'To Become a Warrior and a Son to My Father': Aleksandr Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Durova)'s *Notes of a Cavalry Maiden* (1836) as Transgender Autobiography

Transgender autobiographies first became a subject of narrative analysis in the 1990s, paving the way for the field we now call 'trans narratology'.[1] However, the scholarly approaches to these autobiographical narratives were limited in two crucial ways. Firstly, not all foundational studies on the subject were immediately recognised as works of narratology and were instead confined to the fields of cultural and literary studies, social sciences, and history. Secondly, most of these studies have focused predominantly on twentieth and, later, twenty-first-century texts, guided by the increasing availability of primary sources and the temporal limitations of transgender history.[2] And yet, as Jay Prosser argued in his influential 1998 work *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Sexuality*, 'even without the official discourse of sex change, the plot lines of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century

[1] See Epstein, Traub 1991, Garber 1992, Reich 1992, Hausman 1995, and others. For an overview of early 1990s sources, see Prosser 7-29. The recent push towards interdisciplinarity in the humanities means that studies originating in the fields of sociology, legal and medical history, anthropology, etc., are now more "visible" to narratologists. Previously, it was much more difficult for studies produced outside of the humanities to influence the field of narratology at large. For an example of this change, compare Prosser's overview to Jen Manion's more recent summary (10-12).

[2] Susan Stryker traces the beginning of 'mass transgender movement for social change' back to the mid-nineteenth century (Stryker 46). Stryker describes primarily North American contexts of transgender history and the legal and medical discourses of transition, but this periodisation holds true for many European case studies (for a list of representative cases, see footnote 6). This temporal constraint had less of an effect on historical investigations of lived transgender experiences, with prominent recent studies looking back to Byzantium (Betancour 2020) and the Early Modern period (Traub 2016). Transgender historiography is a thriving field and, as such, has produced lively debates on its own ethical and methodological possibilities and limitations: for a recent critique in relation to literary studies, see Carroll (7-10).

transgendered subjects are remarkably consistent with those of contemporary transsexuals' (133). In this article, I aim to expand the chronology and geography of narratological analysis of this genre through reading *Notes of a Cavalry Maiden* [Zapiski kavalerist-devitsy] (1836) by Aleksandr Aleksandrov (Nadezhda Durova) (1783–1866), a Russian-Ukrainian hero of the Napoleonic wars, as a transgender autobiography. This reading brings into consideration new forms, affects and narrative structures as constituent elements of trans narratives and has the potential to expand anglophone trans imaginaries past the confines of their current locations and temporalities.

Notes of a Cavalry Maiden – a mainstay of nineteenth-century Russian literature curricula – is a first-person narrative of gender transing.[3] In 1808, Aleksandrov, who was assigned female at birth and christened 'Nadezhda Durova', joined the Russian army as a male cavalry officer and served in several military campaigns until retiring in 1817. He then recorded his unusual experiences in a fictionalised autobiography, first published in 1836.[4] Although primarily a military memoir, *Notes* repeatedly addressed its protagonist's gender transing, narrated through 'recognizable transsexual plot[s], tropes, or themes' (Prosser 104): an account of 'strong, early, and persistent transgendered identification' (101), a self-reflective

[3] I am following Claire Sears (2015) and Jen Manion in using 'transing' as an inclusive term for describing specifically historical accounts of gender non-conformity (Manion 2020:11); for a recent critique of this term see Chu, Drager 2019. As a canonical work of Russian literature, *Notes* has been a subject of sustained academic interest in Russian and other languages. For a comprehensive overview of recent scholarship, see Prikazchikova 2018:5-24; for a recent biography, featuring previously unpublished archival documents, see Begunova 2011.

[4] For full publication history of *Notes*, see Zirin 1988:xi. An important, if limited, English-language source of information about Aleksandrov, Zirin's account of Aleksandrov's life has been recently re-read by some scholars as trans exclusionary (Averbach 2022). I discuss the limitations of Zirin's translation below in footnote 20.

mirror scene and a journey plot, which culminated in obtaining an official permission to use the name ‘Aleksandrov’.

Aimed at a wide, general audience, Aleksandrov’s narrative framed the tropes of transgender autobiographies, listed above, in categories familiar to the Russian readers of the 1830s. In keeping with the contemporary fashion for Romantic re-imaginings of the Napoleonic era, *Notes* foregrounded Aleksandrov’s self-identification as a ‘warrior’ [voin]. My contention in this article is that in Aleksandrov’s writings, his self-description as a ‘cavalry maiden’, a ‘warrior’ in ‘spirit’ [dukh], ‘appearance’ [vid], and ‘predisposition’ [naklonnosti], became more than a reference to his army service. Rather, it took on a meaning of a separate gender category, that allowed Aleksandrov to narrate his non-conforming gender expression in terms not only acceptable but lauded in contemporary society. I examine this category from linguistic and historical points of view, focussing on how Aleksandrov used Russian grammar to create a non-binary term that corresponded to his documented personal history of transmasculine gender identification. As I demonstrate below, this distinct narrative strategy was rooted both in a long-standing transnational literary tradition and in Aleksandrov’s own experiences, which prompted him to ‘to part company from the sex whose sad lot and eternal dependence had begun to terrify [him]’ and ‘to become a warrior and a son to [his] father’ (Zirin 15, Durova 1983:40).[5]

I begin by examining the critical tensions between the historical tradition of ‘female warrior’ narratives and the more recent inclusive approaches that have re-categorised some of these historical figures as transgender subjects. I then discuss Aleksandrov’s use of the term

[5] Throughout the article, I quote Mary Fleming Zirin’s English translation of *Notes* (Zirin 1988). I also provide references for the same quotations in the original Russian in the latest critical edition of this text (Durova 1983), where necessary for the purposes of close reading.

