



**'THE BLACK CAR' AS A SYMBOL  
OF REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE IN 1917:  
PHOBIA, MYTHEME, EMOTIONAL STIMULUS**

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**Abstract:** The article studies the phenomenon of rumours in 1917 about 'black cars', which were a visualisation of ordinary people's fears of various forms of violence. It notes that these rumours were a form of mass phobia, widespread in Petrograd and Moscow, but also known in other Russian cities. The methodological basis of the work includes historical anthropology, the history of emotions, and social psychology. The author considers the rumours' intertextual basis: connections with prerevolutionary criminal urban legends, literary and cinematic works, and political and religious discourses. He notes the role of the rumours as an emotional stimulus that provoked the aggression of the crowd. He examines the dynamics of the image of the 'black car', from a symbol of counter-revolution to a symbol of revolutionary abuse of power and anarchy. It is pointed out that contemporary urban legends also retain a memory of 'black cars'.

**Keywords:** rumours, phobias, urban legends, history of emotions, 1917 revolution, black car, mass consciousness.

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## 'The Black Car' as a Symbol of Revolutionary Violence in 1917: Phobia, Mytheme, Emotional Stimulus

The article studies the phenomenon of rumours in 1917 about 'black cars', which were a visualisation of ordinary people's fears of various forms of violence. It notes that these rumours were a form of mass phobia, widespread in Petrograd and Moscow, but also known in other Russian cities. The methodological basis of the work includes historical anthropology, the history of emotions, and social psychology. The author considers the rumours' intertextual basis: connections with pre-revolutionary criminal urban legends, literary and cinematic works, and political and religious discourses. He notes the role of the rumours as an emotional stimulus that provoked the aggression of the crowd. He examines the dynamics of the image of the 'black car', from a symbol of counter-revolution to a symbol of revolutionary abuse of power and anarchy. It is pointed out that contemporary urban legends also retain a memory of 'black cars'.

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The 1917 revolution has long attracted the attention of researchers not only as a political phenomenon, but also as a period of social and psychological upheavals which by their nature had a clearly expressed affect [Buldakov 1997; Kolonitskiy 2001; Steinberg 2002]. Mass meetings, kangaroo courts, local armed provocations and clashes between different political forces all combined to form a single canvas of the everyday activity of ordinary people. However, besides social actions, the revolution manifested itself at the level of the formation of specific peculiarities of mass revolutionary consciousness which allowed people at the time to define the revolutionary population as a single 'evolving individuality' [Karsavin 1993: 135]. One characteristic of this socio-psychological group was the predominance of the emotional over the rational in its perception of events. Moreover, its emotional condition was distinguished by a high degree of mobility, and a susceptibility to reversals: triumph easily gave way to terror, and terror in turn led to outbreaks of hatred towards its sources. Observant contemporaries noted that within the revolutionary mob noble and base impulses alternated with lightning speed [Shulgin 1989: 268].

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The psychology of emotions teaches us that an individual's condition can very rarely be reduced to a single emotion. Even the differential theory of emotions, which prescribes the study of feelings taken individually, studies the features of their interaction and draws attention to the fact that one emotion, as a rule, leads to another. On this basis Carroll E. Izard introduced the concept of emotional triads, for example, the hostility triad (anger, contempt, disgust), three emotions activated simultaneously by a single irritant [Izard 1991: 254]. When it is a matter of studying collective rather than individual emotions, this sort of combined approach proves even more important, based as it is not only on the physiological nature, but also on the peculiarities of mass psychology: these are formed out of the condition of separate individuals, but are not simply the sum of them, but rather the exponent of the arithmetic mean, which smooths out atypical or restricted emotional states [Tarde 1895; Le Bon 1896; Sighele 2015]. It should at the same time be remembered that psychologists often mean different things by the term 'emotion': emotions as such, feelings, emotional states, moods, affects or drives.

Considering that a basic emotion in the narrow, physiological sense of the word lasts for a few seconds, it can hardly be an object of study in historical research. Therefore the present article will understand emotions in the wide sense of the term as moods and affects which may be described by the basic emotion, but unlike it are characterised by a longer duration and may be disseminated among large groups of people. In this connection, considering the peculiarities of the collective psychology of ordinary people affected by the revolution in February and March 1917, Izard's triad of hostility should be corrected: instead of anger, contempt and disgust manifested at the level of individual psychology, we include fear, anger and hatred in this triad (the last of these being as a rule a derivative emotion from contempt and disgust, while fear, in one form or another, was experienced by ordinary people for the whole of 1917, and was often the reason for the anger which then overflowed into hatred).

Ordinary people's emotions are reflected in quite a wide range of sources: both the immediate written language of the subject from sources with a personal origin, which often involuntarily reveals his / her personal attitude to what he / she describes (diaries, letters, memoirs); texts which deliberately give us information about the mood of society, in which the author acts as a communicator (publicistic works, essays); statistical information which obliquely illustrates the consequences of emotional conditions of one sort or another (the statistics of the dynamics of mental illness, suicide, murder, etc.). Another group is formed of rumours which belong to oral sources. The area of rumour, in which the images and subjects most relevant to ordinary people came into being, recorded the irritant stimuli that provoked collective phobias. As early as February

1917 one such irritant stimulus was the motor car, which made Baron N. E. Wrangel call the incipient revolution ‘the auto-revolution’ [Wrangel 2003: 351]. Zinaida Gippius also drew attention to the fact that during the events of February horse-drawn cabs disappeared from the streets, and instead of them there were ‘only humming motor-cars’ [Gippius 1929: 83].

The psychological tension of the events of February was reflected in the letters and diaries of contemporaries, including those ordinary people who were sympathetic to the revolution. For those of them who were predisposed to nervous complaints the revolution was apt to have more serious psychological consequences. It is telling that the number of people admitted to the city clinics with mental illnesses rose sharply during the first weeks after the disturbances of February: whereas in the weeks preceding them new incidences of mental illness in Petrograd averaged 0.9 persons, in the first week of March they rose to fifty persons, and the period of March–April reached record numbers for the whole war.<sup>1</sup> The president of the Psychological Society, Professor P. Ya. Rozenbakh, drew attention to the fact that the revolution had had a stronger psychological effect on the inhabitants of the capital than the beginning of the First World War, and also regarded as justified the introduction of the term ‘revolutionary psychosis’, one of the symptoms of which he regarded as persecution mania. Rosenbakh described the case of one of his patients, an officer in the gendarmes, who had been brought along by his wife: ‘He is in a frenzy of terror, he hears his servants conspiring to murder him. His doctor frightens him. He tells his fears to his wife, who persuades him that he has nothing to be frightened of. He calms down, but his next auditory hallucination returns him to his previous state. He has no other sensory delusions’ (*Birzhevye vedomosti*, evening edition, 18 May 1917). However, the revolution favoured the development of phobias not only among former representatives of the authorities, but also among the majority of ordinary people whose everyday life had been radically changed by the new circumstances. And while only a representative of a fairly narrow social group could find a reason for fear in the whispers of the servants, the motor car, as a symbol of violence in the context of a spreading psychosis, was becoming a universal source of mass phobia (an irritant stimulus), and produced complex emotions among representatives of different political camps.

