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Anna M. Lavryonova

State Archive of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russian Federation

E-mail: lavryonova@mail.ru

The Fatal Fur Coat: M.I. Trusevich and the Death of S.N. Myasoedov

Abstract

Drawing on a number of previously unpublished sources, this article uncovers the complex and non-linear connection between two high-profile events of the early twentieth century that occurred eleven years apart: the explosion at the Bolshaya Severnaya Hotel in April 1904 during preparations for an assassination attempt against the Minister of the Interior, Vyacheslav von Plehve, and the execution of Colonel Sergei N. Myasoedov in April 1915 after his conviction for espionage on behalf of Germany. The link between these two tragic episodes was provided by Mikhail I. Trusevich, then Assistant Prosecutor of the St. Petersburg Judicial Chamber and later Director of the Police Department, who was assigned to investigate the 1904 explosion, as well as by the fur coat belonging to the man killed in the blast, which became one of the key pieces of physical evidence in the case. The principal objective of the investigation was to establish the identity of the deceased. Through investigative work carried out in Montreux, Switzerland, and at the border station of



Verzhbolovo, Trusevich succeeded in locating a relative who had accompanied the victim while making purchases. This ultimately led to the identification of the deceased as the Socialist Revolutionary Alexei D. Pokotilov. The negligent handling of this crucial piece of evidence by Myasoedov, who at the time was responsible for gendarmerie supervision at Verzhbolovo, occurred despite repeated instructions from his superiors to provide full assistance to Trusevich. The unfavorable impression of Myasoedov's professionalism that Trusevich formed during the investigation had lasting consequences for the gendarmerie officer's career. It deprived him of corporate support within the service and ultimately made him an easy target for subsequent political intrigue.

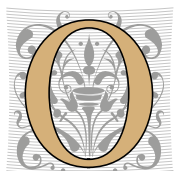
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S.N. Myasoedov; M.I. Trusevich; Verzhbolovo; Police Department; Separate Corps of Gendarmes; Spy mania.

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n the night of April 1, 1904, in a room at the Bolshaya Severnaya Hotel in Moscow, A.D. Pokotilov, a member of the Combat Organization of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, was constructing a bomb intended for the hated Minister of Internal Affairs, von Plehve. Suddenly, the terrorist's hand slipped, a monstrous explosion thundered, and the perpetrator was blown to pieces.

Eleven years later, on April 2, 1915, Gendarme Colonel S.N. Myasoedov, wrongly accused of spying for Germany, was hanged by a court martial in the Warsaw Fortress. It would seem that there could be no connection between these two tragic stories, but in the intricate web of events in the pre-twilight empire, fateful coincidences are not uncommon, and sometimes even inevitable.

The first to suggest the influence of the Severnaya Hotel explosion case on Myasoedov's fate was British researcher William Fuller, but his explanation of the events of 1904 can hardly be considered exhaustive: succumbing to the charm of his hero, he extols his successes, sometimes only hypothetical, and often, without good reason, denounces the offenders of the executed man¹. V.V. Hutarev-Garnishinsky, demonstrating a realistic representation of the true qualities of the former railway gendarme², and O.R. Airapetov, who wrote a review of Fuller's work³, also do not provide details of the 1904 incident that so damaged Myasoedov. Nor are they included in A.M. Popov's recent work on the "Myasoedov affair", although there are some hints about what happened⁴.

In fact, Myasoedov, an officer of the 105th Orenburg Infantry Regiment, should not have been assigned to the Separate Corps of

¹ Fuller William. *The Foe Within: Fantasies of Treason and the End of Imperial Russia* (Фуллер У. Внутренний враг: шпиономания и закат императорской России), trans. from English by M. Malikova. М.: Новое литературное обозрение, 2009. С. 40.

² Хутарев-Гарнишевский В.В. Был ли Мясоедов шпионом? // Родина. 2019. № 2. С. 112–115.

³ Айрапетов О.Р., Фуллер У. Внутренний враг: шпиономания и закат императорской России. М., 2009. [Peer review] // Русский сборник. Т. IX. М., 2010. С. 292–335.

⁴ Попов А.М. За два шага до бездны: интриги против военного министра и саморазрушение власти в России 1907–1915 гг. М.: Язуза-каталог, 2023. С. 194.



Bolshaya Severnaya Hotel. Postcard, early twentieth century.

From open sources

Gendarmes at all, since the assessments by his colleagues were far from flawless and contained details of his affair with the married daughter of his superior, Commander of the 17th Army Corps, General N.G. Zalesov⁵, and also contained references to the officer's numerous debts to "various Jewish tailors and moneylenders"⁶. Despite this, Myasoedov was accepted into the Corps, and in 1901 took up the lucrative position of Head of the Verzhbolovo Section of the Gendarme-Police Department of the Northwestern Railways.

