

Duccio Colombo

Len'ka Panteleev and the traditions of Van'ka Kain: Criminal Biography in XXth Century Russia

The Fighter against the myth, or the memoirist who considers himself a Hercules (*Anton Pavlovich Chekhov: an attempt at a characterization* by N.M. Ezhov).

The vast corpus about the 1920s Petrograd bandit Len'ka Panteleev, comprised of different texts – such as newspaper articles, fiction, film and song, with a complex and often ambiguous interplay between factual accounts and fictional adaptation – seems untypical for the era. A useful term of comparison is the similar corpus concerning the 18th century Moscow rogue Van'ka Kain. The latter shows all the typical features of 18th century criminal biographies, which at the time were popular throughout Europe. According to Michel Foucault, this genre paves the way to the detective novel, where the punitive mechanisms are substituted by the disciplinary ones.

The deeds of the 1920s Petrograd bandit Len'ka Panteleev inspired an impressive corpus of texts belonging to a whole set of different genres, spanning from news to literature, film and song. We can hardly imagine a similar corpus related to any other Russian criminal from the same era. A useful term of comparison can be found instead in the – likewise vast and controversial – corpus concerning the famous 18th century Moscow rogue Van'ka Kain. The comparison reveals remarkable similarities and leads to unexpected conclusions concerning the generic status of contemporary Russian criminal fiction – a largely unexplored field. It is important to

underline that the cases discussed are not the actual stories of the two characters involved¹, but the two corpora of texts concerning them and the cultural myths they express.

Van'ka Kain was born Ivan Osipov in 1714 (or 1718, according to a different version).² A runaway

¹ One writer, however, compares Panteleev directly to Kain: “Panteleev became a sort of Van'ka Kain turned upside-down – there was in Moscow in the 18th century this genius of theft, treason and detection. Only Kain from a thief rose to become a detective, and Len'ka the other way around, but I feel the personalities of these two scoundrels have something in common” (Konstantinov 2004: I, 51).

² The main historical source about Kain is Esipov 1869.

serf, he led a gang of burglars robbing rich houses and merchant estates. In 1741 he presented a petition to the authorities, offering to use his knowledge of the criminal underworld to catch thieves. His proposal was accepted, and the results were so outstanding that his past crimes were pardoned and he was appointed detective (or, as documents state, “official informer”: see Esipov 1869: 307). With his squad, he became the terror of Moscow outlaws. However, he used the almost unlimited power that his new position gave him predominantly as an opportunity to accumulate wealth in any way possible until 1749, when he was arrested. After a five-year long trial, he was sentenced to death, but the condemnation was eventually commuted to forced labour.

A first, short account of his feats appeared in print in 1775; the first edition of Kain’s purported autobiography came out in 1777 and in 1782 one of the pioneers of Russian popular literature, Matvei Komarov, published his own version of the story. Together, these three versions amounted to 15 editions in the 18th century alone (Sipovskii 1902: 98)³. During the following

century, Kain was the hero of dozens of pamphlets – “appearing up to the present day”, wrote V. V. Sipovskii in 1902 (*ibidem*), while Jeffrey Brooks mentions “one of the last works of popular commercial fiction published in Russia” dated 1918 (Brooks 2003: 201), i.e. an anonymous series of ten issues dedicated to Kain in which, however, the original story had become almost unrecognizable – in the words of a contemporary scholar, “in about one hundred years literature went as far as to transform this questionable character into an incarnation of Cossack freedom, a righter of wrongs or a champion of national pride” (Raï-Gonneau 2007: 101). In today’s Russia, the name ‘Van’ka Kain’ still seems to be eponymous with bandit – or is it perhaps now becoming eponymous because of the wave of criminal literature flooding the book market in the post-soviet years? For example, Mikhail Grachev’s 2005 work on the history of Russian criminal slang is entitled *From Van’ka Kain to Mafia* and the second part of *The Valley of Death* – Anatolii Pristavkin’s memoirs of his years as chairman of the presidential Grace commission – came out in 2001 as *The Passion according to Van’ka Kain*. As late as 1998, the writer Anatolii

³ Sipovskii’s work contains detailed bibliographical data.