'warrior' as a gender category in two instances, crucial in narrating transgender autobiographies: in the account of the protagonist's early life and in the scene of corporeal transformation in front of a mirror. Finally, I focus on the interplay between the journey plot and the metaphorical 'progress narrative' (Garber 70) in *Notes*, highlighting the connection between Aleksandrov's literary text and other historical narratives of gender non-conformity and/or female to male transing.

Since the publication of Prosser's foundational study in 1998, narratological and historical investigations have been steadily increasing the pool of sources that document experiences of gender non-conformity across different historical periods and cultures. Specific legal regulations, like sumptuary laws, or linguistic features, like the absence or presence of grammatical gender in some languages, make these narratives distinct. However, when mapped onto the transgender autobiography formula described by Prosser it appears that they share a common narrative structure. Moving beyond the individual stories they convey, these narratives paint a wider picture of textual conventions and networks of transnational gender categories as presented in autobiographical accounts.

Because of its focus on the formulaic aspects of trans autobiographies, Prosser's study remains a useful approach to sometimes very different accounts of trans experience. In Aleksandrov's case, my 'Prosserian reading' of *Notes* as a transgender autobiography highlights the similarities between historical accounts of gender non-conformity across different European cultures. My analysis of these similarities suggests that there are some cross-cultural narrative conventions that are bound up with discussing transness, but they need to examined in their cultural contexts in order to be meaningful. From this point of view, texts like Aleksandrov's *Notes*, written in a gendered language like Russian, are a particularly interesting example. Below, I focus on describing how Aleksandrov's narrative

and linguistic choices indicate that gendered languages might offer more, rather than less, space for conceptual gender inclusivity despite their grammatical limitations.

Cavalry Maiden as Transgender Warrior

Published in 1996, Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* has achieved an important breakthrough in popular transgender history: it has reclaimed the historical cases of many so-called 'female warriors' for more inclusive discussions of gender.[6] Although Feinberg can be credited with highlighting the link between military service and historical gender non-conformity for the general public, *Transgender Warriors* built on an existing interest in this issue in gender studies and queer theory which continues to this day. Already in 1992, Marjorie Garber argued in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* that the category 'warrior' has been historically used to describe non-conforming gender identities. Importantly, she suggested that 'warrior' was not a fixed 'term', but rather a 'mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility', 'the third sex' (11).

More recently, Jen Manion's *Female Husbands*: *A Trans History* (2020), focused, among other things, on categories of gender used in historical accounts of those who 'transed gender for […] war and adventure' (2). Manion persuasively argues that biographies and autobiographies of soldiers, marines, or shipwrights like James Gray (Hannah Snell) (1723-1792), Robert Shurtliff (Deborah Sampson) (1760-1827), and William Chandler (Mary Lacy)

[6] Earlier historical studies of people assigned female at birth in military employ operated mainly within a binary gender model, using categories like 'amazons', 'she-captains', 'female warriors' or 'female transvestites' (Ewing, 1975; Warner 1983; Dugow 1986; Dekker, de Pol 1989; Wheelwright 1987; Creighton, Norling 1996). This categorisation is still used in feminist historiography, sometimes, problematically, also in relation to transgender subjects: see Frohnhaus 1999; Hagemann 2002; Hopkin 2003; Harris, 2011; Francikova 2012; O'Driscoll 2012.

(1740-1801) became a general 'foundational trope and historical antecedent for soldiers who transed gender in the British Empire and beyond' (76). These popular texts have established narrative conventions, in which army service 'was chiefly promoted as a celebration of one person's ability to temporarily transcend the boundaries of sexual difference under extremely trying circumstances', 'in service of a greater good', going 'to war for their nation' (81, 74, 68). Although Manion relied on English-language sources, the proliferation of similar accounts in other European languages indicates that these conventions were not culturally specific and have formed a transnational formulaic narrative of transgender warriors' adventures.[7]

Accounts of people assigned female at birth, who joined either the army or the navy under male names, have been popular across many literary cultures. This literary tradition was underpinned by the early modern and later medieval folk narratives of gender non-conformity, such as 'female warrior' ballads, as well as popular accounts of martyred saints like Joan of Arc (Dugaw 1982; Warner 1983). The militarisation of European societies during the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815) produced another crop of similar oral and literary narratives, many of which referred to their subjects as 'female' 'soldiers', 'sailors', or 'warriors', emphasising their military occupation (Wilson 2017).[8] In terms of the narrative construction, these stories relied on the gender ambiguity of their subjects to propel the 'plot'

[7] See De Pol, Dekker 1989 (Dutch); Wheelwright 1989 (British, North American); Erauso 1996; Velasco 2000 (Spanish); Steinberg 2001 (French); Hagemann 2007 and Watanabe-O'Kelly 2010 (German); Francikova 2012 (Czech); Török 2018 (Hungarian) and many more.

