Swarthmore Undergraduate History Journal

Volume 5 | Issue 1 Article 9

2024

Rider of the Black Horse

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Abstract: This article explores the actions and ideology of the Russian revolutionary and terrorist Boris Savinkov through his final novel, *The Black Horse*. I argue that the book represents its author's attempt to come to terms with a world in which he feels politically homeless with the victory of his enemy, the Bolsheviks. Savinkov reckons with his fate through the liberal use of Biblical allusions and apocalyptic imagery.

Introduction and Background

Boris Viktorovich Savinkov was a contradiction of a man – a socialist who collaborated with reactionaries, an insurgent who sympathized with the regime he fought against, a terrorist who condemned terrorism. Who was this man, and what did he stand for? Savinkov left behind for study several semi-autobiographical works of literature that detail the development of his personal ideology. I will be studying this apparently paradoxical figure with an emphasis on his final novel, *The Black Horse.* The question of what can be gleaned from this work forms the basis for the following essay.

Founded in the early twentieth century from the ashes of Populism, the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) Party was one of the primary instruments of revolutionary pressure on the Tsarist regime. Contrary to the Marxist Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party, the SR Party pushed an agrarian socialist agenda. Rather than focusing on the urban proletariat as the instrument of revolution, they emphasized the role of the peasantry. Savinkov was a member of this group, eventually becoming the leader of its semi-autonomous Fighting Organization (alternatively known as the Terrorist Brigade or Combat Organization). In this capacity he carried out multiple instances of revolutionary terrorism, including assassinations. This use of terror was a source of tension between Savinkov and his fellow revolutionaries, both inside and outside of the SR Party. Furthermore, he was apparently resistant to accepting the truth of the Azef Affair. When his fellow SR terrorist Yevno Azef was revealed as an agent of the Tsarist secret police, Savinkov would begin to drift away from his comrades.[1] His tenuous relationship with the SRs was finally officially broken when in 1917 he joined Alexander Kerenskiy's Provisional Government as Deputy Minister of War. Shortly thereafter he aligned himself with General Lavr Kornilov and fought against the Soviets during the Russian Civil War. Following the end of that conflict, Savinkov worked with a number of groups in opposition to the Soviet Union, from the Polish government to MI6.

[1] Richard B. Spence, "The 'Savinkov Affair' Reconsidered," *East European Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (March 1990): 22.

What is so strange about Savinkov's political story is that until 1917 and his alignment with reactionary forces, he seemed an entirely committed socialist and revolutionary. Certainly, though his methods and ideology went counter to that of the Bolsheviks, they were very much in line with Populist history and theory. As part of the Terrorist Brigade, he was responsible for the assassination of Russia's Minister of the Interior Vyacheslav von Plehve in 1906.[2] For their own part, the Marxists opposed this action on principle.[3] Per Leon Trotsky, the Russian Social Democrats believed that individual terrorist acts undermined the larger class struggle, while also having limited effect on the bourgeois state. Nonetheless, when Savinkov committed political violence he was doing so in the same spirit as a long line of socialist terrorists, from Vera Zasulich to Alexander Ulyanov. Under threat of imprisonment, he was forced to flee into exile after von Plehve's killing. He then made contact with the Russian emigre community and continued his revolutionary activity. When the Great War broke out in 1914, dividing socialists between the Defensists (those who backed their countries in the conflict) and the Internationalists (those who advocated resistance to the war effort), Savinkov aligned with the Defensist philosophy. He supported the Entente broadly and France specifically during the conflict, before traveling to Russia following the February Revolution.[4]

However, during the Russian Civil War, Savinkov worked at first with the Provisional Government and later with various White generals, as well as external anti-Bolshevik forces. When he began to collaborate with the reactionary Kornilov, he was expelled from the SR Party. Thereafter he would continue to operate against the Bolsheviks with the aid of the British and Polish governments, and the personal support of Winston Churchill.[5] Notably, he was part of a delegation sent by a coalition of White governments to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 (though the group was not officially

