Ego-writing in French: the diary of Anastasiia Iakushkina

The Decembrist Revolt

Anastasiia Vasilevna Iakushkina (1806-46), née Sheremeta, was the daughter of Vasilii Petrovich Sheremetev (1765-1808) and Nadezhda Nikolaevna Sheremeteva (1775-1850), née Tiutcheva. She married Ivan Dmitrievich Iakushkin (1793-57), a friend of her mother, at the end of 1822. They had two sons, Viacheslav (1823-61) and Evgenii (1826-1905), who was born just after Iakushkin had been arrested for his role in the Decembrist Revolt.

The Decembrists, as they came to be known, were idealistic army and naval officers who over a long period after the end of the Napoleonic Wars had become disillusioned with the suffocating institution of autocracy. This disillusionment was fed by experience of life in western countries in which they had fought or been stationed during the wars and by familiarity with contemporary western literature, ideas and political movements. In many cases their idealism was also fuelled by discussion of humanitarian ideas in secret societies, such as the so-called Union of Salvation (Союз спасения) and the Union of Welfare (Союз благоденствия) and in Masonic lodges to which they belonged, both in Russia and abroad.

On 14 December 1825, hoping to take advantage of the constitutional crisis that followed the sudden death of the Russian Emperor Alexander I on 19 November that year, they refused to swear an oath of allegiance to Alexander’s younger brother, Nicholas (subsequently Nicholas I). The officers and the troops they commanded, numbering some 3,000 men, assembled in Senate Square in St Petersburg, where Etienne Falconet’s famous statue to Peter the Great stands. As night fell, the rebellion was put down by a much larger number of troops loyal to Nicholas, who had been forewarned of the conspiracy. Over 1,200 people were killed, according to official figures, including many civilians, and more than 700 were soon arrested. Some three weeks later a further revolt took place, among the Chernigov Regiment based at Tulchin in the Ukraine, but on 3 January about 800 southern mutineers were defeated by a loyalist cavalry force. As soon as the mutiny in St Petersburg had been suppressed Nicholas launched an exhaustive investigation, in which he himself played an energetic part and which ended in the summer of 1826. In all, 289 men were sentenced to some form of punishment. Five of those convicted were hanged, including Pavel Pestel (1793-1826), the leader of the southern conspiracy, and Kondratii Ryleev (1795-1826), one of the leaders of the northern conspiracy and a notable civic poet. A further 116 men were dispatched to Eastern Siberia for various terms of forced labour and exile, in 31
cases life-long. Iakushkin, who was known to have mooted the possibility of tsaricide in 1817, was among those who were treated particularly harshly. He was sentenced to 20 years of penal servitude (subsequently commuted to 15 years), to be followed by internal exile. The first few years he spent in Chita. In 1830 he was transferred to Petrovskii Zavod, south-east of Lake Baikal, and in 1835, on the tenth anniversary of the revolt, was allowed to settle in exile in Ialutorovsk, in the Siberian province of Tobolsk.

The Decembrists had many sympathisers in the Russian armed forces and high society. They were also close to or in some cases themselves belonged to the literary elite that was beginning to flourish in Russia. We should beware, though, of exaggerating the extent of support for the conspiracy in those circles. In any case, the Decembrists themselves were sharply divided both by personal animosities and political differences. These differences concerned such matters as the respective merits of constitutional monarchy and republicanism and of federalism on the American model, as commended by Nikita Muraviov (1795-1843), and centralism as advocated in a Jacobin spirit by Pestel. There was also debate among the Decembrists on the need for regicide. Nonetheless, in spite of the limited nature of their support and their divisions amongst themselves, the Decembrists did pose a serious threat to the Russian political order. Their revolt betrayed the alienation of a section of the noble elite nurtured on classical and Enlightenment ideas. It differed fundamentally from the palace coups by which both Catherine II (the Great) and Alexander I had come to power, since it represented an attempt to introduce a new form of government in Russia. Admittedly, it had no immediate practical effect on the nature of the Russian polity other than to make autocratic rule, as Nicholas would practise it, yet more repressive. Nevertheless, it did serve as the basis for a heroic tradition in which future opponents of tsarist autocracy, including revolutionaries, could situate themselves.³

