

The Brief History of Russian Obituary

Kira Onipko

Saint Petersburg State University

Abstract

Up to the 1990s, the genre of the obituary was a wide-spread genre of printed media in Russia. From the beginning of the 19th century, the obituary suffered some significant changes and even served as an instrument in different social and political manipulations. Some modern Russian researchers consider that this genre is dying nowadays, but it is not entirely true. Presently, obituaries are still popular in periodicals of small Russian towns and regional centers as well as in designated magazines. This review is aimed at the short description of the history of Russian obituary and its contemporary state. The researcher focuses on the different manners of speaking about the subject of the obituary and his/her characteristics, and on the representation of his/her biography. For this purpose, it is very important to examine the social and historical context of each period when the obituaries have been created. It can be said that the writing of obituaries is a specific practice, the specific social action that puts the death of the most prominent or remarkable person into the public space. Any biographic text is a social utterance and a narrative, designed to conceptualize actual social processes for contemporaries.

In Russia, journalists mean by obituary a news article, devoted to a person who died recently and was a quite famous person in his lifetime. It is a news item, notifying a wide audience about his/her death. Also, we can mean by obituary a special kind of utterance, that along with other statements (such as death notices, condolences, funeral orations, memorial addresses etc.), practices, actions, and frames the death of one or another community member. As a result, death changes from the fact of an individual,

private life to the fact of a social life. Russian obituary has a two-century long history, and the present state of this genre is underpinned by its history. Examination of the obituaries through the ages is the main task in this article. An attempt will be made to study changes in Russian obituaries from the beginning of the 19th century to 2010s.

In Europe obituaries appeared well before than Russian ones. In England, they appeared in the middle of 18th century. According to Bridget Fowler the first modern obituaries in periodicals accompanied by brief biographies appeared in 1731, in the London-based *The Gentleman's Magazine*. It is interesting to note, that initially the eighteenth century net of prominent persons, mentioned in death announcements, was unusually wide, "including in one issue an astronomer, a well-known widow, a man with thousands of descendents, a 'wild man' who lived by poaching, and John Wesley". (Fowler 2007, 4.) Later, in the first half of the 18th century, the obituaries became linked to class; they were devoted to noblemen and aristocrats and took a highly conventional and formulaic form. (Ibid., 5-6.) In Germany the first obituaries appeared at the end of 17th century. As distinct from British obituaries, German ones were class-oriented and hierarchized texts right from the beginning. (Dirschauer 2012, 12-13.)

In Russia, obituaries appeared in the early 19th century on the back of social and cultural changes, prepared with the efforts of Peter the Great (1672-1725, reigned 1682-1725), and general ideas of the age of Enlightenment, complete with Masonic aesthetics and humanist ideals of sentimentalism. The Russian educated audience was ready for objective acceptance of death, which was perceived inherent with one's life journey and evaluated according to lifetime achievements of the deceased. The ideas of service and posthumous fame became essential in Russian obituaries of the 19th century. The most important subjects, that determined the horizon of readers' expectations, were connection between body and soul, death and immortality (Bogdanov 2005, 79.) As prominent Russian literary scholar, semiotician, and cultural historian Yuri Lotman noticed, all of these thoughts and intentions had never before

been focused on in life, on the ideas of immortality of the soul. (Lotman 1994, 211.) The ideas of sentimentalism influenced the development of this genre too. At this particular time, those genres came to the forefront, which allowed the most diverse description of the look and character of their subjects. There was an increasing interest in the individual person, the ‘inner man’.

Russian obituaries of the beginning of the 19th century were devoted to members of royal family, eminent warlords and noblemen. The first Russian obituaries were dedicated to two major literary figures - Ippolit Bogdanovich and Alexander Radishchev. (Reytblat 2014, 196; Kuzovkina 2004, 276.) Both authors were civil servants; however, Radishchev was also known as a social critic, who was arrested and exiled to Siberia (the Irkutsk Region) until 1797 under Catherine the Great (1729–1796, reigned 1762–1796) because of the publication of his *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) where he criticized the socioeconomic conditions in Russia.

