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Imperial Russian Society's Influence on Dostoevsky's Nihilism

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The development of Russian philosophical investigation is intimately connected with the development of Russian literature. State censorship meant that fictional works and literary journals were some of the only places where Russian intellectuals could convey their ideas to the public. Many important philosophical concepts originated in Russia and have been meaningfully shaped by Russia's unique literary approach to philosophy. One such philosophical concept that was heavily influenced by the Russian tradition is nihilism. The term "nihilism" was defined and popularized by Russian authors. As authors and political movements began to use the term during Russia's imperial period, the meaning of nihilism changed drastically. To understand the importance of these shifts in meaning, this paper will investigate how Fyodor Dostoevsky's writings about nihilism were shaped by the sociopolitical conditions in imperial Russia.

The term "nihilism" was first used in Russia during the early 1860s. Nihilism initially described the intergenerational conflict over the dominant social and political ideologies of the time. The term was popularized by the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev in his 1862 novel *Fathers*

and Children.[1] Turgenev used the term to critique the Russian youth's rejection of the Western philosophical idealism their forefathers had adopted, favoring the use of material science to address the needs of the Russian people. Turgenev represented nihilist ideologies primarily through the character Bazarov, who rejects abstract philosophical ideals in favor of taking practical action through his medical profession. Bazarov believes that "negation is the most beneficial of all" because "the ground wants clearing," and this allows for the construction of a new world.[2] Turgenev's characterization of Bazarov represents Russian nihilists as alienated, angry, and unsentimental people who are ultimately harmful to society. This portrayal of nihilism was not explicitly targeted at specific social or political actors; rather, it represented a synthesis of perspectives among the Russian people. However, Turgenev's portrayal of Bazarov had the opposite effect of what Turgenev had intended, resonating with the Russian people and garnering sympathy for emerging nihilistic ideologies.[3]

Turgenev's work was soon followed by Nikolai Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel *What Is to Be Done*, which reinterpreted the intergenerational conflict of Turgenev's *Fathers and Children* as a positive social phenomenon. While Chernyshevsky never explicitly references nihilism in his novel, *What Is to Be Done* clearly supports the advancement of natural science associated with nihilistic ideologies of the time. Chernyshevky's novel expands on Turgenev's

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[1] Dubnov Arie, "'Those New Men of the Sixties': Nihilism in the Liberal Imagination," *Rethinking History* volume 19, no. 1 (2014): 3, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13642529.2014.913939.

[2] Turgenev Ivan, *Fathers and Children*. ed. by William Nielson, trans. Garnett Constance (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1917), 50-51.

[3] Petrov Kristian, "'Strike out, Right and Left!': A Conceptual-Historical Analysis of 1860s Russian Nihilism and the Notion of Negation," *Studies in East European Thought,* Vol. 71 (2019): 78, https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11212-019-09319-4.pdf?pdf=button.

understanding of nihilism by outlining the beneficial world that could emerge after negating the Western philosophical idealism prominent in Russia. Chernyshevsky's characters have dreams of a utopia with a cooperative organization of life, demonstrating what he believes a world focused on material science could achieve. Chernyshevsky's novel became widely popular, inspiring many young Russians to support the nihilist ideology. Turgenev and Chernyshevsky's novels served as the greatest sources of nihilistic inspiration during the 1860s.[4] This effect was especially pronounced among Russian youth, who began to emulate their literary idols by adopting the lifestyle and action-oriented ideas that they believed accompanied nihilism.[5]

This widespread attunement to nihilist ideology prompted social and political movements to begin self-identifying as "nihilist" organizations. Dimitri Ivanovich Pisarev, a prominent Russian realist, was the first to associate his movement with nihilism. Pisarev explicitly made the connection between nihilism and the Russian realist movement in his 1864 essay "The Realists." Pisarev's essay used nihilist justifications to support his previously held viewpoint that the older generation's idealistic philosophical speculation should be discarded in favor of politics focused on the Russian people's material needs.[6] Pisarev believed that no one captured his approach to politics better than Turgenev and Chernyshevsky's nihilist protagonists. Like Chernyshevsky, Pisarev believed that nihilistic ideology was necessary for cooperatively reorganizing the world to fulfill the needs of the Russian people. Pisarev's position was a crucial development in the

[4] Petrov Kristian, "Strike out, Right and Left," 78.
[5] Petrov Kristian, "Strike out, Right and Left," 75-77.
[6] Dubnov Arie, "Those New Men," 7.