Fear of cars, or of self-propelled means of transport, is known in psychology as autokinetophobia (another, less precise term, is motorophobia, or amaxophobia, the fear of riding in a car) [Juan 2012]. Researchers so classify not only the objective, rational fear

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<sup>1</sup> Counted according to [*Ezhenedelnik...* 1917].

of a potentially dangerous form of transport capable of causing physical injury to people, but also the subjective, irrational fear based on a personalisation of transport, the perception of it as an aggressive monster possessing will and reason. In the latter case not only the sight of a moving vehicle causes fear, but also that of one parked in a safe place. We shall not, of course, be using the term ‘phobia’ in its clinical sense (as a pathology) in the present article, still less be diagnosing it in all the participants in the discourse on ‘black cars’ (in which case we should probably have to speak of an epidemic of autokinetophobia, which would hardly correspond to modern principles of psychiatry as a science). However, we shall draw attention to the fact that the fear of ‘black cars’ in the urban population did have many of the signs of a phobia as a mass neurosis, and moreover the objective, rational bases of this phobia are closely interwoven with subjective, irrational worries.

The mass dissemination of the image of the ‘black car’ in 1917 may be traced through many sources (both the crime reports of the popular press and the denunciations published in more respectable titles, including cartoons on this subject, diaries and reminiscences of contemporaries of the events), which allow us to discover how the phenomenon evolved. Typical scenes witnessed during the days of the February Revolution turned into images that were fixed in the subconscious. The car, which had supplanted other forms of transport (the cabs, which had made themselves scarce, and the trams, which had stopped running) during the events of February, became a symbol of the revolution; however, being connected with violence, it became a dangerous, poorly controlled object, which inspired fear in the people of that time. In the chaotic motor traffic, which, in the absence of any police, was a danger to pedestrians, ordinary people saw evidence of some kind of mania or neurosis: ‘The overall impression of that day, and the next, was confusion, and particularly the speeding lorries and motor cars. The whole city seemed to have turned into a monstrous, senseless *corso* and was driving and driving without getting anywhere. Tyres were punctured, vehicles broke down, a car was abandoned where it was on the street and another requisitioned somewhere, and off we go! racing on and driving, driving, until this one breaks down too. This is no longer passion, it is fury, mania’ [Wrangel 2003: 352].

Wrangel’s evidence is confirmed by the photographic and cinematographic chronicles of the day, which show numerous cars and lorries bristling with soldiers’ rifles. The explanation for the unexpected appearance of large numbers of motor vehicles on the streets of the capital is to be found in the activity of the Military Commission of the Provisional Committee of the State Duma, which had created a special Motor Department, which transported the forty-three commissars of the Provisional Committee, and also other repre-

sentatives of the nascent revolutionary authorities, across the city. As A. B. Nikolaev has reckoned, by 27 February 1917 the Military Commission had sixty cars at its disposal, obtained by the engineer P. I. Palchinskiy using his connections. The next day a motor squadron came under the command of the Commission, increasing the number of vehicles at its disposal by thirty. In addition, by order of B. A. Engelgardt, the chairman of the Military Commission, any cars being driven about the streets ‘without a purpose’ were to be requisitioned [Nikolaev 2005: 304–21]. As a result, about a hundred motor vehicles were in constant circulation in the region of the Tauride Palace, creating a commotion and making passers-by nervous.

The first ‘black car’ as a spectre of counter-revolution ‘appeared’ in the capital on 2 March. The Menshevik N. N. Sukhanov noted: ‘There appeared in Petersburg a certain “black car”, driving fast, they said, from one end of the capital to the other and shooting at passers-by, perhaps even with a machine gun’ [Sukhanov 1991: 178]. Z. Kelson, secretary to the head of the city militia, recalled that he was woken at three o’clock in the morning of 3 March by the commandant of the City Duma, who handed him an envelope that he had just received: ‘To the Head of the Militia. Urgent. Secret. To be delivered into his own hands.’ The envelope contained a report: ‘To the city commandant. As reported by members of the Council of Workers’ Deputies Zhukov, Vasilyev and others, it is expected that black cars with black flags will emerge tonight to fire upon the militia posts. Their numbers are as follows <...>’ [Kelson 1925: 169]. Some time later a member of the Duma, D. A. Kazitsyn, was brought to the Duma under arrest, having been travelling in a car with one of those numbers.

Black cars started to be actively reported in the newspapers on 9 March. *Russkie vedomosti* wrote of night raids undertaken in Petrograd by ‘mysterious motors’, saying that some Black Hundreds organisation had been detected (*Russkie vedomosti*, 9 March 1917). On 16 March the black cars ‘reached’ Moscow, where the popular consciousness, inflamed with fear, discovered them. It was reported that ‘there are rumours in Moscow of the appearance of mysterious cars at night, which have no numbers or lights and drive along the streets at manic speed. Their appearance has been noticed on Trubnaya Ploshchad and the Sretenka’ (*Moskovskiy listok*, 17 March 1917). The next day the same paper published an article beginning with the words: ‘The circulation of mysterious cars continues [this time they had been seen tearing along Sadovo-Spasskaya Ulitsa. — V. A.]’ It was noted that shots had been fired from the cars, although these reports were presented as the purest hearsay. It is notable that although nobody knew anything reliably about any shots, the news of the appearance of these cars produced serious disquiet among ordinary people.

After a certain calm during March, news of further excursions by the 'black cars' in Moscow was published on 6 April. 'We have succeeded in discovering,' wrote one journalist, 'that a mysterious car which was driving towards Povarskaya Ulitsa the night before last with its lights off and with no number was stopped by a militiaman, who demanded that its lights should be switched on. At that moment three revolvers emerged from the windows of the car and opened fire, after which the car drove away at high speed. Fortunately the militiaman was unhurt' (*Moskovskiy listok*, 6 April 1917). Some time later the same car appeared on the Vozdvizhenka, and shots were fired from its windows at a student by the name of Shapovalyants, who was walking along with a militiaman's band on his sleeve.

On 13 April the *Petrogradskiy listok* printed news of three occasions at once when 'black cars' had been detained. On examination, they demonstrate that the rumour had turned into a mass phobia which organised the mob and made it obey a single psycho-emotional affective impulse. According to the information in the *Listok*, about one o'clock in the morning of 12 April Mysovskiy the Assistant Commissar of the Militia for the First Subdistrict of the Spasskaya Quarter, Ensign Khlebnikov and the militiamen Domper and Kleipner set off in a car to carry out a search at the home of a certain artiste. They went along (*Moskovskiy listok*, 17 March 1917) Nevsky Prospekt towards the Nikolaevsky Station. Not far from Nikolaevskaya Ulitsa a tyre burst in the car,<sup>1</sup> but the passengers, engaged in merry conversation, took no particular notice of it and continued their drive. Meanwhile, the sound of the tyre bursting, which sounded like a poor-quality rifle being fired, caused great alarm among the militiamen on duty. They began to blow their whistles to signal to the car to stop, but neither the driver nor the passengers heard them. Then the militiamen opened fire desperately at the car as it drove away. They fired off quite a number of shots, but their aim was poor. All they managed to shoot and kill was the horse of a passing cab. Besides that, during the shooting there was a serious panic on the street, and one pedestrian, fleeing the shots that were supposed to be coming from the black car, but were really being fired by the militiamen, was run over by the horse of another cab and suffered a broken leg and serious contusions. The news of the appearance of the black car spread along Nevsky Prospekt like lightning. Meanwhile one of the militiamen had telephoned his colleagues stationed on Znamenskaya Ploshchad and warned them that a black car was proceeding in their direction and must be stopped, and a lorry with a unit of armed soldiers set off in pursuit of the black car as well. When the people in the car finally noticed

<sup>1</sup> The journalist wrote about a burst tyre, but the version that says the car backfired seems more likely, since the driver could hardly have ignored a burst tyre.

the pursuit and the agitation amongst the militiamen on duty, the driver stopped the car. It was immediately surrounded by a crowd that had gathered, full of 'righteous anger'. The people, extremely excited by the rumour that the passengers in the car had fired into the crowd, very nearly lynched the representatives of the militia who were in the car. It took great efforts by the militiamen who had caught up with them to stop them from taking the law into their own hands. Still, the crowd accompanied the car on its way to the commissariat, and on the way they very nearly lynched them again, but this time it was the soldiers following them in the lorry who helped, threatening to open fire. As a result the passengers in the 'black car' got off with nothing worse than a mild fright.

