

The Biographical Method as a Methodological Tradition in Russia: A Review of Projects and Publications*

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The biographical method in sociology and related disciplines is considered to be firmly rooted in the Western tradition of the first half of the twentieth century (the Chicago School, as well as the Polish memory contests started by F. Znaniecki), while the Russian experience remains largely neglected and unnoticed. The article presents an analytic review of six themes/stages of this movement and their contemporary reception: (1) the N. Rybnikov Institute of Biography, (2) Historical Commissions and Societies, such as Ispart, and others, (3) the Communist Academy, (4) monographic studies and the Central Bureau of Local History, (5) the *History of the Civil War* and the *History of Factories and Plants*, Cabinets of Recordings and Memoirs, and (6) the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War. All of these initiatives are known to researchers, but so far, they have been studied within the narrow confines of separate disciplines, and almost without regard to the biographical method. A detailed account of these themes in the biographical method context provides us with new optics allowing to reveal the general effects of biographization as the self-reflection of modern society, either with scholarly participation or without it. The review takes into account historical realities and is placed within an interdisciplinary field. The internal continuity is traced in all analyzed projects. Their common features include the articulation of social relevance, the temporal regime, and the organizational specificity of work and its methodological characteristics. The latter are given a detailed account in terms of their relevance to the methodological precepts of contemporary humanities and social sciences.

Keywords: biographization, Oral History, reminiscences, interview, conditions of scientific rigor, Nikolai Rybnikov, Alexander Bek, historization on the march, romantic positivism

Introduction: The Articulation of the Problem

The biographical method (BM) in sociology and related disciplines is considered to be firmly rooted in Western science, primarily in the Chicago School with its model research *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by W. Thomas and F. Znaniecki (1918), *The Individual Delinquent* by W. Healy (1915), *The Jack-Roller* by C. Shaw (1930), and others. In 1921, in Poland, Florian Znaniecki launched a contest of autobiographies which was destined to lay the foundations of a unique national tradition. These episodes mark the dates of a triumphant rise of this remarkably new approach, one of research through

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the prism of biographies. In fact, the BM reveals and analyzes a biographical dimension that is relevant to the situation of “biographical solutions of systemic contradictions”.¹

Russia witnessed a similar movement in the same period of time. The six themes/stages of this movement were (1) the Rybnikov Institute of Biography, (2) Historical commissions and societies, (3) the Communist Academy (Komakademiya), (4) monographic studies and the Central Bureau of Local History, (5) the *History of the Civil War* and the *History of Factories and Plants*, Cabinets of recordings and memoirs, and (6) the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War (the so-called Mints Commission), all which constitute an extremely promising field from the perspective of the BM. Yet, so far, they have been studied within the narrow confines of separate disciplines and almost without regard to this method. One of the reasons for that lies in the considerable political involvement: the above-mentioned projects absorbed and employed the key features of the epoch with its political repressions and exacerbated dictates of the Party by necessity (for the *History of Factories and Plants*, the process was described by Zhuravlev [1997], and for the Society of Old Bolsheviks, by Junge [2015]). As a result, the projects were curtailed, and their research potential was lost.

Intensive work with the memory of the Soviet past, started in the late-1980s by the institutions that emerged in the wake of Perestroika — such as the ‘Memorial’ Society, the People’s Archive (the Moscow Historical and Archival Institute), the Biographical Foundation (the Sociological Institute in Saint Petersburg) and others (Golofast, 1995; Bozhkov, 2018) — gave a powerful spur to biographical research. Yet, the surge of interest in the BM in sociology and related disciplines in Russia of the 1990s, which was followed by anthropological and biographical turns as well as other fluctuations of the research field, seems to be based on the adoption of methodologies almost exclusively developed abroad (see, e.g., Rogozin, 2015). The purpose of the article is to present an analytical review of the aforementioned research practices and projects of the first half of the twentieth century and their contemporary reception. The review is arranged by interdisciplinary field and with historical realities in mind.

An attempt at an interdisciplinary study of the biographical method was made in the works of Gennady Solovyov, where the relevant steps in philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, and literary studies were outlined. However, attention was paid mainly to the potential of the BM for the practical needs of social workers and teachers (2002: 6–10, 41–57). The interpretations, which are in key with our approach, construe a range of early Soviet projects in terms of oral history, although this concept entered Russian language usage much later, and its method was considered to be borrowed from abroad. Thus, Tatyana Shcheglova shows that Soviet local history, Istpart, the *History of Factories and Plants* and others have gained rich experience in practical use as well as scientific and methodological grounding of what is now called ‘oral history’ (Shcheglova, Drozhetsky, 2014; Shcheglova, 2019). The authors of the monograph on the Mints Commission go even further, arguing that the “process of anthropologization of history” and the forma-

1. This expression by Ulrich Beck (1992: 137) is repeatedly played with and further developed by Zygmunt Bauman (2000).

tion of oral history in Soviet Russia had occurred earlier than in the West, already in the 1920–1930s (Contribution, 2015: 10, cf.: Depretto, 2001). These publications address almost all of the projects discussed below, but only within the framework of historical studies.

For the first time, the systemic interconnection of most of these Soviet endeavors (2–5, except Cabinets) as prerequisites for the *History of Factories and Plants* was convincingly shown by Sergei Zhuravlev (1997: 3–27). Ilya Kalinin's description is somewhat broader. Here the movement of *rabkors* (worker correspondents), *selkors* (village correspondents) and *voenkors* (war correspondents), Gorky's journal *Literary Studies* [Literaturnaya Ucheba], Istpart, the *History of the Civil War* and the *History of Factories and Plants*, as well as the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War are construed as forms of "a revolutionary avant-garde project, striving to provide history with a subjective dimension, and to endow the subject with an awareness of its own historicity" (Kalinin, 2015: 643). A detailed account of these themes in the biographical method context provides a new optics allowing to reveal the general effects of biographization as a self-reflection of modern society, with academic participation or without it.