Rogov published a new historical novel dedicated to Kain.⁴

Len'ka Panteleev was born (probably) Leonid Pantelkin in 1902 (or 1893, according to a different version). Different sources give very different accounts of his life, but they tend to agree that he was a typography worker before the revolution, took part in the civil war, and after being discharged from the Red Army served in the ChK. After being dismissed, he formed a gang in early 1922 robbing not only the apartments of the new bourgeoisie of the NEP period, but also common street-walkers. He was arrested and convicted in the autumn of 1922, but he escaped from the *Kresty* prison and became the terror of Petrograd until, in March 1923, he was shot dead in a gunfight with the police.

The first texts devoted to his deeds – crime-news sections of the Petrograd newspapers excluded – appeared in 1925: the magazine «Sud idet» published a detailed account of the case (De-lo 1925), and Elizaveta Polonskaia's short narrative poem *V petle*, dated 1923 and dedicated to him, was printed in the «Kovsh» almanac. There is a sto-

ry about Panteleev, dated 1939, in Lev Sheinin's famous *An Investigator's notebook*⁵ and the memoirs of Leonid Dimitriev, a member of the team that captured him, were published in 1967, in a collection titled *Chekisty*. In 1974, the third episode of the TV serial *Rozhden-naia revoliutsiei*, dedicated to the history of the Soviet militia, was centered on Panteleev.⁶ Two books about him, Maksim Tokarev's *Len'ka Panteleev: The terror of the detectives* and Michail Kniazev's *Len'ka Panteleev, the King of Robbers* appeared in 2000 and 2001. By this time, the flood of histories and encyclopedias of Russian crime, which rarely overlook this case, had already begun,⁷ and a number of articles started to appear in the

⁵ I was not able to trace the first printing of the story; it has been included in every edition of the book, since Sheinin 1957 at least.

⁶ The novel written by the authors of the screenplay (Nagornyi-Riabov 1984) is usually referred to as 'the book upon which the serial is based', but is, more likely, based itself on the screenplay (although the possibility that it was published somewhere in the periodical press before the shootings cannot be totally ruled out).

⁷ A necessarily incomplete list of texts of this kind containing Panteleev's story includes: Konstantinov 2004, Razzakov 1996, Khrutskii 2004, Tarasov 2005, and Kolesnik 2012.

⁴ A second edition was published in 2003.

periodical press.⁸ In 2006 Pantelev was the hero of the second episode of the successful television 'documentary series' *Sledstvie veli* (*The investigation was conducted by...*), and in the same year an eight-part series, *Life and Death of Len'ka Pantelev* (screenplay by V. Akimov, director E. Iasan) was broadcast.

In 2009, the writer Elena Khaetskaia, under the pen name of Elena Tólstaia, published a two-part novel: *Len'ka Pantelev, the lucky man – Len'ka Pantelev, the son of ruin*. In 2012, at the Petersburg Young Spectator Theater, M. Didenko and N. Dreiden staged an award-winning musical about him.

The name of Pantelev also became eponymous; in 1927 two young writers from Leningrad, Grigorii Belykh and Aleksei Ereemeev, published a book about their experiences in a special school for problem children, which was to become a classic of Soviet teenage literature, *The Republic of SHKID*. While the former signed it with his actual name, the latter used the pseudonym L. Pantelev. Aleksei Erofeev, an obviously autobiographical character, bears this as his school nickname, given to

⁸ The list of articles is also necessarily incomplete: Stepanov 2002, Khrutskii 2002, Nikitin 2005, Liubvin 2007, Lur'e 2012.

him when he told his new schoolmates his turbulent story:

Then the Gipsy softly said:
- Yeah, quite a life. Full of adventures and risk. You're not Erofeev, Len'ka, you're a real Pantelev. A tough guy. (Belykh-Pantelev 1927)⁹

The pseudonym would remain with Ereemeev (1908-1987) throughout his long career. Although he insisted that his books should be signed simply 'L. Pantelev', some of them came out displaying the form 'Leonid' or even 'Leonid Ivanovich'. In 2003, an apparently cheap criminal novel, *Pulp Fiction in Russian*, appeared under the signature of Leonid Pantelev.¹⁰

Numerous songs have been dedicated to both Kain and Pantelev which creates yet another similarity. In both cases, controversial questions arise.

Komarov's book (Komarov 2008) included a songbook, *Songs sung by Kain*. Every new edition

⁹ In the 1961 revised edition, the writer sensibly altered this chapter; the character's real last name is now Pantelev, and this is why he is nicknamed Len'ka.