Russian understanding of nihilism because it took the fictional representation of an abstract philosophical view and tied it to specific political actors.

As more political organizations were labeled "nihilistic," the term became increasingly associated with political violence. Violent anti-tsarist political organizations such as Narodnaya Volya and Zemlya I Volya adopted the term to gain support from the Russian youth, and "nihilism" came to be associated with acts of political violence.[7] Sergei Nechayev was another political terrorist who described himself as a nihilist. Nechayev was infamously ruthless and justified his actions in his work, *Catechism of the Revolutionist,* by claiming that even the most immoral acts were justifiable if they promoted revolution. The goal of Nechayev's revolution was the "quickest and surest annihilation of the existing order,"[8] which echoes Bazarov's goal to "clear the ground." Nechayev took the negation associated with nihilistic thought to its extreme, advocating for the suppression of all emotion in favor of a "cold passion for the revolutionary cause."[9] Anti-radicals began to see nihilism as the root of political violence, painting the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 as the culmination of the heartless nihilist attitudes of the younger generation.[10]

Dostoevsky's experiences around this time in Russia shaped his understanding of nihilism. Dostoevsky himself lost hope in the usefulness of his Western idealist philosophy after returning from a decade of exile at a Siberian labor camp in 1859. After living among the Siberian peasantry, Dostoevsky realized that the Western idealist philosophy of his ancestors

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[7] Dubnov Arie, "Those New Men," 8.
[8] Petrov Kristian, "Strike out, Right and Left," 81.
[9] Petrov Kristian, "Strike out, Right and Left," 85.
[10] Dubnov Arie, "Those New Men," 8.

could never resolve the problems Russian people faced.[11] This revelation left Dostoevsky feeling hopeless and ashamed that he had believed in such a useless philosophy for so long. To add to his hopelessness, Dostoevsky soon experienced the loss of his brother and his first wife, and he developed a gambling addiction. These tragic events informed Dostoevsky's perspective that isolated despair was a more apt characterization of 1860s St. Petersburg than the disoriented progress that his contemporaries claimed was occurring.[12] These experiences led Dostoevsky to claim that nihilism was the natural conclusion of the anti-traditionalist thought that characterized Russian intellectual writing at the time.[13]

Despite Dostoevsky's own experiences with hopelessness and the failure of Western ideologies, his writing is highly critical of the nihilistic ideology being adopted by the Russian masses. Dostoevsky first condemned the spread of this ideology in his 1864 novel, *Notes from the Underground*. In *Notes from the Underground*, the narrator is meant to exemplify nihilistic ideologies in his attempts to achieve perfection through complete honesty.[14] The narrator's desire for an undeceived consciousness parallels Russian nihilism's negation of established Russian philosophical and religious doctrine, believing that they are harmful forms of self-deception. Additionally, the narrator attempts to view his life as a literary construct, which parallels the way in which Russian nihilism was based on an imitation of fictional characters' ideologies. Dostoevsky shows how the narrator's undeceived consciousness achieves his goal of

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[11] Vinokur Val, "Russian Existentialism or Existential Russianism," in *Situating Existentialism*, ed. Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 40.
[12] Vinokur Val, "Russian Existentialism," 41.
[13] Dubnov Arie, "Those New Men," 8-9.
[14] Woodfolk Alan, "The Two Switchmen of Nihilism: Dostoevsky and Nietzsche," in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 22 (1989): 74, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24780454.

transgressing traditional ideas of what is shameful to create for himself a world where anything is permitted. While the narrator's consciousness is his source of superiority, we also see him describe how "every sort of consciousness … is a disease." [15] Dostoevsky demonstrates that the narrator is never able to fully escape shame as, after achieving an undeceived consciousness, he now views dishonesty or self-deception as shameful. This shame is best illustrated when the narrator describes how, after being dishonest with the prostitute, Liza, he "was ashamed to look at her"[16] and she triumphs over him. Dostoevsky also demonstrates that the narrator still feels conventional shame and misery despite his attempts to achieve a superior, undeceived consciousness. At a dinner party, the narrator hopes that psychologically "dominating [his schoolmates]" [17] will force them to recognize his superiority. However, Dostoevsky tells us the narrator fails and feels "crushed and embarrassed."[18] Dostoyevsky utilizes the narrator's inability to escape shame and misery to illustrate that there are immutable limits to nihilistic negations and transgressions and that a nihilistic rejection of all fundamental values will inevitably fail.

Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* also criticizes Western idealist values, which he sees as failing to deliver the utopian Russian future they promised. Dostoevsky represents Western idealism in the metaphor of a crystal palace that the narrator discusses in an imaginary dialogue with an interlocutor. In this metaphorical crystal palace, there are new, ready-made economic relations, and all questions are instantly answered. The metaphorical crystal palace alludes to London's real Crystal Palace, glorifying the industrial revolution, the ultimate

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[15] Dostoevsky Fyodor, *Notes from Underground*. trans. Garnett Constance (Kansas: Digireads.com publishing, 1996).
[16] Dostoevsky Fyodor, *Notes from Underground*.
[17] Dostoevsky Fyodor, *Notes from Underground*.
[18] Dostoevsky Fyodor, *Notes from Underground*.

representation of Western idealism. Dostoevsky shows the narrator dislikes this metaphorical crystal palace because he believes it would be terribly boring. Dostoevsky uses this metaphor to critique Western idealism's reductionist view that an individual's motivations are reducible to simply interests and profits, illustrating that it could never accurately represent the human experience. Dostoevsky also uses the narrator to demonstrate how the fantasy of a utopia can be detrimental to our well-being. Despite the narrator's denunciation of the boring crystal palace, he can no longer settle for living in his existing chicken coop, even if both serve the same purpose of providing him shelter from the rain. This inability to forget the ideal of the crystal palace echoes Dostoevsky's own disillusionment with Western idealism. Dostoevsky initially believed Western idealist values could save the Russian peasantry, which gave him cruel optimism for a future that could never be realized, yet still made the current Russian sociopolitical situation seem miserable.

Dostoevsky's writing becomes increasingly anti-nihilist in response to the political violence enacted for nihilistic ends. Dostoevsky's novel *Demons* makes clear references to Nechayev and other violent nihilist revolutionaries to illustrate that nihilism is not noble but a symptom of societal decline with frightening implications.[19] Similarly, Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* was written during a time of stability in his personal life, [20] meaning that his decision to write about nihilism was largely in response to social and political trends rather than his own traumas. In this novel, Dostoevsky explicitly relates the misery associated with an undeceived consciousness to Russian social values through the character of Ivan Karamazov.

[19] Petrov Kristian, "Strike out, Right and Left," 82.
[20] Vinokur Val, "Russian Existentialism," 47.

Ivan refers to the naive desire to have either simple and complete acceptance or rejection of the world as "Russianism." Ivan explains that "Russian conversations on these topics are conducted as stupidly as possible" since "reason hedges and hides," while "stupidity is direct and honest."[21] This "Russianism" leads Ivan to reject the possibility of meaning within the world based on rare instances of torturing children that he believes are incommensurable with a sensible world. Dostoevsky displays the misery Ivan feels because of this rejection through his vow to kill himself when he turns thirty. Dostoevsky's character Alyosha exposes the idiocy of this nihilistic mindset by convincing Ivan that before he commits suicide, Ivan should come and talk it over with him. Through this interaction, Dostoevsky expresses his belief that the nihilistic desire to jump to miserable conclusions is absurd since there is still time to resolve the issues at hand. To further his argument, Dostoevsky has Alyosha perform a eulogy in which he ignores the dread of death and uncertainty of meaning, instead opting to focus on the meaningful Russian tradition of eating pancakes at a memorial dinner. This eulogy concludes Dostoevsky's case against nihilism, illustrating that it is often better to choose pleasurable traditions over the suffering that comes with an undeceived consciousness, even if those traditions seem meaningless.

The sociopolitical context of imperial Russia had a pronounced effect on Fyodor Dostoevsky's writings about nihilism. Turgenev and Chernyshevsky's writings about nihilism shaped Dostoevsky's understanding of nihilism as the idea that Western idealism should be disregarded in favor of utilitarian material science. Dostoevsky also understood nihilism in its association with violent revolutionaries like Nechayev, who used nihilist ideology to justify their

[21] Dostoevsky Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov*. trans. Garnett Constance (New York: The Lowell Press, 2009).

violence. This negative view of nihilism is reflected in Dostoevsky's critiques of nihilism throughout his novels *Notes from the Underground, Demons,* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky also recognizes the necessity of anti-traditionalist thought, resulting from his own experiences with hopelessness and the failure of Western idealism within Russia. This realization influences his decision to criticize Western idealism in his novel *Notes from the Underground*, demonstrating the harms of its utopian visions for Russian society. Ultimately, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky draws on Russian cultural traditions to comment on the value of traditional Russian ideas, even if nihilistic thought would expose them as meaningless.

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