Biographization and Historization on the March: Six Themes

At the turn of the twentieth century, mass society brought about the uncertainty of rapid change, new social dynamics, and the question of the subject. According to the Polish sociologist, Marek Latoszek, extraordinary historical periods such as the 1920s and the 1930s with the Great Depression in the United States, Germany, or Poland (and before that, we would add the Great War, revolutions, and the Civil War in Russia, as well as the exceptional 1920s, and the Great Turn) are characterized by the abundance of autobiographical material (1989: 281–282).² Russian futurism and a brief period of the flourishing of literature of fact proclaimed the absolute dominance of biographies and other non-fiction texts.³ The rise of the biographical method in the first third of the twentieth century in the United States encouraged a belief that this approach was a golden key which would finally open all doors for social science. The methodological principles that were formulated at that time, such as Thomas' theorem and Znaniecki's humanistic coefficient, articulated the role of the individual. Here we cannot but agree with Oleg

2. Latoszek refers to the paper on personal documents in sociology by Władysław Adamski (Adamski, 1969: 113–114, 116) — a specialist in the biographical method (see Thompson, 1994: 58). M. Latoszek himself found the biographical method very useful for his study of the events of the "Polish August of 1980".

3. In 1918, Vasily Kamensky, a Russian Futurist, claimed that "any biography of an inconspicuous archivist — even clumsily written — is a million times more interesting" than composed novels. He called for writing and publishing biographies immediately, and primarily of contemporary geniuses, but also of "anyone, yet only the living [people] with full names, the witnesses [of everything] around and of proud truth" (5). The scholar Nicolai Rybnikov, in that very same year of 1918, explained why this happened, writing: "The Great War and the events that followed it" are not coincidentally "marked by an increased interest in all sorts of reminiscences, notes, memoirs, chronicles, letters, etc." — "the hard times" encourage us to think of the increased "role of a concrete person" and "to look into the past attentively" (1, 13) (cf. in Kamensky, who wrote: "a Personality is asserting itself on the arena of humanity" (1918: 6).

Bozhkov who wrote that the most important of all epistemological turns of the twentieth century marked the turn “to a common person” (2018: 6).

With all of their ambiguity, the practices which sprang up on Russian soil embodied this very trend. Viewed together, they produce an impression of an incredible boom, if not a bacchanal of reminiscences, when a multitude of evidence about the recent past and the present was gathered. Such a focus on the historical significance of the current moment and on the desire of recording it immediately in the process could be called “historization on the march”.⁴ The studied themes intersect and overlap, and therefore can only tentatively be situated within a coherent chronology. Yet, they represent the development of the BM in Russia within the institutional framework relevant to the epoch.

(1) Let us take the work of the psychologist Nikolai Rybnikov (1880–1961) for a starting point. In 1916, he conceived of the Biographical Institute as an institution “that would collect, store, and study mass biographical material, generalize the accumulated human experience, and become a collective memory of humanity” (1943: 99; 1994: 16). As he later recalled, his appeals at conferences and in the press were “warmly and sympathetically welcomed”. A biographical section was established in the Paedological Institute to listen to reports and prepare thematic collections, e. g., “Wonderful Russian women”. Although it was not possible to launch full-scale elicitation and research of “mass biographical material” at that time, the scholar was sure that the Institute would certainly “be created, because there was a great need for it” (1943: 97–98).

From 1917–1930, Nikolai Rybnikov published a range of methodological articles and brochures on the prospects of the BM for various fields of science, on the typology of autobiographies, and on the methods of working with them (1918; 1920; 1926; 1928; 1930, and others). In 1918, under the heading of “The Biographical Institute Library”, the family chronicle *Gorbovskaya Khronika* was published. It was written by Rybnikov’s sister and associate, Maria Rybnikova, who later became a well-known philologist, methodologist, and teacher (1918). For the same series, several typewritten volumes of Rybnikov’s *From Generation to Generation: History of the Rybnikov Family (of the Two-Hundred-Year Period of Its Existence)* were prepared. They are dated 1942 and 1943, and stored in the Rybnikov Fund in the Department of Manuscripts of the Russian State Library. Rybnikov’s works on the biographical method have not been republished, except for a short fragment in the *Avant-garde Museology* collection (2015). A detailed account of his scholarly endeavors was published in the late 1990s (see Botsmanova, Guseva, 1997; Rybnikov, 1994; cf.: Loginova, 2001; 2006: 70; Veselkova, 2018: 207).

This stage of the development of the BM in Russia is distinguished, firstly, by the striving for a profound scientific approach to biographical research in terms of both its organization and methodology. The epistemological potential of the BM, as it was formulated in 1918, strikingly anticipates the way qualitative approach is contrasted with the quantitative one in terms of holism and depth today. Rybnikov specifically emphasized

4. The concept of “historization on the march” describes a specific temporal regime, which fuses all modes of time, normalizes everything that goes on at present, and mobilizes its participants (Veselkova et al., 2016: 166–172, 236).

a) integrity (“the integral inner world of a human personality as a unity in itself”, which eludes experimental study), and b) the opportunity to “look into such aspects of the soul that are inaccessible to ordinary observation” (1918: 2, 5).

