



Translating the 'Cavalry Maiden'

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Moving Trans History Forward

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Who Was Aleksandrov?

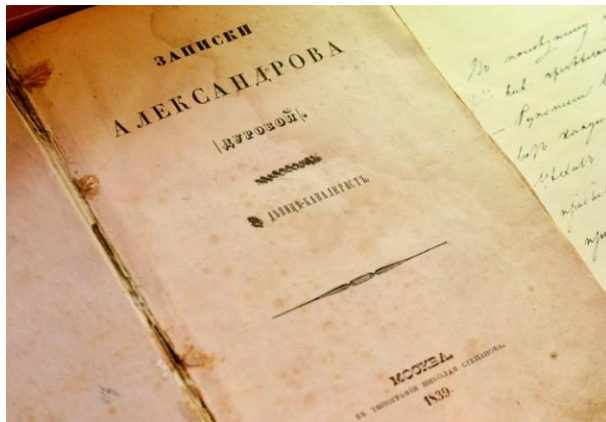
Hero of the Napoleonic Wars

Awarded the Cross of St. George by Tsar Aleksandr I

Also given the right to use the surname Aleksandrov, to showcase his personal connection to the Tsar

Gender identity known to the Tsar and senior officers

The Memoir

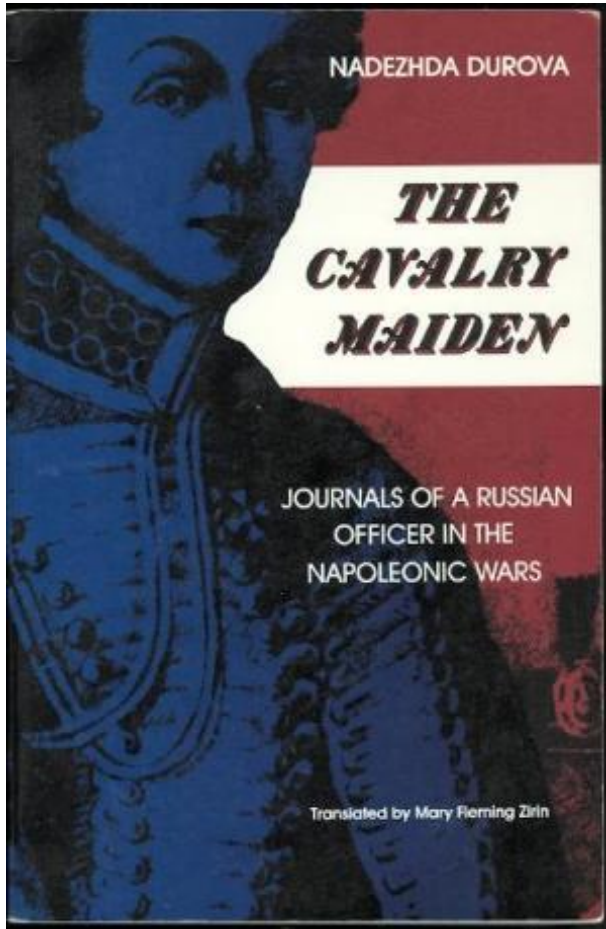


A connection with Aleksandr Pushkin (Romantic poet, editor, etc.) leads to publication

Disagreement over marketing strategy (note author name)

In Russia, the book is now a mainstay of the memoir canon

Aleksandrov also wrote many works of fiction



The Memoir in English

First English translation in 1988

Mainstay of women's studies curricula in Slavic studies and comparative literature

Also translated into German, French & Italian

Trans identity largely erased

Note use of deadname for the author

Russian is a Highly Gendered Language

Kavalerist-devitsa

Kavalerist (Cavalry Officer) is a masculine noun

Devitsa (Maiden) is a feminine noun

So the title of the memoir is already posing questions about gender

The use of agreement in Russian allows for flexibility in gender: 'kavalerist-devitsa' agrees with both masculine and feminine verbs and adjectives



