



[DOI: 10.35549/HR.2026.2026.59.013](https://doi.org/10.35549/HR.2026.2026.59.013)

Original paper



Sergey V. Medvedev

Department of History Russian University of Transport (MIIT),

Moscow, Russian Federation

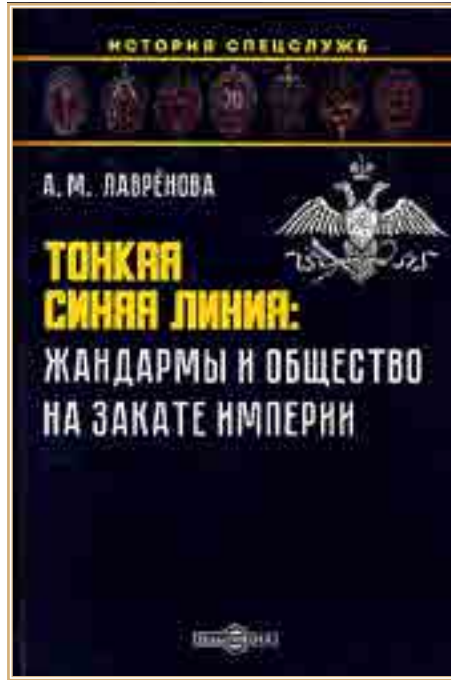
E-mail: speransky1809@yandex.ru

Review of A.M. Lavryonova's Monograph The Thin Blue Line: Gendarmes and Society at the Twilight of the Empire.

Moscow; Berlin: Directmedia Publishing, 2023. 516 pp.

Abstract

This article presents a critical review of the monograph *The Thin Blue Line: Gendarmes and Society at the Twilight of the Empire* (2023) by the historian of Russian political surveillance Anastasia M. Lavryonova. The book is evaluated in the context of recent achievements in Russian historiography on the pre-revolutionary security services and the archival discoveries of recent years. The reviewer concludes that, despite several gaps in its treatment of the history of the Separate Corps of Gendarmes, the monograph is written to a high scholarly standard and incorporates an extensive body of quotations from previously unpublished archival documents. Lavryonova addresses a wide range of contested issues concerning the history of the law enforcement institutions of late imperial Russia, including the functions of the Gendarmerie Police Administrations of the Railways, the relationships



between provincial governors and central and local police authorities, and the diverse spectrum of public responses to the activities of the gendarmerie. The monograph also briefly considers the extent to which the work of provincial gendarmerie administrations corresponded to the methods employed by the security sections. Another important issue examined is the attitude of provincial gendarmerie commanders toward the use of confidential informants. Among the book's principal strengths are its statistical data on the size of the gendarmerie and the number of students involved in public disturbances, as well as its incorporation of material from pre-revolutionary periodicals and contemporary memoirs. At the same time, the reviewer expresses reservations about the insufficiently critical treatment of certain memoir sources cited in the monograph. Overall, Lavryonova's study represents a significant contribution to the continuing scholarly investigation of the investigative and security institutions of the Russian Empire.

Keywords:

A.M. Lavryonova; Sergei V. Zubatov; Police Department; Separate Corps of Gendarmes; Political surveillance

For citation:

Sergey V. Medvedev. Review of A.M. Lavryonova's Monograph *The Thin Blue Line: Gendarmes and Society at the Twilight of the Empire*. The Historical Reporter. 2026. Vol. 59. P. 374–385. [DOI: 10.35549/HR.2026.2026.59.013](https://doi.org/10.35549/HR.2026.2026.59.013)



In 2023, Directmedia Publishing published a monograph by A.M. Lavryonova, C.Sc. (History), *The Thin Blue Line: Gendarmes and Society at the Twilight of the Empire*¹. In 2018, the researcher had defended her dissertation, *The Separate Corps of Gendarmes and Russian Society in 1880–1917*, and the monograph became a logical continuation of the author's archival research. A.M. Lavryonova's book consists of four chapters and thirteen appendices. The appendices contain background information on the number of injured police officers and Separate Corps of Gendarmes (SCG) officials in 1905–1909, the growth dynamics of SCG officials; students who participated in the riots of 1899–1901, information on the number of “political” and “non-political” inquiries conducted by railway gendarmerie officials, etc. While preparing the monograph, A.M. Lavryonova's work was impressive: according to preliminary estimates, she used over two hundred files from the State Archives of the Russian Federation, 55 sources of personal provenance, 27 collections of published documents, six reference and information publications, 20 dissertations, and six monographs and articles in English. Periodicals were represented by articles from *Vestnik Politsii*, *Birzhevye Vedomosti*, *Russkaya Molva*, *Utro Rossii*, and other magazines and newspapers.