On the one hand, the personage of an obituary was determined as an important, famous, distinguished person by the mere fact of its publication. On the other hand, editorial staff tried to form and define social ranking and preferable life script with the publication of one or another obituary. Apparently, that is exactly why the obituary of Bogdanovich, whose poetry was highly appreciated by exalted patrons (including Catherine the Great), was published in the major liberal Russian magazine of the 19th century *The Herald of Europe (Vestnik Evropy)* by its main editor, prominent Russian writer, and historian Nikolay Karamzin. By comparison, the obituary of Radishchev was issued in the small-circulation almanac *The Scroll of the Muses (Svitok Muz)* by his close associate, Russian writer, translator, and educator Ivan Born. Consequently, obituaries of the first third of the 19th century reflected the clash of interests of the state and private publishers on the field of the forming social hierarchies, values and attitudes by publishing texts, dedicated to strictly defined people.

Nevertheless, the period from the second third of the 19th century to the first decade of the 20th century was marked by the real high noon of the genre of the obituary in Russia. As a result, there were tens of thousands of obituaries published, of different people of various occupations and social positions. We can say that the obituaries in some way represented a certain biographical catalogue of this period. It is interesting to note that active publication of obituaries was initiated and maintained by the government. During the reign of Nicholas the First (1796-1855, reigned 1825-1855), it was decreed that every province (*guberniya*) of the Russian Empire had to have their own newspaper (*gubernskiye vedomosti*) where the column with obituaries for the most prominent people of the province was obligatory. Later, every eparchy had to have its own bulletin (*yeparhial'nyye vedomosti*) too where it was possible to find the obituaries for the priesthood, philanthropists and the teachers of parochial schools.

The 20th century imported fundamental changes into the discursive practice, content, and structure of obituaries. Certainly, it was linked to the development of the Soviet Union and formation of the new political language and new communicative conventions and practices. Numerous meetings and conferences, political leaflets and posters influenced everyday life language. As a consequence, people got used to parroting the words, statements, set expressions, and collocations of the party elite. The political establishment dictated a certain manner of collective speaking (Selishchev 1928, 27). At the same time, the important part was not the word sense, but the collective reproduction of these words, the collective discursive practices. The utterances lost their nominative function but acquired a performative one (Bogdanov2008, 303).

There are not many papers devoted to the Soviet obituary description, but there is a research article by Jeffrey Brooks who has examined how the media designed the image of the 'new' Soviet citizens and which metaphors, meanings, and notions stepped forward for this purpose. His research is based on the obituaries from a newspaper

called *Pravda* (“the truth”), the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from the 1920s.

According to Brooks, the notion of service stayed the main concept of the Soviet obituaries, but it was service determined with the notion of devotion (*predannost'*) to the revolution, the working class, the ideas of socialism, the party, Motherland etc. The personage of obituary had to refuse of home, family and private life for the good of the country. The family metaphors were replaced with the military metaphors, the comparison of party members to soldiers in an army. The personage of the Soviet obituary had no business with personal biography as distinct from the personage of pre-revolutionary one:

‘Comrade Nesterenko has no personal biography and no personal needs’ [...] (15 March 1925). [...] ‘Comrade Frunze did not know any personal life, he strove with all his force toward the social ideals of socialism’ (3 November 1925). (Brooks 1992, 33.)

‘The advance of the Germans and fear of Polish retribution compelled comrade Sechko to leave his family to the mercy of fate and to flee to Bortisovskii uezd, where he was able to establish himself as a teacher’ [...] (28 April 1923). (Brooks 1992, 35.)

As noted by Russian researcher Marina Balina, the Soviet obituary leaves no room for private, subjective statements; it presents to us a person who does not have anything “for himself”. Such treatment demands laconic and measured discourse, which concentrates on service to the cause. (Balina 2002, 244-245.)

Some of the Soviet obituaries could take up three pages in a newspaper but gave no direct or relevant information about the deceased. Long obituaries and numerous photos from the place of the burial were the important part of the Soviet funeral ceremony of high-level officials. However, every period of the Soviet era had its own ideal of the person, which was represented in the obituaries. According to a paper by

Russian researcher Galina Orlova (2009), during the Stalin era it was possible to find the ideas of patriotism in the characteristics of the deceased in *Pravda* because this period was remarkable for the fight against the cosmopolitanism (“She was a staunch patriot of her Motherland, a devoted daughter of Lenin-Stalin’s party”, *Pravda*, 12 May 1948).

