

Dostoevsky on Crime and Revolution: A Study in Russian Nihilism

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Fyodor Dostoevsky has received considerable attention for his literary accomplishments, and at present his attractiveness to those interested in Russian intellectual history is certainly not on the decline. Philosophers and theologians, especially those influenced by existentialism, devote considerable attention to his thought.¹ Even students of politics have indicated some interest in Dostoevsky. However, greatness as a novelist did not endow Dostoevsky with commensurate political wisdom, the least impressive features of his thought being a passionate jingo spirit, racism, an especially crude form of anti-Semitism, and extreme nationalism.² His imperialistic political program for Russia was founded on questionable religious considerations.³

The significance of Dostoevsky for political thought is at least partly grounded on his attempts to check the advance of the evils he saw being generated. Politically his appeal is based on his "prophecy" of the character of the nihilistic revolution threatening Russia. Dostoevsky pictured the Russian revolutionary as a man who has lost touch with reality. The revolutionary "nihilist" is a wandering, restless, rootless individual, and he is always radically estranged from traditional ideals and authentic values. Much of Dostoevsky's immense notoriety is founded on his brilliantly portrayed insights into the darker

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¹Existentialists often see in Dostoevsky a precursor of their own movement. See, for example, William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1958), pp. 120-124.

²Hans Kohn, "Dostoevsky's Nationalism," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, VI (1945), 385-402; and his "Dostoevsky and Danilevsky: Nationalist Messianism," in *Continuity and Change in Russian and Soviet Thought*, ed. J. Simmons (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955); and Ernst Benz, "Imperialismus der Liebe oder Imperialismus der Macht? Dostojewskij und die russische Politik," *Zeitschrift für Religion—und Geistesgeschichte*, V (1953), 25ff.

³See Midgley, "God and Immortality in Dostoevsky's Thought," *Brigham Young University Studies*, II (1959), 55-69.

side of man—the gloom, despair, despondency, and melancholy anxiety that often appear in the depths of human existence. Dostoevsky was pleased to think that he had succeeded, at times, in his novels and stories "in discovering certain people who considered themselves sound and then proved to them that they were unsound" (DW, II, 931).⁴

It was Dostoevsky's opinion that Pushkin, Russia's famous poet, "was the first to detect and record the principal pathological phenomenon of our educated society, historically detached from, and priding itself on, the people." Pushkin revealed the Russian "negative type—the restless man, refusing to be reconciled, having no faith in his own soil and in the native forces, denying Russia and ultimately himself". . . (DW, II, 959). The "separation" or "segregation" of what has come to be known as the "superfluous man" from his foundations, his rootlessness, was seen by Dostoevsky as the direct result of the efforts of Peter the Great to introduce into Russia European ideas, technology, and institutions. Aleko, the hero of Pushkin's poem *Gypsies*, was a kind of prototype of the unhappy "wanderer"—a man who roams his native land, suffers intense inner humiliation, and endures everything in the hope of finding "salvation." Aleko's sickness was so intense that he even joined a band of Gypsies; his spiritual descendants became socialists for the same reasons. At first the superfluous man seeks genuine values, and authentic goals by vast expenditures of energy. With matchless enterprise these "homeless Russian ramblers" seek universal human happiness because nothing short of that will satisfy them.⁵

⁴References to Dostoevsky's writings will appear as abbreviated parenthetical citations in the body of the essay. (BK), *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. C. Garnett (New York: Macmillan, 1948); (NU), "Notes from the Underground," in *The Best Short Stories of Dostoevsky*, trans. D. Magarshack (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), pp. 107-240; (DW), *The Diary of a Writer*, trans. B. Brazol, 2 Vol. (New York: Scribner, 1949); (P), *The Possessed*, trans. C. Garnett (New York: Modern Library, 1936); (L), *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to his Family and Friends*, trans. E. C. Mayne (New York: Macmillan, 1917?); (I), *The Idiot*, trans. D. Magarshack (London: Penguin, 1955).

⁵See Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958) for a new study of the superfluous man. The prototype of the superfluous man—Pushkin's Onegin and Lermontov's Pechorin, from *A Hero of Our Time*—establishes a pedigree for the literary type (pp. 14f.). The term *superfluous man* comes from Turgenev's short story "The Diary of a Superfluous Man" (1850).

The first signs of the growth of the revolutionary bacillus are found in the many cases of Russian intellectuals who began playing at "liberalism," and at a somewhat later date with socialism. However, not everyone, at least at first, feels the urge to wander. Dostoevsky asked:

What of the fact that one man has not even begun to worry while another, encountering a locked door, has already smashed his head against it?—in due time all will meet the same destiny And even if not many meet this destiny: it suffices if "the chosen," one tenth, start worrying, the great majority will lose peace through them (DW, II, 969).