Secondly, the fundamental innovation of the BM was the inclusion of ordinary people into the orbit of research. The statement that “everyone deserves a biography, [and] every biography may be interesting for a philologist, a historian, and a psychologist” (1918: 17) still seemed a little too daring, so Rybnikov tried to justify the need for the Biographical Institute by traditionally appealing to the preservation of the heritage of great people first, and only then mentioning the significance of the lives of “average people”, with the needs of positivist science in mind, which “is interested in the most typical” (1918: 13). Rybnikov’s ideas were taken up by the historian Petr Kruglikov, who believed that “an average, mass person” was a true historical actor, and that contemporary science needed the method of “a theoretical biography” (1921).

By the end of the 1920s and in the early 1930s, more and more reminiscences of people from the lower classes were published, and Rybnikov subjected them to a thorough analysis in his book *Autobiographies of Workers and Their Study*, comparing German and Russian publications (1930). It is logical to consider this work as a response to the request for a biographical description of the victorious class, but more broadly, it serves as a manifestation of the above-mentioned turn. It is symptomatic that outside the Soviet Union, in Poland, in the same year of 1930, the almost eponymous *Autobiography of a Worker* by Jakub Wojciechowski was published. It was not as analytical as Rybnikov’s book, yet it was not an ordinary publication, either. Wojciechowski won the competition of workers’ autobiographies as announced by F. Znaniecki and the Polish Institute of Sociology in 1921. According to the experts, the book provided “a sufficient argument” in favor of “the methods of personal documents” in social sciences (Kupriyanov, 2008: 67–68; see also: Thompson, 1994).

Thirdly, a number of significant changes were made to the methodology of empirical biographical research. Namely, (a) the substantiation of the *active* role of a researcher. It is often not enough just to gather the exiting documents; it is necessary *to bring them to life* and preserve them (Rybnikov, 1918: 13, 1928: 93), for example, by encouraging people to keep diaries, by asking parents to collect their children’s drawings and take notes, and finally conducting surveys. For sociologists, it was a routine, but for psychologists,⁵ it was less common. Even for today’s historians, they are to be reminded that oral sources are not so much collected but created at the request of the researcher (Shcheglova, 2019: 94). In later works, Rybnikov introduced the terminology that is still of importance today, distinguishing between provoked and unprovoked autobiographical materials (1930); (b) calling to collect *diverse biographical materials*: “biographies, autobiographies, diaries, family archives, notes, reminiscences, letters, obituaries, curriculum vitae, photo-

5. In his *Autobiography*, Rybnikov denounces the lifeless system of teaching psychology at Moscow University, which started to change only in 1907 thanks to G. I. Chelpanov, who organized a seminar and a psychological laboratory — the embryo, as Rybnikov puts it, of the future Institute of Psychology (1942: 273–291; 1994).

graphs, [specimens of] handwriting, phonograms, and artistic products”, including children’s drawings (1918: 12; 1926). In fact, Rybnikov speaks of the *triangulation* of sources (implying the triangulation of methods for collecting and analyzing information, which, as we know today, form the foundation for the validity of such research); and (c) the diversity of sources, coupled with their *mass character*, provides for what contemporary ego-document specialists call the “cumulative effect” when working “with a large source complex” (Surzhikova, 2017: 25, 2020: 54.20 et seq.). “[T]he very essence of the biographical method is such that it needs mass collection of material” to smooth out the errors of subjectivism of the biographer, and the inaccuracies and incompleteness of biographies. For processing mass sources, Rybnikov insistently suggests the still very new then “method of correlation”, referencing his overseas colleague, Ch. Spearman (1918: 12).

Exceptional attention given to the “aroma of individuality” that is combined with an unconditional faith in statistics (Ibid.) gives the positivism of that period a romantic flavor. This romantic positivism is clearly manifested in Rybnikov’s work, as well as in other initiatives of that time.

(2) At the very beginning of the 1920s, a number of Commissions on History and Societies emerged, such as the Commission on the History of the October Revolution and the Communist Party (Istpart), the Commission on the History of the Trade Union Movement (Istprof), the Commission on the History of the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League and the Revolutionary Youth Movement (Istmol), the Society of Former Political Convicts and Exiles, and the Society of Old Bolsheviks. The Commissions were established top-down on the initiative of the state, while the Societies were a grass-roots movement.⁶ However, all of them worked for a decade, and some even longer, to capture the history of what was considered to be a revolutionary turn of world significance, and were instructive for both the audience abroad, for the peoples who would take this path later, and for internal recipients as education of the Soviet youth in the right spirit.

To this day, the amount of research on these institutions reflects their place in the Soviet political hierarchy. Istpart has been the most extensively studied (see the review by Lazareva 2011;⁷ Corney 1998; 2004), while Istprof (Gilmintinov, 2018; 2019a; 2019b), the Society of Former Political Convicts (Vasilieva, 2011; Junge, 2015), the Society of Old Bolsheviks (Pivovarov, 2018) and Istmol deserved much less attention. Researchers claim that the activities of Istpart, or Istprof, etc., were driven by the need to stand in competition with the West in the interpretation of the revolution, providing “a new model of historical memory with a source base and a new historical concept” (Klopikhina, 2019),⁸ and ultimately to legitimize the regime and mobilize the population.

6. Although the Society of Old Bolsheviks was founded “in direct subordination to Istpart”, and according to Mark Junge, Istpart was a competitor to the Society of Former Political Convicts and other organizations, all of them interacted closely (2015: 54–55).