[2] Spence, "The 'Savinkov Affair' Reconsidered," 21.
[3] Leon Trotsky, "Why Marxists Oppose Individual Terrorism," Marxists.org, November 1911, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1911/11/tia09.htm.
[4] Spence, "The 'Savinkov Affair' Reconsidered," 22.
[5] Spence, "The 'Savinkov Affair' Reconsidered," 23.

recognized by the Entente).[6] I note this not to question Savinkov's revolutionary credentials or motivations, but offer the beginning of an explanation for his activities during the last years of his life. The degree to which the agendas of his patrons influenced his own ought to be considered.

During their early history, the Soviet Union and its predecessor and later constituent state, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, were constantly harassed by anti-socialist groups, many of which were organized by Savinkov, that posed an existential threat to the newly established state. The Cheka's solution came in the form of Operation Trust, a counterintelligence program that set up a fake White resistance group. In 1924 Savinkov was lured into the USSR by this group and imprisoned. His death less than a year later has been ruled a suicide.

While abroad, Savinkov was encouraged to begin writing by the emigre poet Zinaida Gippius. He published his first novel, *The Pale Horse,* in 1909. In Russia and abroad he authored a number of novels and analyses, including *What Never Happened* (1912), *Memoirs of a Terrorist* (1917), and *The Black Horse* (1924). While *The Black Horse* has been subject to little study in English-language scholarship (though an anglophone translation exists, difficulties in locating and accessing it made translating it myself the simpler task), Savinkov's actions both within the SRs and during and after the Civil War have been relatively thoroughly analyzed. Even so, his role within the larger revolutionary movement, or even if he should be considered a revolutionary at all, remains a matter of debate.

What I wish to investigate, then, is how Savinkov's literary work can aid in defining his ideological journey, and what the endpoint of that journey actually was. In this essay, I will analyze the novel *The Black Horse* in pursuit of new perspectives on Savinkov and the development of his political thought. I will be focusing on how his attitudes towards the Bolshevik party, terrorism, and socialism in general bleed through the pages of the book, to the extent that his characters and themes may be taken as representative of his own beliefs and ideology.

[6] Charlotte Alston, "'The Suggested Basis for a Russian Federal Republic': Britain, Anti-Bolshevik Russia and the Border States at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919," *History* 91, no. 1 (January 2006): 26.

The Black Horse as an Ideological Work

Generally, Savinkov's writings should be considered political actions – they were tools to explain, analyze, and propagate his ideology. They deal with subjects and events with which the author either had some personal stake in or took part in directly. Take his first novel, *The Pale Horse,* for example, which is very much a counterpart to *The Black Horse*. Putting aside their references to the same portion of the Bible, they are both told through the point of view of a terrorist under the pseudonym of George, and they both appear to deal with Savinkov's personal journey towards disillusionment with the concept of individually-perpetrated revolutionary terrorism. George begins *The Pale Horse* as a terrorist and revolutionary, and ends it doubting his cause – but still with revolver in hand.[7] I take the position that George's revolutionary and counterrevolutionary actions that drive the plot of both of these books represent Savinkov's own struggle to understand his ideology and political purpose.

The Black Horse tells the story of Colonel George and his band of insurgents in their campaign against the Soviet government. The group encounters the destruction wrought by both sides in the conflict, and slowly each of their motivations for fighting are revealed against the backdrop of the turmoil and violence of civil war. Although the communists take on the role of the ever-present main antagonist, George also struggles with more violent and reactionary elements of the White army. Their insurgency eventually moves from the countryside to the city, where George hides in a safehouse as his comrades are picked off by the Cheka, one by one, until only he remains.