The rootlessness of the Russian wanderer was compared to a blade of grass "torn from its roots and blown about by the wind." Dostoevsky felt that the wanderer was "a fantastic and impatient creature, he still awaits salvation pre-eminently from external causes" (DW, II, 969).

The Russian wanderers felt strongly indignant over the many abuses in their society, were highly disturbed by the pitiful plight of the poor, and felt considerable "civic sorrow" for the unfortunate peasants. These superfluous men had a humane feeling for the people; "nevertheless," according to Dostoevsky, "they remained corrupted Russians, detached from their soil." The superfluous man finally profoundly despised and abhored his people (DW, I, 5). The Russian wanderer, in spite of his original high mindedness, and in spite of his lofty idealism, was somehow forced to adopt an extreme position from which he frequently was willing to crush the people in the name of the people. The wanderer after having first imbibed intoxicating Western ideologies at last becomes a *demon* desiring only terror and destruction. Wanderers ultimately see themselves "like flies caught in a web by a huge spider" (P, 561).⁶ The spider was many things for Dostoevsky; as a symbol of evil it was "nihilism, profligacy, and godlessness" (P, 30).

The Russian "Liberal"

Dostoevsky's most striking treatment of nihilism was his

⁶For a good recent account of the rise and significance of biological imagery, especially the spider image, in Dostoevsky's novels see Ralph E. Matlaw, "Recurrent Imagery in Dostoevsky," *Harvard Slavic Studies*, Vol. III (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 201-225. The spider was Dostoevsky's favorite symbol for evil.

"political pamphlet," *The Possessed*.⁷ The novel is based, at least in part, on the notorious Nechaiev murder case, but Dostoevsky always insisted that *The Possessed* was really not an attempt to provide portraits of contemporary figures or events, and that there was "no literal reproduction" of Nechaiev. Dostoevsky explained that he

took a phenomenon and merely sought to explain the possibility of its occurrence in our society as a social phenomenon and not in an anecdotal sense of a mere depiction of a particular Moscow episode The face of my Nechaiev, of course, does not resemble that of the real Nechaiev. I meant to put this question and to answer it as clearly as possible in the form of a novel: how, in our contemporaneous, transitional and peculiar society, are the Nechaievs, not Nechaiev himself, made possible? And how does it happen that these Nechaievs eventually manage to enlist followers—the Nechaievtsi (DW, I, 142f.).

There are some dramatic differences between Pushkin's prototype of the superfluous man, Aleko, and the violent revolutionary Pyotr Verkhovensky, Dostoevsky's Nechaiev. The main argument of *The Possessed* is that the superfluous man inevitably degenerates into a destructive, violent, amoral nihilist—a Nechaiev.⁸ The Russian "wanderer," as we have seen, began by accepting Western "liberalism" and eventually a dreadful shift produces the revolutionary.

The fictional character that opens Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, Stephen Trofimovich, is an "old liberal"—a father of the young nihilist, Pyotr Verkhovensky. The "old liberal," Stephen Trofimovich, was the spiritual contemporary of such Russian liberals as Tshaadaev, Belinsky, Granovsky, and also of Hertzen (P, 4). Stephen Trofimovich, pictured by Dostoevsky as a dreaming, languid, ineffectual idealist, is indicted

⁷Dostoevsky set great hopes on *The Possessed*, but not "as a work of art, but because of its tendencies; I mean to utter certain thoughts, whether all the artistic side of it goes to the gods or not. The thoughts that have gathered themselves together in my head and my heart are pressing me on; even if it turns into a mere pamphlet, I shall say all that I have in my heart." See Dostoevsky's letter of March 24, 1870, to Strachov, L, 184.

⁸Dostoevsky was pleased when a friend wrote him to claim that the nihilists of *The Possessed* "are Turgenev's heroes in their old age." Dostoevsky felt that these few words expressed "in a formula" the entire purpose of the book. See letter to Maikov in Dostoevsky's, L, 214. Turgenev's hero of *Fathers and Sons*, Bazarov, is the literary prototype of the "nihilist."

along with the other "liberal fathers" for creating a generation of violent nihilists.

Man should not step out of childhood into life without the embryos of something positive and beautiful; without these a generation should not be permitted to start on its life journey. Look: do not the contemporary fathers, from among the ardent and diligent, believe in this? Oh, they fully believed that without a cohesive, general moral and civic idea it is impossible to bring up a generation and let it start on its life journey! But they themselves have lost the general idea, and they are dismembered. They are united only in the negative, and even this in a negligent manner. They are disunited in the positive; besides, essentially, they do not even believe in themselves, since they are echoing somebody else's voice, they have joined an alien life, an alien idea, and they have lost all connection with their native Russian life (DW, II, 762).