¹⁰ Some critics reacted with anger: how could the author associate his mediocre work with the name of a respected children's writer? See Vasilevskii-Kriuchkov 2004.

of the 'autobiography' appearing from this moment on also included songs, and their number grew in every new printed edition of both texts (see Raï-Gonneau 2007: 101), while several collections of folk songs from the late 18th and 19th centuries included a *Kain songs* section. It is now clear (and probably it was already at the time) that most of these songs (if not all of them) were not originally related to Kain (see Raï-Gonneau 2007: 101); their constant presence in the book corpus, however, merits attention. Folklorist P. Besonov commented in 1872:

In any case, of these songs there is one that stuck to Kain so strongly that nowadays it is still impossible to separate it from his name. It is the famous *Ne shumī, mati zelenaia dubravushka*. For the connoisseur it is enough to take a look at it or to listen to it once and it is easy to realize that in its origins it is very much more primordial and old than Kain. (...) Such is every similar case in which a song belongs to a well-known epic or historical person, it is for a while his property, and then it passes, together with his

name, in the public domain (Pesni 1872: 71).

The case in point, indeed one of the best-known Russian folk songs, refers clearly to a country setting, and its connection to Kain, a typical city bandit (although he purportedly moved his gang to the Volga for a while, where they spent some time as mounted raiders), appears problematic; Kain's best friends could hardly be the "good steed" and "taut bow" mentioned in the song, evidence suggesting his favourite weapon is the stick. Making this a 'Kain song' is a step towards turning the character into a highwayman, a peasant bandit, a Cossack. Cossacks can be classed among what Eric Hobsbawm (1985: 70) called "social bandits". The historian considered this kind of banditry a typical peasant phenomenon; however, he admitted that:

where for one reason or another social banditry did not flourish or had died out, suitable criminal robbers might well be idealized and given the attributes of Robin Hood (...). Thus, in eighteenth-century France, England and Germany celebrated underworld characters like Dick Turpin, Cartouche

and Schinderhannes substituted for the genuine Robin Hoods who had disappeared from these countries by that time (Hobsbawm 1985: 39).

Kain was called “The Russian Cartouche” by Komarov, who published his story under the same cover as the translation of a German life of the latter.¹¹

Applying the same interpretive categories to Panteleev would

¹¹ D. Mordovtsev, a historical novelist who wrote an essay about Kain in the second half of the 18th century, thought that he was somehow envious of the glory of the Volga highwaymen and tried consciously to become one of them: “The mob Kain had joined was not such – they were simple city thieves. In their environment you can see nothing poetic, nothing charming, while in the Volga highwayman’s environment there really was something charming for a daredevil, and this charm constituted in a sense the moral force of the Volga highwaymen. Kain himself felt this difference between the modest role his fate provided him and the one the Volga highwaymen played, and consequently, aiming to raise his status in his own eyes and in the others’, did not restrain from posing: he wanted to present himself as a ‘gallant rogue’; he loved to sing daring songs (...); but in any case he was not able to raise himself to that ideal position where, in the eyes of the people, and first of all of the ragged, stood the *atamans* of the Volga highwaymen Zametaev, Berkut, and, further off, Razin, Ermak, Kudeiar, Kol’tso and so on” (Mordovtsev 1876: 31-32).

be, of course, a risky operation – social banditry, according to Hobsbawm, flourished in preindustrial societies, and the not-so-few songs about Panteleev are mostly pop songs by well-known authors produced for commercial purposes.¹² There is one interesting, albeit dubious, exception: many versions of Panteleev’s story mention a song, allegedly widespread in Petrograd at the time:

Len’ka Panteleev,
The terror of the
detectives,
Bracelets on his wrist,
Blue eyes...¹³

These lines are from Polonskaia’s poem. The poem is clearly modeled on Blok’s *Twelve*, and it is of course possible that the author included lines from an existing song, just as Blok used lines from the *Var-*

¹² There are at least two Panteleev songs in the corpus of the contemporary, impressively popular, *blatnaia pesnia* or criminal song: one, written by Anatolii Polotno, appeared in his 1990 album *Privet ot Len’ki Panteleeva*, the second was sung by Vika Tsiganova in her 1991 *Guliai, anarkhiia* album; another one is included in a 2007 record by one of the senior Russian rap groups, Bad Balance, titled *Legends of Gangsters*.