¹ Лавренова А.М. Тонкая синяя линия: жандармы и общество на закате империи. М.; Берлин: Директмедиа Паблишинг, 2023. 516 с.

Of particular interest, in my opinion, are the previously unpublished memoirs of the surveillance operative of St. Petersburg Security Section, E.L. Zaitsev, and fragments of memoirs about the youth of the Head of Warsaw Security Section, P.P. Martynov, included in the publication. Unfortunately, the memoirs of P.P. Martynov are not preceded by an introductory article by the author of the monograph; readers can find a brief biographical note about him only on pp. 68–69. The tendentious notes of E.L. Zaitsev, who turned out to be a revolutionary and sympathized with the plans to blow up the Security Section (p. 344), require a more detailed commentary. For example, Zaitsev's assertion that "Gapon was one of the secret police's own men" (p. 341) is not confirmed by the works of authoritative historians. Most of them did not consider G.A. Gapon an agent of the *Okhrana*². The priest's contact with the St. Petersburg secret police did not lead to an ongoing, mutually beneficial cooperation. In the context of a critical analysis of Zaitsev's memoirs, it would be interesting to examine his investigation file. The author's claims about repeated beatings he suffered during interrogations certainly require verification. Overall, it is quite difficult to understand the chronological or substantive logic behind the inclusion of some fascinating archival documents as appendices to the monograph.

The main content of the monograph under review is preceded by an introduction, which provides general reflections on the negative attitude toward gendarmes in various historical periods. At the same time, A.M. Lavryonova expresses concern regarding "a tendency toward the forced glorification of some representatives of the Separate Corps of Gendarmes" (p. 8), without, however, citing examples of such studies. The virtual absence of a review of the academic literature on the topic in the monograph is regrettable: while fairly assessing the high level of Z.I. Peregudova's monograph, A.M. Lavryonova cites the

² Потолов С.И. Георгий Гапон и петербургские рабочие: пути и перепутья рабочих организаций России накануне и в годы первой русской революции / Рабочие и общественно-политический процесс в России в конце XIX–XX в.: Материалы VI Всерос. науч. конф.: В 2 ч. / Отв. ред., сост. А.М. Белов. Кострома: КГУ им. Н.А. Некрасова, 2012. Ч. II. С. 29–42; «Охранка». Воспоминания руководителей политического сыска / Вступ. ст., подгот. текста и коммент. З.И. Перегудовой. Т. 2. М., 2004. С. 541–542.

source-rich study of L.V. Ulyanova's "controversial and curious," and the works of V.V. Hutarev-Garnishevsky are only cited in the list of references. A detailed analysis of the important, and in some ways iconic for all researchers of political investigation, works of G.N. Bibikov, M.V. Sidorova, L.V. Ulyanova, and V.V. Hutarev-Garnishevsky³, as it would seem, would help readers determine the author's position on important issues in the topic under study, as well as understand the range of scholarly problems of interest to her. Although the works of G.N. Bibikov and M.V. Sidorova are devoted to an earlier period in the history of the Russian gendarmerie, it would be interesting to understand the extent to which A.M. Lavryonova agrees or disagrees with their assessments of the effectiveness of gendarmerie surveillance in the public administration system. Unfortunately, the names of the historians whose works A.M. Lavryonova cites are not included in the index, which complicates work with the publication.