The novel opens with a preface in which Savinkov reflects on why he did not name it after what he views as its main character – not George, but Fedya, one of his subordinates. After all, he states, Fedya embodies the apparent message of the book – resisting the Bolsheviks. He is supposed to be any agent of anti-communist resistance. In the preface, Savinkov explains his reasoning: "Fedya, not knowing why he struggles against the Bolsheviks, and still hating them, was everywhere, on all fronts,

[7] Boris Viktorovich Savinkov, *The Pale Horse,* trans. Michael Katz (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), XXI.

in all 'White' armies, in all 'Green' squads and in every secret organization."[8] In a way, he is even able to benefit from the conflict, having carved out a new identity for himself. More than a soldier, Fedya is an artist. In a self-portrait, he depicts himself in Western-style clothing and entertains sending the work to an exhibition, if it were possible.[9] What Savinkov leaves unclear is whether Fedya had a chance to acquire this skill if his life were more peaceful, or if the conflict revealed it. Considering that the description of his self-portrait pays special attention to his battle scars, I am inclined to believe the latter. Taking this into consideration, Fedya's artistic talent serves as a sort of light in the darkness, a singular positive point in an ailing world.

However, the story of *The Black Horse* is told not through Fedya's point of view. Rather, George is the first-person narrator. George may well be the same character as the protagonist of *The Pale Horse,* with whom he shares a name[10] and Savinkov's personal experiences as a terrorist and revolutionary. When Savinkov was an SR and a terrorist, he wrote George as an SR and a terrorist; when Savinkov was a White Army insurgent, so too was George. Being the experienced, single-mindedly anti-Bolshevik leader of a group of insurgents, he may very well be a self-reflection of his author, but he potentially could also be meant to function as a projection for the reader. Regardless of the events of *The Pale Horse,* George has no real past in *The Black Horse.* He is nothing but the sum of his values and experiences: "But what do I hate for? I have no home and no family. I have no loss because I have no property."[11] Whereas most of his compatriots in the fight against Bolshevism have had something taken away from them by the communists, George had nothing to begin with. He represents neither revenge nor justice, but struggle for its own sake. In this sense, he works as a protagonist just as well as Fedya. Recall that Fedya was defined as the main character for his ability to be anyone against the Bolsheviks. Similarly, both of them have no real motivating cause.

[8] Boris Viktorovich Savinkov, *The Black Horse* (1924).
[9] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.
[10] Savinkov, *The Pale Horse,* 116-117.
[11] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.

Yet there is a major difference in their values. Where Fedya never doubts the cause and eventually gives his life for it, George has trouble justifying his purpose, at times: "What could I answer? Yes, at the home front we have Tsarist generals. Yes, landlords drag, like leeches, behind us. Yes, in the army there is theft..."[12] George, like the author who created him, continues to fight without any real purpose. Through George, we may view *The Black Horse* as Savinkov's acknowledgment and acceptance that he has become totally consumed by the anti-Bolshevik conflict. However, this is a narrow view, and there is certainly more to be said about Savinkov's self-perception within the book.

The Collective and Individual Communist

Savinkov on occasion uses characters to represent various concepts. The most obvious of these, literally spelled out for the reader, is George's former lover, Olga – "Russia is Olga, Olga is Russia."[13] But she is more than simply a static character to humanize George. What complicates their relationship is that Olga is a communist, and therefore aligned with the system he has spent the entire novel fighting against. The two interact a few times throughout the book, and are always ideologically opposed. Furthermore, she gives communism in the novel a face, and a sympathetic one at that. Communists are frequently referred to negatively and in the abstract. As an example, take one of George's companions, Egorov, whose "House [they] burned and son [they] killed]"[14] In this statement, the communists are first a unit, the one indistinguishable from the other, and second the perpetrator of political violence. Egorov, meanwhile, is first the victim of this action, and second the vehicle of righteous vengeance. Savinkov differentiates between characters, who are defined by what they do and what is done to them as individuals, and groups, which are defined by their collective actions. When Egorov, Fedya, or any other character does something, that action is their own. When a communist does something, that is the action of all communists – which is why Olga as an individual is difficult for George to reconcile.

[12] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.
[13] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.
[14] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.