The Khrushchev period was notable for its humanistic universalism, which was reflected in the obituaries too: “He was an engineer enamored with technics, however, he was well-versed in painting too” (*Pravda*, 26 April 1967). The idea of the miscellaneous, all-round person was one of the central ideas of the so called Khrushchev Thaw (*khrushchovskaya оттепель*), which was marked by relative openness and cultural liberalization, scientific and technical progress and interest in art.

As noted by Galina Orlova, during the Soviet era, obituaries were primarily focused on the working career of the decedent. The description of his or her moral virtues was non-mandatory, but sometimes it could finish the life overview. Political and psychological qualities were summarized and generalized into a short list without any examples or comments. By doing so, an image of a ‘perfect person’ was created. This figure represented a set of attributes and characteristics, which depersonalized the deceased and referred to him/her as a certain social type. (Orlova 2009.)

During the period of stagnation of Brezhnev’s administration, the Soviet obituary became a very conventional genre with formalized set of clichés. In the early 1980’s, a famous Russian poet, author and artist, conceptualist Dmitri Prigov (he was a dissident during the Soviet era) created a poetry collection named *Sovetskiye Teksty* (“the Soviet texts”, 1980) where he issued four obituaries for Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky in the manner of the typical Brezhnev period obituaries. In these texts, we can see with half an eye some disparity between the real figure of the writer and the language, which is used to tell about him. Of course, on the one hand, this technique deconstructs the image of the ‘great Russian

novelist', but on the other hand, it represents the context of this period that depersonalizes and devalues anyone.

The Central Committee of the CPSU¹, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, and the Soviet government report with deep sorrow that in 1881 the famous author Dostoyevsky Fyodor Mikhailovich died.

Commitment to principle, sense of responsibility, exacting attitude to oneself and others always distinguished Comrade Dostoyevsky F.M. In all the posts where he was sent he showed unselfish devotion to the task, entrusted to him, military courage and heroism, high qualities of a patriot, a citizen, and a poet.

He will forever remain in the hearts of friends and those, who knew him closely, as an acrimonious and suspicious person, endowed with a severe disease and the recollection of the years of imprisonment.

The name of Dostoyevsky will always live in the memory of the people as a god-seeker and fideist. (Prigov 1997.)

In spite of the fact that Russian obituary discourse was highly modified after Perestroika, Russian obituary writers have been affected by the Soviet speech practice. In modern Russia, the obituarists partly carry on the Soviet tradition of obituary creation. As in the Soviet times, they focus primarily on the social relevance of the decedent and his/her working career. All the same, they pay attention to his or her moral virtues and family life: sometimes obituaries turn into intimate memoirs.

Nowadays obituaries are widespread in the periodicals of small Russian towns and regional centers as well as in designated magazines, but not in major titles. In Russia, the obituary can be topical only within the bounds of a determinate community. The presence in a space where everybody knows each other, allows an obituary to be presented to the relevant community where a considerable number of its members are expected to know the deceased. It is probable that obituaries still exist in modern

¹ The Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Russia because there is an audience, ready to perceive them. An obituary demonstrates a lacuna in an urban community system, formed after the death of one of the community members. At the same time, obituaries confirm the existence of the firmly established social order.

My own Ph.D. study of contemporary obituaries is based on obituaries collected in the town of Pushkin², in the Leningrad (St. Petersburg) region, from the local newspaper *Tsarskoselskaya Gazeta* (“the Newspaper of Tsar’s Village”). I have collected almost 250 obituaries over a period of 16 years (2000–2016). For this reason, I will keep in mind my own research data when I speak about the present-day obituaries.

Modern Russian obituaries are published on the last pages of a newspaper next to the advertisement paragraphs. There is no specialized page for obituaries in Russian newspapers. However, sometimes the obituaries for prominent, honored persons can be issued on the fifth, third or even on the second page, but never on the first one. It is remarkable that it was possible to find the obituaries or death notices on the front-page in the newspapers of pre-revolutionary Russia (in other words, before 1917). During the Soviet era, the previously mentioned newspaper *Pravda* featured on the first page the obituaries for Lenin, Stalin or Brezhnev. Also, the obituaries were published over 3–9 days after the death of their subjects.