Anastasiia Iakushkina’s attempt to follow her husband to Siberia

Eleven of the convicted Decembrists were voluntarily accompanied to their place of exile by their wives. Iakushkina too intended to join her husband. After the revolt, she moved with her mother and her sons to St Petersburg and managed to arrange a meeting with Ivan. Iakushkin agreed with Anastasiia that she would follow him to Siberia with the children, leaving her mother behind. He was transferred to Rochensalm Fortress (Ruotsinsalmi in Finland), then, in 1827, from there to Siberia via Iaroslavl. Nadezhda Sheremeteva was able to find out when groups of prisoners were to be transferred from Rochensalm to Siberia, but it was not clear which individual prisoners would be in each group. Consequently, Iakushkina travelled twice in vain to Yaroslavl, spending weeks waiting for prisoner transports which would turn out not to include her husband. Her third visit, however, resulted in a meeting with Iakushkin. At this meeting, he learned that the Emperor, whilst allowing wives and fiancées to travel to Siberia, had ordered that the Decembrists’ children remain in Russia. Iakushkin asked his wife to stay with the children, as he considered her presence essential for their upbringing.⁴ Iakushkina, thus left behind in Moscow, lived with her children and her mother in a house on the corner of Vozdvizhenka Street and
Sheremetev Lane (today Romanov Lane), seeing only close friends and going out only to walk with the children.\(^5\) It was at the very beginning of this period that she wrote the diary of which we publish excerpts here.

In 1831, Iakushkin finally agreed to let his wife travel after him. His motives are unclear, but he may have been satisfied that he had found a good arrangement for the care of his sons with Ivan Fonvizin (1790-1853), brother of Iakushkin’s fellow Decembrist Mikhail Fonvizin (1787-1854). (The Fonvizin brothers were nephews of the eighteenth-century dramatist Denis Fonvizin (1744 or 1745-92).) Ivan Fonvizin would have raised Iakushkin’s sons without indoctrinating them against their father and his political tendencies. Other potential arrangements could not guarantee the same benevolent stance: a substantial part of the aristocracy, including the Sheremetev family, disapproved of the Decembrists’ actions.\(^6\) Iakushkina started making the necessary arrangements but, after months of anxious waiting, was ultimately refused permission to go to Siberia. Alexander von Benckendorff (1783-1844), head of the Third Section,\(^7\) made enquiries through Nikolai Muraviov (1768-1840), the father of Iakushkina’s brother-in-law, to find out whether Iakushkina was acting of her own free will or being forced to travel to Siberia. Muraviov informed Benckendorff that Iakushkina had merely told him that she had promised her mother she would go. Furthermore, Muraviov reported that Iakushkina’s siblings Praskovia and Aleksei were extremely concerned about her plans and that Nadezhda Sheremeteva had forced Aleksei to borrow 20,000 roubles for his sister’s journey.\(^8\) Benckendorff relayed this message to Tsar Nicholas I, adding his impression that Iakushkina had been forced by her mother to marry Ivan and did not love him.\(^9\) Iakushkina, although concerned by the delay, had been oblivious of the campaign against her journey (her contemporary letters to Iakushkin are full of anticipation of their reunion\(^1\)). Benckendorff told her that despite the fact that Nicholas, immediately after the sentencing, had granted permission to Decembrists’ wives to live in Siberia, he had closed this route to Iakushkina – her duty was now solely to her children, and for their benefit she was to sacrifice the reunion with her husband.\(^11\) Anastasiia died in 1846, without seeing Ivan again. Iakushkin, upon hearing of her death, opened the first girls’ school in Siberia in her memory. Their son Evgenii, however, travelled to Ialutorovsk in the 1850s, met his exiled father and other Decembrists, and would later facilitate the publication of their works, letters and memoirs.