[8] Focussing on the British phenomenon of 'Nelson's women', Wilson discusses the general effect the Napoleonic wars had on contemporary epistemologies of gender and sexuality across Europe. For an analysis of similar cases in Germany, see Hagemann 2007.

forward. They often culminated in either the reveal of the gender assigned at birth or a triumphant return from a dangerous journey.

The sheer number of well-known historical cases across Europe, Asia, and the Americas demonstrates that enlisting was one of the most accessible ways for people assigned female at birth to obtain legal documentation that proved their new identity: a record of military service under a new name. At the same time, the cross-cultural celebration and normalisation of their biographical accounts suggests that this was also one of the most acceptable forms of female to male gender transing.[9] In some cases, it is by now impossible to tell what the motivation for enlisting might have been: for some, it provided an opportunity to trans genders and for others the army or navy service functioned as a period of utilitarian cross-dressing that reflected the person's gender performance rather than identity. But for many, 'warrior' became a category that described these subjects' gender, removing them from the heteronormative 'gender matrix' (Butler 7). It diffused the threat their transing or cross-dressing posed to the stability of conventional binary gender categories, allowing their stories to be absorbed into mainstream cultures globally, including in Russia.

In the first half of the nineteenth-century, popular views on gender non-conformity in Russia were shaped by several overlapping discourses: the oral folk cultures and literary, educational, and scientific texts, either composed originally in Russian, or translated from

[9] Describing the high-profile cases of gender transing during the American Revolution, Manion notes that these were 'celebrated and normalised to the point that [they are a] part of the traditional US history canon' (Manion 69). This holds true for many military celebrities, including Aleksandrov – for more on Aleksandrov's queer celebrity, see Vaysman 2023.

other European languages.[10] Because the secular Russian literary tradition was established only at the end of the eighteenth-century, popular ecclesiastical narratives (including those of transvestite saints) also played an important role in shaping early-nineteenth-century Russian readers' perceptions of gender categories outside of the binary paradigm.[11] No equivalent of the third gender category exists in Russian, but, similarly to other cultures, the hyper-masculine environment of the military service has long been perceived as a site of gender liminality for those identifying as women.[12]

The Greek term 'Amazon' [amazonka] has as long a history in Russian as in other cultures of the Enlightenment period, first recorded in 1766 (Ivinskii 2013). Catherine II (1729-1796) founded and patronised an 'Amazon battalion', formed of the wives of the Greek soldiers in Crimea in 1787 (Esipov 1886). Both Catherine and her predecessor, Empress Elizabeth (1709-1762), commissioned state portraits of themselves in military uniform, to promote their eligibility as rulers. Between this recent history and the Romantic fascination with the story

[10] In Aleksandrov's lifetime, Russian empire was a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual country, and folk and oral cultures reflected this diversity (in contrast to print and literary cultures which were dominated by Russophone publications). For more on the influence of local folk cultures on Aleksandrov's work, see Marsh Flores 2013. Russian literature's reliance on Western European literary models had an important effect on how gender categories were 'translated' into Russian: for an analysis of an early Russian novel as a case study, see Levitt 2018. For a general overview of 'native' sexual vocabulary in Medieval Russia, see Levin 1993. For a foundational history of sex, gender and sexuality in Russia, see Kon 2010.

[11] For more on gender categories in early Slavic Orthodox cultures, see Mayhew 2018; for a later case study in the same context, see Worobec 2011.

[12] Grammatically, Russian uses three genders: feminine, masculine, and neutral, but neutral is used exclusively for inanimate subjects. For more on the use of gendered grammar in Russian, see Kirey-Sitnikova 2001. For a brief survey of 'female warrior' figures in pre-twentieth century Russian culture, see Zuseva-Ozkan (2021:62-92).

of Joan of Arc (a Russian translation of Friedrich Schiller's *The Maid of Orleans* was published in 1820 and enthusiastically reviewed in the press), the story told in *Notes* was unusual but by no means unprecedented.[13]

The text we now know as *Notes of a Cavalry Maiden* was popular with contemporary readers and came out several times in Aleksandrov's lifetime under different titles, revised and expanded for each edition. An excerpt titled 'Notes by N.A Durova' first appeared in 1836, published in the literary magazine *The Contemporary* [Sovremennik] (Durova 1836). The journal's editor, Russia's leading Romantic poet Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837), edited Aleksandrov's text and provided a foreword, framing it as a cross-dressing military adventure in the style of Shakespearean comedies, popular in Russia at the time.[14] Unhappy with this presentation, as well as Pushkin's decision to credit the author as 'Nadezhda Durova', Aleksandrov took the publication of the standalone edition into his own hands. *Cavalry Maiden. An Incident in Russia* [Kavalerist-devitsa. Proisshestvie v Rossii] appeared later the same year, followed by *Notes by Aleksandrov (Durova). Addendum to Cavalry Maiden* [Zapiski Aleksandrova (Durovoi). Dobavleniie k Devitse-kavalerist] in 1839.[15]

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[13] See Zhukovskii 1960. For more on Zhukovskii's re-interpretation of Schiller's text in the context of nineteenth-century Russian social and political thought, see Kiseleva 2002; for 'amazons' in Russian culture see Alexander 2001; for 'female warrior' tropes in Russian modernism see Zuseva-Ozkan 2021.