Dostoevsky believed that Russian liberalism was without genuine meaningfulness because it was the intellectual product of the "separation" or "segregation" of the intelligentsia from their cultural roots. He maintains in *The Possessed* that: "'The higher liberalism' and the 'higher liberal,' that is, a liberal without any definite aim, is only possible in Russia" (P, 31). The Russian liberal lacks direction precisely because he is a "wanderer," a "seeker," and a superfluous man. Dostoevsky is never tired of stressing the superficiality, the shallowness, and the ineffectual nature of liberalism.

The young men of Russia were restless because "they are, precisely, the children of those 'liberal' fathers who, at the beginning of Russia's renaissance during the present reign, detached themselves *en masse* from the general cause, imagining that therein lay progress and liberalism" (DW, I, 271). In *The Possessed* Shatov says of utopian dreamers: "Those men of yours never loved the people, they didn't suffer for them, and didn't sacrifice anything for them, though they may have amused themselves by imagining it" (P, 35). "You can't love," Shatov added, "what you don't know and they had no conception of the Russian people." Those who centered their "whole attention on French Socialist beetles" went further than overlooking the people. "You've not only overlooked the people, you've taken up an attitude of disgusting contempt for

them" (P, 35). The Russian wanderer began by being conscience stricken by the awful plight of the peasants and the privileges of the aristocracy. This was all very genuine. The fact that the suffering was genuine is actually the cause of the problem. The wanderer joined a Gypsy band, but in this symbolic act he was still unable to find relief from terrible anguish. Instead he stained his hands with blood.

Nechaievtsi

In 1873 Dostoevsky wrote an editorial for his *Diary of a Writer* entitled "One of the Contemporaneous Falsehoods." In this essay he explained the purpose of *The Possessed*. The occasion for such an explanation was an article that appeared in *The Russian World* which said in part: "An idiotic fanatic of the Nечаiev pattern manages to recruit proselytes only among idlers, defectives—and not at all among the youths attending to their studies" (quoted in DW, I, 143). The thing that really set Dostoevsky to writing was a statement by the Minister of Public Education: "in recent years the youth has adopted an infinitely more serious attitude toward the problem of learning, and has been studying far more diligently" (also quoted in DW, I, 143).

After all the humorous aspects of the article had been discussed Dostoevsky explained his views on the causes of the nihilist revolutionary of the Nечаiev pattern. He began by asking:

What if it should happen that some *case* [of nihilism] were to involve by no means "defectives"—not the *unruly ones swinging their feet under the table*, and not merely idlers—but, on the contrary, diligent, enthusiastic youths precisely attending to their studies, even endowed with good, but only misdirected, hearts? (DW, I, 146). (Italics supplied.)

Dostoevsky emphatically denies that revolutionaries are necessarily "defectives." His argument was that society had produced the potential for Nечаievtsi as it had segregated its "Russian boys." Dostoevsky proclaimed: "I am an old 'Nechaievtsi' myself" (DW, I, 147). Of course, he was referring to an event in his youth, the so-called "Petrashovsky affair." Dostoevsky belonged to a circle of intellectuals who were interested in nothing more than remodeling society on utopian socialist lines.

They were followers of the French writers Fourier and Saint-Simon. The Petrashevsky group planned among other things to run a printing press. For this, on April 24, 1849, the circle was arrested after the Petrashevsky house had been raided by police. Twenty-one members of the circle were condemned to be shot as a result of the arrests.

"I also stood on the scaffold," wrote Dostoevsky, "condemned to death; and I assure you that I stood there in the company of educated people No, Nechaievtsi are not always recruited from among mere idlers who had learned nothing" (DW, I, 147). Dostoevsky argues that the "Petrashevtsi" have the potential of becoming Nechaievtsi. "How do you know," asked Dostoevsky, "that the Petrashevtsi could not have become the Nechaievtsi, i.e., to have chosen the 'Nechaiev' path, *would things have turned that way?*" (DW, I, 147).

Dostoevsky recognized differences between what he called the "theoretical" socialism of his youth and the "political" socialism of the next generation. But the differences were mostly of degree and not of a really controlling nature. Dostoevsky mentions the "rosy and moral light" which bathed his early socialism. The whole movement had "great appeal" and "seemed holy in the highest degree and moral, and—most important of all—cosmopolitan, the future law of all mankind in its totality" (DW, I, 148). Dostoevsky recognized that there had been some major shifts in socialist doctrine since his youth. But the same kinds of shifts in doctrine might have occurred in the Petrashevsky circle had it been provided with the necessary historical pressures.