7. Cf. a short list in the review of the book by F. Corney (Novikova, 2007: 466).

8. It seems that this characteristic, given by V. Klopikhina to Istpart, can be fairly extended to all other establishments.

The routine dimension of their work is of special interest for the BM: it is necessary to find and sometimes withdraw relevant documents from archives and libraries, photograph historical sites, register participants of events, collect artifacts from them, and encourage them to give their reminiscences. Incoming materials were actively published (in 1930, Rybnikov mentioned the specificity of Ispart publications), and put on display in exhibitions and new museums (see, for example, Krasilnikova, 2016).

In 1924, in preparation for the twentieth anniversary of the 1905 revolution, the chief Soviet historian, Mikhail Pokrovsky, made a methodological statement which “legitimized” the value of reminiscences as a historical source; this step is especially appreciated by oral history experts (Shcheglova, Drozhetsky, 2014: 258). Like in Rybnikov’s case, the conditions of scientific rigor were ensured by the mass and organized elicitation of memories, but this time, they were not just provoked, but compiled according to a certain plan (a questionnaire) of collecting evidence. A draft questionnaire or, in more up-to-date terminology, a guide to a semi-formal interview on the Russian Revolution of 1905 was also published. Pokrovsky specifies the flexibility and variability of his questionnaire, and addresses not so much the informants as those “who will gather information from the working masses” (1924a; 1924b: 14). In this regard, historians distinguish between more independent memoirs of the first half of the 1920s (“self-recordings” and printed transcripts of the original manuscripts), and more unified later reminiscences compiled according to the Ispart plan (Krasilnikova, 2016: 93, cf.: Narsky, 2017: 77).

(3) The Communist Academy, a Section of the History of the Proletariat in the Institute of History, used the BM in the historical research of the proletariat in the USSR, which was construed as the “scientific ‘biography’ of the proletariat”. This endeavor was encouraged by M. N. Pokrovsky in the end of the 1920s, and was conducted under the supervision of A. M. Pankratova. Several Commissions were formed in the Section, including a Questionnaire-Biographical and a Monographic one, on the study of individual enterprises (Ignatenko, 1975: 10, 12; Chaadaeva, 1930). The value of autobiographies and memoirs was determined by the immediacy and concreteness of observations, but according to the head of the Questionnaire-Biographical Commission, Boris Gorev, they had to be no more than 60 years old: it was essential to make haste with eliciting precious evidence (Gorev, 1930).

The memoir materials, which had been accumulated earlier by Ispart, Istprof, and others were found to be of little use due to their “spontaneous nature”, and the task was to develop a new methodology. The Commission’s efforts were to be focused on working with factory archives, ordering autobiographies of the figures of the revolutionary movement, organizing detailed interviews (“surveys”) of old workers, and conducting a less detailed but broader polling of “workers of the entire [Soviet] Union” (Chaadaeva, 1930: 148; Gorev, 1930: 180–181; Ignatenko, 1975: 17–18). In the article by Olga Chaadaeva, the conditions of scientific rigor were specified: a) to identify the role of the narrator in the events described, b) to separate personal experience from what was known from others, c) to discern current evaluations from the past ones, and d) to verify autobiographical

materials by archival data. A step-by-step description of work at these enterprises and a number of procedural recommendations were also given (1930).

At this stage, the “scheme-questionnaire” became even more extensive. In comparison with Pokrovsky’s questionnaire, it was supplemented by a fundamentally-novel block on biography and everyday life. The questions were accompanied by detailed notes, and the guidelines were very close to the current instructions for a narrative biographical interview (Sobiraniye, 1931). These guidelines were used at two Moscow enterprises, the Trekhgornaya Manufactory, and the ‘Hammer and Sickle’ factory. Reminiscences, that is, the ‘autobiographies’ of workers, were taken down in shorthand or simply recorded during 2–3, or sometimes more, meetings at their place of residence. The format varied from a much desired “live and smooth narration of the worker” to answering the interviewer’s questions. Some informants wrote down their reminiscences themselves, checking with the proposed scheme. For each plant, a collection of summarizing articles and selected autobiographies was published, while the source materials were accumulated in the fund of the Questionnaire-Biographical Commission in the research room of the Communist Academy Library, and were declared to be available for anyone who wanted to use them (Anketno, 1930, 1931).

Thus, the systematic work with reminiscences undertaken at the second (Istpart and others) and third (the Communist Academy) stages embodied the initial design of Rybnikov and Pokrovsky, in order to purposefully generate the necessary materials and compile a database. This was a scientific breakthrough, which anticipated, according to J.-P. Depretto, the field of contemporary “Oral History” (2001: 84).

(4) Through the efforts of the historians Anton Bolshakov, Mikhail Phenomenov, and others in the 1920s, monographic studies of the village were carried out (Tsvetkova, 2016; a brief review: Kulachkov, 2014: 10). Igor Vernyaev notes their relation to the works of the Zemstvo statisticians, on the one hand, and Teodor Shanin’s reflexive peasant studies, on the other (2005). Factories and plants were studied by special commissions of the Moscow Regional Trade Union (since 1928), the Central Bureau of Local History (from 1929–1930), and the Communist Academy (since 1930) (Ignatenko, 1975: 20–29; Sklyarenko, 1986: 7–11; Zhuravlev, 1997; Zhadaeva, 2018: 106–107). In the Communist Academy journal *The History of the Proletariat in the USSR*, a section titled “Monographic Research of the History of Industrial Enterprises” appeared, where methodological articles and programmatic documents were published (Shcheglova, Drozhetsky, 2014).