[14] During Aleksandrov's lifetime most of his texts were published under the name 'Aleksandrov' or 'Aleksandrov (Durova)' (for the full bibliography, see Prikazchikova 2018:573), but most posthumous editions follow Pushkin's lead in crediting 'Nadezhda Durova' as the author of *Notes*. To avoid confusion when referencing Aleksandrov's works, I follow established bibliographies, which credit the author of most nineteenth-century editions as 'Aleksandrov' and of most posthumous editions as 'N.A. Durova', as published.

[15] As fictionalised autobiography, Aleksandrov's *Cavalry Maiden* texts occupy a liminal space between fictional and autobiographic narratives. I have argued elsewhere that Aleksandrov's writings can be categorised as

In the original Russian, a language in which grammatical gender is indicated by endings, the title of Aleksandrov's text was a deliberate play on words. It fused two nouns: masculine *kavalerist* (cavalry officer) and feminine *devitsa* (maiden), to create a new gender category to define his personal experience of military service. Because the Russian title combined two nouns, rather than a noun and an adjective, as in English, it ascribed equal semantic weight to both of its parts.[16] As a result, the title was grammatically genuinely gender-fluid: Russian relies on agreement in endings to indicate connections between words in sentences, and Aleksandrov's neologism agreed with both feminine and masculine pronouns, adjectives, verbs and participles.

Historical evidence indicates that Aleksandrov himself consistently presented as male from the moment he enlisted.[17] His protagonists, however, both in *Notes* and later fiction, inhabited a more gender-fluid narrative space afforded by their self-identification as *kavalerist-devitsa*. The first-person narrator of *Notes* was grammatically gendered in the original Russian as feminine throughout the entire text. But when the protagonist enlists as 'Durov', and then

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transgender 'autofiction', 'allowing him to carve out a niche in nineteenth-century Russian literary culture where his re-writing of his own life had assumed a status of an authentic biography' (Vaysman 2022:38). Specifically for the discussion of transgender narrative aspects of Aleksandrov's autofiction, see Vaysman 2022:50-55.

[16] This equal semantic weight is also reflected in the fact that Aleksandrov used first 'kavalerist-devitsa' and then 'devitsa-kavalerist', reversing the order of these two nouns in the titles of the two editions, discussed above. In nineteenth-century Russian culture, 'female warrior' narratives often overlap with folk-tale plots of 'tsar-maidens' [tsar-devitsy] (Zuseva-Ozkan 2021:66-92): this is a similarly constructed noun that might have influenced Aleksandrov's neologism.

[17] Aleksandrov's legacy includes not just *Notes* and other published fiction, but also a substantial corpus of personal documents, some of which have only recently been recovered from the military archives. These texts form a record of Nadezhda Durova's documented transition to Aleksandr Aleksandrov and testify that from 1808 Aleksandrov consistently identified as a man until his death in 1866 (see Vaysman 2022).

takes on the name ‘Aleksandrov’, this feminine voice goes on to describe the events in the life of a cavalry officer, perceived and addressed by others as male. The first-person narrative continues, as before, using feminine endings, but all reported speech and dialogue switches to using masculine endings, reflecting Aleksandrov’s transmasculine gender expression. Similar to other terms that have been used historically to describe non-conforming gender expressions, in Aleksandrov’s writings *kavalerist-devitsa* became ‘a category that was never simply woman or man. It was effectively a trans/position in one way or another, affirmed through accounts that move back and forth between masculine and feminine descriptors and male and female pronouns’ (Manion 10). In deference to this grammatical fluidity, in the analysis that follows, I use the pronoun ‘they’ to refer to the protagonist of *Notes*.[18]

A Warrior’s Calling

A precursor to modern transgender autobiographies, Aleksandrov’s text told a story of a nineteenth-century transgender subject, where ‘transsexuality emerge[d] as an archetypal story structured around shared tropes and fulfilling a particular narrative organisation of consecutive stages’ (Prosser 101). However, instead of the medico-legal discourse used by modern transsexual authors to articulate their experience, *Notes of a Cavalry Maiden* tapped into an established cultural tradition of narrating a female-to-male transition as an irresistible inner call to arms. Despite this obvious difference, Aleksandrov’s account is remarkably similar to modern transgender narratives in mood, temporal and spatial organisation, and structure, explored below.