¹³ See, for instance, Stepanov 2002, Tarasov 2005: 80-81; Lur’e 2012. Even in the *Sledstvie veli* documentary these lines are read, not sung.

shavianka. Or, if they were actually written by her (using a clearly recognizable song-like, rhythmical pattern to give the feeling of a real street-song), they could have been turned into a song by the common people. However, while the ‘song’ is quoted quite often, we were not able to discover any clues as to its tune. A definitive answer is hardly likely to be reached, but a realistic one might be found by turning the problem upside down: those who wrote about Pantelev merely needed a song, possibly a folk song, in order to construct the image of a social bandit, “the kind of outlaws about whom men sing ballads: champions, heroes and avengers” (Hobsbawm 1985: 36). In the stories about Pantelev almost all the characteristic attributes of the social bandit as outlined by Hobsbawm are present, albeit often under discussion (we read that Len’ka “was no Robin Hood” more often than the contrary – this means, however, that authors felt compelled to discuss the possibility); he was famed, if not for stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, for at least not robbing proletarians (that is to say, members of his community). He had turned outlaw because he was a victim of injustice (in many of the different accounts

of his dismissal from the ChK) and he was believed to be invulnerable; according to some versions he abstained from harming women (“*s babami ia ne voiuiu*”).¹⁴ Finally, according to Hobsbawm, social banditry “seems to occur in all types of human society which lie between the evolutionary phase of tribal and kinship organization, and modern capitalist and industrial society, but including the phases of disintegrating kinship society and transition to agrarian capitalism” (Hobsbawm 1985: 18); Pantelev is a hero at the time of the temporary restoration of capitalism during NEP. It is, of course, hazardous to apply this kind of model to such different conditions (Hobsbawm himself repeatedly warns against it). However, the coincidences, nevertheless, are striking. Every text about Pantelev calls him the hero of a myth spread through the lower classes of Petrograd, but it is now virtually impossible to test the veracity of this information. It is in any case likely that Robin Hood, Van’ka Kain, the ‘social bandit’, may simply have been the only blueprint available to writers looking for a way to tell Len’ka’s story. Various additional traits are de-

¹⁴ According to the *Sledstvie veli* documentary.

veloped in the corpus, and they often passed from one text to the other to grow closer to the actual model. In the following pages, we will pursue this hypothesis to its rational conclusion: it is here that the comparison with the case of Kain can become the source of useful insights.

Genre is the issue in question and the Kain stories doubtless belong to a specific one, that of criminal biography, which was at the time well established in Europe. The English case is the best known, perhaps because, as some scholars maintain, criminal biography had its greatest development there, or perhaps because its relationship with Defoe's work drew the attention of researchers. These texts may well be interpreted as a Russian import of a European genre (See Raï-Gonneau 2007: 101). The Pantelev corpus is less easily defined, as it is composed of texts belonging to different genres, from poems to newspaper articles. The complex relationship between them, however, contributes to a blurring of the differences. Two examples may help clarify this point.

Sheinin's work is ambiguous in its generic characteristic. It belongs to a collection of texts that present themselves as factual:

Zapiski, Notebook, a definition which usually applies to memoirs.¹⁵ The bulk of the collected texts are first-person tales with exact names and dates that, be they true or false, are no doubt intended to be taken as factual. This, however, does not concern every single one of them – in the introduction, the author refers to the texts comprising the book as *ocherki* and *rasskazy*, 'sketches' and 'stories' (Sheinin 1984: 16) – and *Len'ka Pantelev* is one of the cases most likely to fit more easily into the second class. Sheinin's *Len'ka* is a gentleman outlaw, appearing at parties of the wealthy in a dinner suit, robbing the guests whilst displaying excellent manners, proposing toasts to the hostess and even leaving a visiting card with a greeting to the police. The scene repeats itself, after his escape from jail, at the fashionable Donon restaurant, where he flirts with his lawyer's partner. At Donon, according to the account published in the «Sud idet» magazine, Pantelev with one of his gang had been arrested for drunkenness.¹⁶ We might

¹⁵ A partial translation of this book has appeared in English as *Diary of a Criminologist* (Sheinin 2003).