The second case took place beyond the Moscow turnpike on the road to Mozhaysk. A militiaman standing at his post during the night mistook an armoured car carrying soldiers, which had not stopped at his whistle, for a black car. The militiaman opened fire, and the soldiers, who had not noticed him, hearing the bullets strike their armour, answered by firing into the air. Fortunately nobody was hurt.

The third episode took place on Kamennooostrovsky Prospekt, along which a car was travelling at high speed. In it there were two officers and two ladies who were spending some time together. The duty militiamen thought that there was something suspicious about this car, and they decided to stop it. After a warning to which the car did not react, the militiamen opened fire, after which the car stopped. As the paper said, the passengers were highly indignant at the militia's behaviour (*Petrogradskiy listok*, 13 April 1917).

It is telling that as a rule witnesses saw the black cars at night time: they were affected by exhaustion, which had built up over the day, and poor visibility in conditions of inadequate street lighting, and also fear of the dark (nyctophobia), to which more impressionable citizens were prone.

The rumours about mysterious black vehicles in the capital were spread by the popular press and discussed throughout the country. On 17 April *Odesskiy listok* reported that the central commissariats of Petrograd had received a telephone message, according to which the Minister of Justice had ordered the militia to open fire without warning on the car with the registration number 4247. However, on verification it had been established that the minister had given no such orders, and the car with that number was the one in which Alexander Kerensky travelled. Although this should have demystified the role of the black car to some extent, there arose new questions as to who was responsible for sending such a telegram. In this way the fear of a mysterious counter-revolutionary organisation remained.

Nevertheless, the absence of any proof that counter-revolutionaries were active, or that they were indubitably linked to the passengers in the mysterious cars, soon made ordinary people rethink their significance. They started to talk simply of a gang of escaped criminals, which did indeed correspond to the current situation. Furthermore, it was noticed that the cars presented the greatest danger to the militia, so that the public soon produced a rumour that criminal associations were out to get the city militia, which somewhat reduced the degree of tension.

Thus we can see that the rumours about ‘black cars’ in 1917 produced a mass phobia: they were current among representatives of various social groups; despite attempts in the press to debunk them, belief in them continued and spread from Petrograd to Moscow; the fear produced by the rumour provoked anger in ordinary people and impelled people, in accordance with the laws of mob psychology, to collective aggressive actions, leading them to take the law into their own hands and condensing into a feeling of hatred towards the source of the fear that was longer-lasting than the anger. In this way the rumours about ‘black cars’ were the emotional stimulus around which the aforementioned triad of hostility — fear, anger and hatred — formed. A lexical analysis of the rumours allows us to identify the following epithets, which characterised the ‘black cars’ in the accounts of ‘witnesses’: mysterious and enigmatic; elusive and insanely fast; nocturnal; felonious. These distinguished them from other forms of transport by their superpowers and endowed them with fatal, mystical properties. As well as the colour black, the sign of such a car could be black flags and switched-off lights. For an understanding of the mystical nature of the rumour it is important that they appeared during the hours of darkness, as a rule at night, and were the bearers of death. The rumours thus combined elements of a rational scenario (black cars with criminal passengers) with mystical, irrational characteristics (mystery, elusiveness), creating an archetypical allegory of violence, which bestowed upon the rumour the sign of a mythologem.

The phenomenon of this mythologem rumour makes one pay closer attention to the question of its sources, and to examine the image of the car in the semiosphere of the preceding period. Considering the emotional nature of the rumour, its appearance can hardly be given a single rational explanation. The sources of the image of the ‘black car’ should be sought in literary tradition, political vocabulary and everyday pictures — in everything that formed the mass consciousness of ordinary people.

In this case, probably the first things that come to mind are words from the article ‘A Tragic Position’ by the Kadet V. A. Maklakov, a deputy of the Fourth State Duma, published on 27 September 1915

in *Russkie vedomosti*, in which he compared Russia to a car being driven over a cliff by an incompetent driver: 'You are travelling at high speed in a car along a steep and narrow road; one false step and you are lost forever. The people in the car are close to you, your own mother. And suddenly you see that your chauffeur cannot control the car, either because he has no idea how to drive on hills, or because he is tired and no longer understands what he is doing, but he is driving you and himself to destruction, and if he continues to drive as he is, you are facing certain death' (*Russkie vedomosti*, 27 September 1915). What is noteworthy is not only the use of the image of a fast driven car as an allegorical image of Russia, but also the eschatological context, which fills the image of the car with tragic connotations and negative emotions.

Maklakov's countrymen found the image that he had created memorable. In particular, one of Maklakov's colleagues in the Duma, M. A. Karaulov, the member for Terskaya province, returned to it over a year later. On 3 November 1916 he slightly paraphrased Maklakov, recalling 'the argument of the criminal driver driving the car in which our motherland is sitting, and driving it over a cliff' [*Stenograficheskiy otchet...* 1916: col. 79]. It is noteworthy that in Karaulov's version the image of the car takes on a somewhat different meaning: if for Maklakov it is the state, governed by an incompetent government,<sup>1</sup> who are leading the empire's subjects to destruction, for Karaulov the passenger is Russia itself, and the car in which she is sitting is some kind of malign fate.

The image created by Maklakov was such a vivid one that it began to be visualised in the illustrated press. Soon after the article had been published the journal *Budilnik* printed a cartoon entitled 'The Mad Chauffeur', showing a black car being driven at top speed along a narrow mountain road and headed straight over a cliff; besides the chauffeur it contained the Empress.<sup>2</sup> In August 1917 this composition was repeated by the artist of the Odessa journal *Teatr*, but now the car was adorned with the inscription 'Russia', and Kerensky was depicted as the chauffeur.

There are probably several factors explaining the popularity of this allegory. Firstly, from a visual point of view, the image may have

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Siegelbaum, evidently unaware of the original source and citing Maklakov after George Katkov's monograph *Russia in 1917*, sees in the image of the chauffeur Nicholas II [Siegelbaum 2011: 293], whereas the author most likely had in mind I. L. Goremykin, and moreover concluded that one must not try to grab the wheel from the chauffeur-government at a point when the car-state was passing over a dangerous stretch of road.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that formally, the artist had depicted the Empress of Germany, and he had also placed the drawing under the heading 'What the Germans say about themselves', ascribing it to the well-known German graphic artist Thomas Theodor Heine; however, this was a means of avoiding the Russian censorship, and there is no doubt that in reality what we have before us is an illustration of Maklakov's article.