The information from the sources cited by Lavryonova requires commentary and clarification. For example, on page 67, the researcher quotes the head of the St. Petersburg Security Section, A.V. Gerasimov, as saying that S.V. Zubatov, more than anyone else, became closely associated with gendarmerie activities. However, this opinion contradicts her own account on page 71 and the overall monograph's Conclusion: "The relationship between gendarmes and police officials was often competitive. The small Corps of Gendarmes could not meet the need for political oversight in the provinces, and therefore police officials had to assume some of these functions. This duplication of functions led to excessive secrecy, mutual distrust, and rivalry..." (p. 309). The long-standing conflict between the Gendarme Directorate and the *Okbrana* has been extensively covered in the scholarly literature. As an example

³ Биби́ков Г.Н. Жандармский надзор в системе государственного управления Российской империи (1826–1856 гг.). М.: Квадрига, 2023; Биби́ков Г.Н. А.Х. Бенкендорф и политика императора Николая I. М.: Три квадрата, 2009; Сидорова М.В. О жандармах, императорах и изобразительном искусстве: архивные заметки. СПб.: Алетейя, 2023; Улья́нова Л.В. Политическая полиция и либеральное движение в Российской империи. Власть игры, игра властью. 1880–1905. СПб.: Алетейя, 2022; Хута́рев-Га́рнише́вский В.В. Противостояние. Спецслужбы, армия и власть накануне падения Российской империи, 1913–1917 гг. М.: Изд-во Института Гайдара, 2020.

from archival documents, we can cite the review of the head of the Riga Security Section on the work of local gendarmerie departments, sent to the Director of the Police Department, M.I. Trusevich, on December 8, 1907: "The Chief of the Livonian Gendarme Directorate's role in the investigation consists of monitoring Lieutenant Colonel Papadzhanov's investigations. The latter's efforts, however, yield no positive results, as he has no staff. The Chief of the Courland Directorate's role in the investigation consists of him personally conducting the investigation"⁴. A significant number of gendarmerie directorates' leaders sabotaged work with secret agents, raising the question of the fundamental rejection of "Zubatov's methods" within the gendarmerie. The percentage of local gendarmerie leaders and officers who recognized the usefulness of infiltrating agents into revolutionary circles remains to be determined by future historians.

A.M. Lavryonova's monograph addresses a number of controversial issues related to the activities of railway gendarme police departments. On page 91, the researcher, unfortunately without providing the date of the document, cites a Police Department circular prohibiting the participation of lower-ranking Railway Gendarme Police Directorate officers in searches. Since 1903, due to the insufficient number of personnel at the Railway Gendarme Directorate, local railway gendarme police officers began to be involved in searches at the request of the Gendarme Police Directorate heads (p. 92). According to the researcher, the number of Railway Gendarme Police Directorate inquiries into state crimes constituted less than one-tenth of a percent of the total number of inquiries. In the pre-war years, "not a single political investigation was launched" (pp. 93–94). This information allows the researcher to conclude that the local railway gendarme police officers were placed even lower than the regular police in terms of investigating state crimes (p. 91), and also that "the railway gendarmes ... were not actually a political police..." (p. 109).

A.M. Lavryonova's conclusions do not correlate with the historiographic data on the issue under consideration. P.A. Kolpakov, who has written several articles on the railway's Gendarme Directorate, cites a secret order of the Police Department of the Ministry of Internal

⁴ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. Оп. 237. Д. 3. Ч. 21. Л. 28.

Affairs dated November 15, 1915, No. 17531, which stated that “railway gendarmes were ordered to take measures to remove from circulation printed materials containing joint images of Nicholas II and Wilhelm II”⁵. The confiscation of printed materials involved searches, and, as the document suggests, these did not require permission or an order from the head of the Gendarme Directorate. The distribution of joint portraits of the German and Russian emperors during World War I was a political crime, and combating the dissemination of unacceptable images was a political investigation. In another article, Kolpakov, based on an analysis of a significant number of archival documents, concludes that “the fight against military espionage was one of the most important areas of activity for railway gendarmes during the war years”⁶. Counterintelligence, given the overlapping functions of various police agencies and the shortage of personnel in the Separate Corps of Gendarmes and Border Guards, can be considered political investigative work. Z.I. Peregudova also writes about the political investigation of the Railway Gendarme Directorate: “The revolutionary uprisings of 1905 and the active role played by railway workers in giving the October Strike a nationwide character forced the government to take urgent measures and involve the Railway Gendarme Police Directorate in the fight against revolutionary uprisings. By order of the Separate Gendarme Corps of July 28, 1906, No. 14528, the Directorate officials were charged with conducting inquiries into all ‘criminal actions’ of a political nature ‘committed within the railway right-of-way’... As a result, the Directorate began to function as political police. Secret intelligence surveillance was also established on the railways, which obliged the Railway Gendarme Police Directorate to maintain their own secret agents”⁷. Information that during the 1905–1907 revolution and in subsequent years, the Railway Gendarme Police

⁵ Колпаков П.А. Противодействие распространению антиправительственных изданий на железных дорогах России в последней четверти XIX — начале XX в. По материалам жандармской железнодорожной полиции // Вестник архивиста. 2024. № 1. С. 181.