¹⁶ He managed, however, to escape before reaching the police station thanks to the fact that he had not been recognized as the widely-sought bandit.

therefore consider Sheinin's work as an exercise in pure and traditional fiction, and his use of the name of a historical character more or less casual; but then, how to explain the fact that some of the episodes and details he first mentions reappear in purportedly factual accounts? Even the most obviously literary detail – the visiting card, which, of course, comes from the tales about Arsène Lupin – is presented in the *Sledstvie veli* serial and in Andrei Kolesnik's *Banditskii SSSR* as fact and dinner jacket raids on parties and restaurants found their way into 'documentary' accounts long before. Sheinin's story, therefore, has been treated as a fully legitimate source by writers working after him and the corpus appears to have more and more details of spurious origin, which pass freely from one text to another, irrespective of their generic specificity.

Kniazev's book is defined as a novel on the title page; why then the continual mention of exact dates of events and of exact addresses where they took place, why the repeated inclusion of documents, with no guarantee of their authenticity, but in a form that gives the impression that they might well be real? In general, even the more overtly fictional texts in the corpus

(such as Khaetskaia's novel or the *Life and death* TV serial) takes great care in showing that Len'ka's first raid was on the apartment of the fur-trader Bogachev, on 39, Kazanskaia street, on 3rd March 1922, at four (or three) in the afternoon, when Mr. Bogachev and his wife were not at home, although their daughter Emilia was sick in bed. Panteleev's partners-in-crime bear the same names everywhere: Belov, Gavrikov, Varshulevich and so on, though often they have very different biographies and characteristics. On the other hand, this obsession with concrete details at times generates comical effects: from the very first account, i.e. the «Sud idet» article, we know that, after Len'ka's killing, his body was displayed for some days at the morgue, so that city dwellers could be assured that the fiend was indeed dead. Subsequent reports go as far as to specify the location of the hospital and its morgue, however sometimes it is the Mariinskaia, other times the Obukhovskaia, other times again the Aleksandrovskiaia.

Recent Panteleev texts tend to include (with increasing frequency) allegedly original documents, the real status of which is usually unclear. This happens even in a rap song, where an ar-

ticle from «Krasnaia gazeta» (republished in «Sud idet») is quoted but introduced as a secret report to Dzerzhinskii. The general impression that modern versions of Pantelev's story leave is that their sources are rather to be sought in previous texts – both fictional and factual. The Pantelev corpus, moreover, offers a rare occasion to observe *in situ* the process of creating fiction on the basis of factual accounts. Unsurprisingly, coincidence is one of the devices most frequently used: in the *Rozhdennaia revoliutsiei* serial, the head of security of the State bank, killed by Pantelev while running from the police, is the detective hero's neighbour and friend, whereas the bandit is recognized at the Donon restaurant by the hero's wife. In the *Life and Death* serial the detective, Kondratev, was Len'ka's colleague and friend at the time that the latter worked in the ChK. Based on the fact that Kondratev was the last name of both the detective leading the search for Len'ka and the prison guard who helped him escape from prison, Kniazev makes them cousins. However, the same strategy is adopted, for instance, in the *Sledsvtie veli* documentary: every account mentions the fact that, when he was arrested for the first time at the

Kozhtrest shoe-store on the Nevskii prospekt, Pantelev killed the head of the third department of the Petrograd militia, Pavel Bardzai (or Borzoi, or Barzai). The latter had entered the store to buy himself a pair of sandals and had fallen upon the bandit. Barzai, about whom much detail is given (and a photograph is shown) was in charge of the search for Pantelev. This may be the truth; but how curious that Kondratev, passing by, ends up putting handcuffs on Len'ka!

Both Sheinin's and Kniazev's texts, therefore, are untypical of the fictional genres to which, individually taken, they appear to belong. While factual accounts of the case display fictional features, the difference appears blurred in the corpus. The features of the individual texts could be better explained if we include them all together in the same category – that of criminal biography.

The case of Kain is not very different: research has proved that “the autobiography is not a reliable historical source” (Raï-Gonneau 2007: 104), however historians used it as such throughout the 19th century. As for Komarov's book, it is usually read as a novel, or proto-novel. In the introduction, the author reveals his sources; he had spo-

ken to Kain when the latter was detained for questioning in Moscow and to people who knew him well. The decision to write came after he had read the autobiography (most likely, in fact, the short text), which “...although [...] copyists committed big mistakes [...] however, based on the content, we should think that the original must have been written either by Kain himself or by someone else according to his [oral] narrative” (Komarov 2008: 283). Komarov, therefore, vindicates the reliability of his writing, while criticizing a preexisting text on the same subject.