In local history studies, as well as in other fields, the emphasis was on the mass involvement of the population and assistance to the national economy (Smirnova, 2016). In 1930, the Central Bureau of Local History announced a competition for the best writing about a factory or a plant in the form of a monographic description of either its current state, its historical development, or both. Popular scientific works were expected by September 1, 1930, and research works by January 1, 1931, consisting of from 8 to 15 printer’s sheets, respectively (Pravila, 1930). The Central Bureau of Local History was very proud that it distributed 9,000 copies of a color poster with the terms of the competition. However, campaigning alone was not enough, so methodological and instructional brochures

called *Monographic Study of Factories and Plants* (Promyshlennaya, 1930), and *Study Your Plant* were published in large print runs (Krandievsky, 1932).

Planned for the end of 1930, “the local history five-day period” included, among other things, thematic evenings of reminiscences (Postanovleniye, 1930), which could be viewed as a point of intersection of the monographic approach (case study) and the BM (see Veselkova, 2017). Turning to letters was less common; therefore, Pavel Bazhov’s proposal, who was then working in the Urals in the *Peasant Newspaper* [*Krestyanskaya Gazeta*], to use letters as a local history source (Bazhov, 1927; on letters see: Veselkova, 2018) is especially interesting.

A number of visits to Moscow enterprises urged the *Soviet Local History* [*Sovetskoe kraevedenie*] journal to claim that the idea was in the air and “in some cases began to be implemented independently”. Several examples were given when enthusiasts began studying the history of their own factories on their own initiative. At the grassroots level, the interest was primarily focused on the historical and social characteristics of enterprises in contrast to the expected industrial aspect (Mirskaya, 1930), so the monographic description of the enterprise turned into its biography. For example, from the North Caucasus, it was reported of a compiled ‘autobiography’ of a kolkhoz (Pyatigorskiy, 1931). It was not possible to study all of the enterprises in one year, but, according to the report of the Industrial section of the Central Bureau of Local History from 1929–1930, the competition still gathered 30 manuscripts (Sklyarenko, 1986: 11). Gradually, the monographic work merged into Gorky’s *History of Factories and Plants* (Ignatenko, 1975; Zhuravlev, 1997: 19–27), and several manuscripts from the local history contest⁹ were also passed over there.

(5) Conceived by Gorky in the late 1920s among a number of other “Histories” (Moskovskaya 2016; Spiridonova 2016), in 1931, the *History of the Civil War* (HCW) and the *History of Factories and Plants* (HFP) received support in the form of resolutions of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party, and soon the spreads of all newspapers were allotted to the Instruction-Plan. The ultimate goal, according to Gorky, was to give mass audience “a point of view” on key events in Soviet history (Zelenov, Brandenberger, 2017; Moskovskaya, 2018). In the future, HFP was seen as the “Institute for the Study of Growth and Development of Socialist Industry in the Union of the Soviets” (Zak, Zimina, 1959: 37). David Brandenberger assumes that these and other projects of the 1930s managed to make the past “useful” due to the “cult of heroes”, i. e., by showing not impersonal schemes, but concrete people and events (1999: 86; 2017a: chap. 4; 2017b).

Both the HCW and HFP succeeded previous projects and maintained contact with them, but just as the Communist Academy could not use the materials from Istpart and the Societies of Old Bolsheviks and Former Political Convicts, so factory histories prepared by the Communist Academy did not fit the new format. Gorky rejected them as

9. In the *History of Factories and Plants*, these manuscripts were ostracized as “the examples of obscurantism” due to “the authors’ hostility to socialist building” and the general lack of “political acuteness” (Shushkanov, 1932: 177).

“way too scholarly”.¹⁰ It was assumed that the main creators of these *Histories* were to be immediate participants of the events, the workers. The qualifications of the invited authors were also uneven, so the methodological disputes were by necessity enriched with concrete recommendations. The *The History of Factories* bulletin, published by the editors of HFP from 1932–1934, sheds light on the techniques of eliciting information both from archives and from “recording reminiscences” in interviews (Gaisinovich, 1932a, 1932b, 1932c; Rozhkova, 1932; Rabinovich, 1933; see: Shcheglova, Drozhetsky, 2014). In 1933, six brochures *In Support of the Authors*, each about ten pages long, were published (Akhun, Lukomsky, 1933; Grekulov, 1933; Rozhkova, 1933a, 1933b; Tretyakov et al., 1933; Programma, 1933).

In 1931, at Kuznetskstroy, the writer Alexander Bek became an ardent supporter of the method of “conversations”, which was the biographical interview in its essence.¹¹ Years later, in his *Postal Prose*, he would use his correspondence with his wife Lydia Toom, who organized the HFP editorial office at Kuznetskstroy.¹² In this book, he would give a detailed account of the Moscow writers’ brigade (1993; see also; 1962b). Venerable authors were reluctant to get involved in such projects, but for beginners like A. Bek and V. Kovalevsky, HFP became a powerful career boost.