⁶ Колпаков П.А. Разыскные циркуляры железнодорожной полиции как источник изучения шпионажа на территории России в конце XIX — начале XX вв. // Вестник Государственного университета просвещения. Серия: История и политические науки. 2024. № 1. С. 77.

⁷ Перегудова З.И. Политический сыск России. 1880–1917. М., 2013. С. 131.

Directorate “exceeded all other units of the combined in terms of personnel”⁸, also testify to the permanent involvement of their officials in the investigation of political crimes throughout the entire area of operating railways and railways under construction⁹.

On page 131, A.M. Lavryonova shares with readers a dubious story from the work of N.G. Rabotnov, a member of the Commission for the Analysis of the Archives of the Former Yaroslavl Provincial Gendarme Directorate and the Yaroslavl Security Section: “N.G. Rabotnov describes an incident that occurred in Yaroslavl, when police agents forcibly drove surveillance agents away from houses within their area of observation and deliberately exposed them”. It’s quite difficult to imagine such a picture. The author of *The Secrets of the Yaroslavl Torture Prison* collected the material in the spring and summer of 1917 and, obviously, was intended to present the facts, or “facts”, within the context of public demand for condemnation of the monarchical system of power in general and police institutions in particular. On the following (132) of the monograph, A.M. Lavryonova recounts a surprising story from an article by M.S. Chudakova: “Bünting [Governor of Tver. —S.M.] ... ordered local police to report all political incidents not to the Gendarme Directorate, as was the norm, but to the Governor’s Office. Furthermore, by order of the governor, all persons visiting the Directorate were registered. The police often made information they received about undercover agents public”. The information uncovered by Chudakova inevitably raises a number of questions. How was information about undercover officers disclosed? What were the consequences of exposing the gendarmerie undercover officers? How did the Police Department respond to the blatantly subversive actions of the Governor and general police?

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ A.M. Lavryonova’s monograph cites an article by V. Sherwood published in *Vestnik politsii* (the date of publication is not provided), in which he describes the Railway Gendarme Police Administration as understaffed (P. 135). Information on the Railway Gendarme Police Administration drawn from an article by the little-known V. Sherwood can scarcely be regarded as more reliable than the data available in Z.I. Peregodova’s now-classic monograph. Unfortunately, the principles of internal source criticism are not applied to Sherwood’s article.

Similarly, Felix Dzerzhinsky's stories about the gendarmes raise doubts. A.M. Lavryonova, apparently not doubting their veracity, recounts scenes from the life of an 18-year-old female prisoner who allegedly repeatedly "punched the gendarmes in the face" (p. 166). The monograph under review also conveys the myth of the Soviet publicist D.I. Zaslavsky about S.V. Zubatov. The head of the Moscow Security Section did not intend to make Maria Vulfovna Vilbushevich a star of the Zionist movement (p. 172). The Independent Jewish Labor Party, which carried out its activities in the Pale of Settlement, primarily opposed the propaganda of the Jewish socialist party "Bund". The "Independents", like police agents in workers' mutual aid societies in various industries, tried to switch the attention of the working class from political demands to economic ones. Unfortunately, Maria Vilbushevich was unable to live up to Zubatov's hopes. Several years ago, historians found documents indicating that she had been under the care of a psychiatrist since her youth¹⁰.

As noted above, A.M. Lavryonova's monograph is dominated by negative information about the gendarmes. The study depicts gendarmes drinking, intriguing, causing scandals, playing cards, shooting themselves, and their wives accepting bribes for the release of prisoners. The section entitled *Negative Public Attitudes Toward the Gendarmes: Origins and Realization* takes up 60 pages of the book (pp. 246–306). However, it is clear that a section entitled *Sources and Examples of Positive Public Attitudes Toward the Gendarmes* would also have a right to exist. Loyal workers and peasants, nobles, merchants, and industrialists could express gratitude to the gendarmes, security officers, and members of the general police for their effective service in protecting the country from the illegal actions of radical socialists or in combating criminals. For example, in 1907, 400 workers from the Berestovo-Bogodukhov mines sent a request to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers P.A. Stolypin to reinstate Dudarev, "as a tactful and skilled police inspector"¹¹. In A.M. Lavryonova's monograph there are expressions that are inappropriate for serious historical research. On p. 49 we find that "the officials... were

¹⁰ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. Оп. 226. Д. 103.