Such vindications are almost ubiquitous in 17th- and 18th-century criminal biographies (see Faller 1987: 197-200), as well as in early novels, whose connection to the genre of criminal biography has already been demonstrated (see Davis 1980: 116-118). In fact, Lennard Davis, a specialist on early English novel, maintains that the genre could originally have been one for all – that of prose narrative (what he calls the “news/novel discourse”), where “no narrative form had become the locus of what we might call today nonfiction” (Davis 1978: 125-27), where “the factuality or fictionality of a work was not crucial to defining the genre of that work before

approximately the second quarter of the eighteenth century” (*ibid.*: 130). This is merely a hypothesis, and it is for historians of 17th-18th century English literature to discuss it. However, if we accept it as true, the Panteleev corpus should be considered as proof that, in Russia (as regards, of course, popular literature, a category to which, anyway, the texts considered by Davis doubtlessly belonged as well) this distinction has not yet been firmly established: there appears to be no elements, neither in the paratexts, nor in the texts, allowing to finally identify an unambiguous pact, either referential or fictional (see Lejeune 1989: 22), nor does this appear to be the authors’ aim.

There is another way in which the Panteleev corpus appears to be archaic: according to Michel Foucault, “broadsheet literature” on crime disappeared together with the punishment as spectacle, and was substituted, in the new disciplinary society, by newspapers and the crime novel, constituting together

...a patient attempt to impose a highly specific grid on the common perception of delinquents: to present them as close by, everywhere present and

everywhere to be feared. This was the function of the *fait divers*, which invaded a part of the press and which began to have its own newspapers. The criminal *fait divers*, by its everyday redundancy, makes acceptable the system of judicial and police supervisions that partition society; it recounts from day to day a sort of internal battle against the faceless enemy; in this war, it constitutes the daily bulletin of alarm or victory. The crime novel, which began to develop in the broadsheet and in mass-circulation literature, assumed an apparently opposite role. Above all, its function was to show that the delinquent belonged to an entirely different world, unrelated to familiar, everyday life. This strangeness was first that of the lower depths of society (*Les Mystères de Paris*, *Rocambole*), then that of madness (especially in the latter half of the century) and lastly that of crime in high society (Arsène Lupin). The combination of the *fait divers* and the detective novel has produced for the

last hundred years or more an enormous mass of 'crime stories' in which delinquency appears both as very close and quite alien, a perpetual threat to everyday life, but extremely distant in its origin and motives, both everyday and exotic in the milieu in which it takes place (Foucault 1991: 286).

Developing a possible parallel between this phenomenon and the formation of the modern distinction between fact and fiction as outlined by Davis would be a very delicate endeavour, which will not be pursued here. What appears to be particularly relevant for the purpose of this article is the political interpretation of the transition from '*ancien régime*' criminal biography to the modern crime novel. The former was, in the words of Foucault, an essential component of the punitive system:

In one sense, the broadsheet and the death song were the sequel to the trial; or rather they pursued that mechanism by which the public execution transferred the secret, written truth of the procedure to the body, gesture and speech of the

criminal. Justice required these apocrypha in order to be grounded in truth (*Ibid.*: 66).

This kind of literature, however functional, contained serious flaws and would have been of little use because of the development of the disciplines involved:

But the effect, like the use, of this literature was equivocal. The condemned man found himself transformed into a hero by the sheer extent of his widely advertised crimes, and sometimes the affirmation of his belated repentance. Against the law, against the rich, the powerful, the magistrates, the constabulary or the watch, against taxes and their collectors, he appeared to have waged a struggle with which one all too easily identified (*Ibid.*: 67).

Hence its substitution by the detective novel/news pairing.¹⁷ Its

¹⁷ An interpreter of English criminal biographies points out – coming close to Foucault’s time scale – that “From the 1750s onwards... a new strand of crime literature emerged in which the detection process was the main, sometimes

survival well into the twentieth century appears to be closely connected to the peculiar situation of Soviet Russia.¹⁸ Pantelev’s story is loaded with political overtones, and there is hardly a text that avoids a political interpretation. Their conclusions, however, strongly differ from one another.