The method of biographical conversations developed at Kuznetskstroy by A. Bek and L. Toom was successfully used later, for example, from 1934 in the *Cabinet of Recordings* of the newspaper “For Industrialization” when the prominent figures of industry were interviewed, and in the *Cabinet of Memoirs*,¹³ created on the initiative of M. Gorky in the editorial office of the “People of Two Five-Year Plans” collections. With the commission of the Military Publishing House [Voenizdat], the interviewers (*besedchiki*) gathered “colossal material covering the entire history of aviation” (Transcript, 1957: 33, 37–38). In A. Bek’s works, a common motif of a conversation between the author and his protago-

10. See Gorky’s reviews of the manuscripts by historians Zeltser, Paradizov, Rozhkova about the Trekhgornnyy manufactory (Zak, Zimina, 1959: No. 59, No. 60). Historians N. A. Rozhkov and M. K. Rozhkova studied the Trekhgornny (Prokhorov) manufactory back in the 1920s from the economic and political perspective (Ignatenko, 1975). Although M.K. Rozhkova’s article in the Communist Academy collection was written on the basis of ‘autobiographies’ of workers, HFP published the book of S. M. Lapitskaya, who used the same data, but wrote about everyday life and not the economy (Rozhkova, 1930; Lapitskaya, 1935). The works of writers were also severely criticized when they lacked a documentary basis (Zak, Zimina, 1959: No. 78; Zhadaeva, 2018: 120).

11. At that time, the term “conversation” was more preferable than “interview”. It is suggestive that in the wake of Perestroika, the first Russian article about qualitative interviewing in the *Sociological Studies* journal also defined this method as a conversation (Ivanov, 1989).

12. Their grandiose work was followed by only two preliminary books (Bek, 1933; Toom, 1934), but a lot of material was gathered. O. Belousova mentions about 250 recorded reminiscences, which are deposited in the archives of Novokuznetsk (2004); see also A. Bek’s Fund in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, and Kuznetskstroy’s History Fund in the State Archive of the Russian Federation.

13. It is noteworthy that Igor Orlov translates the *Oral History Research Office*, which was created in 1948 at Columbia University and is believed to lay the foundations for oral history, as *The Oral History Cabinet* (Orlov, 2010: 44–45). A decade earlier, its organizer, Allan Nevins, in the preface to the first edition of his book *The Gateway to History*, had expressed an idea to retrieve information on recent past, within half a century, directly from contemporaries (1938). Paying the Russian tradition of using oral sources its due, I. Orlov, in contrast to T. Shcheglova and others, still prioritizes the American Cabinet.

nist can easily be traced when the writer inquires about his character's life. In the novel *The Talent (The Life of Berezhkov)*, the work of the "Cabinet of Memoirs" in 1936 was described, and in *Postal Prose* a real instruction on "the method of conversations" was provided (Bek, 1991b: 7–11; 1993: 417–418). After Gorky's death, the Cabinets subsided, but A. Bek considered them to be "a constantly replenished repository of human documents", which was absolutely necessary for writers and historians. He repeatedly called for the revival of this "institution for the study of life" (Bek, 1962a: 168; Grudtsova, 1967), or "the first Soviet Storybank", as it would be called in the new century (Gopius, 2019).

Vyacheslav Kovalevsky was invited by Gorky to HFP (the historical short novel about the Trekhgornny manufactory came out after the series was closed (Kovalevsky, 1939)). The experience of HFP was of use for both him and Bek in their work as war correspondents. The material was later used in Kovalevsky's *Notebooks from the Map Case* (1968) and Bek's *Volokolamsk Highway* (1991a).¹⁴

HCW and HFP were strongly intersecting, and in 1933–1937, they operated within the united publishing house *The History of the Civil War and the History of Factories and Plants*. HCW was planned to be a 15-volume edition, and from 1935 to 1960, five volumes of the conceived 15-volume edition of HCW were published. Meanwhile, in 1935, the colossal number of 300,000 copies of its first volume appeared in print, and the next year, 500,000 copies of its second edition came out. Before its liquidation in January, 1938, the HFP's publishing house issued 30 books, including six methodological brochures. After the XX Congress of the CPSU, there were attempts at starting HFP anew, with appeals to the authority of Gorky (Iokar, 1957; Rozanov, 1958; Zak, Zimina, 1959; Rogachevskaya, 1963; Panfilova, 1974). The wave of publications on the history of enterprises eroded the initial high standards (Argutinskaya, 1965), but it satisfied the demand for a return to the "right" (Leninist and Gorky) traditions. More generally, the need was for a collective identification and for inscribing oneself in history by scaling social memory.

Analytical works and collections of documents on the HCW project have been published in recent years (Bystrova, 2017; Zelenov, Brandenberger, 2017; Moskovskaya, 2018; Iroshnikov et al., 2018; cf. Malysheva, 2001). As for HFP, new materials can be found in the correspondence of Gorky (e.g., Gorky, 2018). A full-text database of reminiscences on particular factories (Rudenko, 2017) has been created. In terms of historiography, Sergey Zhuravlev's work (1997, see also Zhuravlev, 1989) remains to be the most complete. Philologists and cultural historians traditionally situate these Histories in the dynamics of Soviet socialist realism (Dobrenko, 2007: ch. 2 and 4; Clark, 2002; Clark, 2004; Litovskaya, 1998). Published in an international collection, Katerina Clark's article places HFP in a wider context of working-class literature of different countries (2017). The Cabinets are still waiting for their researchers.

Despite the watershed of the 'Great Terror' and then the War, experts find signs of continuity in the research work on historicization: Tatyana Shcheglova argues that oral

14. On the use of conversation practices by A. Bek in the *History of Factories and Plants* and the Mints Commission: Lotareva, 2014: 152; Shcheglova, Drozhetsky, 2014: 257) and in more detail: Zhuravlev, 2015: 235–241.

history practices were developing in the following years, in particular, in the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War (2019: 97).