Those among us—that is, not only the Petrashevtsi, but generally all the *contaminated* in those days, but who later emphatically renounced this chimerical frenzy, all this gloom and horror which is being prepared for humankind under the guise of regeneration and resurrection—those among us were then ignorant of the causes of their malady and, therefore, they were still unable to struggle against it. And so, why do you think that even murder *a la* Nechaiev would have stopped—of course, not all, but at least, some of us—in these fervid times, in the midst of doctrines fascinating one's soul . . . (DW, I, 149).

The purpose of *The Possessed* was to indicate some of the many motives that cause otherwise rather high-minded people to perpetrate the most awful crimes in the name of some cause. The thing that makes it possible for the otherwise honorable man to involve himself in what, in any other circumstances, would be considered complete depravity, is simply the common idea that allows the "criminal" to think that he is not a villain at all, but a "saint" working for the good of humanity. The concept that justifies the Nekhaievtsi is the nihilistic notion that "everything is lawful" (BK, 65, 623) taken seriously and raised to the political level.

Dostoevsky experienced considerable sympathy for the young men of Russia who were brought up in corrupt families, who saw nothing admirable in their fathers, who were taught right from the first to despise everything. What could one expect except that the sensitive ones would strike out against tottering materialism and moral decay, and who else could they ultimately blame except Russia?⁹

The Question of Socialism

In *The Possessed* Shatov is by all odds the most common bearer of Dostoevsky's ideas. Shatov experiences a profound spiritual struggle and out of this intense crisis he regains his faith in the Russian people. "But," asked Shatov, "what have I broken with?" The answer was:

The enemies of all true life, out-of-date liberals who are afraid of their own independence, the flunkies of thought, the enemies of individuality and freedom, the decrepit advocates of deadness and rottenness! All they have to offer is senility, a glorious mediocrity of the most bourgeois kind, contemptible shallowness, a jealous equality, equality without individual dignity, equality as it's understood by flunkies or by the French in '93. And the worst of it is there are swarms of scoundrels (P, 589).

⁹In April of 1878 Dostoevsky wrote a long letter "To a Group of Moscow Students" who had demonstrated against the arrest of some of their colleagues. The university students appealed to Dostoevsky, and he responded with a long letter presenting his advice and comments on their plight. Dostoevsky believed that the demonstration was proof of the decadence of the Russian society. L, 244. Dostoevsky was certain that the students were not to blame for the incidents. He said to the students: "You are but the children of the very society from which you now turn away, as from 'an utter fraud'." L, 241.

At another time Shatov took the opportunity to affirm that the "Russian liberal is a flunkey before everything, and is only looking for someone whose boots he can clean" (P, 137; cf. I, 371). Why should Shatov, upon coming to his senses, strike out against the liberals? Shatov's enemy should have been the nihilists. Or was Dostoevsky again attempting to associate at least the Western brand of liberalism and Russian revolutionary nihilism?

Dostoevsky saw Utopian Socialism—he liked to call it "theoretical" Socialism—as the connecting link between high minded, socially conscious, but aimless, directionless liberalism on the one hand; and the total denial of all values—nihilism—on the other. If the evil of the Russian "liberals" is that they are flunkies and aimless drifters, then an even greater evil is generated when the liberal finds some real direction. When the teachings of Cabet, Fourier, or Saint-Simon were really taken seriously, when they were subtly transformed by Russians, they became a deadly cancer that would eventually devour society. Behind the apparent demand for justice in the socialist program there was a value system that would sanction the worst crimes in the name of abstract, futuristic goals (see BK, 331). "They [the socialists] openly declare," according to Dostoevsky, "that they are seeking nothing for themselves and that they are laboring for humanity, that they seek to establish a new order of things for its happiness" (DW, II, 620).

The socialists, at least at first, argue that man can be brought to accept the new society because it will be pointed out to him that it is "rational" for him to accept it, that is, that it is for his own good, in his own self-interest to conform to the pattern. Dostoevsky wrote an entire book attacking materialistic, utilitarian ethics. The *Notes from the Underground* not only offers a violent objection to the factual validity of the assumed "rationality" of man, but the *Notes* present a systematic defense of the "irrational," and the "free" aspects of human existence (NU, 132, 139f.). Dostoevsky argued that man is such that he is bound to revolt against mechanical self-interest. Man, for the author of the *Notes*, is something more than just reason, man is among other things passion and will. And this is how it should be. Dostoevsky would not change

man into just a rational creature even if he had the opportunity. Dostoevsky believed that socialism, using the "scientific," rationalistic, materialistic ethics, is bound to deny freedom both in principle and most certainly in fact.