[18] The limitations of using ‘they’ in transgender historiography, while working with sources not originally composed in English, are discussed, with French as a case study, in Mesch 2020:9-11. For a recent note on critical approaches to narratorial distance between non-gender-conforming narrators and protagonists, see Pellegrini 2022:53.

The first full edition of *Notes*, published in 1836, presented a text in two parts. Part One consisted of chapters 'My childhood years' [Detskie leta moi] and 'Notes' [Zapiski], describing, respectively, the protagonist's life from birth until they enlisted and then their army service up to 1812.[19] Part Two, titled 'The war of 1812' [Voina 1812 goda], followed their military adventures during the Napoleonic Wars. Even though *Notes* was inspired by contemporary literary fashion for military memoirs (Prikazchikova 2015), and was most likely read by contemporaries as such, in structure it followed a linear plot typical for autobiographical narratives. Moreover, I argue that it has specifically followed the 'consecutive stages' of the autobiographical 'transsexual plot': 'suffering and confusion; the epiphany of self-discovery; corporeal and social transformation and conversion; and finally the arrival 'home' […]' (Prosser 101).

Reflecting the mood of the first stage in Prosser's transexual plot, the chapter 'My childhood years' is dominated by descriptions of physical and emotional trauma. The protagonist's relationship with their parents is strained from the start – the Durovs expect a son, but a 'robust', 'vigorous', and 'incredibly vociferous' daughter is delivered instead: 'But alas! this was no son as handsome as a cupid! This was a daughter – and a **warrior** [**bogatyr**] of a daughter at that! I was unusually large, had thick black hair, and was bawling loudly. Mother pushed me off her lap and turned to the wall' (Zirin 3, Durova 1983:28).[20] Transsexual

[19] Later editions included addendums to the first part (Durova 1983:260-283) and a short essay on the life of the Don Cossacks (Durova 1983:283-4).

[20] Zirin's translation, while mostly true to Aleksandrov's original text, has certain limitations. Firstly, Zirin interprets *Notes* as a proto-feminist text, situating it in the history of Russian women's writing (Zirin xiv-xviii). This interpretation, in turn, influences Zirin's choices when translating parts of the text that directly articulate the protagonist's transmasculinity: her translation of 'manly bravery' [muzhestvo] as 'courage', in a passage analysed below, is one example of this limitation. Secondly, Zirin's translation is literary rather than literal and it is therefore

autobiographies often begin with a trope of 'repeated positing of 'true gender' ab initio', underscoring 'the continuity of the self, the 'I' across time', in which 'the subject become[s] what, according to the subject's deepest conviction, s/he already truly was' (Prosser 119). In *Notes*, the 'true gender' is stated literally ab initio, in a scene describing the protagonist's birth. This scene heralds the first of many future disappointments: the child's behaviour is at odds with what is expected from someone who was assigned female at birth, confounding their parents.

Not only is the new child of the 'wrong' (in relation to the parents' expectations) gender, but their expression of this gender is also unsatisfactory, because of their 'warrior-like' temperament, appearance and behaviour. This conflict between the assigned and 'true' genders produces the suffering and confusion that characterise the mood of the opening chapters of this text. But the binary primarily articulated in *Notes* is not 'masculine' vs 'feminine' but 'warrior' vs 'feminine'. Already in the opening scenes of his narrative, Aleksandrov establishes the term 'warrior' as a gender category, using an Old East Slavic term of Turkic origin, 'bogatyr', meaning 'heroic warrior'.[21] Describing a case of obvious gender non-conformity that did not fit the binary matrix of contemporary views on gender, Aleksandrov immediately provided his readers with a frame of reference that legitimised his protagonist's 'gender deviant' (Halberstam 21) behaviour. Although the term 'cavalry

(rightly) primarily concerned with the text's readability in the target language. As a result, Zirin often relies on synonyms where Aleksandrov's Russian text consistently uses the same word. This is specifically noticeable in the use of the word 'warrior' [voin] and its derivative adjectives 'warrior-like' [voinskii, voinstvennyi], which in Zirin are variously translated as 'soldierly', 'military', or 'heroic'. For the purposes of the close reading carried out in this article, I have adjusted Zirin's translation in these instances, reverting to literal equivalents of Aleksandrov's lexical choices, highlighted in bold throughout the text.

[21] For examples of nineteenth-century usage, see Dal' 2008-2020.

maiden' would only appear later in Aleksandrov's text, he effectively 'trials' other versions of non-conforming gender categories in the opening chapters of his narrative.