The communists are also placed in Biblical terms, being literally demonized in the text, with Egorov referring to them and those aligning with them as "those devils."[15] The Bolsheviks are cast as an obscene and otherworldly adversary. Rather than just people bound together by a cause, they instead represent something inherently malevolent. Furthermore, they are a homogeneous group, with no national or religious identity, no defining characteristics beyond their infernal nature. Contrast this to George's motley band, made up of peasants, Cossacks, Old Believers, and others. This only serves to further contribute to the characterization of George's companions as living, breathing people, opposing an undefined mass of ideology. In fact, Savinkov even seems to be portraying the very concept of ideology as the enemy. George is defined by what he fights against; the Bolsheviks are defined by what they fight for. Nonetheless, by the novel's end, ideology, that is, mass belief in a set of ideals, seems to win out over the individual.

But let us now return to Olga. She is, I believe, the key to Savinkov's entire ideology in writing this book. It is the work of a broken man. George continues to love her, in spite of what she has become and how the two have grown apart. Similarly, Savinkov held an idealized image of a Russia that might have been. His work between the October Revolution and his imprisonment revealed a projection of his own beliefs on the people of Russia. In *The Black Horse,* he acknowledges that the Russia he wants cannot be. The scene in which George leaves Olga near the very end of the novel represents Savinkov's at least partial acceptance of the new Bolshevik status quo. Partial, because Olga still wishes to accompany George wherever he goes, but an acceptance nonetheless that she, and Russia, will remain communist.

Savinkov's Political Stance

The reader may also note the apparent lack of archaic language present in the novel. Savinkov uses word choice that is literary, but not at all inaccessible. The novel was clearly meant to be widely approachable. This begs the question, then – who is *The Black Horse*'s audience? With his attempts at

[15] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.

insurgency foiled time and again, did he hope that it would be read by anyone? Distributed to a sympathetic Western public or White emigre community? Smuggled into the Soviet Union to inspire anti-Bolshevik resistance? In order to answer these questions with any degree of satisfaction, we must further address the political alignment of *The Black Horse.*

That is, is *The Black Horse* even against the Soviet Union at all? Further complicating this entire situation is an important and rather obscure piece of context – by 1923, Savinkov's faith in the anti-Bolshevik struggle showed signs of faltering. In the text, he certainly demonstrates a level of regret for his actions – or at least their direct consequences. George is painfully aware of the pain that he has caused: "The Jews went into the forests, with the elderly, women and children, with the cattle and household goods. We are not liberators in their eyes, but pogromists and murderers. In their place I would also leave."[16] (To his credit, George does punish his subordinates harshly for their crimes.) Even beyond *The Black Horse,* there is evidence that he expressed a certain amount of admiration for the Communist leadership.[17] In personal correspondence, he specifically characterizes *The Black Horse* as sympathetic to the Soviet cause: "Did you read the last page of [*The Black Horse*] in the original version? Do you remember that I completely changed it because unconsciously it gave the impression [of being] definitely in favor of the Bolsheviks?"[18] His use of "unconsciously" suggests a contradiction between his actions and his beliefs: Savinkov's experiences were beginning to lead him into alignment with the Bolshevik cause, even as he continued to work to undermine it. Naturally, this quote suggests no small level of discomfort with this notion. However, there is another source that suggests a different point of view.

One must keep in mind that Savinkov wrote *The Black Horse* after experiencing a series of failures to ignite anti-Bolshevik resistance. It reflects a rather different Savinkov than his other works. He is no longer the daring revolutionary he featured in *The Pale Horse.* There exists a letter, an appeal,

[16] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.
[17] Spence, "The 'Savinkov Affair' Reconsidered," 27.
[18] Spence, "The 'Savinkov Affair' Reconsidered," 33.

to Felix Dzerzhinsky, then the head of the Cheka, penned by Savinkov in the days before his death. In the correspondence, he (rather boldly) proposes that he be released from prison and go to work for the Soviet government, referencing previous discussions had with and assurances received from other Soviet officials.[19] One's interpretation of this proposal depends on whether one sees in it Savinkov the ideologue or Savinkov the pragmatist. Other documents written at the same time as *The Black Horse*, fortunately for scholars of Russian and Soviet history, play an important role in informing us of his ideology and mental state during this final period of his life.

