Suicide and the Body Politic in Imperial Russia

In early twentieth-century Russia, suicide became a public act and a social phenomenon of exceptional scale, a disquieting emblem of Russia’s encounter with modernity. Drawing on an extensive range of sources, from judicial records to the popular press, this book examines the forms, meanings, and regulation of suicide from the seventeenth century to 1914, placing developments into a pan-European context. It argues against narratives of secularization that read the history of suicide as a trajectory from sin to insanity, crime to social problem, and instead focuses upon the cultural politics of self destruction. Suicide – the act, the body, the socio-medical problem – became the site on which diverse authorities were established and contested, not just the priest or the doctor but also the sovereign, the public, and the individual. This panoramic history of modern Russia, told through the prism of suicide, rethinks the interaction between cultural forms, individual agency, and systems of governance.

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Suicide and the Body Politic in Imperial Russia

Susan K. Morrissey

University College London
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of them do appear, generally scattered across several chapters and in a changed
form. I would like to acknowledge these articles and thank the presses for copy-
right permission: “Patriarchy on Trial: Suicide, Discipline, and Governance in
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of Chicago, all rights reserved; “In the Name of Freedom: Autocracy, Serfdom,
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Note on transliteration, translations, and dates

I have used the Library of Congress system of transliteration and partially modified old-style orthography to conform to modern usage. In the main text, the names of rulers and well-known cultural figures have been rendered in the more familiar English versions – Nicholas (not Nikolai), Dostoevsky (not Dostoevskii), and place names written without the soft sign. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted. Finally, dates are given according to the Julian calendar.
Abbreviations

**ASMOG**  Arkhiv sudebnoi meditsiny i obshchestvennoi gigieny

**BE**  Entsiklopedicheskii slovar’ Brokgaus i Efron, 84 vols. (SPb, 1890–1907)

d.  delo (file)

**EM**  Etnograficheskii muzej

**f.**  fond (collection)

**GANO**  Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Nizhegorodskoi oblasti

**GARF**  Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi federatsii

l., ll.  list, list’ia (folio, folios)

**IRLI**  Institut russkoi literatury (Pushkinskii dom)

op.  opis’ (inventory)

**OPNiEP**  Obozrenie psikhiiatrii, nevrologii, i eksperimental’noi psikhiiologii

**PSS**  Polnoe sobranie sochinenii

**PSZ**  Polnoe sobranie zakonov

**RAPKMB**  Russkii arkhiv patologii, klinicheskoi meditsiny i bakteriologii

**RGADA**  Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv drevnykh aktov

**RGB**  Rossiiskaia gosudarstvennaiia biblioteka: Rukopisnyi otdel

**RGIA**  Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv


**SPb**  St. Petersburg

**SSSM**  Sbornik sochinenii po sudebnoi meditsine, sudebnoi psikhiiatrii, meditsinskoi politii, obshchestvennoi gigiene, epidemiologii, meditsinskoi geografi i meditsinskoi statistike

**SZ**  Svod zakonov

**TS**  Vladimir Dal’, Tolkovy slovar’ zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka, 4 vols. (reprint: Moscow, 1994)

**TsGIA SPb**  Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv, g. S.-Peterburga

**VKSPN**  Vestnik klinicheskoi i sudebnoi psikhiiatrii i nevropatologii

**VNPM**  Voprosy nervno-psikhiiacheskoi meditsiny

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<td>Vestnik obshchestvennoi gigieny, sudebnoi i prakticheskoi meditsiny</td>
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<td>VPKAG</td>
<td>Vestnik psikhologii, kriminal'noi antropologii i gipnotezii</td>
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<td>VSMOG</td>
<td>Vestnik sudebnoi meditsiny i obshchestvennoi gigieny</td>
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<td>ZhMVD</td>
<td>Zhurnal Ministerstva vnutrennykh del</td>
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<td>ZhMNP</td>
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<td>ZhROONZ</td>
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Introduction

The general is not thought about with passion but with a comfortable superficiality. The exception, on the other hand, thinks the general with intense passion.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 1843

Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.

Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 1922

The “state of exception” in which we live is not the exception but the rule.