(6) The Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War, or the Mints Commission,¹⁵ was formed in December, 1941. Initially, it was conceived as a chronicle of the defense of Moscow, but in the future, Isaak Mints planned to establish the academic Institute of the Great Patriotic War. In Leningrad, in the first months of the siege, the idea of gathering current documents came up. According to an employee of the local Ispart, “reports, factory papers, newspaper articles, wall newspapers, leaflets, protocols, resolutions, posters, letters, diaries” were to be collected (cit. ex: Chistikov, 2019: 11). At working meetings, the Leningrad Commission members explained the importance of reminiscences, diaries, and autobiographies, and prepared the first collections of documents and materials (Sobolev, 2012: 74; Ganzenmüller, 2019: 416–418). The difference from previous projects was that the reminiscences were recorded at the front and in the rear. As a rule, they were still fresh and elicited by professionals, that is, historians and writers.

Publications about the Commission that appeared in the (late) Soviet period (for a historiographical review, see: Lotareva, 2014; Budnitskii, 2018) emphasized a large number of interviews with high-ranking military commanders, which was obviously a sign of the value of the information elicited. Later, though, on the contrary, the interest and expected value shifted to the lower levels of the social hierarchy. Describing the work of the Commission in Stalingrad, Jochen Hellbeck gives a detailed account of the categories of informants. Along with generals, staff officers, and commanders, there were ordinary Red Army soldiers, commissars and agitators, sailors, nurses, and civilians such as engineers, workers, and a woman who worked in the kitchen (Hellbeck, 2015: 12). Currently, the Commission’s website is operating,¹⁶ and the materials are gradually being brought into circulation. It would be interesting to compare them with the data of the Harvard project which was implemented by American scholars shortly after the war (some data of the Mints Commission were also obtained in this period), through formalized and semi-formalized interviews with former Soviet citizens who stayed in the Allied occupation zone (Inkeles, Bauer, 1959; Kodin, 2003; Budnitskii, Novikova, 2018); a small step in this direction has been made by Oleg Budnitskii in his recent publication (2018).

Alexey Kurnosov, who specializes in the Mints Commission, pointed out its continuity with Ispart, HCW, and HFP, arguing that their experience was adopted by various institutes, museums, and archives (1974: 118; Arkhangorodskaya, Kurnosov, 1982: 225). In a recent collective publication of the Institute of History of Russia of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the connection of the Commission with “the rich experience of previous

15. A common name after the actual leader I. I. Mints, another variant after the name of the official head — “The Commission of A. F. Aleksandrov” (see Chistikov, 2019). The Estonian Republican Commission was led by the historian H. H. Kruus (1971), who became the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the ESSR for several years after the war.

16. The Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War (<http://komiswow.ru/>). A part of its collection is available on the website “Stalingrad” (<http://stalingrad.rusarchives.ru/razdely/stenogrammy-besed-s-uchastnikami-bitvy-iz-arhiva-komissii-po-istorii-velikoy-otechestvennoy-voyny>), and is included into the bigger oral history project “Soviet & Post-Soviet Wars” (Sieca-Kozłowski, 2019).

historical initiatives of the 1920s and 1930s” is represented in detail, taking into account the local history movement and the Communist Academy’s Questionnaire-Biographical Commission. In fact, Isaac Mints was at the head of the History of the Civil War secretariat from 1931 to 1947, and the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War, which was created on his initiative, was even located in the same room with HCW (Contribution, 2015: 9–14; Lotareva, 2014: 123–124). In the draft of the Instruction to the military units of 1942,¹⁷ the work on their history was presented as a continuation of HCW. Apart from Mints and other 16 members of HCW who also worked in the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War,¹⁸ there are other intersections on the personal level. For example, Olga Chaadaeva, who gathered reminiscences in the early 1930s in the section of the History of the Proletariat in the Communist Academy, and Alexander Bek, who we know from the Moscow writers’ brigade of HFP at Kuznetskstroy and the Cabinets of Recordings and Memoirs, also worked in the Mints Commission. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War is successive to all the described biographical projects (1–5), starting from the intentions of N. Rybnikov and up to the collections of transcripts celebrated by A. Bek. In my opinion, all of them have the following four features in common:

(1) The articulation of social relevance: discussions usually focus on their educational and scholarly significance, but the projects themselves emphasized the social request for historicization and biographization. As it was said previously, it was high time to organize the spontaneously-spreading practices (the publishing of memoirs, compiling histories of organizations, etc.) to raise them to a new level, to be either scientific (as in Rybnikov’s case, or in monographic local history studies, and in the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War, partly in HCW and HFP), or ideologically verified (Istpart, Istprof, Istmol, HCW, and HFP). In all cases, it had to be of mass character.

(2) The temporal regime: the projects were usually arranged on the go to lay the groundwork for future research (for example, the second edition of the *Biographical Dictionary of the Fallen Revolutionaries* was published in 1924 by Istpart, and was presented as “a preliminary collection of materials requiring further study” (Lezhava, Rusakov, 1924). In terms of procedures, there were clear connections, yet not absolute, to the memorable dates and places. An example of this is the Twentieth Anniversary of the 1905 Revolution (the exception was prompt research on new construction sites in HFP and in the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War). The commemoration of memorable dates and places is usually analyzed in terms of the formation of a new “collective memory landscape” (Krasilnikova, 2015; 2016: 343), but it is worth paying attention to the elicitation of information *in situ*, when the potential of the place and space is included in the study.

17. See this project and a number of other documents: Zhuravlev, 2015.

18. Members of the Commission // Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War of the USSR Academy of Sciences 1941–1945 (<http://komiswov.ru/?q=chkomis>).