In 1907, Myasoedov left Verzhbolovo and the Gendarme Corps amidst scandal. According to Fuller, shortly before this, the Ministry of Internal Affairs had received a denunciation accusing the border station's management of aiding smugglers. Consequently, Cornet L.E. Ponomarev⁷ arrived in Verzhbolovo to conduct an inspection; he was a hereditary gendarme (son of a sergeant major), a former student

⁵ Лавренова А.М. Отдельный корпус жандармов и российское общество в 1880–1917 гг.: дис. ... канд. ист. наук. М., 2018. С. 50; Хутарев-Гарнишевский В.В. *Op. cit.* С. 112–115.

⁶ ГА РФ. Ф. 110. Оп. 2. Д. 6991. Л. 7–11.

⁷ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. Оп. 316. ОО. 1906 г. Д. 1020; Д. 635, 635. Т. 2, 635. Т. 3; 1-е Д-во. 1907 г. Оп. 27. Д. 240; Ф. 110. Оп. 6. Д. 1636 а.



Alexei Dmitrievich Pokotilov.

From open sources

at the Mining Institute and a failed secret agent⁸. Unable to obtain evidence, he decided to fabricate it, but was exposed by Myasoedov in court. Myasoedov's testimony was deemed “tactless” by his superiors, especially since his statement caused a media frenzy painful for the Department⁹. Stolypin ordered Myasoedov transferred “no closer than the meridian of Samara”, but the former felt insulted and chose to leave the service altogether.

After retiring, Myasoedov pursued entrepreneurship, but an acquaintance with War Minister V.A. Sukhomlinov inspired him to seek reinstatement in 1911 and transfer to the War Ministry. His happiness was short-lived, though, as already in 1912, Myasoedov found himself embroiled in a major intrigue plotted by A.I. Guchkov against the War Minister. Wishing to stir up trouble, the Octobrist leader instigated a persecution of Myasoedov, accusing him of spying for Germany. The scandal was a resounding success, culminating in a duel in April 1912¹⁰. The short-sighted gendarme's bullet did not cause any harm to his opponent, which, however, did not prevent him from appearing in the Duma the next day with his arm in a sling¹¹.

⁸ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. ОО. 1902 г. Оп. 316. Д. 1536.

⁹ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. ОО. 1910 г. Оп. 316. Д. 75. Л. 49.

¹⁰ Лавренова А.М. Тонкая синяя линия: жандармы и общество на закате империи. М., 2023. С. 295–296.

¹¹ Фуллер У. Опр. cit. С. 113.



Guchkov's efforts were not in vain: the media frenzy, coupled with the perennial prejudice of the average person against the “blue uniforms”, ensured that the public accepted the flimsy and unsubstantiated accusations against Myasoedov at face value without further ado. That's why, when in 1915, following the defeats in East Prussia, General Headquarters needed a scapegoat, the dubious testimony of Second Lieutenant Ya.P. Kolakovsky, who claimed that the Germans who had recruited him had recommended he contact Myasoedov by searching for him in the capital's restaurants, served as the basis for his dreadful sentence.

Many of the high-ranking officials of the Separate Gendarme Corps did not believe in the veracity of the version about treason¹², while the military did not doubt the betrayal of the gendarmerie officer¹³. Incidentally, Myasoedov was not the only representative of the “blue uniforms” to face such accusations. For example, Captain M.V. von Plotto, Assistant to the Head of the Courland Provincial Gendarme Directorate, was accused of conspiring with the Baltic barons¹⁴, who allegedly hosted German airplanes, and Assistant to the Head of the Finnish Gendarme Directorate, Lieutenant Colonel N.N. Kornilov, was accused of assisting the espionage activities of the German consul in Tornio¹⁵. As is well known, despite the baselessness of the accusations, Myasoedov was hanged on the personal orders of Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich.

In the gallery of enemies of the executed man, there is one figure who became truly fatal for him, a figure due to whose influence Myasoedov lost the corporate solidarity of his colleagues and the patronage of his superiors, which, in turn, made him first an easy prey for Guchkov, and then a victim, given over to slaughter. In a report to P.A. Stolypin dated September 1, 1909, Myasoedov claimed that he owed the ruin of his career to M.I. Trusevich, whose resignation as Director of the Police

¹² Глобачев К.И. Правда о русской революции: Воспоминания бывшего начальника Петроградского охранного отделения / Под ред. З.И. Перегудовой; сост.: З.И. Перегудова, Дж. Дейли, В.Г. Маринич. М., 2009. С. 76–79; Спиридович А.И. Великая война и Февральская революция 1914–1917 годов. Кн. 1. Нью-Йорк: Всеславянское изд-во, 1960. С. 106–111.