been borrowed from cinema posters advertising thrillers. Contemporaries noted that it was cinema posters with their garish colours, when illuminated by electric light in the evening, that had the greatest effect on the crowd (in comparison with theatre posters), and easily lodged in ordinary people's memories (*Vestnik kinematografii*, January, 1917, no. 123, p. 8). It is noteworthy that Yuri Leving, observing the effect of street advertising on ordinary people's mass consciousness, examines this in the context of mystical notions, comparing the illuminated letters with the flaming letters written upon the wall of Belshazzar's palace [Leving 2004: 230]. In cinema plots the automobile was often connected with a malignant fate, as for example in *The Hunchback's Dreadful Revenge*, in which the hunchbacked millionaire knocked down the poor seamstress in his car (*Obozrenie kinematografov, sketing-ringov i teatrov*, 10 April 1915, no. 224); it appeared in comedy films, for example *Will You Get Out of That Car!* 'an amusing comedy', as the advertisements announced, 'which shows us how greatly love may be influenced by... a car' (*Sine-fono*, 1915, no. 1, p. 75). It is noteworthy that opponents of the cinema, who insisted that it had a corrupting influence on the people, used the scenes of dreadful car accidents exploited by directors as an argument for their case (*Sine-fono*, 1915, no. 4, p. 50). As an example of a film of this last sort one might perhaps point to *Satan's Whisper*, made in 1916 by the Russo-Danish Cinema Office and very popular with the public, about which the critics wrote: 'Our attention is drawn to the moment when a suspension bridge collapses beneath a car that is speeding across it, and the car and its passengers hurtle into the abyss.' On the poster advertising *The Secret of the Cards* there was a car that had driven over a cliff, with the bodies of the passengers lying around it (*Sine-fono*, 1916, no. 11–12, p. 70; no. 19–22, p. 63). Thus the image of the car plunging into the abyss was known in the Russian visual semiosphere.

Secondly, it should be considered that the twentieth century was identified in the contemporary consciousness above all with technical achievements, and one of the most noticeable of these in everyday urban life was the motor car. In this context it is worth noting the turn of phrase used by Maklakov during his speech in the Duma in May 1916, in which he essentially contrasted 'automotive Russia' with primordial, patriarchal Russia: 'There is much that is dear and familiar to us, and to me as well, in these pictures of our native Russia, in this patriarchal way of life that survives in places, and even in this primordial culture, where there are places where no motor vehicle has ever been driven' [*Stenograficheskie otcheti...* 1916: col. 4725]. The Moscow journal *Avtomobilist* printed cartoons depicting villagers scared by the cars rushing by them. The image of the car was used in journalistic satire to denounce the backwardness of civil servants: in 1917 *Budilnik* published a cartoon in which

an aged civil servant is trying to start a car stuck in the snow by lashing it with a whip (*Budilnik*, 1917, no. 3).

However, for the members of the poor and middle classes, a private car was a sign of belonging to the highest strata of society, and often provoked class hatred, and its passengers were sometimes depicted as hard and cynical persons. In September 1915, when the question of housing and feeding refugees had become acute in the capitals, the *Novyy Satirikon* published Nikolay Remizov's sketch showing a young lady and her suitor in a car, the lady saying 'Ah, Serge! You're so sharp-witted! All the theatres are closed today, and it was such a good idea of yours to go and look at the refugees!' (*Novyy Satirikon*, 1915, no. 38, p. 7). Ordinary people began to be particularly irritated by private motor transport in 1915–6, when for various reasons the tram services were cut in Petrograd and Moscow, and passengers would take the waggons by storm, crushing each other and looking hatefully at representatives of 'the upper class' driving along in their private or official cars. It is not surprising that mass consciousness placed the enemy within — spies — in cars; artists' imagination drew a huge private car for Wilhelm II, looking like something between a tank and a house (*Budilnik*, 1915, no. 4).

At the same time the car as a symbol of progress (a positive image for the educated part of society) was in the eyes of ordinary people also taking on the negative connotation of a symbol of violence. This was mostly connected with the road accident statistics, and although it was most often trams that were involved in traffic incidents, as a rule they were not responsible for accidents involving pedestrians. Since they had to follow the trajectory of their rails and did not travel at high speed, they could only be a danger to drunken or particularly heedless pedestrians; often passengers were injured when they tried to alight from or board a moving tram. The car, by contrast, was a symbol of speed and untrammelled movement. As it manoeuvred amongst the trams and cabs, where there was no regulation of road traffic it was a real threat to pedestrians.<sup>1</sup> The compulsory traffic regulations prescribed that motor car drivers should give way to horse-drawn transport and forbade them to overtake it, but these rules were constantly being broken. Pictorial satire in the papers preserved many visual images of road incidents involving cars. The spring number of *Strekoza* for 1917 compared cars to tanks: they crushed their pedestrian enemies on the streets of the city like tanks on the field of battle (*Strekoza*, 1917, no. 11, p. 5). Yuri Leving has pointed out that in Russian poetry riding in a car was surrounded

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<sup>1</sup> However, in 1900 in St Petersburg and 1912 in Moscow the city dumas passed the first road traffic regulations, which set, in particular, a speed limit of twenty versts per hour (21.3 kph) for motor cars, though this, of course, was impossible to measure.

with ‘an aura of calamity’ and the car itself ‘was associated with unrestrained, elemental force with the potential for mythologising’ [Leving 2004: 263].

The press liked to ‘make a meal of’ incidents involving cars, mentioning the serious injuries sustained both by their passengers and by pedestrians. Given that car passengers were as a rule wealthy individuals or well-known public figures, such reports often took on a social resonance. One of the car accidents that created the most stir in Petrograd happened on 7 January 1915: the car ‘caught up with’ a sledge, running into it from behind, upsetting it and throwing the passenger onto the pavement; he hit his head on the road and lost consciousness (*Russkie vedomosti*, 8 January 1915). Although the passenger did not suffer any serious injury, the incident was much discussed, because he was Grigory Rasputin. What is noteworthy in this incident is that the car, despite the rules, had been travelling faster than the sledge and had hit it from behind, which might suggest malice aforethought. Besides, one cannot help noticing the verb ‘catch up with’ used by the journalist — thus the incident was viewed by Rasputin’s opponents as a sort of punishment or retribution that had come upon the ‘elder’.<sup>1</sup> In this latter case the car was an embodiment of fate, which, as noted above, is one of the signs of autokinetophobia, which animates means of transport. It is not without interest that the rumours of Rasputin’s elusiveness and inaccessibility were also connected with the car: interrogated in 1917, the ex-Minister of the Interior A. N. Khvostov recounted that the secret agent I. F. Manasevich-Manuylov had a special fast military car, which was too fast for the cars of the guard to catch up with, and that from time to time he would take Rasputin somewhere in it [*Padenie tsarskogo rezhima...* 1924: 27].

The comparison of technology to living beings was particularly topical in the years of the First World War in conditions where a mystical eschatological atmosphere was endemic. It is worth noting a newspaper’s description of an enigmatic yellow fog that covered Moscow soon after the incident with Rasputin: ‘The trams swam out of the mist like fantastic spectres with red eyes’ (*Russkie vedomosti*, 27 January 1915). One must also take account of the wide context of the use of the word ‘automobile’ to refer to any self-propelled vehicle. In this sense the designation of a tank as an ‘automobile’ is noteworthy. The tank, one of the chief technological monsters of the First World War, inspired horror in the hearts of ordinary people. Playing on their readers’ feelings, newspapers and magazines published pictures that created anxiety. Thus in March 1917 the magazine *XX vek* published a photograph of a tank with the caption:

<sup>1</sup> The verb *nastigat’* can be used with a sense of retribution: cf. the English, ‘his sins / crimes caught up with him’). [Eds.].

‘An English “tank” [sic] — a monster automobile that can crawl across trenches and dugouts’ (*XX vek*, 1917, no. 10, p. 3).