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 1940

Suicide is an exception. Only a small minority of people actively seek death. This fact renders suicide unusual and particular. Yet its particularity rests not on the numbers of such deaths. Throughout European history, self-killing has also been regarded as a special—and usually a terrible—way to die. It has formed not just a deviation from normalcy but also an assault upon it. Modern Western societies now tend to see suicide as the consequence of a mental illness or depression that has undermined the “natural instinct” to preserve life. While many suicides may indeed be related to illness, this approach renders the decision to die intrinsically pathological, even trivial, because it disputes the potential of ethical choice and reflexivity. Another feature of recent times, in contrast, is the contentious debate about the “right to die,” a right that is typically circumscribed to those instances when disease or incapacity has already destroyed the “quality” of life. This exception (to the exception) confirms the tautological norm prevalent today: healthy people would not choose to take their own lives, unless they were not healthy. Life thereby becomes the ultimate value, the right to reject it denied. The historian Lisa Lieberman argues that modern, medical concepts take the defiance out of suicide by excluding the act from the bounds of the normal.¹

To claim defiance as a quality of suicide is not to read all suicides as political or even willful acts. Only a small number are explicitly defiant. Among the most famous cases is that of Jan Palach, who, in January 1969, set himself

on fire in Prague’s Wenceslas Square as a demonstration against the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops. Yet Palach was himself concerned that his act should be viewed not as a suicide but as a protest, an archetypical distinction predicated here upon the opposition of the personal and pathological to the political and conscious. Agency and ethics were thereby excluded from the category of suicide but attributed to the heroic feat of political action. In contrast to Palach’s case, the defiance in suicide is usually only implicit: to reject life is to challenge its meaning and its order. This challenge has historically demanded a response. In medieval and early-modern Christianity, roughly since the era of St. Augustine, both life and death were considered prerogatives of the sovereign, that is, of God who determined the duration of man’s worldly existence. Within the sphere of earthly affairs, the divinely constituted sovereign power likewise claimed a monopoly upon the right to take or to give life: to declare war, to execute criminals, or to bestow the gift of clemency. Intentional suicide was consequently conceived as a mortal sin and a heinous crime, an act of insubordination against God’s dominion that was often linked to demonic forces. Its consequence was eternal perdition. In a noteworthy distinction to contemporary times, the defiance of self-murder was fully acknowledged, for this framed the rituals of exclusion. The bodies of suicides were not buried in the consecrated ground of the church cemetery but interred profanely, without commemoration, and sometimes desecrated. The symbolic erasure of these lives reaffirmed the rightful order and authority.

On the eve of the modern era, attitudes first hardened, and the enforcement of the legal prohibitions grew more severe; but then they slowly softened, and these rituals began a long process of decline. Philosophers condemned superstition, writers penned sympathetic portraits of suicidal heroes and heroines, and newspapers reported incidents within the context of everyday social and economic life. By the mid-nineteenth century, criminal statutes across Europe had usually been liberalized and often eliminated altogether. Simultaneously, suicide was becoming the object of two new scientific disciplines, moral statistics and psychiatry, both of which disputed the agency of the act. By locating its causes in the social environment or human physiology (and later the psyche), they cast suicide as a social problem and a medical pathology, either way as an abnormality requiring expert intervention.

Self-killing did not fully lose its defiance, however, despite these many transformations. In analogy with changing notions of political sovereignty, it was

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2 See the following website (consulted July 19, 2005) that likewise includes information on several other suicides inspired by Palach: http://archiv.radio.cz/palach99/eng/.


no longer situated within the primary domain of divine authority but instead inserted into the space between individual (moral) autonomy and social duty. The public debates drew upon the categories of ancient philosophy, natural law, and the social contract to produce arguments both for and against suicide. When life becomes a burden due to illness or infirmity, it was claimed, for example, then we have the right to relinquish it. More recently, the political philosopher Giorgio Agamben has noted the parallel between suicide and the sovereign decision on the state of exception, that is, the most fundamental act of sovereignty that lies in the very suspension of law.\textsuperscript{5} Such a notion of suicide as the decisive expression of man’s autonomy has underpinned some of the greatest literary and philosophical works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In his exploration of the consequences of a God-less world, Fedor Dostoevsky provided perhaps the paradigmatic account in his anti-hero, Kirillov, for whom shooting himself represented “the fullest point of his self-will,” even his transfiguration into God.\textsuperscript{6} Later existentialists would define suicide as a problem integral to human freedom and the assertion of meaning, a conceptual frame that has also shaped some well-known suicides among writers and artists.\textsuperscript{7} The concepts governing suicide have thus changed dramatically over the last centuries.

The history of suicide now forms a large field in its own right. The first studies generally concentrated on intellectual debates, literary representations, and law.\textsuperscript{8} More recent works have broadened their scope in an attempt to grapple with the complex character and dynamics of change itself. This narrative – so briefly and schematically sketched above – fits easily into the conventional periodization of European history, and it has often been told as the story of modernity. “From Sin to Insanity” is the title of a recent collection of articles on suicide in early-modern Europe, when “modern” suicide, “suicide as we know it – decriminalized, secularized, and medicalized – [took] hold among


\textsuperscript{6} Dostoevsky frequently returned to the theme of suicide, especially in his novel, \textit{The Demons}. The best analysis of his views is Irina Paperno, \textit{Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky’s Russia} (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997).