Savinkov, it seems, was a man who dealt in absolutes. In this letter to Dzerzhinsky, he describes himself thusly: "I can't take a halfway position, I must be either pro or contra…."[20] In light of this, it becomes easier to reconcile his socialist history with his alignment with the Whites. In order to be contra to the Bolsheviks, Savinkov found it necessary to work with anyone who shared his enemy, be they the Provisional Government, reactionary insurgents, the Poles, or the British. Earlier, I briefly discussed the idea that Savinkov's actions were motivated less by his own beliefs than by those of his supporters. That is, he became a tool for use by external and internal anti-revolutionary forces. That Savinkov was a socialist became secondary to his single-minded war against communism – and that was exactly what was needed by his patrons.

The Biblical *Black Horse*

There is an apocalyptic element to the novel. Following the preface are two Bible verses. The first is from Revelation 6:5 – "...And behold, a black horse, and on it a rider, holding a scale in his hand."[21] The black horse and its rider are of course part of a quartet, with the rider of the white horse representing conquest, the red – war, the black – famine, and the pale – death.[22] Yet it is not the rider but the object he carries that Savinkov invites the reader to study. "And the subjectively unshaken

[19] Boris Viktorovich Savinkov, letter to Felix Dzerzhinsky, May, 1925.
[20] Savinkov, letter to Dzherzhinsky.
[21] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.
[22] Helmut Nickel, "And Behold, a White Horse... Observations on the Colors of the Horses of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 12, (1977): 179. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1512732.

scales objectively bow with one of their cups, that on which is the 'final and decisive' for the life and the wellbeing of the working people. That is not George's cup."[23] The scales may be a reference to Dostoevskiy's *The Idiot,* which also emphasizes this particular aspect of the third horseman.[24] In fact, the end-of-days aspects of *The Black Horse* recall a long tradition of apocalyptic imagery, and reference to *Revelation* in particular. What must be considered is that the apocalypse in Dostoevskiy's work was simultaneously two things: a rejection of earthly utopianism and at the same time an invitation to a new, unearthly paradise for the virtuous.[25] With this in mind, Savinkov's vision of Biblical Armageddon in Russia becomes clearer. The conflict between the Bolsheviks and the counter-revolutionaries becomes a divinely-inspired necessity, a crucible for the country to pass through if utopia (communist or otherwise) is to come.

The order in which the horsemen arrive may also be important. The black horse is the third to arrive, and before it are the riders representing conquest and war.[26] The Russian Empire had clearly suffered conquest and war during World War I and the Revolution, but death has yet to claim it. Therefore, with the first two horsemen already having left their mark on the country, it is famine's turn to come to Russia. Savinkov implies in the title of *The Black Horse* that Russia is the victim of an apocalypse in progress, but his conclusion is unclear.

I am inclined to believe that the Bolsheviks are the riders of the pale horse. His apparently reluctant acceptance of the resilience of the Soviet system, both in personal correspondence and the novel itself, suggests that a successful Bolshevik revolution may actually serve as the fourth horseman in Savinkov's worldview. It would be necessary for Russia to die so that a new socialist state could rise in its place. "'For Russia'… but for which Russia?"[27] Perhaps Savinkov's understanding of the conflict

[23] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.
[24] William J. Leatherbarrow, "Imagery in Dostoevskij's *The Idiot* and *The Devils,*" in *Shapes of Apocalypse: Arts and Philosophy in Slavic Thought,* ed. Andrea Oppo (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 128.
[25] Leatherbarrow, "Imagery in Dostoevskij," 133.
[26] Rev. 6:1-6:8 (New King James).
[27] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.

places both George and the Bolsheviks as fighting for different Russias. Savinkov's Russia rides the black horse, bringing Tsarist generals and aristocrats like parasites. The Communists' Russia rides the pale horse, killing the old world and heralding the new – that is, rejecting an earthly utopia and shepherding Russia onward to an unearthly one, in line with the tradition of Dostoevskiy that Savinkov may well have followed in.