¹³ Деникин А.И. Путь русского офицера. М.: ВАГРИУС, 2002. С. 281.

¹⁴ ГА РФ. Ф. 110. Оп. 2. Д. 19495.

¹⁵ ГА РФ. Ф. 124. Оп. 69. Д. 466.



Maximilian Ivanovich Trusevich.
From open sources

Department in 1909 prompted Myasoedov to attempt to reinstate himself in the Gendarme Corps. Myasoedov wrote that he had been repeatedly warned at Corps Headquarters that Trusevich felt hostility toward him saying he would never forget how he had been treated in Verzhbolovo. “I have never known and do not know any guilt toward Trusevich”, Myasoedov wrote, asserting that his colleague, Colonel Schultz, who later died in the explosion of Stolypin's dacha on Aptekarsky Island, was somehow involved. According to Myasoedov, Schultz, a lawyer, “due to some corporate grievances, treated Trusevich less than kindly”. Furthermore, Trusevich allegedly perceived mockery in the actions of the head of the Verzhbolovo section, which manifested itself in the fact that Myasoedov sent him a dirty, torn fur coat, material evidence, without packaging, thereby embarrassing him in front of officers of the St. Petersburg State Gendarme Directorate¹⁶. At the height of the Guchkov campaign, the 1909 petition leaked to the press, and the *Birzhevye Vedomosti* newspaper exercised its eloquence: “Gogol's hero was ruined by a goose, Myasoedov by a fur coat! Yes, yes, a simple one, and, what's more, an old, worn-out fur coat...”¹⁷

¹⁶ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. ОО. 1910 г. Оп. 316. Д. 75. Л. 2 об., 82, 91.

¹⁷ Биржевые ведомости № 92. 19 апреля 1912 г.



The bitter irony of fate was that this was indeed the case. The fur coat in question belonged to the terrorist killed by his own bomb and was one of the few pieces of evidence in the case. After the explosion, the government was left with only false documents in the name of Arkady Petrovich Kazanov, a mutilated corpse, and some charred clothing, which needed to be used to establish the identity of the deceased and the organization behind him. Maximilian Ivanovich Trusevich, then Assistant Prosecutor of the St. Petersburg Judicial Chamber, played a key role in this investigation. The only lead was a stamp on the buttons of the deceased's trousers, which identified a tailor from a resort town on the shores of Lake Geneva. Trusevich hastily departed for Switzerland, and the best forces of the Russian political police were dispatched to assist him: L.A. Rataev, head of the Foreign Agents Service of the Police Department, was dispatched from Paris to Geneva. At that time, he was the handler of the notorious Azef, assisted by the head of the Berlin Intelligence Office, A.M. Garting. The investigation was overseen by the Director of the Police Department, A.A. Lopukhin, and the Prosecutor of the St. Petersburg Judicial Chamber, E.I. Vuich.

Trusevich first established that the terrorist, who had lived on the farm of the émigré E.E. Lazarev, had been visited by a relative named Mikhailov, who had made purchases with him. On April 22, 1904, the assistant prosecutor went to Verzhbolovo, where he hoped to identify this individual by his customs declaration. He succeeded: the bomber's relative turned out to be a clerk at the Dvoryansky Bank, colleague councilor D.A. Mikhailov. He was quickly found and interrogated, which led to the discovery of the identity of the deceased. He turned out to be Mikhailov's wife's brother, A.D. Pokotilov. Interestingly, Azef, Head of the Combat Organization of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, had been deceiving his handler Rataev until the very end and revealed Pokotilov's name only when further concealment not only made no sense but also threatened to lose the trust of his handler¹⁸.

¹⁸ See: Лавренова А.М., Трухин М.Д. Холодная весна 1904 г.: дело о взрыве в «Северной гостинице», швейцарский вояж М.И. Трусевича и кальсоны Покотилова // Ежегодник Государственного архива РФ: публикации, исследования, рецензии [2024] / Гл. ред. С.В. Мироненко. М., 2024. С. 58–96.



Sergei Nikolaevich Myasoedov.
From open sources

There's little doubt that, at the height of the Socialist Revolutionary Party's hunt for the Minister of Internal Affairs, there was no investigation more important than the Severnaya Hotel explosion. Although Myasoedov wasn't privy to its details, as a gendarme officer, he couldn't help but understand the gravity of Trusevich's mission and the significance of the material evidence, especially since he'd been repeatedly informed of this by individuals whose orders he should have heeded. On April 5, Myasoedov received a telegram from Lopukhin, Director of the Police Department, about the need to “assist Assistant Prosecutor Trusevich, who was sent abroad on a secret mission, so that Prussian border authorities wouldn't inspect his baggage”¹⁹. On April 7, Chief of Verzhbolovo gendarmes was sent a bundle of material evidence, which he was ordered to send further to Geneva, to Rataev²⁰. On April 22, he again received²¹ telegram from Lopukhin, informing him of Trusevich's imminent arrival with a repeated

¹⁹ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. ОО. 1904 г. Оп. 232. Л. 155. Л. 80.