This sort of demonisation of motorised transport was also connected with literature, which created the image of the car as murderer. It featured, for example, in the adventures of Nat Pinkerton, which had a huge popularity in pre-revolutionary Russia. One of these stories was entitled ‘The Devil’s Car’. The author described the horrific appearance of a car encountered by one of the heroes: ‘Right in front of him there glared through the darkness the two huge eyes of a gigantic skull, surrounded by a bluish phosphorescent light. This monster rushed upon him with incredible speed. He wanted to jump aside and run, but terror froze his limbs and fixed him to the fateful spot’ [*Ves Pinkerton...* 2013: 64]. And although, as it turned out in the story, this sort of car was the work of an inventive gang of bandits, as Pinkerton had never doubted, the broad mass of farmers, terrorised by ‘the devil’s car’, in view of their customary prejudices believed in its mystic power.

Russian poetry also had a tendency to demonise the car. Mayakovsky compared it to a devil in his poem ‘The city’s great hell’ (1913): ‘The windows have shattered the city’s great hell | Into tiny little hells sucking with light. | Motor cars smoke like red devils, | Sounding their horns right in your ear.’ In his poem ‘Vlado the Chauffeur’ (1918), Sergey Gorodetsky ‘dispatched’ a car to the service of Satan: ‘Like a whirlwind driven by Satan, | Rattling, whistling, raising the dust, | The car flew headlong.’

The consciousness of the Russian peasantry was full of prejudices about motorised transport. Interesting in this connection is a group of eschatological rumours, according to which Nicholas II was none other than the Antichrist [Aksenov 2012]. In one of them, suspected of treason in the interests of Wilhelm II, he left the Winter Palace by a secret underground passage in a car, straight to Germany [RGIA, f. 1405, op. 521, d. 476, ff. 261v.–262]. These ideas of the car were probably encouraged by yet another mutation in the tradition of representing the supreme power. The official periodicals like *Letopis voyny* were publishing photographs of Nicholas II not on a white horse, which corresponded to the former popular ideas of the Tsar, but in a black car, which gave rise to rumours about a false tsar, a traitor tsar or a tsar who was Antichrist [Aksenov 2014].

But let us return to the literary tradition. From the ‘auto image’ that it had created it was only a short step to its embodiment in real life: among the crime rumours circulating in Russia on the eve of the revolution there were tales of motorised gangs of criminals. It is important to note that whereas hitherto we have been dealing the symbolism of the car as such, without the epithet ‘black’, it was on the eve of the revolution, in January 1917, that the collocation ‘black

car' appeared. In particular, according to the rumours, there was a gang active in Vyborg that committed its crimes in 'a black car'. On 22 January, citing 'our own correspondent' in Vyborg, they began to be reported even in Odessa: 'A mysterious black car has appeared in Vyborg which drives about the town as soon as darkness falls abducting young girls and ladies. Afterwards their bodies, with signs of rape, are discovered on waste land on the outskirts of the city. Sixteen bodies have been found within a short period. Rumour names the criminal as "Black Bil"' (*Odesskiy listok*, 22 January 1917). There is a play of words and meanings in the name 'Black Bil' (Bill): on the one hand, the name Bil seems to be derived from the Russian word '*avtomobil*', which is confirmed by their common epithet 'black', and on the other, Black Bill (variously transcribed as Bill or Bil' in Russian translations of foreign literature) was a common criminal character in American literature, appearing, for example, in the stories of O. Henry, which had been published in Russia ('The Hiding of Black Bill').

It is thus not surprising that, being connected with the visual and literary traditions, political vocabulary, eschatological discourse and the crime stories of pre-revolutionary Russia, the image of the black car became in 1917 one of the most powerful irritant stimuli provoking a mass phobia. However, to complete the picture, there is one further source of the origin of 'black cars'. It is connected with the person of the Minister of the Interior, A. D. Protopopov, an odious figure to ordinary people, about whom there were rumours circulating among the less well educated townsfolk that he was the reincarnation of Rasputin [GARF, f. 102, op. 265, d. 1069, f. 186]. In March 1917 there was discussion of the rumour that on the eve of the revolution Protopopov had bought ten cars for his own private purposes, and that these had subsequently vanished (*Saratovskiy listok*, 22 March 1917). Rumour immediately christened them 'Protopopov's cars', which united them semantically with the rumour about 'Protopopov's machine guns' — the machine gun posts which were said to have been placed on the roofs of the buildings of Petrograd in February in order to suppress the popular uprising, which everybody was talking about but nobody was ever able to discover, neither in February nor afterwards when the question was specially examined by an extraordinary investigative commission of the Provisional Government. The image of a car with a machine gun has been preserved in the reminiscences of people who witnessed the events of February. In 1929 the former governor of Petrograd, A. P. Balk, recalled an event that took place on 28 February 1917: 'A car drove out of Gorokhovaya Ulitsa past the City Offices and opened fire from a machine gun. The crown around us was seized with panic. Everybody threw themselves on the ground, and uncoordinated firing began' [Balk 1991: 59]. If Balk's evidence is

true, the cars can hardly have belonged to the police or a counter-revolutionary organisation; rather one might suppose that they had been seized either by one of the criminal gangs who had been let out of prison in the course of the February disturbances or by anarchists. Nevertheless, the fact that it was machine guns — said to have been used by the police on Protopopov's orders — that were fired from the black cars also connects these two rumours in a single causal link, connecting the rumours about 'Protopopov's cars' via the rumours about 'Protopopov's machine guns' with the rumours about 'black cars'. In this case the colour symbolism also becomes clear: whereas before the revolution the adjective 'black' had been a synonym of 'diabolic' (in this sense Pinkerton's 'Devil's Car' had been a 'black car'), in 1917 'black' came to be connected with the Black Hundreds, which had been proscribed and were perceived as a concentration of counter-revolutionary forces.

It is curious that mass consciousness included among the counter-revolutionaries not only former policemen and representatives of the nationalist parties, but also the priests, who, according to other rumours, had been firing machine guns on peaceful citizens from the roofs of bell-towers and cathedrals. In April the *Novyy Satirikon* published a cartoon of a priest with a cross in his hand firing a machine gun. The caption read: 'During the revolution there were many machine guns placed on bell-towers, from which the insurgent people were fired upon' (*Novyy Satirikon*, 1917, no. 4, p. 7). Rumours of clerical participation in police operations to suppress the revolution were so widespread that they made the representatives of the provincial clergy send in inquiries to their superiors [RGIA, f. 797, op. 86, d. 22, f. 157]. As a result mass consciousness was quite ready to see priests as the mad drivers of the black cars, especially as they were predisposed to this by the black habits of the monks. (We shall show below how priests figured as motorised criminals in the Soviet period in rumours about the 'black Volga', which continued the tradition of 'black cars'.) Besides the image of the priest with the machine gun, the clergy were connected with the 'black cars' by the rumours about the use of an elusive, high-velocity car (the typical properties of a 'black car') by Rasputin, the personification of the 'forces of darkness'.

Recognising how widespread these phobias were among the masses, certain political parties tried to make use of them. Thus *Pravda* published on 10 March an article entitled 'The People in the Black Car': 'A black car without lights has been driving round the streets of Petersburg over recent nights. The people in the car have been shooting at passers-by and particularly at militiamen. Fifteen persons have been killed or injured. Who are they, these people in the black car? It turns out that they are D. A. Kazitsyn, a member of the City Duma, and his friends. So the Petersburg City Duma is in the hands of Kazitsyns. The members of the Duma — the people in the black

car — have a long reputation as Black Hundreds and shameless thieves. <...> In Petersburg the people in the black car are in charge of the education of our children, and run the hospitals and trams. Even the militia is answerable to the City Duma. Such a situation is impossible, impermissible. The whole running of the city must be torn, in its entirety, without exception, from the hands of backward-thinking people — the people in the black car' (*Pravda*, 10 March 1917). The article, as we see, gives a perfectly rational treatment of the image, but the expression 'the people in the black car' supposes the demonisation of the Bolsheviks' political opponents.