The passage of time exacerbates, rather than resolves, the issue of the protagonist's gender non-conformity. Their mother struggles to bond with a baby whose predisposition to a military career makes them difficult to care for: '…evidently guided by the fate that intended me for a soldier's uniform [soldatskii mundir], I suddenly gripped my mother's breast and squeezed it as hard as I could with my gums. My mother gave a piercing shriek...' (Zirin 2, Durova 1983:27). The mounting estrangement between mother and child culminates in a strikingly violent episode: a crying baby drives its mother so mad that she throws it off the moving carriage (Zirin 3, Durova 1983:28). Although modern readers might recognise a depiction of postnatal depression in this scene, Aleksandrov's text frames the lack of affection between mother and child mostly as a consequence of their non-conforming gender expression. After the incident in the carriage, the daily care of the baby is handed over to its father's orderly, Astakhov. By the time the child is reunited with its mother at the age of four, their behaviour and appearance becomes even more reflective of their warrior-like nature. More terms are introduced to describe the specific gender non-conforming identity of the protagonist: 'Once she took me from Astakhov's arms, my mother never knew a single calm or cheerful moment. Each day my strange sallies and ***knightly*** *spirit* [**rytsarskii** dukh] angered her. […] Every day my ***warrior*** propensities [**voinstvennye** naklonnosti] grew stronger, and every day my mother liked me less' (Zirin 4, Durova 1983:29). [22]

[22] 'My Childhood Years', and specifically the implications of the protagonist's early relationship with their parents for the development of their gender identity, have been a subject of sustained academic attention in feminist criticism (Savkina 2007, Prikazchikova 2015). For a more inclusive recent reading, see Renner-Fahey 2009.

The effects of this early upbringing do not dissipate with age. Ten years later, the same warrior spirit is still present: 'I had entered my fourteenth year by then. I was tall, slim and shapely, but my **warrior** spirit [**voinstvennyi** dukh] was sketched on my features…' (Zirin 9, Durova 1983:34). A short stay in Ukraine with a strict but good-natured aunt, who treats the teenage protagonist with respect and affords them freedom to pursue their own interests, brings a temporary respite: '… [I] began making my peace with women's lot, especially as I saw the polite and obliging attentions of men. […] My **warrior** dreams [**voinskie** mechty] slowly began fading bit by bit from my mind' (Zirin 11, Durova 1983:36). The vacation smooths the roughest edges of their appearance and personality both, since the family there firmly, if gently, discourages any '**warrior** propensities [**voinstvennykh** naklonnostei] in a girl' (Zirin 9, Durova 1983:35): 'Although in a year and a half I had grown a good deal and was nearly a head taller than my mother, I no longer had the **warrior** appearance [**voinstvennogo** vida] that made me look like Achilles in woman's dress nor the **hussar** ways [**gusarskikh** priemov] that drove her to despair' (Zirin 13; Durova 1983:38). And yet, the final scene of this visit seems to re-affirm the protagonist's predestination: their grandmother's parting blessing offers protection – in a neat bit of foreshadowing – for the rest of their 'turbulent warrior life' [**voinstvennoi**, burnoi zhizni] (Zirin 13, Durova 1983:38). 'Warrior', 'hussar' and 'knight' are used interchangeably in these passages, underscoring the limitations of the more common contemporary binary gender categories that Aleksandrov had at his disposal.

Once the protagonist returns home, the suffering and confusion of early childhood resume. Their relationship with their mother, who, 'poisoned' by her husband's recent infidelities, now exemplifies the 'dismal […] woman's lot' (Ibid.), deteriorates further. The bond with their father strengthens but now rests exclusively on the father's wish to see his child as son and heir, following in his footsteps as a cavalry officer: 'He took pleasure in teaching me to

ride handsomely, keeping a firm seat in the saddle and managing the horse skilfully. […] Papa admired my ease, skill, and fearlessness. He said that I was the living image of him as a youth and that, had I been born a boy, I would have been the staff of his old age and an honour to his name' (Zirin 14, Durova 1983:40). These conversations rekindle the protagonist's earlier commitment to the dreams of a different life, setting into motion the second stage of the 'transexual plot' – the epiphany of self-discovery: 'This set my head awhirl, and this time for good! […] The ardour of a **warrior** [**voinstvennyi** zhar] flared in my soul with incredible force; my mind swarmed with dreams, and I began searching actively for means to realize my previous intention: to become a **warrior** [**voinom**] and a son to my father…' (Ibid.).

Their final transformation into a warrior is accomplished during a self-reflective scene in front of a mirror:

> … I got up to take off my female clothing. I went over to the mirror, cut off my curls, and put them away in a drawer. I took off my black satin dressing-gown and began putting on my Cossack uniform. After I had tied the black silk sash around my waist and put on the high cap with a crimson crown, I spent a quarter of an hour studying my transformed appearance. My cropped hair gave me a completely different countenance. I was certain that nobody would ever suspect my sex [pol]. (Zirin 17; Durova 1983:42)

A mirror-scene, another key trope of transgender autobiographies, 'captures the definitive splitting of the transsexual subject, freezes it, frames it thematically in narrative', and 'elucidate[s] the formalization of transsexuality as a plot' (Prosser 100, 102). Prosser's analysis focuses primarily on twentieth-century anglophone narratives, in which appearances,

even if still markedly gendered, are not as regulated as they would have been for the protagonists of historical accounts. Extending this analysis to the past allows us to situate the 'transgender mirror scene' in the long tradition of plot-defining mirror scenes in nineteenth-century autobiographical narratives (Carlisle 1979). Similarly to other historical transgender subjects, in this scene Aleksandrov's protagonist achieves corporeal and social transformation by changing clothes and cutting their hair.[23] This transformation is framed as a resurrection, book-ended by metaphors of death and birth: the protagonist fakes a drowning, leaving their old clothes at the riverbank. It is preceded by descriptions of 'sepulchral void and silence' of the Durovs' house at night, and followed by an image of a rider speeding through 'the deathly hush of the forest and the dark of the autumn night' (Zirin 18; Durova 1983:43). At sunrise, the protagonist reaches the village where a regiment is quartered, literally emerging from darkness into the light of the breaking dawn: 'And so I am at liberty! Free! Independent! I have taken the freedom that is rightfully mine – the freedom that is a precious gift from heaven, the inalienable prerogative of every human being! I have found a way to take it and guard it from all future claims against it; from now to my grave, it will be my portion and my reward!' (Zirin 18; Durova 1983:42-43).