(3) Organization of work vertically and horizontally, carried out by a head office, its regional divisions, and a wide territorial and industrial network. This is the striving for fundamentality through the establishment of research “Institutes”.

(4) Methodological characteristics (Zhuravlev, 2015: 9–14) of the analyzed projects show that the foundations of the BM were developed. These foundations are directly related to the methodological principles and subjects of contemporary humanities and social sciences. This feature can be broken down into four additional points:

(a) the significance of the biographical experience of not only outstanding individuals but also of ‘ordinary people’, their involvement not only as informants, but to a lesser yet systematic extent, as participants in the elicitation and subsequent processing of information, could be referred to as the principles of participatory research and action research;

(b) the value of the grassroots and the insider perspective, with a focus not only on the eventual and structural aspects of the “Big History”, but also on living particularities and details, and on the emotions and experiences could be correlated with the themes of everyday life and the anthropological turn;

(c) the participation of specialists in various fields, such as historians, archaeographers and archivists, local historians, writers, journalists, photographers, artists, and printers, as well as party functionaries and activists, could be construed as research triangulation, but with the peculiarity that such cooperation was aimed at writing books for a wide range of readers, and;

(d) the triangulation of sources and methodologies is manifested in the use of heterogeneous data obtained by various methods with a large share of initiative documentation and sources of personal origin, including the provoked ones, i. e., written by order of the researchers of autobiographies or reminiscences, as well as memories given orally and recorded at individual and collective interviews and discussions. It is supplemented by the compilation of comprehensive databases, referred to as “factographic card-catalogues” (Zak, Gorodetsky, 1987; Lotareva, 2014: 126; Zhuravlev, 2015: 10).

Conclusion

Viewed from today, the striving for the mass expansion and establishment of the special Institutes during the first half of the twentieth century may seem absurdly gigantomaniacal and eccentric, even if their political and ideological charge is left out. At the same time, promising seeds have found fertile soil. A hundred years ago, the *Biographer* almanac, conceived by Nikolai and Maria Rybnikov for “a comprehensive study and systematization of Russian biographical literature” (1918: 16), never came into being. Yet, it seems to have found its embodiment in *AvtobiografiЯ*, the online journal on “life stories and self-representations in Russian culture”, which has been published since 2012 by the University of Padua (Criveller, 2012: 11). From the start of Perestroika, new types of archives, museums, and other research initiatives began to appear in academic institutions (Bozhkov, 2018). Take, for example, the grandiose 15-year-long project of Boris Doktorov, which gathered the biographies of seven generations of Russian sociologists (2013; 2014;

2020). Along with such Internet resources as Lived Through [Prozhito], Oral History, Open List, EtoRetro.ru and others (some of them are of a more general character, while others have a narrower thematic and local historical focus), these projects and institutions actively democratize relations with the past (Sobolevskaya, 2019; Abramov, 2011), and, at the same time, serve as a useful support for specialists (see, e.g., Hellbeck, 2017: 416–417). The seemingly-impossible combination of the mass and the professional finds its implementation in the “constantly replenished repositories of human documents”, which N. Rybnikov, A. Bek, and probably other personages of this review so passionately aspired to.

Until now, the presented initiatives of the first half of the twentieth century have been studied within the narrow confines of separate disciplines; Rybnikov’s legacy has been studied in psychology, and the rest have been of interest for history and literary studies, practically without regard for sociology, anthropology, etc. For the most part, these studies have been aimed at the information retrieval or the denunciation of ideological bias. The given review allows us to conclude that these projects constitute a significant part of the general movement of biographization which has manifested itself in different countries and continents since the beginning of the twentieth century, and which is known today as the BM (and the related sphere of oral history). The abundant experience of the Russian initiatives of the first half of the twentieth century definitely deserves a new interpretation, and the BM is an appropriate framework for this endeavor.

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Биографический метод как методологическая традиция в отечественной практике: обзор проектов и публикаций

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Биографический метод считается прочно укорененным в западной традиции первой половины XX в. (Чикагская школа социологии, начатые Ф. Знанецким польские конкурсы памяти); отечественный опыт не интегрируется и не замечается. Поэтому возникший в 1990-е гг. всплеск интереса к биографическим исследованиям выглядит основанным на вовлечении наработанных исключительно за рубежом методологий. Вместе с тем, в России в тот же период имело место во многом сходное движение. В статье представлен аналитический обзор шести сюжетов этого движения и их современной рецепции:

1) Биографический институт Рыбникова, 2) исторические комиссии и общества — Истпарты и др., 3) Комакадемия, 4) Центральное Бюро Краеведения и др., 5) История гражданской войны и История фабрик и заводов, Кабинеты записей и мемуаров, 6) Комиссия по истории Великой Отечественной войны. Известные специалистам, все эти начинания до сих пор изучались узкодисциплинарно и почти безотносительно к биографическому методу. Рассмотрение развернутого ряда этих сюжетов в контексте биографического метода дает новую оптику, выявляя общие эффекты биографизирования как саморефлексии современного общества, с участием академической науки и без нее. Обзор построен с учетом исторических реалий и в междисциплинарном поле. В анализируемых проектах прослеживается внутренняя преемственность, к их общим чертам отнесены: артикуляция социальной актуальности, темпоральный режим, особенности организации работы и методологические характеристики, которые детализируются особо на предмет релевантности методологическим установкам современной социально-гуманитарной науки.

Ключевые слова: биографирование, устная история, воспоминания, интервью, условия научности, Николай Рыбников, Александр Бек, историзация на марше, романтический позитивизм