Of course, one should not overestimate the extent to which the masses were infected with this phobia. A number of educated citizens took a sceptical attitude to this sort of information, particularly since urban satire could not help taking the opportunity to mock prejudices, providing a little balm for the souls of its readers. Satirical journals began to print cartoons connecting the appearance of rumours about 'black cars' with the fears of inexperienced students who had joined the militia and were not up to the burden that they had taken upon themselves of maintaining civil order in the first months of the revolution [Aksenov 2001]. The journal *Trepach* created the image of a militiaman who trembled and hid at the sound of anything resembling an approaching car (*Trepach*, 1917, no. 6, p. 14). The journal *XX vek* printed a cartoon showing a shadow resembling the outline of a bird of prey travelling in a car with beams of darkness proceeding from its lights, with the caption 'Fear plays upon the imagination of the populace, or the mysterious elusive car that drives around Petrograd terrifying decrepit old women and little children [the latter expression often referred to militiamen. — V. A.]' (*XX vek*, 1917, no. 14, p. 14).

In May 1917 the same journal printed a fantastic farce entitled 'The Black Car', which mocked the fears of ordinary people. The head of the gang that drove around in the black car shooting at people was the former hussar Akakiy Kosovorotov, and the other members of the gang were cats. This is how the author described the driver of the car: 'It was night. A black cab drew up at the corner of Nevsky Prospekt and Fontanka. Behind the wheel was a driver of small stature, dressed in thick gloves that covered his hands and a strange fur coat that hugged his body far too tightly. The upper part of his face was covered by round, smoked goggles, but by looking more closely one could ascertain that this driver was not a human being, but a large Siberian cat, Kosovorotov's favourite' (*XX vek*, 1917, no. 18, p. 8). The story ended with Kosovorotov killed by a militiaman's bullet and the cat eating his former master's heart and disappearing into the night wrapped in a cloak. It is remarkable that even for the author of the story the image of the criminal black car did not disappear without trace: eleven years later, by which time he was a well-known writer, he returned to it in one of his last novels,

‘She Who Runs on the Waves’, creating the image of a gang which tried to take over the urban legend: ‘Amid the motley deafening traffic that was moving around the square, the smart black car stood out like an unburnt coal among the flames. There were five men in it, none of them disguised, wearing black evening clothes and top hats. <...> “There they are!” shouted Bavs. “There are the carnival’s knaves of hearts!”’ [Grin 1986: 151–2].

It is curious that Aleksandr Grin linked the legend of the gang in the ‘black car’ with another legend of late nineteenth-century crime, the gang of ‘knaves of hearts’. They can probably both be referred to the same oral tradition of urban criminal folklore, with which the young contributor to the newspapers and magazines of the capital was thoroughly familiar. Neither can one help noticing that the chief hero of Grin’s 1917 story, Vaska the Cat, seems to have been the prototype for another famous literary character — the cat Behemoth, all the more that Grin’s influence on Bulgakov’s work has been written about more than once in the scholarly literature [Chudakova 1976; Yablokov 1991]. One notices the similarity of their manlike shape, of the mention of Behemoth’s ‘cavalry whiskers’ to Vaska’s ‘hussar origins’, and also of the endings of the two works: in Grin’s, a horde of cats overrunning the city, and in Bulgakov’s, cats being shot *en masse*.

Continuing the theme of literary allusions, one cannot help remembering another story published in 1917, ‘The Devil’s Chariot’, by a less well-known writer, Valentin Franchich. Its main hero is also a monstrous car and its inventor, Rok (another possible literary prototype for one of Bulgakov’s characters). Franchich describes an attempt at counter-revolutionary mutiny in an imaginary country, the people of which have only just won their liberty. The murderous emperor, who has abdicated, supported by the remnants of the police and the mad inventor Rok, tries to regain power. The ‘monstrous machine’ and ‘instrument of the devil’ built by Rok, crushed and sliced the people and, making mincemeat of their corpses, moved on; ‘I cast a quick glance towards Chambord Street and saw a black silhouette, at least three storeys high and at least seventy feet long, perhaps twice that. With a loud puffing and piercing roar, it made its way through the crowd of living people, leaving behind the bodies of the dead and wounded, accompanied by howls of horror and rage and the groans of the dying’ (*XX vek*, 1917, no. 23, pp. 3–4). Finally, unable to cope with the load, the black machine breaks down. Despite its relatively optimistic ending, Franchich was expressing a foreboding of the Civil War, although at the time when the story was published, June 1917, there were still no evident signs of it.<sup>1</sup> Considering

<sup>1</sup> There were, nevertheless, warnings of it in the press, and they had also been expressed by Menshevik I. G. Tsereteli, the chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, at the First All-Russia Congress of the Councils of Workers and Soldiers, which took place on 3–24 June.

the wide context of the meaning of the word ‘automobile’, this image of a diabolical black chariot participates in the same discourse as the image of the ‘black car’.

Direct indications of the demonic nature of ‘black cars’ may also be encountered in the literature. In the spring of 1917 the poet Valentin Goryanskiy (Ivanov) called the black car a feature of hell city in his poem ‘The Universal’: ‘Among the black cars of hell-city, | Or where the elms still nod.’ These lines refer to the poem mentioned above, ‘The city’s great hell’, with the notable difference that Mayakovsky’s cars were red, and Goryanskiy’s black. Thus the rumours about ‘black cars’ that we have been examining, though themselves in part stemming from literature and oral urban legends, also had an indirect influence on the literary tradition that was taking shape.

In the summer the rumour about the ‘black car’ in its original form disappeared. Being the result of a certain emotional and psychological state among people at the time, it was transformed together with the change in the mood of the populace. Emotions must be evanescent, otherwise they change into neuroses and serious pathology. The emotional élan of the first months of the revolution, which were characterised by a combination of extreme conditions — the thrill of liberty and the fear of having to pay for it — had by autumn been replaced by depression and apathy among ordinary people. The striking mystical images of black cars bearing the mark of aristocratic, bohemian life were replaced by the more realistic and banal pictures of lorries full of soldiers and sailors. The image of the motor lorry became particularly topical after the disturbances of July, provoked by the Bolsheviks. Journalists who described the disturbances drew parallels with the events of February, stressing such common features as fast-moving vehicles and machine-gun fire and the requisitioning of motor transport: ‘On the evening of 3 July fast-moving cars and lorries with machine guns and armed soldiers and workers appeared on the streets of Petrograd; they stopped private cars, threatening to shoot the drivers and passengers, set up their machine guns on them, and added them to the cars that they had armed previously. Soon a disorderly fire from rifles and machine guns began, to which peaceful citizens, going about their business or happening to be in the street, fell victim’ (*Sibirskaya zhizn*, 2 August 1917).

However, the lorry did not provoke such mass acts of delinquency as pursuit and lynching, as had been the case in March and April, although militiamen on duty at night still regarded motor vehicles with suspicion. For example, on 13 July the commissar of militia of the Second Kolomna Sub-district informed the head of the militia with alarm of information that he had received regarding the systematic appearance of a car containing armed sailors on the streets at night (*Petrogradskiy listok*, 31 July 1917). But it would be

hard to call these ‘black cars’, because of the difference in the meaning of colour symbols: if black cars were understood as the forces of right-wing, monarchist or Black Hundred organisations, the new danger came from the ‘red’ camp. At this time ordinary people began to refer to ‘red cars’, often meaning the armoured cars of the ‘red guard’. At the same time the political collisions of the Russian Revolution were leading to a mixing of the political palette. The point is that the events of July were turning the word ‘Bolshevik’ into a common noun. In Tomsk, for example, they wrote about ‘Bolshevik priests’, meaning that they had spoken in favour of emancipating the Church entirely from the power of the Synod (*Sibirskaya zhizn*, 28 July 1917). In this way the image of a reactionary priest of right-wing views was easily transformed in the popular consciousness into that of a radical priest of the left, and a Bolshevik could organise an assassination attempt on Kerensky together with an ex-policeman, which was talked about in Siberia in July (*Sibirskaya zhizn*, 30 July 1917).

