

Good News for the Doctor of Culture from Dostoevsky's Three Great Novels

by

James M. Tallmon, Ph.D.

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How much disintegration can a culture endure? The degree of disintegration and destruction that our own culture has experienced is probably not yet fully known or knowable, but mid-to late-Nineteenth Century Russian culture is another matter. The vicious nature of the attacks upon the "old forms" of Russian culture, especially those waged by the Nihilists of the late 1860s, provides ample material for post facto analysis of this important consideration. Fortunately, for those anxious about the condition of our own culture, Fyodor M. Dostoevsky, "the most sagacious student of political economy in the Russia of the 1840s,"ⁱ kept his hand to the pulse of Russia's intelligentsia. Dostoevsky's preoccupation with the status of Russian culture is understandable, given the exigencies of Russian life in his time. When, in 1861, the "Tsar-Emancipator," Alexander II, liberated the serfs, pent-up forces for social change were unleashed. In *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation; 1860-65*,ⁱⁱ Joseph Frank notes:

All the ideals on which previous Russian life had been founded were called into question; influential voices were heard proclaiming that an entirely new moral basis must be sought on which to construct human society. Russian culture thus entered an acute phase of crisis."ⁱⁱⁱ

According to Professor Frank, the scenario described above is the "indispensable context within which the works of Dostoevsky must be understood."

Utopian Socialism, popular among the intelligentsia in the early 1840s, was grounded in Christian social-moral ideals. By the mid-40s, however, the Christian elements were discounted and replaced with principles more consistent with Naturalism--science and reason. By the time Tsar Alexander II emancipated the serfs in 1861, a new generation of liberals had evolved by following the tenets of scientific materialism. This new generation of Russian intelligentsia were radicals known as the *raznochintsy*. The *raznochintsy* differed from the Socialists of the 1840s in two ways; they were more frustrated and more militant. The most frustrated and militant elements of the *raznochintsy* eventually broke with their counterparts--these were the Nihilists. The Nihilists were the object of Dostoevsky's later work and, for that matter, much of the social-cultural work of the late 1860s.

Dostoevsky's three great novels, *Crime and Punishment*, *the Possessed*, and *the Brothers Karamazov*, may be viewed as a continuum. That is, in these works, Dostoevsky traces the

degenerative effects on the Russian psyche of the doctrines of radical and Nihilistic ideologues by beginning with a psychoanalytic study of one solitary man and then chronicles the movement of that crisis from the intelligentsia outward to the masses.

***CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, THE POSSESSED, AND THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV:
A CONTINUUM***

Crime and Punishment is a genesis of sorts. Professor Frank suggests that "if we look for some general formula to characterize Dostoevsky's works after the ordeal of his exile, they might be described as a dialectical amalgam of what he had learned during that time applied to the theories of the radical intelligentsia that he had encountered on his return."^{iv} Having come face-to-face with the consequences of rational egoism and other Nihilistic ideas while imprisoned in Siberia for his political views, Fyodor Dostoevsky was uniquely equipped to warn his people. Dostoevsky's first attempt to "prophesy in fiction" came in the form of a psychoanalytic case study of one individual's intense struggle to practice pure radicalism. Raskolnikov, the lead character in *Crime and Punishment*, is representative of the radical intelligentsia of the 1860s. By exploring Raskolnikov's inner struggles, Dostoevsky clearly illustrates the moral implications, in one solitary life, of the actual application of the exceptional-being concept.^v Interestingly, the Russian word for "crime" in the title of the novel, *prestuplenie*, has the root meaning "to step across" or "transgress." In the laboratory of Raskolnikov's mind, Dostoevsky examines the consequences of going too far; of crossing the line of rational action.

Consider Raskolnikov's article "On Crime." Porfiry, the police inspector who had read Raskolnikov's essay, (before Raskolnikov was even aware that his first piece had been published) questioned Raskolnikov on an idea at the end of the article which the author had "merely suggested without working it out clearly."^{vi} The idea that interested Porfiry was;

That men are in general divided by a law of nature into two categories, inferior (ordinary) . . . and men who have the gift or talent to utter *a new word*. . . . The second category all transgress the law. . . . for the most part they seek in very varied ways the destruction of the present for the sake of the better.^{vii}

Raskolnikov maintained that such higher good gave the extraordinary person a right to violate normal boundaries--even commit murder. Porfiry's observation that the idea had not been fully "worked out" in the article is an indication that Raskolnikov was still "working it out" for himself. This was his "new word."

Dostoevsky interjects an interesting note directly following Raskolnikov's elaboration, the conclusion of which contains a rhetorical allusion to the "New Jerusalem." Porfiry was prompted by that allusion to ask about Raskolnikov's belief in God. After Raskolnikov answered in the affirmative, inspector Porfiry pressed the issue:

And . . . do you believe in Lazarus' rising from the dead?

I . . . I do. Why do you ask all this?

You believe it literally?

Literally.

You don't say so. . . I asked from curiosity. Excuse me, but let us go back to the question. . . .^{viii}

It is hard to imagine a Nihilist making such affirmations unless, of course, he was attempting a red herring. That would not seem to be the case. Raskolnikov, rather than throw the law off track, amused himself by engaging in intellectual duels, (especially with Porfiry,) more for a test of his own sanity than anything else, I think. At any rate, such a confession (if not completely genuine, at least not a denial of God's existence) argues strongly for placing Raskolnikov in the radical camp, not the Nihilist. These observations support the thesis that Dostoevsky's continuum begins here with his first great novel--*Crime and Punishment*.