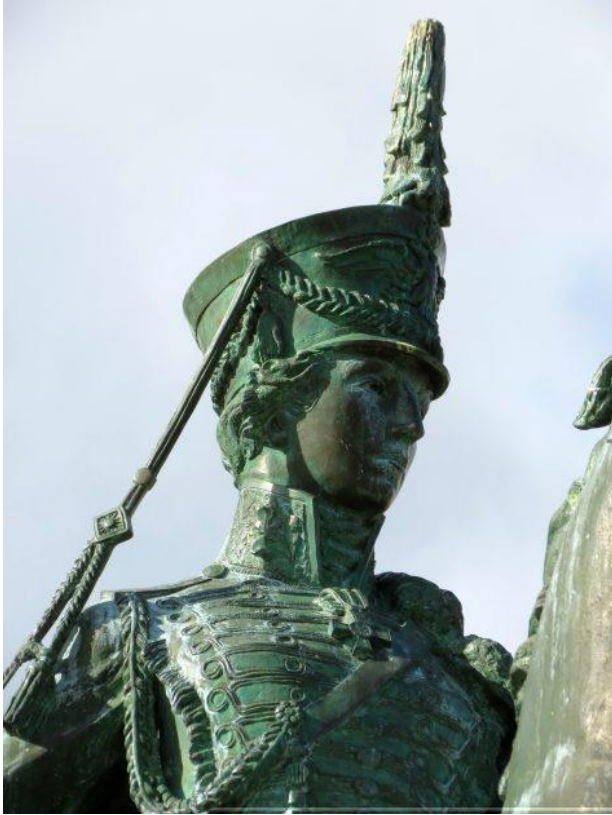
The Narrator and the Subject

The memoir is narrated by
someone gendered as
female

The subject of the memoir
is gendered as male

But they are the same
person





Choice of Words Matters

Aleksandrov uses gendered ambiguity in Russian to complicate the narrative

Mary Zirin's translation "corrects" this to allow a more consistently feminine presentation

For example, Aleksandrov's *muzhestvo* ("manly bravery") is translated as "courage"

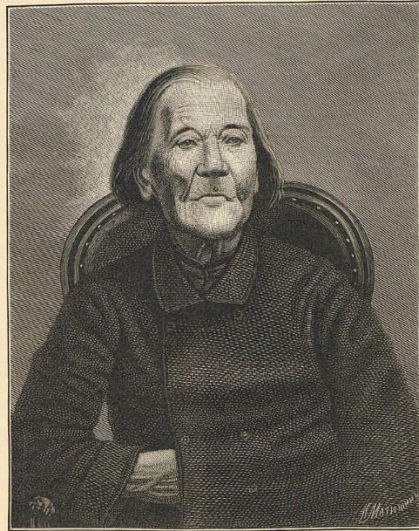
Other Evidence

Aleksandrov spent the rest of his life as a man (60 of his 83 years)

We know this because 19th Century Russian historians visited his home town and interviewed people who had known him

They are remarkably sympathetic to his identity

Also his business correspondence consistently uses masculine pronouns



НАУМОВНА АНДРЕЕВНА ДУРОВА

РОД. 1783 Г. + 23 МАРТА 1866 Г.

(КАВАЛЕРИСТЪ-ДЪВНИЦА АЛЕКСАНДРОВЪ).

ПРЕДЛОЖЕНИЕ КЪ ЖИТИЕТО "РУССКАЯ СТАРИНА".

ДОДАНОЕ КЪЖИТО. С.-ПЕТЕРБУРГЪ, 16 АПРЕЛА 1899 Г. ВИВЕДЕНИЕ ЗАКОНАМИТЕ РУССКАЯ СТАРИНА.



Selected Extracts - 1

F.F. Lashmanov:

“To the day she died, N.A. Durova could not bear to be called by her existing female name, and so I will herein after refer to her by the name given to her, or rather authorized, by the Emperor Aleksandr I in 1807”



Selected Extracts - 2

N.A. Kutshe:

“Durova always considered herself to be a man, wore male clothing, aspired to imitate the male manner, voice and gait, and did not permit herself to be addressed otherwise”

<https://notchesblog.com/2024/12/10/aleksandr-aleksandrov-new-sources-in-nineteenth-century-russian-trans-life-writing/>

Cultural Context



Russian society at the time was strongly hierarchical

The historians' reports show considerable deference being shown to Aleksandrov by local society

Russia is a multi-cultural society

The towns of Sarapul, where he was born, and Elabuga, where he retired, are formerly colonized territories that still have sizable indigenous populations who speak Uralic (Udmurt) and Turkic (Tatar) languages



Conclusions

Translating trans autobiographies requires knowledge of not just the language but conventions around the linguistic use of gender

And of the cultural context

Poorly informed translations can easily mislead

"Translating Historical Trans Life-Writing: Aleksandr Aleksandrov (1783-1866)", *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (forthcoming 2025)