s textual self-fashioning in the walls of the Peter and Paul Fortress should be seen as an originary

⁸⁰It is at this crossroads—between Tartu school cultural semiotics, Foucauldian genealogy, and Frankfurt school political epistemology—where I have searched for the origins of the Russian intelligentsia and their narratives of political imprisonment.

⁸¹The recent historiographical turn to examining regimes of subject formation in the Soviet Union—“Soviet subjectivity” studies—can and should be brought to bear upon the imperial period as well. In my attempt to do so here, I am indebted to works such as A. Krylova, “The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1/1 (2000), 119–46; Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburg, 2000); and Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind* (Cambridge, 2006).

⁸²For more on the question of the “Russian modern” see Hoffman and Kotsonis, *Russian Modernity*.

⁸³My notion of an “intelligentsia-in-becoming” is indebted to philosophical existentialism’s language of contingency and self-fashioning—recently brought to bear on Russian history by Slavoj Žižek, who has called us to imagine a Kierkegaardian Lenin, a “*Lenin-in-becoming*.” See Slavoj Žižek, “Introduction: Between the Two Revolutions,” in V. I. Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917* (London, 2002), 3–12, at 6.

⁸⁴The term “collective representation” used here is from Nathaniel Knight’s invaluable recent *Begriffsgeschichte* of the word “intelligentsia.” See Nathaniel Knight, “Was the Intelligentsia Part of the Nation? Visions of Society in Post-Emancipation Russia,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7/4 (2006), 733–58.

image of the Russian subject-in-revolt, and his *Confession* taken as one of the founding ego-documents of a paradigm shift towards intelligentsia narration, capable of representing tsarist-era dissent in both fetters and freedom.

* * *

But one last problem remains: can we really draw any sort of genealogy that stretches back to Bakunin, when the text of his *Confession* lay unread until after the Russian Revolution? It is true that this memoir was unknown to the generations of radicals who would soon adopt its genre to narrate their own lives. However, this simply reinforces my argument: that what we have here is a larger epistemological shift. This article has not been a study in reception. If we can speak of “origins” in the Peter and Paul Fortress, it is not in the sense of a prime causal force but rather that of a Benjaminian *Ursprung*.⁸⁵ In the 1850s, a novel conception of the historical subject arising out of Hegel and Goethe formed the conditions of possibility for a new intelligentsia genre of self-narration especially suited to conditions of incarceration, and Bakunin’s *Confession* was simply one of the first of its many manifestations.

This stance both complements and moves beyond existing literature on this subject. While the study of Russian ego-documents was long neglected by Western and Soviet scholarship, several recent works have begun to recognize the importance of its development for nineteenth-century regimes of subjectivity.⁸⁶ Historians have found that the French Revolution and the War of 1812 perhaps first set in motion a drive towards new historical understandings of the self. However, there is also agreement that these energies only truly broke open in the 1850s. These years would see the publication of both Lev Tolstoy’s *Childhood* and the first sections of Aleksandr Herzen’s *My Past and Thoughts*: works that embodied a reconfigured relationship between self and history crucial for the invention of the Russian intelligentsia. These, indeed, have recently been read as the first proper Russian *Bildungs*-memoirs. Irina Paperno has argued that Herzen’s work is not only Hegelian in structure (as it erupts at “the convergence of ‘intimacy’ and ‘history’”), but also a crucial document in the production and re-production of intelligentsia

⁸⁵“Origin [*Ursprung*], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [*Entstehung*] ... Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis ... There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history. Origin is not, therefore, discovered by the examination of actual findings, but it is related to their history and their subsequent development.” Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London, 1998), 45–6.

⁸⁶See Martin Aust and Frithjof Benjamin Schenk, eds., *Imperial Subjects: Autobiographische Praxis in den Vielvölkerreichen der Romanovs, Habsburger und Osmanen im 19. und frühen* (Cologne, 2015); Jochen Hellbeck and Klaus Heller, eds., *Autobiographical Practices in Russia—Autobiographische Praktiken in Russland* (Göttingen, 2004); and A. G. Tartakovskii, *Russkaia memuaristika i istoricheskoe soznanie XIX veka* (Moscow, 1997). This push towards the history of subject formation has also seen a renewed interest in biographical writing: see D. Ia. Kalugin, *Proza zhizni: russkie biografii v XVIII–XIX vv.* (St Petersburg: Izd. Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2015); as well as *Writing Russian Lives: The Poetics and Politics of Biography in Modern Russian Culture*, special issue of *Slavonic and East European Review* 96/1 (2018).