Although 'My childhood years', and *Notes* as a whole, broadly adhered to the facts of Aleksandrov's biography, he made several significant changes to his story when committing it to paper. These changes – Aleksandrov chose a later date of birth (1788, instead of 1783) and made no mention of his marriage to Vasilii Chernov in 1801 and a birth of a son in 1803, both preceding his enlisting – were noted by Aleksandrov's first biographers as early as 1888

[23] Erauso describes a similar scene of change of costume and haircut in Erauso 1996:4. A mirror scene, followed by a journey and a scene of rebirth and renewal, are recognisable tropes of transgender narratives. In his reading of *Notes*, Andreas Schoenle suggests that the protagonist's later meeting with the tsar also functions as a symbolic rebirth under a new name (Schoenle 2001:67-70).

(Blinov 1888).[24] Scholars of Aleksandrov's life and work have suggested that these discrepancies were caused by the author's desire to avoid public censure: the figure of a sixteen-year-old patriotic Cavalry Maiden was sure to elicit a more sympathetic response than that of a twenty-three-year-old leaving behind a young child.[25] However, reading *Notes* as a transgender autobiography suggests that these adjustments are an example of a narrative technique typical for this genre: narrativizing trans identities to produce a coherent account, a 'recasting of the past to produce the present', highlighting 'persistent transgender identification' (Prosser 119). Making his protagonist a few years younger allowed Aleksandrov to place the scene of their corporeal and social transformation at the end of the first chapter, effectively marking the end of the protagonist's childhood. Omitting any mention of Aleksandrov's own marriage highlighted the connection between the specific gender category he has created – the Cavalry *Maiden* – with its most famous historical antecedent: Joanne of Arc, *The Maid* of the Orleans. The subtle religious imagery of the mirror scene (notably absent in the rest of the narrative) reinforces this reading, heralding the beginning of the protagonist's journey, metaphorical and literal: a journey towards acceptance (Prosser's 'home') and a peripatetic military campaign.

The Journey

A persistent trope in transgender narratives, the journey 'draws attention to the self-conscious formality of the story' (Prosser 117). It is often 'structured as progression-developmental' and thus reminds the readers that 'writing is always a retrospective reconstruction' (ibid.).

[24] Other inconsistencies included the use of names: in *Notes*, the protagonist enlists as 'Durov', whereas Aleksandrov first joined the army as 'Sokolov' (for a reprint of his military record see Begunova 366).

[25] For a full account of the changes Aleksandrov made to his biography, and the effect they had on the reception of this text by contemporaries, see Prikazchikova 2018:24-111.

Aleksandrov's narrative engages with the journey trope on several levels, both as a metaphor and as a plot device.

Notes begin with a story of the Durovs' elopement and continue with the scenes of their itinerant army life, travelling across the Russian Empire, with each instance of travel moving the transsexual plot forward, marking its new stages. Even before the protagonist joins the army, journeys, long and short, are used as important structural points of the overall transgender biography. But it is in the parts of *Notes* that describe the protagonist's adventures during the Napoleonic Wars that their journeys become the main focus of the transgender plot.

Military service takes them from their native Sarapul to the western fringes of the Russian empire and further into Poland, Lithuania and Eastern Germany. Depictions of the protagonist's new life as a cavalry officer, constantly on the move, create an atmosphere of persistent liminality. In each place where the soldiers stop to quarter, the protagonist's passing is tested anew. As a result, the narrative is punctuated by suspense-generating instances of near discovery, underscoring that the protagonist's 'gender is relational, external, and often out of control' (Manion 10.) It takes an external validation of the highest order to officially establish their identity as 'Aleksandrov' – a government decree, issued after a personal meeting with Tsar Aleksandr I, the nominal head of the Russian army. Although this meeting happens half-way through the narrative, it marks, in Prosser's terms, the protagonist's arrival to their metaphorical 'home': a space of acceptance of their transgender identity, the point where metaphorical and literal journeys converge. Interestingly, this meeting does not divide Aleksandrov's narrative into sharply contrasted 'before' and 'after'.