As is customary, Russian death notices are published within a black frame. Also, Russian obituaries use photographs of the decedent, not always, but quite often. In some of them, we can find funeral ceremony-related information. For example, we can know the time and place of the burial or commemoration meeting. Usually the obituaries are not very long, about 150 words.

Often obituaries include the following elements in Russian obituary: the main stages of the deceased person’s life, his/her basic professional merits, his/her relationships with

² Pushkin is a municipal town in Pushkinsky District of St. Petersburg, located about 20 kilometers south of St. Petersburg with the population near 93 thousand people. Mainly, Pushkin is famous for its State Museum-Reserve ‘Tsarskoye Selo’, a palace and park ensemble of 18th–19th centuries, built as a royal residence.

other people and their acknowledgments, mention of his/her family life, a positive estimate of his/her personality and moral virtues. Some obituaries look like quite intimate memoirs about the decedent and inform us of his customs and hobbies, containing quotations from the deceased and even his/her poems, a typical obituary looks like this:

Galina Viktorovna Semyonova

On March 8, 2014, Galina Viktorovna Semyonova suddenly passed away.

Galina Viktorovna dedicated all her life to the protection of historical and cultural monuments.

In 1971, she worked at the Archive of the Main Office of Culture at the State Museum of the History of Leningrad. Since 1981 - at the State Inspectorate for the Protection of Monuments, subsequently modified into the Committee of State Control, Use and Protection of Monuments of History and Culture.

Since February 2010, Galina Viktorovna was a Senior Researcher at the State Museum-Reserve 'Tsarskoye Selo'. Being a specialist with her own scientific interests, Galina Viktorovna was actively involved in the work of the Museum-Reserve, sought and found answers to many questions that arose during the restoration of palaces and pavilions, developed relevant to the museum themes, and repeatedly took part in scientific conferences. Studying the Alexander Palace played a key role in her research. These studies are a great contribution to the history of a unique monument.

A thoughtful professional, a person of encyclopedic knowledge, Galina Viktorovna was the most well-known researcher of Tsarskoye Selo, the author of books and numerous articles. The intelligence, kindness, delicacy of Galina Viktorovna, her ability to approach everything carefully and thoroughly are present in the mind of those who had the luck to work with her.

We are saddened by this premature loss. It is a great loss for the academic potential of our museum. We extend sincere condolences to the family and friends.

The staff of the State Museum 'Tsarskoye Selo'.
(27 March 2014)

We see that professional achievements (and therefore, professional qualities) turn out to be the central characteristics here, as though swallowing up the individual. In addition, we can notice that the obituary is due to the staff of the State Museum '*Tsarskoye Selo*'. It is a customary practice for Russian obituaries: the obituary is an institutional genre in Russia.

Thus, every period of history and development in Russia offers insights into newspaper obituary. For example, death within the framework of Soviet discourse became not just a public phenomenon, but also an area for manipulation in various social games. The figure of the subject of the obituary was subjected to extreme depersonalization and schematization of the image, which corresponded to the setting of this or that period of the existence of the Soviet state.

Present-day Russian obituaries concentrate on social relevance and activity of the deceased. Much attention is given to characteristics, which could help a person to communicate and work effectively with other people. Besides, in Russia, an obituary is an institutional phenomenon so it focuses primarily on the working career of the decedent. To my mind, here we deal with the Soviet obituary tradition.

In spite of the fact that the obituarist usually focuses on the life acts of a concrete person and presents them as something special, prominent, unique, at the same time, the writer describes the life of the decedent in a standard way and emphasizes those essential facts that occur in everyone's life. An apparently individual obituary continues to be conventional. As noted by Russian modern researcher Dmitri Kalugin, readers get an idea of society and current events and processes there through these biographic texts. These kinds of texts uncover the structure of a social field and the rules of behavior for its agents as well as a socially approved mechanism of their representation. (Kalugin 2015, 12-13.)

In my opinion, it is important to note that when we talk about our deceased associates and colleagues, we talk about the living too, we talk about ourselves, we imagine what

we would like other people to have, what is important and valuable in life, and what we have lost with the death of a certain person.