**The functions of Iakushkina’s diary**

Diary-writing was a widespread practice among women in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian nobility and served several different purposes. The practice was borrowed from French culture, and women in Russia at this time wrote diaries influenced by contemporary French literary styles or genres, such as the epistolary novel. In France, autobiographical diaries had started to appear from the second half of the eighteenth century; Russian diaries emerged in the middle of the century and their number grew rapidly towards the century’s end. Ego-writing was considered a means of acceptable self-realisation for women, confined as it was to the private, domestic sphere.\(^12\) However,
whereas in France the majority of diary writers belonged to the tiers état, that is to say the commons or middle class, in Russia diaries were kept by noblemen and noblewomen.¹³

Diaries can be regarded as historical testimony, a particular literary form or an autobiographical document.¹⁴ This introduction to extracts from lakushkina’s text examines these three aspects of her diary – what it tells us of history, what form it takes and why, and what light it sheds on lakushkina’s life – with the aim of exploring the reasons behind lakushkina’s use of French and Russian. First, we shall consider the private versus public nature of diaries and ego-writing, especially in lakushkina’s case. Then, we shall examine the content of the excerpts we publish and the diary as a whole, before focusing finally on lakushkina’s language use and possible explanations for it.

Diaries and other forms of ego-writing exist on a continuum between public and private genres. They always have a reader, whether an actual or merely potential figure or the author alone. Russian noblewomen’s diaries of the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century usually have a specific addressee, such as a sister, friend, lover or husband, and were often intended to be read aloud to a circle of family and friends. Indeed young women were exhorted by their families to keep diaries of their travels and share them with their circle.¹⁵ lakushkina's diary takes the form of letters to her husband. Epistolary diary-keeping was a particularly feminine activity among the nobility, as men’s diaries resisted the influence of the epistolary genre and the recording of emotion, instead modelling themselves on chronicles.¹⁶ Epistolary diaries like lakushkina’s were addressed to a specific recipient, to be sent either in instalments or as a complete work once finished.¹⁷ They can therefore also be regarded as collected letters, sent en masse for practical reasons.¹⁸ lakushkina kept the diary from 19 October to 8 December 1827 in the form of letters to her husband which were sent to Ivan with a trustworthy person, most probably Natalia Fonvizina when she joined her husband Mikhail.¹⁹ lakushkina’s diary, however, is not merely a collection of letters. Notwithstanding its epistolary nature, this diary can also be considered a private document. Firstly, lakushkin was not in a position to reply to his wife in the same manner, so this private correspondence was unidirectional. Then again, the diary, unlike letters sent through the post, was uncensored. Apart from the diary, lakushkina also writes letters to her husband, often co-written with her mother, who knew lakushkin very well. These letters would have been read by a number of people. The diary, on the other hand, lakushkina keeps strictly secret from her mother. She writes either late at night or in the early hours when the infant Evgenii has woken her, and in the daytime she either hides the diary when her mother returns ('Mamenka is coming back, I am putting down the quill.') or lies, saying she is writing to someone else.²¹ Writing the diary is for lakushina an intensely private activity ('I write this diary when nobody is around, I do not want anyone to see it'), from which she derives pleasure ('when I write to you, my good mood returns').²²