regimes of self-narration: “[Herzen] created the image of an *intelligent* ... *Byloe i dumy* has been used by generations of Russians caught in the historical dramas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to arrange their own lives and to write them in memoirs and novels.”⁸⁷ As widely read tales of intellectual life between the personal and the world-historical, the texts of Tolstoy and Herzen would become the models in whose vein new generations would translate their selfhoods into *Bildungsromane*.⁸⁸

However, up until now, M. A. Bakunin and the space of the prison have been absent from these histories. Yet the *Confession* is the product of the exact same radical shift in Russian technologies of the self, written *before* the more recognized *Bildungs*-memoirs of Tolstoy and Herzen (published in 1852 and 1856 respectively). Even as a generation of revolutionaries began to parse their “past and thoughts” in the drawing rooms and journals of the empire, one of the individuals most responsible for this new epistemological terrain was discovering the political aesthetics of Hegelian–Goethean self-fashioning in a tsarist cell. While it would be going too far to argue that Russian *Bildungs*-subjectivity was invented in the Peter and Paul Fortress, it is clear that it found an early home there: intelligentsia prison narratives are as old as the intelligentsia itself.

Thus does Bakunin deserve a central place in our new histories of both modern political imprisonment and the discursive practices of dissent. In the Russian revolutionary tradition, the *Confession* should be seen as an uncanny, unknown ancestor: an essential text in the history of the intelligentsia, the first Russian “memoir in the prison,” indeed one of the very first modern Russian memoirs, at the head of an entire tradition of radical political aesthetics which possessed no knowledge of its primogenitor. Asked for a confession in the Peter and Paul Fortress, Bakunin pursued a virtuosic path of carceral self-fashioning that clearly demonstrated the vitality of a genre which he had helped assemble: a genre which, when reexposed to tsarist cells in the decades to come, would prove crucial in giving lasting political legibility to the experience of imprisonment in the long nineteenth century.

Acknowledgments. This article is based on archival research generously supported by the Social Science Research Council, the Cornell Institute of European Studies, and the Cornell Society for the Humanities.

⁸⁷Irina Paperno, “Introduction: Intimacy and History. The Gercen Family Drama Reconsidered,” *Russian Literature* 61/1–2 (2007), 1–65, at 2–6. In making this argument, Paperno is expanding on Lydia Ginzburg’s earlier analysis of the Hegelian “conscious historicism” in Herzen’s text. See Ginzburg, *On Psychological Prose*, 195–217. The present article—in its study of prison narrative, epistemologies of the self, and the politics of aesthetics—is consciously seeking to build upon the insights of these two scholars.

⁸⁸It is clear that Herzen’s much more famous autobiographical text was shaped by exactly the same intellectual coordinates as Bakunin’s *Confession*. We have seen in this article how a young Herzen passed through the crucible of Hegelian thought, reaching a synthesis of German idealism and radical political praxis. In light of this article’s original argument, we should also recognize his debt to the *Bildungsroman*. Goethe appears in Herzen’s published work as early as 1834, where in a discussion of *Werther* and *Wilhelm Meister* he crowns the author “the Napoleon of literature” (a World Spirit in Weimar?). Quotations and references to Goethe appear throughout Herzen’s *oeuvre*, including in *My Past and Thoughts*. Perhaps the most telling line Herzen penned on the tension between Goethe’s Right Hegelian metaphysico-aesthetics and his own political commitments is the short musing “Rousseau said that man is born *free*, and Goethe said that man *cannot be free*; both are right, both are wrong.” See Zhirmunskii, *Gete*, 257–76, Herzen’s emphasis.

Working versions received invaluable feedback during events at New York University and Binghamton University. I would like to thank my key interlocutors for their help in developing this text, especially Valeria Dani, Will Cameron, Ray Craib, Heather DeHaan, Chelsea Gibson, Roman Gilmintinov, Nathaniel Knight, Camille Robcis, Enzo Traverso, and Claudia Verhoeven. Special gratitude is also due to Tracie Matysik, the coeditors of *Modern Intellectual History*, and the three anonymous readers for their welcome aid.

Cite this article: Bujalski N (2021). Narrating Political Imprisonment in Tsarist Russia: Bakunin, Goethe, Hegel. *Modern Intellectual History* **18**, 681–707. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244320000189>