Besides, ordinary people were afraid not only of the Bolsheviks but of the threat of anarchy, which also used black banners. Amongst ordinary people there did not seem to be much difference between Bolsheviks and anarchists, since they were both perceived in the context of their calls for an armed uprising. Moreover, the press started to call the anarchists criminals engaged in daylight robbery. Newspaper articles headed ‘Anarchists Too’, ‘Beneath the Flag of Anarchy’, or simply ‘Anarchists’ told of the activities of all kinds of criminal gangs, and the June edition of *Strekoza* already contained a cartoon of an anarchist in a black cloak and black hat with a dagger and revolver with the caption ‘Today’s Anarchist Programme: Terrify and Dispossess’ (*Strekoza*, 1917, no. 24, p. 1). In July *Strekoza* published a cartoon entitled ‘Waiting for the Renaissance’, in which Nicholas II, watering the flowers in his garden, ruminated ‘The “anarchists” are working so well together that I can get on with my flowers in peace, and won’t even notice that I’m on the throne again! If I’d known this before, I’d never have persecuted the “anarchists”, I’d have let them have all the rights of the Black Hundreds’ (*Strekoza*, 1917, no. 27, p. 4).

Thus the extreme right and extreme left wings came to be united in the collective consciousness of ordinary people under the banner of violence, the motor vehicle remaining a habitual visualisation of this, only, since the autumn, in a coarser form, that of a lorry rather than a car. Bunin was later to connect all the terrors of the revolution with this image: ‘The lorry — what a dreadful symbol it remains for us, how much of this lorry there is in our most horrid and difficult memories! From its very first day the revolution was linked with this roaring and stinking beast. <...> All the coarseness of modern culture and its “social affect” are embodied in the lorry’ [Bunin 1991: 54].

How widespread these associations were is also indicated by the fact that in the autumn of 1917 Maxim Gorky also wrote about the motor vehicle as a symbol of revolutionary violence that provoked negative emotions [Gorky 1990: 91], as did Pitirim Sorokin [Sorokin 1992: 79] and many others among their contemporaries. In October 1917, when the people of Petrograd were expecting yet another *démarche* on the part of the Bolsheviks, ordinary people were most afraid of a complete descent into anarchy and another crime wave. Even such an ‘incontrovertible’ authority for the Bolsheviks as Maxim Gorky wrote that October (not forgetting to mention the motor vehicle as a symbol): ‘The rumours that there is going to be “a Bolshevik action” on 20 October are becoming ever more persistent. <...> This means that again there are going to be lorries jam-packed with people with rifles and revolvers in their hands, trembling with fear. <...> They will flare up and start making a mess, poisoning with malice, hatred and vengeance all the dark instincts of the mob, which is already irritated by the collapse of life, and the lies and dirt of politics. People are going to be killing each other because they cannot destroy their own bestial stupidity. Out onto the streets will crawl a disorganised mob with little idea of what it wants, and under cover of it the adventurists, thieves and professional killers “will begin to create the history of the Russian Revolution”’ [Gorky 1990: 148].

The Bolshevik seizure of power and the prospects that it opened for the political development of Russia were seen by part of the urban middle class, particularly the elderly, through an eschatological prism. In December 1917 N. P. Okunev, a resident of Moscow who had been employed for most of his life by the *Samolet Steam-Ship Company*, summed up the last three decades of Russia’s development in a disconsolate manner, numbering the motor car among the other diabolical inventions of mankind: ‘Over the last thirty years there have been various railway works, telephones, electric light, trams, gramophones, and cars, and every year life has become harder and harder. <...> I looked askance at the onslaught of electricity even before now, and now I am firmly convinced that it is not from God, but the devil. All these nerves, all these perversions, all this crookery, all this unbelief, all this hard-heartedness, all this immorality and degeneracy is the result of these damned bells, whistles, disasters, flashing lights, stench, hooters and marvels!’ [Okunev 1997: 125]. If for Maklakov and Karaulov in 1915–6 the approaching catastrophe was the result of the actions of the ‘mad driver’ of the car, for Okunev in December 1917 the car itself, as a work of the devil, had acquired an evil will that was bringing on the destruction of the state.

In the first half of 1918 the car continued to figure in the press and in correspondence among ordinary people as a symbol with a negative connotation. There were mass demonstrations in Petrograd and Moscow on 5 January in support of the Constituent Assembly; these

were broken up by units of the red guard. As in the days of the February Revolution, there appeared spectres of death in the form of cars with machine guns mounted on their roofs. In Moscow on 9 January a car with a machine gun was seen on Tverskaya, and machine-gun fire ‘was heard’ on Lubyanka, Strastnaya, and Krasnaya Ploshchad (*Utro Rossii*, 11 January 1918). The writer Mikhail Prishvin described the situation in his diary in words from the sixth chapter of Revelation (‘The stars will turn black and fall from the sky’<sup>1</sup>), also demonstrating eschatological expectations which even drove him to the thought of suicide: ‘Lord, hast thou forsaken me indeed, and if so, is it worth living any longer and will it not be forgivable to kill myself and so perish in the general ruin?’ [Prishvin 1994: 45]. Suicidal moods as a sign of profound depression and emotional heaviness altogether corresponded with the eschatological context in which the rumours about ‘black cars’ existed.

Criminal violence, as well as political violence, was actively discussed in the towns, though some of the population preferred not to make any distinction between them. It is not surprising that in the capitals bandits were ‘supposed’ to travel by car. True, in the conditions prevailing at the beginning of the Civil War and the national self-determination of the peoples of the former Russian Empire, they acquired a further peculiarity that distinguished them from the previous period: the collective consciousness often imagined them as ethnic minorities. Thus on the evening of 16 January 1918 in the Taganka district of Moscow a gang travelling in two cars and speaking Polish, some of whom were dressed in civilian clothes and others in military uniforms, committed several daring robberies, breaking into Muscovites’ houses, tying up the owners and making off with their valuables, which they immediately loaded into the cars (*Utro Rossii*, 16 January 1918). Shortly afterwards the newspapers published a notice forbidding private individuals to travel in cars [Okunev 1997: 155].

The general condition of nerves and overwrought emotions led to further flare-ups of violence for which the car had been the stimulus. An incident recalling the scene of the hunt for ‘black cars’ in Petrograd on 12 April 1917 was recorded in Moscow on 21 April 1918. A lorry carrying armed men was crossing Teatralnaya Ploshchad; either one of them fired into the air, or else there was again a backfire, but the crowd decided that the soldiers were firing on the people, and opened fire on the lorry. The soldiers returned fire. As a result some people were killed, and there were many casualties among the passers-by, including children (*Zarya Rossii*, 23 April 1918). It is noteworthy that by this time the image of the ‘black car’ had been joined in the area of the urban terrors of Moscow by the ‘nocturnal

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<sup>1</sup> Not a direct quotation from the Bible, but a possible reference to Revelation 6:13 [Trans.].

steamer', which was said to be shooting at militiamen and other representatives of authority as it cruised by night up and down the Moskva River (*Zarya Rossii*, 23 April 1918). It was reported that on each occasion the steamer had disappeared in the direction of the Simonov Monastery, which may be seen as an echo of the rumours of priests with machine guns in February 1917.