The almost daily entries in lakushkina’s diary describe details of her life with the children, her mother and the nanny and give an account of her emotional state, which ranges from despair, abandonment and grief to cautious hope and attempts at stoicism. Unlike her other letters, then, this private document is a vehicle in which to confess her innermost feelings.
Iakushkina intends this diary to describe ‘all the tiniest recesses of my sad heart’ (« les plus petits replis de mon triste coeur ») and she writes at length about her deep love for her husband and the torment of separation from him. Many Russian noblewomen’s journals of the time, as well as their European models, are focused on the man the woman loves.24 There are many examples of diaries of separation like Iakushkina’s which speak of the cruelty of being separated and the joy of meeting again; if a husband is the centre of the diary, the diary contains assurances of love but also sometimes anger or accusations of not caring.25 As we see in the following discussion of Iakushkina’s ways of writing to her husband, those elements are present in her diary too. The differing roles inscribed in the addressee in Iakushkina’s journal show how Iakushkina uses the diary to define private and public roles for herself.26 Her husband is conceptualised variously as the ideal friend, a sort of alter ego of the author herself, or a strict father figure who knows how Iakushkina should behave as a woman, wife and mother. Throughout the diary Iakushkina anticipates the anger of her husband about her emotional outpourings, excusing and justifying herself – her diary frequently features apologies for her expression of sadness and love, begging Iakushkin’s forgiveness ‘a million times’.27 In the first excerpt, for example, she anticipates his criticism of her kissing an item of clothing of his: ‘maybe you think this is sentimentality, oh, it is far from any romantic sentiment’. In other sections of the diary, she accuses him of not having thought of her wishes and feelings when he ordered her to stay with the children, even of despotic behaviour (‘it is a sign of a certain despotism, isn’t it’). Iakushkina wishes she could live with her husband far away from the social world (‘I would like to be in a hut, away from everyone, with you and the children’), perhaps in a desire to relive the early days of their marriage when they resided quietly in the family estates of Pokrovskoe and then Zhukovo, ‘in solitude and obscurely’, as Iakushkin put it in a letter to Piotr Chaadaev (1794–1856).29 Iakushkina frequently begs her husband to let her join him in Siberia, explaining that ‘you are my god, you are my salvation, you are everything for me’.30

Apart from accounts of feelings of loneliness and yearning for her husband, Iakushkina provides reports of their sons’ wellbeing and behaviour and of her daily activities with them: the reader is presented with images of Iakushkina drawing pictures for her children’s amusement, tending to the infant Evgenii, dealing with the nanny and going for constitutional walks with Viacheslav. Iakushkina constructs herself as fulfilling her duty and obeying the wishes of her husband: ‘in the evening I have done drawings for Viacheslav as I promised you I would’ (« le soir comme je te l’avais promis je dessinais a Wecheslas »), she writes, proving that she is fulfilling the tasks he has set her. She stresses that this is the only reason she is drawing for them: she imagines he might think about her at this time, believing that ‘she is drawing for my children now’ (« je la vois aprésent dessinant pour mes enfans »). The diary, apart from expressing her love and grief about separation, is thus also a space where Iakushkina can portray herself in an ideal way and give proof of appropriate feminine behaviour, as other Russian noblewomen’s diaries were as well.31

Diaries, as Elena Grechanaia and Catherine Viollet remind us, should be regarded not just as historical documents but as texts in themselves, human documents, with their own laws.
and characteristics. One of those characteristics, of course, is language use. As highly personal documents in which feelings are expressed with candour and intensity, diaries are sensitive barometers of language use and linguistic change. In the following section of this introduction we shall examine Iakushkina’s use of language in the excerpts of the diary that we publish.

Language use in Iakushkina’s diary

French was used as the language of writing in genres intimes, such as letters, journals and memoirs. As regards diaries, a clear gender divide in language use can be detected: Russian women’s diaries of the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century are usually written in French, whereas men’s diaries are predominantly written in Russian. However, the Russian language is nearly always present in women’s diaries as well (increasingly so in the nineteenth century) and the impression of women as unable to express themselves in Russian is not accurate, as Grechanaia has demonstrated. This means that the prevalence of the French language in particular genres and social settings cannot be explained primarily by linguistic competence. Indeed the excerpts from Iakushkina’s diary show clearly that she was well able to express herself in Russian as well as French, although her Russian has been described as less elegant than her French.

