

Title: The Literary Resurrection of "Narodnaia Volia" Martyrs in Late Soviet Russia
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One of the principal tasks of official culture throughout the post-Stalin decades was to revive and inspire the romantic revolutionary ethos of the pre–World War II years. It was to be fulfilled in the realm of artistic literature, of course, through works of socialist realism, which provided readers with exemplary fighters for the construction or defense of Communism. The demand for heroic models also encouraged a growth of historical-biographical fiction that found vivid expression in the “Plamennye revoliutsionery” [Flaming Revolutionaries] series of books published in the Soviet Union between 1968 and 1990. Produced by the well-funded publishing house of “Political Literature,” the 160 titles in the “Plamennye revoliutsionery” series featured dramatized portraits not only of Soviet Communists, but also of international revolutionaries and even pre-1917 activists.

While the “Plamennye revoliutsionery” books aimed mainly to satisfy the utilitarian demand for colorful biographies of well-known political heroes, the series also offered writers an opportunity to commemorate less familiar individuals, some of whose lives stood potentially in stark contradiction to the model Communist. In particular, the leaders of the “Narodnaia volia” party (1879–1887), the “executioners” of Tsar Aleksandr II in 1881, provided models of passionate, even violent opposition to tyranny. Following official tolerance and qualified praise throughout the 1920s, by 1935 biographies of Narodnaia volia leaders—Mikhailov, Zheliabov, Perovskaia and others—were effectively prohibited for the remainder of the Stalin period, only to reappear in conspicuous fashion by the 1960s. My paper aims to shed some light on the nature and causes of the post-Stalin revival of the Narodnaia volia legacy. It also seeks to explain how, in effect, the biographies of some of Narodnaia volia’s key figures, while apparently satisfying official expectations, also undermined the ideological rationale of the “Plamennye revoliutsionery” series.