That the image of the 'black car' is an archetype is confirmed by the fact that it remained the hero of criminal urban legends in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, and also in countries that used to be part of the Russian Empire. As a rule it appeared in rumours of crime which told of a gang made up of representatives of social or ethnic groups which ordinary people felt to be hostile. O. V. Velikanova points out that in February 1931 rumours of black cars in which unknown people kidnapped people and then dismembered them forced the OGPU to conduct an investigation in the course of which different versions of the origin of the 'gang' were identified. According to some rumours, it was a secret Jewish organisation committing ritual murders; according to others, on the contrary, it was an anti-Semitic organisation murdering Jews; a third version had it as a gang of counter-revolutionaries hunting down communists; a fourth saw the black cars as harbingers of the Antichrist; a fifth blamed the OGPU for unleashing terror on the *ci-devants* [Velikanova s. d.: 4]. The last version fed into the fear of the 'black crows' (model GAZ-M-1 cars) and 'black Marias' (model GAZ-MM lorries) used by the NKVD, although, as Lewis Siegelbaum has pointed out, they were painted various colours, frequently steel grey, and also sea-green [Siegelbaum 2011: 338]. However, the collective consciousness, remembering the demonic nature of the 'black cars', painted them all black. In the second half of the twentieth century the image of the 'black car' was refined to a specific model, the Volga (in the late 1950s a GAZ-21 and in the 1960s — 1980s a GAZ-24), which was, in socialist countries, a marker that its owners were well-off and belonged to the *nomenklatura*. A. Panchenko, examining urban legends about organ transplantation ('baby parts stories') has noted that a 'big black car' appears in them, usually a Volga, and classifies the rumours as 'late Soviet legends of the 1970s and 1980s' [Panchenko 2014: 246].

However, even without considering the obvious connection between this rumour and the 'black cars' of 1917, it should be noted that in Azerbaijan as early as 1958–66 there were rumours of a black Volga driven by a gang of criminals who robbed shops and banks and murdered militiamen in Baku. It was reported that their chief was a bandit nicknamed 'Lion's Paw', who finally turned out to be a woman dressed in man's clothing who was arrested in Moscow.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Baku Pages. Criminal investigation community. <<http://www.baku.ru/blg-list.php?id=88687>>.

In the researches on urban legends by Czubala, Bennett and Orliński it is noted that subjects like this were widespread in the urban criminal folklore of the Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and even Mongolia [Czubala 1991; Orliński 2007; Bennett 2009]. Zuzanna Grębecka sees in this legend echoes both of the stories about the kidnapping and ritual murder of Christian children by Jews and of the rumours about 'black cars' that circulated at the beginning of the twentieth century [Grębecka 2013: 3]. It is telling that even in 1917 one version of the legend of the 'black cars' suggested that they were hunting for 'millionaire children' from among the pupils of grammar schools. Nevertheless, the legends of the black Volga could cast Polish priests and nuns, KGB men, or simply highly-placed Soviet bureaucrats as the criminals, which gave a political subtext to the rumours.

Even though the Volga has lost its former status (and even despite its romanticisation in modern art, for example in Timur Bekmambetov's film *Black Lightning* and the song with the same title by the band Spleen), the subject still crops up from time to time in twenty-first century crime rumours. In our time the image of the 'black Volga' emerged on 4 September 2014 in one of the groups of the VKontakte social network, where there was a report of a gang operating in one district of the province of Nizhny Novgorod: 'In the village of Kopsosovo, Sormovo district, three maniacs of Caucasian nationality are operating in a black Volga. In less than a week they have attacked three girls, raped and brutally killed them. They make their attacks in the evening and at night.'<sup>1</sup> Apart from the bandits' ethnicity, the indication of which relates to the topic of current relations between ethnic identities, from the point of view of the objects and forms of criminal activity this rumour repeats the rumours from Vyborg about 'Black Bill's' gang in January 1917. This resemblance can hardly be explained by a conscious desire on the part of the instigator of the rumour to draw a parallel between the situation in 2014 and that in January 1917, if only because the subject of the 'black cars' is not well known even to professional historians. The coincidence is probably to be explained by the unchanged emotional nature of the rumour: the fear of violence embodied in the archetypal image of the car, which had become a symbol of the twentieth century, the age of world wars and revolutions.

In this way we see that the rumour as a stimulus to social activity is a concomitant of a socio-psychological atmosphere in which the emotional perception of events predominates over the rational. This is explained both by factors of a general character (for example, the information crisis caused by the censorship, which raises the significance of oral information) and by particular ones —

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<sup>1</sup> Portal ProGorod. Nizhny Novgorod. <<http://progorodnn.ru/news/view/90395>>.

the emotional vacillation of the mob as a specific organism, the ‘evolving individuality’ taking shape within a society in the process of being revolutionised. It has been noted that several discourses intertwined in the rumours about ‘black cars’ in 1917: that of the political opposition, which imagined Russia as the passenger of the ‘mad driver’, the criminal one, connected with the stories about ‘Black Bill’s’ gang, the revolutionary one, steeped in rumours about Protopopov’s machine guns and his ten vanished cars, and the eschatological one, based on ideas of the car as the invention of the devil. The dynamics of the image of the ‘black car’ in 1917, from the luxury cabriolet to the lorry, reflected the development of the fears of ordinary people, first of right-wing counter-revolution, later on of left-wing anarchism, and then of left-wing counter-revolution. It is no accident that the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 led to the reincarnation of the rumours of machine guns and automobiles of February 1917. The new government’s use of armed force against peaceful demonstrators was seen as a counter-revolutionary putsch, antagonistic to the events of a year ago. The intertextual basis of the rumour about ‘black cars’ allows us to see it as an independent, archetypal mythologem in the semiosphere of the Russian Revolution, reflected both in the area of oral urban legends and in high literary texts, which has determined its survival to the present day.

At the same time the relevance of the study of the rumour is determined not only by its inner structure and its text, but also by its function in the social milieu, by investigation of those actions which it results in. In respect of 1917, the significance of the rumour in forming the psychology of the mob has been established, provoking a wave of violence in the form of such revolutionary phenomena as kangaroo courts. The study of crowd behaviour as a reaction to rumour as stimulus makes us speak of the emotional nature of the rumour, which became a particular kind of framework for the ‘triad of hostility’ (fear, anger, hatred) that determined the emotional climate of the period of the revolution and Civil War.

### Abbreviations

GARF — Gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Rossiyskoy Federatsii [State Archive of the Russian Federation]

RGIA — Rossiyskiy gosudarstvennyy istoricheskiy arkhiv [Russian State Historical Archive]

### Archival materials

GARF, f. 102, op. 265, d. 1069. Perlyustratsiya chastnykh pisem [Per-illustration of Private Correspondence].

RGIA, f. 797, op. 86, d. 22. Perepiska po zhalobam prikhozhan raznykh tserkvey i drugikh lits na deyatelnost mestnykh syvashchennikov,

ne sootvetstvuyushchuyu novomu gosudarstvennomu stroyu. 3 otd., 5 stol. 1917 [Correspondence Relating to Complaints by the Parishioners of Various Churches on the Activities of Local Priests that are not in Accordance with the New Forms of State Governance. Third Section, Office 5. 1917].

RGIA, f. 1405, op. 521, d. 476. Dela, rassmotrennye okruzhnymi sudami po 103 st. Ugolovnogo ulozheniya 1903 g. 1914–1916 [Cases under Article 103 of the Criminal Code, 1903 Reviewed by District Courts in 1914–6].

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