Biographical note

Kira Onipko is a postgraduate student in the Philological Department of Saint Petersburg State University (Russia). Currently, she is working on her Ph.D. thesis. Her study focuses on the speech genres in the funeral tradition of the modern city. Her research interests include cultural anthropology, Russian literature, folklore, death studies, narration of day-to-day life, and biographic narratives. Contact kirin.klik@gmail.com

References

Balina, Marina R. "Kakoj-to neproyavlenniy zhanr: memuary v literature sotsrealizma." [Some Neuter Genre: a Memoir in the Literature of Social Realism] In *Sovetskoe bogatstvo: statyi o culture, literature i kino* [Soviet Wealth: Articles for Literature, Culture, and Cinematography], edited by Marina Balina, Evgeniy Dobrenko, and Julia Murashova, 241-258. Saint Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2002.

Bogdanov, Konstantin A. *Vrachi, pacienty, chitateli: Patograficheskiye teksty russkoj kultury XVIII-XIX vekov*. [Doctors, Patients, Readers: The Pathological Texts of Russian Culture of the XVIII-XIX Centuries] Moscow: O.G.I., 2005.

Bogdanov, Konstantin A. "Ritorika rituala. Sovetskij sotsiolekt v yetnolingvisticheskom osveshchenii." [Rhetoric of the Ritual. The Soviet Sociolect in the Ethnolinguistic Lighting] *Antropologicheskij Forum* 8 (2008): 300-337.

Brooks, Jeffrey. "Revolutionary Lives: Public Identities in Pravda During the 1920s." In *New Directions in Soviet History*, edited by Stephen White, 27-40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Dirschauer, Klaus. "Die Ursprünge der Todesanzeige." *Bestattungskultur* 64 (2012): 10-12.

Fowler, Briget. *The Obituary as Collective Memory*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Kalugin, Dmitry Ja. *Proza zhizni: Russkiye biografii v XVIII-XIX vv.* [The Prose of Life: Russian Biographies in the XVIII-XIX Centuries] Saint Petersburg: The European University at St. Petersburg Publ., 2015.

Kuzovkina, Tatyana D. “Nekrolog Bulgarina Zhukovskomu.” [The Obituary from Bulgarin for Zhukovsky]. In *Pushkinskiye chteniya v Tartu 3: Materialy Mezhdunarodnoj nauchnoj konferentsii, posvyashchenoj 220-letiyu V.A. Zhukovskogo i 200-letiyu F.I. Tyutcheva* [Pushkin Readings in Tartu 3: Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference on the 220th Anniversary of V.A. Zhukovsky and the 200th Anniversary of F.I. Tyutchev], edited by L. Kiselyova, 276–293. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2004.

Lotman, Yuri M. *Besedy o russkoj kul'ture. Byt i traditsii russkogo dvoryanstva (XVIII- nachala XIX vekov).* [Conversations about Russian culture. Life and traditions of the Russian Nobility (XVIII- Early XIX Centuries)] Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPb, 1994.

Orlova, Galina A. “Biografiya (pri)smerti: zametki o sovetskom politicheskom nekrologe.” [Biography of (Close to) Death: Notes About the Soviet Political Obituary] *Neprikosnovenniy zapas* 2 (2009). Accessed August 20, 2017. <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2009/2/or11-pr.html>.

Prigov, Dmitry A. *Sovetskiye Teksty.* [The Soviet Texts] Saint Petersburg: Ivan Limbakh Publishing House, 1997. Accessed August 20, 2017. http://www.kulichki.com/moshkow/akm/txt/prigov/sovetskie_teksty-3.html#nekrologi.

Reytblat, Abraham. “Nekrolog kak biograficheskiy zhanr.” [The Obituary as a Biographical Genre] In *Pisat poperyok: Statyi po biografike, sotsiologii i istorii literatury* [Writing Across: Articles for Biographics, Sociology, and Literary History], 195–202. Moscow: New Literary Observer, 2014.

Selishchev, Afanasy M. *Yazyk revolyutsionnoj epohi. Iz nablyudenij za russkim yazykom poslednih let (1917-1926).* [Language of the Revolutionary Era. From Observations On the Russian Language of Recent Years (1917–1926)] Moscow: Rabotnik Prosveshchiya, 1928.