
AUTHORS & CRITICS

Dostoevsky's Realism?

By Michael Egan & David Craig

IN HIS DEFENCE of what he calls Dostoevsky's "historic veracity" in *The Devils* [ENCOUNTER, March 1973], Joseph Frank ends up facing in two directions at once. On the one hand he claims the novel is "a work of art and not either literal history or reportage"; but, on the other, he asserts that Dostoevsky "based his political plot on a dramatic actualisation of the tactics and aims of the Nechayev movement." Having retraced the well-known parallels between Nechayev's *Catechism* and some of Peter Verkhovensky's outbursts, he concludes: "Sources and parallels for every other politico-ideological feature of *The Devils*, even those that seem the most extravagant and the least credible, can be found. . . ."

But, first, *The Devils* is not an historical novel after the manner of Scott, as Frank suggests. He is curiously silent about many of the details surrounding its composition. In fact it was written straight from the newspaper on Dostoevsky's breakfast table, as a propaganda exercise in support of Czarism and the Greek Orthodox Church. Further, like many 19th-century novels it was serialised, and began publication in the reactionary Moscow journal, the *Russian Messenger*, in February 1870. These points are important, because many of the "facts" about revolutionary organisations, the wording of leaflets, and the circumstances of Ivanov's murder, closely follow accounts of police witnesses at the show trial of 79 young nihilists (none of whom was Nechayev) in July 1871. In other words, Dostoevsky placed the convolutions of his story virtually at the service of the Russian state prosecutor and conservative daily press. The novel is a dramatic actualisation, but of the case for the prosecution in a Czarist police-state. It is an attempt to render that case credible.

Publicly, Dostoevsky put a bold front on it. He told Maykov that he wished to be "even nearer reality" than he had been with *Crime and*

Punishment, and "directly concerned with the most important contemporary question." In his letter to the Crown Prince he claimed the book to be "almost an historical study" through which he sought "to explain the possibility in our strange society of such monstrous phenomena as the Nechayev movement." (Frank quotes the first observation, laying great stress on the qualification, but keeps quiet about the rest which contradicts his reading.) In his opinion these phenomena were not accidental but "the direct consequences of the great splitting away of all Russian education from the native and original bases of Russian life." The Czar will have read these words with great pleasure, since his own view of the current discontent (viciously suppressed at the time by the feared Third Section of police, who had initiated a terror campaign in 1866) was that the universities had become centres of sedition. He was looking to his new Education Minister, Dmitri Tolstoy, to ensure that in future only religion and the classics were studied.

Privately, however, Dostoevsky was less confident. The effort of bending reality to accord with his prejudices was proving almost too much for him. He confided to S. A. Ivanovna that he was "unable to cope" with the difficulty, adding: "I am turning out decided trash, but to discard it is impossible because I like the thought too much!" In April 1870, he admitted to Strakhov that his book was becoming a political pamphlet: "I am anxious to express certain ideas, even if it ruins my novel as a work of art. . . . Let it turn out to be only a pamphlet, but I shall say everything to the last word." And to Maykov: "What I am writing now is a tendentious thing. Let the nihilists and Westerners howl that I am a REACTIONARY! To hell with them."

Our conclusions here are, first, that a novelist in this frame of mind is unlikely to deal objectively or accurately with his material, and secondly, that *The Devils* is not an historical novel like *Ivanhoe*. On the contrary, it offers itself as an eye-witness account of contemporary events, and therefore the standards of accuracy we should demand of it are the same as those we expect, and find, in a novel such as Silone's *Fontamara*.

Frank further asserts that Dostoevsky limits his attack to Nechayev, not being concerned to smear the radical movement as a whole. But this is obviously untrue since the novel repeatedly claims that Peter is working under the direct control of Marx and the *Internationale* (pp. 250, 419, 459, Penguin edition). More seriously, however, Dostoevsky widens his attack to include all critics of Czarism and Greek Orthodoxy, so that terrorism, socialism, atheism, nihilism, liberalism and even leniency by prosecutors and juries, are all viewed as of a piece.

AS IS WELL KNOWN, *The Devils* is based on the parable of the Gadarene swine. The passage from *Luke* viii, 32–36, is cited in full twice in the novel, apart from its celebration in the title, first as its superscription, and finally as Dostoevsky's central pronouncement on the condition of Russia. The judgment is placed in the mouth of the dying Stepan Verkhovensky, who is in a religious ecstasy. He draws "*une comparaison*," the burden of which is that Russia is like the sick man of the parable. Once the evil spirits have been exorcised it will sit again at the feet of Christ. The devils are all the woes and bad men of the day, including "Peter—*et les autres avec lui*—and perhaps I at the head of them all." (pp. 647–8).