Polonskaia’s poem set the tone by presenting Len’ka’s criminal choice as the reaction of a revolutionary to the restoring of capitalism during NEP:

We stood against the
palace.
I was in the first line at the
storm
For freedom! For bread!
For peace!
War to the capitalists!
“Go die, old world!”

They shivered, the bitches
At the sight of our flags!
And now they just laugh,

the only, topic” (Rawlings 1992: 25). Jeffrey Brooks (2003: 208) underlines the substitution of tales of banditry by detective stories in Russia after the revolution of 1905.

¹⁸ Foucault’s own interpretation of the Soviet penitentiary system was somewhat hesitant (see Plamper 2002); tentative readings in Foucaultian terms of both this system (Dobrenko 2001) and of the Soviet system as a whole (Engelstein 1993) constantly underline their contradictory nature.

They disdain the sailors!
(Polonskaia 1925: 114).

NEP is depicted as the paradoxical situation in which the Bolshevik police are protecting the bourgeoisie:

The leather jackets will
stand guard over the city
For the fat and rich to sleep
peacefully.

[...]

Sleep safe, jeweler!
The old word won't die out!
The revolution is here to
protect you... (*Ibid.*: 115)

Robbing them, therefore, becomes the logical thing to do for an old communist.¹⁹

This paradox, played down in different ways, repeats itself at the core of every text. In Sheinin's story, after the robbery at

the Donon restaurant, a significant scene takes place:

For a minute a heavy silence reigned in the restaurant, then a corpulent, aged man in a dinner suit jumped up from a table and, pulling off his fashionable pince-nez with a golden chain, eyes wide open with strain, gave off a heart-rending yell:

- The police! The police right now... Hey, boy, phone the police...

A gray-haired, skinny waiter respectfully bent down towards him and said, quietly but distinctly:

- It's six years already that there's no police anymore, sir. The militia I will phone right now... (Sheinin 1984: 167)

The author's position is self-evident; so self-evident, in fact, that a disclaimer had to be added to the story:

The fact is that all these romantic details and eccentric tricks were just cheap props and a cynical game.

Under the roughly and fondly painted mask of the 'gentleman robber', the

¹⁹ Eighty years later, Kniazev explicitly maintains the same stance. During NEP, he writes, a class system emerged again, "And if there are two classes, there is also class hatred. And people will always be found who, out of desperation or as a matter of principle, will decide to 'again expropriate what has been expropriated' by any means. There were not so few of these people, and, like a dark cloud, they kept the whole town in a state of fear" (Kniazev 2001: 6).

valiant knight, the boy next door and the ‘terror of the NEP’ hid and lived a circumspect, greedy, cold-blooded and very dangerous criminal, ready to the most horrid crimes (*Ibid.*, 157).

Given his peculiar position as head of the investigative section of the Soviet State Procuracy, Sheinin’s contradictions are particularly enlightening. Of all Soviet crime writers, he can be considered the closest to the government positions. His *Notebooks* are filled with sympathy for the criminals, the “socially friendly element” as compared to the bourgeoisie (and the intelligentsia, constantly suspected of sympathizing with the bourgeoisie) – they also feature many stories exemplifying their conversion to conscious builders of the socialist future (see Fitzpatrick 1999: 78-79).

The identification of the reader with the criminal, in this context, should not necessarily be avoided; to a certain extent, in fact, it is even to be sought after. Sheinin’s paradox is the paradox of Soviet power – a revolutionary power becoming state power whilst pretending to remain revolutionary.

Decades later, the state approach has become dominant,

and, in the *Rozhdennaia revoliutsiei* serial, Len’ka becomes a counterrevolutionary. Every account mentions the fact that a prison guard helped him escape from the Kresty prison; the usual suggestion is that he did this for money. It is often hinted that the militia attempted to ensnare Panteleev at the place that he was supposed to meet and pay the guard. In this version, the guard has become a member of the socialist-revolutionary party, freeing Len’ka for ideological reasons – he considers his criminal career a political act, an ‘example’. “Do you promise to carry on the fight until the end?” (In the novel version, even more explicitly: “In essence, you are a terrorist”, see Nagornyi-Riabov 1984). In this guard’s words, criticism of the NEP becomes a party slogan: “The Bolsheviks sold out the revolution”, and robbing the NEP bourgeoisie is an anti-communist undertaking.