At this point Dostoevsky doubles back upon the socialists and argues that in the end those supreme believers in man's rationality will see that there is only one way they can build their system: "that man can be reduced to this state [socialism] only by means of terrible violence and on condition that dreadful espionage and unceasing control by a despotic government are established over him [man]" (DW, II, 620).¹⁰

Environment and Responsibility for Evil

One feature of Dostoevsky's society caused him much anguish—the tendency of the liberals to condone crime on the basis of a belief that the environment was responsible. Frequently Dostoevsky used his novels as a vehicle to attack what he thought were gross and pernicious errors. Dostoevsky's novels are full of pot shots at the theory that environment is the sole cause of, and is responsible for, crime. An example is Stavrogin's emphatic declaration that he was conscious of his monstrous crime, the violation of the little girl, which is now included in the confession "At Tihon's" in *The Possessed*. Stavrogin declared that he did not wish to claim freedom from responsibility for his crimes "on the grounds of either environment or disease" (P, 704; see also BK, 333, and I, 373).

Dostoevsky was heavily involved all during his career in the questions of crime and guilt. His novels are sometimes dominated by these themes. His famous novel *Crime and Punishment* is an example of an entire work of art developed on the theme of human guilt.¹¹ Any attempt to lift the ultimate responsibility for choices involving good and evil from man would tend to dissolve all values and make man irresponsible. If environment is responsible for evil there can be no personal

¹⁰Dostoevsky wrote a letter to his niece, Sofia Alexandrovna, from Geneva, Switzerland, on September 29, 1867, to describe a Peace Congress. "Only when fire and sword have exterminated everything, can, in their belief, eternal peace ensue." L, 130. See also Dostoevsky's *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*, with forward by S. Bellow (New York: Criterion, 1955), p. 151.

¹¹Dostoevsky hated the idea that "if everyone were provided for, everybody would be happy; there would be no poor and no crimes." DW, I, 337.

responsibility. The result of such reasoning is the awful thought that "everything is lawful" (BK, 623). The entire plot of *The Brothers Karamazov* is built around Ivan who holds that "everything is lawful" on intellectual grounds, and his half-brother, Smerdyakov, who accepts this doctrine literally and is led to murder as a result of it.

Dostoevsky felt that each man must be held personally responsible for his crime—his evil. He expressed this responsibility for evil in terms of guilt. Dostoevsky's soteriology involves the belief that suffering for sin somehow saves. "If the pain is genuine and sharp, it will purify us and make us better" (DW, I, 13). There is no need to review the numerous passages in Dostoevsky's novels that extol the virtue and necessity of suffering as a means of purification and ultimate salvation. It is necessary to realize that Dostoevsky was, for various reasons, opposed to fixing the responsibility for crime, or evil on environment. This he believed would destroy all genuine freedom.

According to Dostoevsky:

Making man responsible, Christianity . . . also recognizes his freedom. However, making man dependent on an error in the social organization, the environmental doctrine reduces man to absolute impersonality to a total emancipation of all moral duty, from all independence; reduces him to a state of the most miserable slavery that can be conceived (DW, I, 13).

By perpetually refusing to admit that man can be personally guilty of crime or responsible for evil, "by-and-by, we may reach the conclusion that there are no crimes at all, and that 'environment is guilty' of everything. We will come to the point . . . that crime is even a duty, a noble protest against 'environment.' 'Since society is wickedly organized, it is impossible to struggle out of it without a knife in hand'" (DW, I, 13).

The theory that evil is the sole product of environment saps the moral strength of man, and creates within man "the conscious liking for perversity" (DW, I, 100). Man, under the influence of the environmental explanation of evil, "is not naively vile . . . but lovingly; he adds to meanness something

of his own" (DW, I, 110). "Tragic fate! A human being is converted into some rotten worm, fully content with itself and its pitiful horizon" (DW, I, 110). The argument that evil exists because society is abnormally organized leads directly to the judicial acquittal of man for deeds of crime. Dostoevsky states the logic of the argument in the following way:

To overcome crime and human guilt it is necessary to overcome the abnormality of society and its structure. Since it takes long to cure the existing order of things, and besides, inasmuch as no medicine has been discovered, it is necessary to destroy society *in toto* and to sweep away the old order as it were with a broom. After that everything has to be started anew, upon different foundations, which are still unknown, but which nevertheless cannot be worse than the existing order and which, contrariwise, comprise many chances for success. The main hope is in science (DW, II, 787).