The base language of Iakushkina’s diary is French, the default language of writing for noble women of her time. Despite gaps in research on women’s education in the late eighteenth century, we may assume that a woman of Iakushkina’s background and social standing would have been educated at home, with foreign teachers and governesses in attendance. Employing a French governess in particular was commonplace, an essential part of maintaining the bon ton of the era. It is therefore very probable that Iakushkina was familiar with the French language from early childhood. Certainly the French in her diary is fluent. However, it contains hardly any punctuation. (Run-on sentences without punctuation occur frequently in women’s diaries of this time.) Like many of her contemporary diarists again, Iakushkina is poor at distinguishing homophonous forms and is consequently prone to grammatical error in word endings (« Dieu m’avait inspirait [inspiré] »; « j’était [étais] »; « que je les consentraient [concentrais] »). Some of her mistakes, of course, may be accounted for by the fact that she has to write in haste, using those brief moments when her mother is away or Evgenii does not require her attention.

Iakushkina’s journal also contains frequent instances of code-switching, which is a common phenomenon in private journals of the time and which often concerns toponyms, personal names and Russian realia. In the first excerpt that we reproduce, for example, Iakushkina uses the Russian word шлафорок (shlaforok). This word (also spelled шлафорок) is a loanword from German and denotes a house-coat or dressing-gown. As a word for a specific everyday garment, it remains in Russian within a predominantly French text. Code-switching into Russian also occurs as Iakushkina describes life with her children. In the second of the excerpts from her diary published here, the first sentence is a saying: « Les
enfants qui ont beaucoup d’esprit ne sont pas долговечны» (‘Children who are too clever do not live long’; in Russian: Затейливые ребята недолговечны). Although she starts the sentence in French, lakushkina no doubt has in her mind the Russian saying, which may have been used in conversation with the children and is thus familiar to her. Furthermore, she switches codes when she quotes her children or when she quotes herself in interaction with the children or their nanny. Russian was the language spoken with servants, so quoting Russian conversations with the nanny is unsurprising. lakushkina writes the word охать (‘to groan’ or ‘to moan’) in Russian, perhaps because the word is common currency in the household: the nanny, we may assume, exhibits such behaviour on a regular basis, as the infants too might have done. Narrating an argument with the nanny, lakushkina portrays herself both as strong and capable of managing this domestic serf: « moi avec mon что вам за дело la мет тут-а-та-тас hors des gonds » (‘with my “what business is it of yours” I made her really fly off the handle’). Again, « je lui dis quelquefois des grossiérés », she reports (‘I say rude things to her sometimes’), and « alors je lui dis подите вон » (‘so I tell her to “go away”’). All the while, lakushkina behaves in an impeccably ladylike way, she would have Ivan believe: « mais je lui dis cela d’un air de politesse admirable » (‘but I say this to her in an admirably polite way’).

From lakushkina’s code-switching, we may infer that the language she used for speaking every day to her children and her mother, as well as to her domestic serfs, was in fact not French but Russian. Two factors would have contributed to this linguistic choice. First, lakushkina’s sons had not begun to be educated, so no foreign tutors or lessons would have yet had an effect on their language use. Secondly, lakushkina’s mother Nadezhda Sheremeteva evidently preferred to use Russian both in writing and as her domestic language. As we see in a letter by her which we shall publish elsewhere in this corpus, she writes to lakushkin in Russian. The lakushkins’ son Evgenii also recalled that although his grandmother corresponded with eminent authors such as the poet Vasilii Zhukovsky (1783-1852) and the prose writer and dramatist Nikolai Gogol (1809-52), she had not received a good education and ‘even spoke French badly’. Nadezhda’s poor command of French, which was unusual for a woman of her status (as Evgenii’s words about his grandmother imply), helped to ensure that the default language at home was Russian, although lakushkina herself would resort to French for conversation with Russian visitors such as Piotr and Mikhail Chaadaev (1792-1866), to whom she refers as Pierre and Michel respectively.