Instead, it aligns Aleksandrov's personal gender identification with his – now officially sanctioned – transmasculine presentation.[26]

The meeting happens in St Petersburg, where the protagonist travels during one of their many domestic journeys. Once there, they are summoned for an audience with the Tsar to receive an award for bravery in battle. This meeting is an occasion when the protagonist needs to articulate their transmasculine identity, convincing the Tsar that going back to their family life in Sarapul is unthinkable. As before, the protagonist relies on the term 'warrior' to make their case. The tsar, who has been made aware of Aleksandrov's assigned gender, suggests that now, having earned glory on the battlefield, they should return home to their family. Instead, Aleksandrov begs the tsar to grant their ultimate wish: 'To be a **warrior** [**voinom**]! To wear a uniform and bear arms! […] I was born in an army camp. The sound of trumpets was my lullaby. From the day of my birth, I have loved the **military** calling [**voennoe** zvanie]; by the age of ten I was devising ways to enlist; at sixteen I reached my goal […] through my courage [**muzhestvo**] alone…' (Ibid). Aleksandrov's other lexical choices in the original Russian also support his protagonist's claim. For example, *muzhestvo,* the word Aleksandrov chooses for 'courage' (instead of its synonyms *hrabrost',* or *otvaga*) shares a root, 'muzh', with *muzhchina* ('man'), emphasising the connection between military service and masculinity. The protagonist 'arrives home', progressing to an officially 'sanctioned' transmasculine identity: the Tsar grants them an 'unprecedented grace: permission to dedicate my life to him in the ranks of his **warriors** [**voina**] (Zirin 67, Durova 1983:94).

[26] After Aleksandrov enlisted in 1806, his father Andrei Durov submitted a request directly to the tsar's chancellery, outlining his child's history and asking for help to return them home. Intrigued, the tsar arranged for a private meeting with Aleksandrov. For an insightful analysis of the description of this meeting in *Notes,* see Schoenle 2001:67-70.

This progress – social, legal, and sexual – was, on the one hand, an inherent part of Aleksandrov's own biography. Starting out in 1808 as the child of a provincial civil servant and trapped in a failed marriage, by the 1840s he was able to retire from his career as a celebrity author with modest but not insignificant means and a military pension. On the other, the importance of the progress narrative in *Notes* indicates how closely Aleksandrov's text was related to other historical narratives of female to male gender transing. Common in accounts of gender non-conformity from the earliest examples to present day, the 'progress narrative' explains instances of cross-dressing and/or gender transing as necessary to achieve professional success, redress inequality, 'escape repression, or gain artistic or political "freedom"' (Garber 70). Historically, a progress narrative created 'a clear framework for understanding why someone assigned female at birth might want to live as a man': since 'most people assigned female at birth had so little access to economic advancement, educational achievement, or legal autonomy, no one was surprised when they claimed rights and privileges reserved for men' (Manion 6). In this framework, the protagonist's journey was a progress towards not only their new life as Aleksandrov, but also the social, economical and personal opportunities it created.

A progression through the military ranks enabled the protagonist's social transformation, providing a metaphorical 'home' where their gender identity was not questioned. Eager to 'play a part of a **warrior** [**voina**] under orders' (Zirin 21; Durova 1983:45), the protagonist enlisted to serve alongside other officers of 'martial appearance' (Zirin 30, Durova 1983:54), happy to be 'worthy of the honour of being accepted as one of the warriors with the enviable good fortune of serving Alexander' (Zirin 31; Durova 1983:55). When asked why they have joined the army, they explained: 'I have loved the **military** craft [**voinskoe** remeslo] from the day of my birth; that martial pursuits [**voinstvennye** zaniatia] have been and will be my sole exercise; that I consider **the warrior's calling** [**zvanie voina**] the noblest of them all and the

only one in which it is impossible to admit any vices whatsoever…' (Zirin 32, Durova 1983:56). Life in military service, although challenging, dangerous and sometimes boring, manifested the fulfilment of the protagonist's ultimate wish: 'At last my dreams have come true! I am a **warrior** [**voin**]!' (Zirin 37; Durova 1983:62).

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Aleksandrov's journey culminated not only in receiving state military decorations like the Cross of St George but also in a flourishing, if brief, literary career in the late 1830s. *Notes of a Cavalry Maiden* was an immediate success with contemporary audiences, turning Aleksandrov into a celebrity almost overnight. Its enduring popularity meant that the fictionalised narrative of *Notes* acquired the status of a factual autobiography, streamlining Aleksandrov's complex experience of gender transing into a swashbuckling story of military adventures. Nevertheless, Aleksandrov managed to successfully communicate his personal gender identification as a 'warrior', or 'cavalry maiden', to contemporary readers. The originality of his narrative strategies, explored in this article, is perhaps less noticeable for modern readers because of our familiarity with other transgender autobiographies. But the reception of his message by his contemporaries testifies to their success. When Aleksandrov died in 1866, the first recollections of his life began to appear in popular history journals. All discussed Aleksandrov's military career, and many followed his lead in using the category of 'warrior' to describe the nature and motivation for his gender transing (Lashmanov 1890, Kutsche 1894, Nekrasova 1890). While the exploration of texts like Aleksandrov's *Notes* has an intrinsic value for literary history, framing it in larger narratological categories such as transgender autobiography allows us to see them as a part of a transnational literary conversation on non-binary gender categories and sexual difference.

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