Dostoevsky rejected this easy solution. He argued that "evil in mankind is concealed deeper than the physician-socialists suppose; that in no organization of society can evil be eliminated" (DW, II, 787).¹²

From the *Notes from the Underground* we learn that man would never submit to a mechanically perfect universe. Dostoevsky's fame is based partly on his insights that involve his profoundly negative evaluation of man. What prevents the complete success of formal or mechanical solutions to human problems is the fact "that men still are men and not keys on a piano" (NU, 136). Society cannot be reformed by "science" or rationalistic plans because man possesses deep in his soul the capacity for radical evil with which "science" cannot cope.¹³

¹²From the *Notes from the Underground* we read: "But these are just golden dreams. Oh, tell me who was it first said, who was it first proclaimed that the only reason man behaves dishonourably is because he does not know his own interests, and that if he were enlightened, if his eyes were opened to his real normal interests, he would at once cease behaving dishonourably and would at once become good and honourable because, being enlightened and knowing what is good for him, he would see that his advantage lay in doing good, and of course it is well known that no man ever knowingly acts against his own interests and therefore he would, as it were, willy-nilly start doing good. Oh, the babe! Oh, the pure innocent child!" NU, 125f.

¹³Dostoevsky reflected on the revolutionary activities in Paris in 1848 and 1849 and noted that "at bottom, the entire movement is but a repetition of the Russian delusion that men can reconstruct the world by reason and experience Why do they cut off heads? Simply because it's the easiest of all things to do" See Dostoevsky's letter to Strachov, May 18, 1871, L, 218.

Attempts to reform society on rationalistic or mechanistic grounds produce a marvelous edifice—what Dostoevsky liked to call “the ant-hill” (NU, 138).¹⁴

The socialists “are looking forward to the future ant-hill, and meanwhile the world will be stained with blood” (DW, II, 787). Because the socialists overlook the darker sides of human existence they inevitably succeed in liberating demonic forces in man. Dostoevsky saw an ant-hill under construction in Europe (DW, II, 1003). The demons who are to possess Russia’s once high-minded, liberal wanderer have their homes in Europe and are *not* indigenous to Russia.

The Religion of Nihilism

From *The Possessed* we learn that socialism has wide appeal because of a religious quality. The socialists “are fascinated not by realism, but by the emotional side of Socialism, by the religious note in it, so to say, by the poetry of it” (P, 75). The key to the meaning of revolutionary movements is in their religious nature. The rootless revolutionary had lost touch with the people. This means, among other things, that the wanderer, in spite of his original lofty idealism and genuine humanitarian motives, is an atheist (see BK, 22f., 239; P, 144, 254f., etc.). Atheism, for Dostoevsky, was not so much a lack of religion, as a false religion—a substitute for the real thing. Atheism was the chief cause of Dostoevsky’s disaffection from his early socialist leanings.

Dostoevsky’s Shatov admitted that he did not “know either why evil is hateful and good is beautiful” (P, 257). Shatov was certain that “Socialism is, from its very nature, bound to be atheism” simply because the socialist organization of society was to be established “exclusively on the elements of science and reason” (P, 253).

Dostoevsky does not attempt to make a complete identification of the superfluous man’s separation from the people and his hated atheism, but he comes very close to doing so. The revolutionaries “had to perjure” themselves “and praise the peasant all the same for the sake of being progressive” (P,

¹⁴Dostoevsky believed that “no ant-hill, no triumph of ‘the fourth estate,’ no elimination of poverty, no organization of labor will save mankind from abnormality, and therefore—from guilt and criminality” DW, II 787.

33). The revolutionaries "never loved the people, they didn't suffer for them, and didn't sacrifice anything for them, though they may have amused themselves by imagining it!" (P, 35). The nihilist exhibits, as he begins to develop, "an attitude of disgusting contempt" for the people, "and he who has no people has no God."

The supreme example of the collapse of genuine values was human suicide. The nihilist Kirillov argued that suicide was the necessary outcome of the belief in the non-existence of God (P, 627ff.). Suicide was the highest value for self-willed man—for those men who "had suddenly lost their roots, as though the ground were giving way under everyone's feet" (P, 334). Kirillov argued that, since there isn't any God, then man is god.

The man-god is a self-willed man, a man who has exalted himself above all values—an extreme nihilist. The man-god is the ultimate, final, and direct opposite of the god-man. Self-deification is the social manifestation of the spirit of the anti-christ.

At this point in the argument Dostoevsky seeks to make an identification of suicide and murder—the most extreme extension of despair, self-will and atheism. Of course all this takes place on the individual level. When this analysis is played out in terms of society it becomes apparent that the nihilist will stop at nothing until the world is consumed by fiery destruction. The revolutionary nihilists argue that they "should unite and form groups with the sole object of bringing about universal destruction" (P, 412). Berdyaev accurately sums up Dostoevsky's position: "The question whether 'everything is allowable' is put before society at large as well as to particular men, and the same roads that lead an individual to crime lead society to revolution."¹⁵

It is necessary, according to Shigalov's theory, to sacrifice many heads in order to lighten the burden to make it possible to "jump over the ditch more safely" (P, 413). When man realizes that there is no God or that he is god, he also realizes