A similar version, but with a contrasting evaluation, appears in an article in 2002 in the National-Bolshevik «Limonka» newspaper. Here, the guard helping Panteleev is “of peasant origin, filled with fiery hatred for the rich” (Stepanov 2002). This article is entirely aimed at a positive political interpretation of Len’ka’s feats: “the *Nepmany* lose their sleep and their peace,

and in the workers' quarters they rejoice".

The «Limonka» interpretation is explained by the journal's peculiar political stance. Compared with the majority of texts of the corpus, here several details are altered and no source is mentioned; e.g. Chmutov, the head of *Gosbank* security killed by Panteleev while running from the police, here becomes "a former workman, now an important *Gosbank* functionary"; Manulevich, robbed of a bag full of money at the corner of Morskaia Street and Pochtamtskii Alley, usually referred to as a member of a cooperative carrying from the bank the money for his comrades' pay, becomes here "the rich man Manuilov". Here, once again, the bandit is on the side of the people fighting against the rich. The governmental position is again highly contradictory: when he comes to the special ChK squad in charge of the search for Panteleev, the author comments: "Yes, this clash emerged when these straight-out fighters for social justice were ordered to catch and destroy others fighting ferociously for the same thing".

The same contradiction can lead to a completely different reading. Eduard Khrutskii remember

his puzzled reaction after reading, as a child, Sheinin's story:

...I pictured a tall, elegant, fine-looking man, taking the money away from the damned bourgeois, and there was no way I could understand why the militia defended the *nepmany* who, how they explained us at school, "drew buckets of blood from the working class" (Khrutskii 2002).

His adult self has a tentative explanation: Len'ka might in fact have been working for the Soviet powers, robbing the NEP bourgeoisie to finance the government. This would help explain why, if he was arrested when working for the ChK, he was only fired, and not executed. It would also explain why he robbed only private apartments and shops, and never a governmental enterprise, and, perhaps, even his escape from prison.

Khrutskii's hypothesis becomes the key around which the plot of the *Life and Death* series revolves. Here, the good, honest Len'ka is tricked by an overtly bad commissar, who has Len'ka working for him and then fails to take responsibility; in a post-Soviet reading, the government is no longer on the side of the people. Even in post-Soviet

times, the serial sparked a reaction – an article in «The Shield and Sword», the Ministry of Internal affairs magazine reads:

Here the film creators seem just the winners over the “false and too hasty Soviet court”. They want to condemn such a noble bandit! The authors of the serial wanted so badly to make a Robin Hood or a Vladimir Dubrovskii out of him.

Thus, the wolfish nature of the bandit and of his accomplices, their cynicism, their cruelty, their impertinence, their greed finally remained off-screen (Liubvin 2007).

Pantelev's story, therefore, is still the object of discussion even in a fictional reworking. The Petrograd bandit is still the object of political reworkings, including a rap song (where our hero is “At the head of the barefoot mob” in “The swamp city” which “doesn't spare the bourgeois”) and even a musical, with a pastiche of songs from the 1920s and with retro-constructivist set design, the plot being overtly inspired by the *Threepenny Opera*. Once again, we encounter the bandit,

the rich, the lower classes, power relations and so on.

Can this unresolved political tension help explain the archaic, Van'ka Kain-like nature of the Pantelev corpus? One more detail can be read through a Foucaultian interpretation: the punitive technique, in the words of Foucault, implied a visible manifestation of power inscribed on the body of the condemned. We mentioned the fact that, after Pantelev's death, his body was left exposed (though at the morgue and not on the gallows) “at the *nepmany's* instance”, writes the «Limonka». Moreover, his head was allegedly cut off and preserved in alcohol a fact which, according to Konstantinov's 1995 book, was a hard-to-believe legend (Konstantinov 2004: 57). However, the fact appears to be true. According to *Sledstvie veli*, the original jar was found some years ago at the St. Petersburg State University (and was shown in the TV show), while a reproduction of it is on display at the city's militia museum.²⁰ If true, this offers the most impressive

²⁰ The writer Elena Kaetskaia published a report (with photographs) of her visit to the museum on her blog – <http://haez.livejournal.com/650223.htm> 1, 19 November 2017. The head is mentioned on the museum's website – <http://kcguvd.spb.ru/museum.htm>, 21 February 2014.

testimony to the mechanisms of the NEP era; in any case, given the insistence on this detail in numerous texts in the corpus, it offers a striking testimony to the

way in which Russian culture perceives itself.

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