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Why, then, does lakushkina write this diary in French, despite the fact that she probably spoke Russian every day and may even have conceptualised particular sentences in Russian, causing her to code-switch intrasententially as the above example of a Russian saying shows? A diary is ‘both a text, or a document, and a practice, or an activity’, Irina Paperno has observed, and for lakushkina the activity of writing a diary has several purposes: apart from proving her maternal capability and her obedience to her husband, she is giving
expression to and affirming her love for her husband. French, besides being a language of social and domestic communication for the Russian gentry, was the language of writing about love and expressing romantic sentiment and devotion. Moreover, French writings provided models for Russian women wishing to express their love. In Iakushkina’s case, the use of French serves to create privacy and intimacy whilst simultaneously allowing her to keep within appropriate bounds of feminine expression. As Iakushkina does not speak French in her daily life with those closest to her, this language is to a great extent reserved for the domain of love. She associates it with her expression of love for Iakushkin, as is revealed elsewhere in her diary when she recounts how she has told Viacheslav about this love in French, although she then has to translate her remarks into Russian to make him comprehend fully: ‘I don’t think anybody will understand me, but sometimes as I kiss Viacheslav I tell him “how I love papa [comme j’aime papa]”, and to make it more expressive I translate it for him: «как я папу люблю». At the same time, francophone diarists often switch into Russian when expressing heightened emotion. Iakushkina sometimes departs from French, the sanctioned language of love, to include affectionate terms such as душка (darling) and милушка (dearest) that she may have used in face-to-face conversations with her husband.

Thus French is not only a publicly appropriate language for the expression of feelings of love, but also a private language of love, the romantic effect of which is enhanced for Iakushkina by the fact that Russian is her principal domestic language. As she clearly feels anxious about overburdening her husband with declarations of love – and indeed Ivan Iakushkin may not have returned her love in equal measure – the use of French in her private diary enables her to give vent to both her love and grief in an appropriate manner.

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1 The term ‘Decembrist’ (декабрист in Russian) did not come to be widely used until the 1860s.
2 This is the ‘bronze horseman’ of Pushkin’s famous narrative poem of that title («Медный всадник»).


5. Ibid., p. 155.

6. Ibid., p. 156.

7. I.e. the Third Department of His Imperial Majesty’s Own Chancery, the secret police founded by Nicholas in 1826 in the wake of the Decembrist Revolt.


11. Ibid., p. 159.

12. E. Murphy, ‘Je suis plusieurs: plural subjectivities in life-writing by three francophone Russian women, 1800-1825’ (MA (Research) thesis, University of Nottingham, 2010), pp. 18 f.


16. Ibid., p. 22.


19. I. Savkina, ‘“Пишу себя...”: Автодокументальные женские тексты в русской литературе первой половины XIX века’, p. 95.


21. Ibid., p. 142.

22. Ibid., p. 140.

23. Ibid., p. 145.


25. Ibid.


27. Ibid., p. 99; see also ‘Дневник Анастасии Васильевны Якушкиной’, p. 145.


37 E. Murphy, ‘Je suis plusieurs’, p. 99.

38 V’olle and Grechanaia, «Дневник в России в конце XVIII-первой половине XIX в. как автобиографическое пространство», p. 25.


41 See the entry in Vladimir Dal’s dictionary of Russian sayings, available online at http://www.gumer.info/bibliotek_Buks/Culture/dal/06.php (accessed on 22.01.2013).


43 «Дневник Анастасии Васильевны Якушкиной», p. 139.

44 Paperno, ‘What can be done with diaries?’, p. 564.

45 «Дневник Анастасии Васильевны Якушкиной», pp. 147 f.; italicised text in Russian in the original.

46 Grechanaia, «Мémoires et journaux intimes féminins rédigés en français dans le premier quart du XIXe siècle», p. 163.

47 «Дневник Анастасии Васильевны Якушкиной», p. 143.