¹⁵Nicholas Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky*, trans. by D. Attwater (New York: Meridian, 1957), pp. 136f.

that "there is no crime!" Suicide is only the radical manifestation in the life of the individual, of the fire that is in the heart and mind of man; the fire that burns the town is nihilism (P, 524)—"the fire is in the minds of men and not in the roofs of houses" (P, 525). Shigalov represented accurately Dostoevsky's view of the revolution: "Starting from unlimited freedom," we were told, "I arrived at unlimited despotism. I will add, however, that there can be no solution of the social problem but mine" (P, 410).¹⁶ In Shigalov's system "one-tenth enjoys absolute liberty and unbounded power over the other nine-tenths" (P, 410). Pyotr Verkhovensky, Dostoevsky's Nechaiev, gave the secret away when he argued that the goal of the revolutionaries "was to bring about the downfall of everything—both government and its moral standards The intelligent we shall bring over to our side, and as for the fools, we shall mount upon their shoulders" (P, 617). The world was to be bathed in blood because, according to Pyotr Verkhovensky, "We've got to re-educate a generation to make them worthy of freedom" (P, 617).

The Inquisitor

Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor was a fictional Spanish cleric who recognized Jesus in a crowd, had him arrested and forced him to submit to a bitter indictment for having caused untold suffering among mankind by having taught the moral freedom of man. The Inquisitor was certain that moral freedom was not a blessing to mankind, but, instead, a terrible curse. Jesus was told that to ask man to live in freedom was to demand too much from him. To require that man live in freedom is to ask him to embark upon a journey that is bound to be both a pure and endless hell.

The Inquisitor and his Church had determined to betray Christ in order to be able to successfully minister to what is weak and mean in man. There is no doubt that the Inquisitor is a grand humanitarian. He lets it be known that he has made a hard and profoundly serious decision in casting aside Jesus

¹⁶"They aim at justice, but denying Christ, they will end by flooding the earth with blood, for blood cries out for blood, and he that taketh up the sword shall perish by the sword." BK, 331.

and freedom for the good of mankind. The Inquisitor was not simply made into a foil for Jesus.

The Grand Inquisitor repeats one idea that Dostoevsky hated above all others: "there is no crime, and therefore no sin; there is only hunger!" (BK, 259). This is the old environmental theory again. The Grand Inquisitor supported his position by affirming that science will always be unable to provide sufficient bread for mankind as long as man is free. The Grand Inquisitor was certain that: "In the end they [the people] will lay their freedom at our feet, and say to us, 'make us your slaves, but feed us'" (BK, 260).

The Inquisitor's Scepter

It should not be difficult to see the image of the Catholic Church lurking in the background of the legend of the Grand Inquisitor. However, at least one writer has attempted to argue that Dostoevsky was really sympathetic with the Inquisitor and on the side of the "enslavement" of humanity. The Catholic writer, Romano Guardini, maintains that the vision of Christ given by Ivan was unacceptable to Dostoevsky.¹⁷ The weakness of this point is indicated by the fact that Dostoevsky really hated the Catholic Church (see, for example, BK, 62, 328; I, 584 ff.). Dostoevsky felt that "the key to the present and future events in all Europe lies in the Catholic conspiracy" (DW, II, 821). The ideological background of the legend of the Grand Inquisitor is to be found in a number of editorials in *The Diary of a Writer*.

According to Dostoevsky: "Catholicism sold Christ when it blessed the Jesuits and sanctioned the righteousness 'of every means for Christ's cause'" (DW, II, 911). Dostoevsky raises the same fundamental objection to Catholicism that he raised against the socialists and nihilists; namely, they bless any means to secure their ends and this is bound to ultimately produce slavery and a blood bath. In the name of lofty ideals, even in

¹⁷For a discussion of this entire matter see J.C.S. Wernham, "Guardini, Berdyaev and the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," *Hibbert Journal*, 53 (1955), 157-164. Guardini's argument is developed in chapter 5 of his *Religiöse Gestalten in Dostojewskijs Werk*, trans. in *Cross Currents*, 13 (1952), 59-86.

the name of God, the Catholic Church has taken man's freedom, and in the name of the "third temptation," attempted to rule the earth with the sword. All this was later spelled out in greater detail in the legend. For just as the Catholic Church has resurrected "the ancient Roman idea of world dominion and unity" and sold "the true Christ in exchange for the kingdoms of the world" (DW, I, 256), the socialists dream of a future Babylon. Dostoevsky provided the link. The protests against the church in France did not really produce anything new. "When Catholic mankind turned away from the monstrous image in which, at length, Christ had been revealed to them . . . endeavors arose to organize life without God, without Christ" (DW, II, 911). But all that was actually changed was the exterior form of the movement, not the substance.