Dostoevsky rests his entire political analysis on this absurd proposition. All the major characters in the novel are apparently in the grip of a collective insanity. A mindless "rabble" has come to the surface like "scum," and is under the control of "so-called progressives," themselves manipulated by the agents of the *Internationale*. All sorts of "worthless individuals" such as "wretched little Jews" mysteriously gain "the upper hand" (pp. 458–60.) But the illness vanishes as incomprehensibly as it comes. Such causes as Dostoevsky is able to discover are located in individual acts of madness or in gross derelictions of duty which can only be explained by hypothesising lunacy. This is the essence of von Lembke's collapse at the critical moment, and what lies behind Peter's tirade setting forth his programme of abject baseness and gratuitous violence. It's just demonology, in other words: literally devils who operate from a set of motives simultaneously obscure and precise (wreaking Evil), endowed with a strange power to corrupt but vanquishable at the appearance of the True Cross. All Dostoevsky's positives in this connection are spelled out in Shatov's interview with Stavrogin, when reason, "half-science," atheism and socialism are attacked and Greek Orthodoxy is offered as the only true religion (pp. 253–63).

THE POINT IS that Dostoevsky was unable to depict his central figures as anything other than insane, because no sane people could have been credibly shown as behaving and speaking in the way they do in *The Devils*. His commitment to the notion of insanity is his commitment to untruth. On no other basis could the distortions with which the book abounds have been presented. What we have in mind here, for example, is that long catalogue of public servants which Peter claims are really "one of ours." What the author means is that "they" are really "one of them." No revolutionary atheist, insane or not, would speak of a teacher laughing with his pupils

"at their God" and—sentimental image—"at their cradle." Equally, though he might deride the judicial institutions of the state, he would not attack public prosecutors who tremble in court because they are "not sufficiently progressive," or juries who "acquit all criminals without distinction" (pp. 419–22). The real speaking voice in this passage is Dostoevsky's.

A crucial dimension of the novel which Frank overlooks is the way Dostoevsky widens his attack even beyond radicalism, insinuating a continuity of ideas, and therefore of political responsibility, between liberalism and Peter's insanity. We have already quoted Stepan, the representative liberal, placing himself at the head of the infecting devils. Dostoevsky also attaches an emblematic significance to his fatherhood of Peter, and of course to the fact that he was Stavrogin's tutor. But Dostoevsky is quite willing to be much more specific. In Chapter IV Shatov (who, as the embodiment of Ivanov and a disaffected nihilist with religious leanings, speaks for the author) dismisses "our Russian liberal" as "a flunkey before anything else. He's only waiting for the opportunity of polishing someone's boots" (p. 147). By Part II Dostoevsky is prepared to reveal just whose boots they are, making Stepan admit that the liberalism of his generation paved the way for nihilism. He contemplates Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* in despair, confessing that it is "our idea—yes, ours!" but "distorted" and "mutilated." Still, "we were the first to plant it, to nurture it" (p. 308). Earlier Dostoevsky had been quite explicit about which liberals he had in mind, mentioning by name Herzen, Granovsky, Belinsky, and Chaadayev (p. 22). Finally, he allows Shatov—now come to God and about to be martyred by Peter—to make everything limpid. He identifies directly the "enemies of life . . . of individuality and freedom" with the "dead" and "rotten" ideas of liberalism. Notions of equality—"envious equality, equality without self-esteem"—lead straight to Robespierre's white terror (p. 575). Does Frank believe that this "politico-ideological feature" of the novel has a basis in fact?

THE ESSENTIAL CRITIQUE of Dostoevsky's portrayal of the condition of Russia arising out of this, of course, is that there is a vast gulf between what is alleged about the dangerous revolutionary professionalism of the radicals, like Peter Verkhovensky, and the silly tittering demons we are actually shown. Peter is a posturing, blustering fool, who flounders in the mud behind Stavrogin almost comic in his desperation to wreak havoc for its own sake. In a word, the danger he presents lies all in the allegation: it is never successfully dramatised. Even Dostoevsky was

aware of this, and it puzzled him. He wrote to Katkov: "To my personal amazement this character developed in my hands into a half-comic character. . . ." But of course it would be the case, granting the absurdity of the whole proposition Dostoevsky was committing himself to work with. The entire political side of the novel, which is to say most of it, fails desperately in consequence.