¹¹ ГА РФ. Ф. 102. Оп. 105. Д. 169. Л. 4.

eager for promotions”, and on p. 38 “the cornet started working like a snowplow”.

Overall, A.M. Lavryonova's book lacks generalizations, authorial analysis, and an analytical perspective on the key issues of the SCG during the revolutionary period of Russian history. In my opinion, the study can be defined as a potpourri of interesting stories from the lives of gendarmes of various ranks and units.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the monograph is of a high scholarly standard, introducing new sources and facts into scholarly circulation that will attract the attention of specialists and anyone interested in the history of the SCG. The section *Gendarmes and Women* (pp. 207–246) is absolutely unique; this topic has not previously been examined in such detail in serious scholarly works. Most of the review's comments are interpretative in nature; I hope that in future studies, A.M. Lavryonova will deem it possible to explore these themes, thereby undoubtedly complementing and enriching the body of literature on the political police. The book is written in accessible language and abounds with interesting stories from the official activities of security agencies; the author speaks from the perspective of a professional chronicler of the everyday life of the gendarmes.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



References

1. Bibikov G.N. *A.Ch. Benckendorff and the politics of Emperor Nicholas I*. Moscow: Tri kvadrata, 2009. 407 p. (in Russ.)
2. Bibikov G.N. *Gendarmerie supervision in the system of state administration of the Russian Empire (1826–1856)*. Moscow: Kvadriga, 2023. 354 p. (in Russ.)
3. Kolpakov P.A. Countering the spread of antigovernment publications on Russian railways in the last quarter of the 19th – early 20th century. Based on the materials of the Gendarme railway police. *Herald of an Archivist*. 2024;(1):179–192 (in Russ.).
4. Kolpakov P.A. Investigative circulars of the railway police as a source for studying espionage in Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. *Bulletin of the State University of Education. Series: History and Political Sciences*. 2024;(1):76–86 (in Russ.).
5. Lavryonova A.M. *The thin blue line: Gendarmes and society at the end of an Empire*. Moscow; Berlin: Directmedia Publishing, 2023. 516 p. (in Russ.)
6. “Okbranka”. *Memoirs of the directors of the political investigation* (in 2 vols.). Vol. 2 / Introd. art., text prep. and comm. by Z.I. Peregudova. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie (New Literary Observer), 2004. 598 p. (in Russ.)
7. Peregudova Z.I. *Political investigation in Russia. 1880–1917*. Moscow: Russian Political Encyclopedia (ROSSPEN), 2013. 430 p. (in Russ.)
8. Potolov S.I. Georgiy Gapon and the St. Petersburg workers: Ways and crossroads of Russian workers’ organizations on the eve and during the First Russian Revolution, in: *Workers and the sociopolitical process in Russia at the end of the 19th–20th centuries*: Proceedings of the VI All-Russian Scientific Conference (in 2 parts). Part 2 / Respons. ed., comp. by A.M. Belov. Kostroma: N.A. Nekrasov Kostroma State University, 2012. P. 29–42 (in Russ.).
9. Sidorova M.V. *On gendarmes, emperors and fine art: Archival notes*. St. Petersburg: Aleteya, 2023. 947 p. (in Russ.)

10. Ulyanova L.V. *Political police and the liberal movement in the Russian Empire. The power of the game or playing the power. 1880–1905*. St. Petersburg: Aleteya, 2022. 353 p. (in Russ.)
11. Hutarev-Garnishevsky V.V. *Confrontation. Special services, army and government on the eve of the fall of the Russian Empire, 1913–1917*. Moscow: Gaidar Institute Press, 2020. 648 p. (in Russ.)



 **Sergey V. Medvedev** 

C.Sc. (History), Associate Professor of the History Department
of Russian University of Transport (MIIT),
SPIN-code: 8118-7746,
AuthorID: 795000,
ORCID: 0000-0001-6132-0997

Received
22.03.2026

Revised
13.05.2026

Accepted
12.06.2026