French socialists dreamed of constructing "something on the order of an unmistakable ant-hill" (DW, II, 911). According to Dostoevsky the socialist creed was not at all better than the Catholic creed. The socialist had a plan, intelligible to everyone, "to rob the rich, to stain the world with blood, after which *somehow everything will again be settled of its own accord*" (DW, II, 911).

Dostoevsky saw that it was inevitable that the socialists would be bettered. European socialism was nothing more than a secularized, but still a religious, Catholicism. The fact that socialists talk a somewhat different language from their Catholic compatriots does not really change matters. The goal of the socialists was materialistic—their values were values of this life and they were primarily concerned with the acquisition and distribution of "bread." The socialists dream of the time when there will be "no more material privations, there is no more of that degrading 'milieu' which used to be the cause of all vices, and how man is going to become beautiful and righteous" (DW, I, 192).

This socialist dream, in spite of all that is commendable about it, is the religion of material bread and is nothing but the demon's "third temptation" in a new form. Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor also appropriated the materialism of "the stones turned into bread." Still Catholicism is secularized as far as it has yielded to the "third temptation." In this respect socialism

and Catholicism are brothers under the skin.¹⁸ The relationship could actually be expressed better as a relationship of father and son. Catholicism is in the process of decay; the entire society it has nurtured is also in decay.

The decay of European society produced the bacillus infecting the Russian intelligentsia. Dostoevsky maintained an optimistic faith that the Western sickness would not prove fatal for Russia. After all, nihilism had an appeal only to the Russian intelligentsia, the Russian people remained free of such deadly infections. Dostoevsky felt that a return by the intellectual to the Russian soil and the people offered Russia the only hope of escaping the desolation that awaits Europe. "Do you know," asked Shatov, "do you know who are the only 'god-bearing' people on earth, destined to regenerate and save the world in the name of a new God, and to whom are given the keys of life and of the new world Do you know which is that people and what is its name?" The reply: "it is the Russian people" (P, 250).

An obvious but nevertheless crucial factor in Russian intellectual history is the violent, destructive character of the Westernization process. Peter the Great commenced a process that created institutions alien to traditional Russian institutions and culture. Into a Russia that had not really experienced a Renaissance, or a Reformation; and into a Russia little affected by the scientific and technological developments of the West, Peter imported alien Western thought and especially technology. This radical process split Russia into two classes: those who accepted the Western culture and those unable to accept.¹⁹

¹⁸In *The Idiot* Dostoevsky's Prince Mizhhin denounces the Catholic Church. Catholicism "is an unchristian religion, in the first place . . . and, secondly, Roman Catholicism is even worse than atheism." The Prince asserts that Catholicism preaches antichrist and "believes that the Church cannot exist on earth without universal temporal power." This has significance beyond theology: "For socialism, too, is the child of Catholicism and the intrinsic Catholic nature! It, too, like its brother atheism, was begotten of despair, in opposition to Catholicism as a moral force, in order to replace the lost moral power of religion, to quench the spiritual thirst of parched humanity, and save it not by Christ, but also by violence! This, too, is freedom through violence. This, too, is union through the sword and blood." I, 584-586.

¹⁹Nicholas Berdyaev's *The Origin of Russian Communism*, trans. by R. M. French (new ed.: London: Bles, 1948) treats Russian intellectual history as a series of reactions to Peter's reform which "was a fact so decisive for all subsequent Russian history that our currents of thought in the nineteenth century were distinguished by the value they assigned to it" (p. 12).

There were, of course, always a vast number caught between the two cultures and left in a condition of unbearable tension.

Doestoevsky, even though he was under the spell of Western "liberalism" in his youth, never really accepted Western culture. He stands in the broad tradition of those extreme enemies of the West—the Slovophiles and the Old Believers. The entire treatment of the revolutionary intelligentsia is coloured by a radical commitment to "our holy Russia," i.e., non-western Russia, a Russia unaffected by the bacillus of Western thought. Nihilism is the function of Westernization. It is the evil disease of the "sons," to use Turgenev's famous figure of the political generations of "Fathers and Sons."²⁰

Dostoevsky's biased point of view is a weakness in one respect, but his bias also is a certain advantage. We are able to see the impact of one culture on a second culture. The entire process is viewed from the point of view of "holy Russia." What was not seen was that Russia was destined by the inexorable forces of history to ultimately yield and be transformed by those who desired the technological blessings of the West. From this point of view the success of the Bolshevik revolution in 1918 was the consummation of the work of Peter the Great in remodeling Russia. Dostoevsky's confidence in "holy Russia" was misplaced. His vision of violence was somewhat more authentic.

²⁰See note 11, *supra*.