²⁰ Ibid. Л. 102–103.

²¹ Ibid. Л. 170.



request for assistance. Myasoedov apparently took this request lightly. In a published report dated May 21, 1904, Trusevich pointed out to Lopukhin Lieutenant Colonel Myasoedov's disregard for his official duties and his unacceptable manner of communicating with an official. However, the incident had no formal consequences at the time.

Thus, Trusevich's dislike of Myasoedov was not due to his overly vulnerable pride, but rather simply to his own judgment of the railway gendarme officer's professional qualities. His vibrant social life and the favor of foreign crowned heads passing through the border station, who generously showered Myasoedov with their countries' medals²², apparently contributed to his loss of touch with reality and became the cause of his defiantly reckless behavior, which ultimately led him to such a disastrous end.

State Archives of the Russian Federation.

Ф. 102. ОО. 1904 г. Он. 232. Д. 155. м. 2. Л. 29—30.

*Manuscript. On the letterhead of the Assistant Prosecutor
of the St. Petersburg Judicial Chamber.*

Letter from Assistant Prosecutor of the St. Petersburg Judicial Chamber M.I. Trusevich to Director of the Police Department A.A. Lopukhin regarding Lieutenant Colonel S.N. Myasoedov's improper handling of material evidence in the case of the explosion at the Severnaya Hotel. May 21, 1904.

Confidentially

To His Excellency A.A. Lopukhin

Dear Sir Alexei Alexandrovich,

In order to investigate the identity of the criminal killed in the Severnaya Hotel, the latter's fur coat was taken by the act[ual] st[ate] coun[cilor] Rataev to Paris, where it was presented to furriers, and

²² Лавренова А.М. Жандармский надзор в Вержболово накануне Первой мировой войны // Транспортные коммуникации Российской империи в годы Первой мировой войны: Материалы Международного круглого стола, 28 января 2014 г. / Сост. А.С. Сенин, Л.Д. Шаповалова. СПб.: Нестор-История, 2014. С. 175.



Memorandum concerning a fur coat.
 Государственный архив РФ. Ф. 102. ОО. 1904 г.
 Оп. 232 Д.155. т. 2 Л. 29

then Mr. Rataev informed me by letter that he had sent the fur coat to the Verzhbolovo station to the local gendarme lieutenant colonel Myasoedov for forwarding to the St. Petersburg provincial gendarme office. During my stay on the 25th of last April at the said border post, Lieutenant Colonel Myasoedov informed me of the arrival of some parcel from abroad addressed to him (and I had warned him about the upcoming delivery to him from L.A. Rataev of the aforementioned fur coat, which constituted material evidence in the case, and about the need to send it to the said gendarmerie office).

On the 20th of May, a city messenger came to this office, having with him the aforementioned fur coat, wrapped in paper, and an opened letter, without an envelope, on an official blank: “Sergey Nikolaevich Myasoedov”, addressed to Vladimir Sergeevich²³, whom

²³ Probably Lieutenant Colonel Starov, Chief of Section at the Warsaw Station.
 (Ed. note.)



Mr. Myasoedov asks to “transfer this fur coat to Trusevich”. Having received the coat and the letter, the gendarme non-commissioned officers began a futile search for “Vladimir Sergeevich”, apparently embarrassed to approach me directly with the scorched and torn coat, not knowing its connection to any case, as it was not indicated in the rather strange manner of its shipment. Having confirmed, however, that there was no “Vladimir Sergeevich” at the office, the sergeant showed me the aforementioned note, the significance of which I only grasped when I saw the coat and realized that in this case, the gendarme officers were sending material evidence to an official of an outside agency. Fortunately, the glove of the deceased, which was in the coat's pocket, was not lost.

I consider it my duty to bring the above to the attention of Your Excellency, and I most humbly request you to accept the assurance of my full respect and complete readiness to be of service to you.

M. Trusevich

May 21, 1904

Note: re: the case of the Sev[ernaya] Hotel explosion 27/V.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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 Anna M. Lavryonova 

C.Sc. (History), leading specialist of the State Archives
of the Russian Federation,
SPIN-code: 3468-6783,
ORCID: 0009-0003-8576-6979

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