However, given textual evidence and Savinkov's own commentary, it is more likely that the black horse instead represents the Bolsheviks. With the Communist Party in power, it is they who hold the scales that balance the allegiance of the people. And the scales, not the famine, are the aspect that Savinkov intentionally emphasizes. The famine that the rider of the black horse brings is secondary to the measure that he carries. Perhaps, by extension, in Savinkov's view, the loyalty of the people matters more than any turmoil that the Bolsheviks have brought.

Let us now return to this quote about the scales and dissect it piece by piece. "And the subjectively unshaken scales objectively bow with one of their cups…."[28] The scales are "subjectively" unshaken, meaning that they may appear stable from one point of view, and shaken from another, yet they "objectively" bow, meaning that regardless of how one sees them, they are weighted towards one side. This suggests an argument that there is an objectively more virtuous, more correct side in Russia's conflict. The cup that bows carries the "'final and decisive' for the life and the wellbeing of the working people," and it decidedly does not bend to George.[29] Savinkov argues that George and his band are fighting a losing battle for the allegiance of the Russian people. Given this, he becomes a tragic hero, fighting against the inevitability of history for the loyalty of a people that are already aligned *against* him, and therefore *with* the communists.

And Savinkov does indeed reserve the SR's traditional place for the common people, and the peasants in particular, in the revolution. In comparing rural laborers to urban workers, George notes,

[28] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.
[29] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.

"We knew Nietzsche, but not how to distinguish winter crops from spring crops."[30] From his understanding, the country cannot survive on the know-how of intellectuals, soldiers, and all the others that made up the Red and White armies. More crucial to Russia's future than any of them is the peasantry.

Earlier I had mentioned that *The Black Horse* begins with two quotes from the Bible, but only discussed the first. The second, John 2:11, may support the idea that Savinkov's last novel is the beginning of a reconciliation with the communists: "But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes."[31] Civil wars are often cast as tragic wars between brothers, but that it is featured so prominently, just below the quote taken from Revelation 11:5, implies that there is more to it. One way to interpret Savinkov's use of this quote is that it functions as a proposal of rapprochement between himself and the Soviets. Evidence of at least some level of sympathy for the Communist government in his personal writings, as well as in *The Black Horse* itself, as I have argued, supports this idea. If this is taken as true, then Savinkov envisioned himself as part of a brotherhood with the communists – maybe based on their shared national identity, or maybe based on their similar belief in a socialist future. Based on his understanding that the Russian people have chosen their side, he appeals to a sense of fraternity in the hope of having a place for himself in the Soviet future.

Alternatively, it should also be considered that Savinkov sees a brotherhood not with the Bolsheviks, but with his fellow insurgents – that is, between George and his companions. One of George's defining characteristics is that despite his self-doubt, he is committed to the struggle for its own sake. With no past or relatives, his comrades have in a real sense become the only family he has. This sense is arguably reciprocated, making it all the more tragic that at the novel's end, George's brothers-in-arms are eliminated, and he is forced to abandon his struggle all alone.

[30] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.
[31] John 2:11 (New King James).

Conclusion

I propose that the *The Black Horse* is the ego document of a broken man in a broken world. Showing the view from rock bottom, it is Savinkov's last attempt to come to terms with his own failures and the contradictions of his beliefs. Within it, he reconciles the futility of the struggle he has devoted the last of his life to, and accepts that he is no one at all without it. Moreover, he reckons with having no future, because he has no real hope of success, and his actions have precluded acceptance into the Soviet Union. Ultimately, Russia's future is not for Savinkov to shape, and he struggles to see any place for himself in it on his current path – "What have I achieved? Behind – freshly dug graves. Ahead... What awaits me ahead?"[32]

[32] Savinkov, *The Black Horse*.

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