A Reply

MESSRS EGAN AND CRAIG seem to disagree with my article, but for reasons that I find difficult to understand. My purpose was a strictly limited one: to show that none of the incidents or events used by Dostoevsky on the political level of *The Devils*, that none of the plans, ideas or actions of the revolutionary plot, exceed the bounds of verisimilitude. I attempted to prove this by comparing the entire political intrigue (not only "some of Peter Verkhovensky's outbursts") with the documents at Dostoevsky's disposal about the Nechayev affair. Nothing said by my critics addresses itself to this argument, or refutes it in any way. Hence, I see very little to answer, and take the silence of my critics on the main point as an implicit admission of the strength of my position.

However, my critics are obviously perturbed at the idea that *The Devils* could possibly have any historical veracity; this no doubt conflicts too severely with their own ideas about Revolution and revolutionists. And in attempting to circumvent this uncomfortable fact, they raise a number of issues on which I should like to comment.

1. Their first point, if I understand them rightly, is that even if Dostoevsky's use of the facts is legitimate, such facts are only "the case for the prosecution in a Czarist police-state." Hence the novel is biased because the trial was a frame-up.

This is ingenious but unconvincing. The *Catechism*, the leaflets, the murder of Ivanov, all existed independently of the testimony of "police witnesses." The letter of Bakunin I cited—surely not a "police witness"—supports and confirms all the accusations made against Nechayev. They were also all accepted by Marx and Engels, whose biting account of the affair is much more damning even than Dostoevsky's novel (*Werke*, Berlin, 1962, vol. 18, 396-441).

2. Messrs. Egan and Craig cite a number of letters indicating that Dostoevsky did not approach his material in an equitable frame of mind, and was bitterly biased against the radicals and their movement—at least as reflected in the Nechayev case. This is certainly true; it was so stated by me; and Dostoevsky never claimed

otherwise. It is all the more remarkable, under these circumstances, that his manipulation of the material did not exceed the bounds of verisimilitude as I defined it—that is, an extrapolation of the actualities and possibilities contained in the Nechayev evidence.

Incidentally, all the letters cited refer to the first idea for the novel, before the inclusion of Stavrogin as part of the plan. They do not refer to the book as finally written; this became much less a "pamphlet" as Dostoevsky's ideas developed.

3. My critics make much of the religious symbolism of the book, which comprehensibly does not please them at all; but since this was not included in the scope of my argument, I shall not discuss it here. I have dealt with it at length elsewhere ("The Masks of Stavrogin," *Sewanee Review*, Oct.-Dec., 1969, pp. 660-691).

They object, however, to Dostoevsky's image of the revolution advocated by Nechayev as the handiwork of devils and madmen. Let me cite for them a passage from Herzen's *Letters to an old Comrade*, written—just as was Dostoevsky's novel—as a response to the revelations of the Nechayev affair. The "old comrade" is Bakunin.

"The savage clamours exhorting people to close their books, to abandon science and to engage in an absurd battle of destruction, belongs to the wildest and worst demagoguery. It always provokes the unleashing of the worst passions." (Italics in text.)

In any case, there is something astonishingly naïve, but also rather touching, in the belief that revolutionists are always sane and reasonable people.

4. Far from being an invention of Dostoevsky's (as my critics apparently believe), the continuity between the Russian Liberalism of the 1840s and the Radicalism of the 1860s (culminating in Nechayev) is one of the commonplaces of Russian cultural history. Let me cite another letter of Herzen, the father of Russian Socialism, to Bakunin (30 May, 1867):

"I am sending you the brochure of Serno-Solovievich. He's insolent and a fool; but what's most deplorable is that the majority of the Russian youth are the same, and it's we who have contributed to make them so." (Italics in text.)

The Nechayev affair occurred a year or two later; and Dostoevsky, in explaining the symbolism of the novel to Maikov (9/21 October, 1870), writes:

"The devils have emerged from Russian man to enter into the Nechayevs, Serno-Solovievichs, etc." Dostoevsky had certainly read the brochure to which Herzen refers, and had simply dramatised Herzen's response—which he could not possibly have known.

Joseph Frank