We have considered the **substance** of Raskolnikov's "new word;" we must now consider (as was Dostoevsky's primary objective) the **implications** of practicing that new word. The crime was murder; the punishment was a slow realization, a self-awareness that emerged from Raskolnikov's soul, that the justification for the crime--his precious idea--was, in actuality, a pernicious idea. Raskolnikov attempts to justify the murder on moral grounds; the desire to aid his family and then devote himself to the aid of humanity. The novel climaxes during Raskolnikov's famous confession to Sonia, the young girl who prostituted herself to aid her poor family, when he realizes that the old pawn broker woman's money was not the point at all:

. . . I know it all now. . . Understand me!

. . . it was something else led me on.

I wanted to find out then and quickly whether I was a louse like everybody else or a man. Whether I can step over barriers or not, . . . whether I am a trembling creature or whether I have the *right* . . .^{ix}

Professor Frank points out in his introduction to *Crime and Punishment*:

The whole point of the novel is to reveal this inner dialectic: the impossibility of combining the feelings that impel Raskolnikov to conceive of himself as a benefactor to humanity with those required to put into practice the idea that he can blithely disregard the moral law.^x

In other words, the inherent intellectual anarchy of the radical movement of the 1860s produced an idea that, in this instance, resulted in a double homicide and one very distraught *raznochinet* who had believed a lie.

By its nature, then, *Crime and Punishment* is a beginning--it fixes the reader's attention on the consequences in the life of one solitary individual who worked out and acted upon a single, relatively new idea. Actually, excepting the crime itself, the consequences of Raskolnikov's idea are not so devastating. In fact, Raskolnikov is redeemed in the end. Unfortunately, however, the consequences quickly multiplied as Nihilism took root among the Russian intelligentsia. Dostoevsky's prophetic nature (not to mention his creditors) compelled him to take up the pen once more.

In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky portrays the personal consequences of Raskolnikov's radical idea. *The Possessed* explores the social consequences of a widespread acceptance of even more extreme ideas. By the time Dostoevsky published *the Possessed* (1871-2), secret societies of Nihilists like *Organization* (a secret society with an inner circle that practiced terrorism) were actively, openly, agitating for revolution. The novel is set in a rural area to signify how the movement networked out from St. Petersburg, that Nihilism's attack upon the old forms extended the crisis from the intelligentsia to the masses. Dostoevsky illustrates how philosophical chaos, sown in this case by the Russian Nihilists, results in moral collapse and, finally, in a riot, suicides, insanity, arson, robbery, and not one, but several murders.

The deception, hate, and destruction that characterized Russian Nihilism in the late 1860s possessed Pyotr Verhovensky in much the same way Raskolnikov's idea possessed him. Pyotr carried out the extraordinary person concept without compunction. Raskolnikov **wondered** if he had the "right stuff;" Pyotr was **convinced** of his elevated status. The narrator of *The Possessed* reflects back upon the situation in his own town, when Pyotr Verhovensky swayed the "riff-raff," by pondering a general tendency:

In every period of transition this riff-raff, which exists in every society, rises to the surface, and is not only without any aim, but has not even a symptom of an idea . . . Moreover this riff-raff almost always falls unconsciously under the control of the little group of "advanced people" who do act with definite aim, and this little group can direct all this rabble as it pleases, if only it does not itself consist of absolute idiots,

which, however, is sometimes the case. It is said among us now that it is all over, that Pyotr Stepanovitch was directed by the Internationale. . .^{xi}

Dostoevsky here posits a social stratification that goes beyond the simple extraordinary/ordinary dichotomy. The above also reveals an assumption on the part of the fictional townspeople regarding Pyotr's association with a larger body. What was the program that Pyotr was directed to establish in the village?

Shigalov, one of the members of Pyotr's inner circle or "quintet," recited all the aims of their program, as he understood it, while seeking clarification from Verhovensky:

Each of these clusters of activity, proselytizing and ramifying endlessly, aims by systematic denunciation to injure the prestige of local authority, to reduce the villages to confusion, to spread cynicism and scandals, together with complete disbelief in everything and an eagerness for something better, and finally, . . . to reduce the country at a given moment, if need be, to desperation. . . . Is that the programme you gave us as the authorised representative of the central committee, which is to this day utterly unknown to us and almost like a myth?^{xii}

The nature of the program of destruction set out by Shigalov is correct according to Pyotr, but Shigalov's assumption regarding the source of Pyotr's authority is incorrect. A brief look at the relationship between Pyotr Verhovensky and Nikolay Stavrogin, his idol, reveals the true source of Pyotr's directives.

Dostoevsky, in his extreme subtlety, suggests that Stavrogin is literally possessed. His own mother used to reflect on why she feared him, and, at a gathering on her estate, ". . . the wild beast suddenly showed his claws." He outraged one of her guests, and Dostoevsky's description of the ensuing embarrassment strongly suggests that Stavrogin was not merely insane: ". . . describing it afterwards, people said that he looked almost dreamy at the very instant of the operation, 'as though he had gone out of his mind,' . . . and that, far from being confused, [he] smiled gaily and maliciously. . ."^{xiii} When he came to himself, his only explanation was; "I really don't know what suddenly came over me."

Shigalov's suspicions about the existence of the Internationale are well founded, as it turns out. Stavrogin and Pyotr were on their way to a meeting one evening and Pyotr was preoccupied with formulating a plan to cement the quintet. Pyotr's idea was to "invent ranks and duties" to appeal to the members' pride and to set them to spying on one another. Then a "better way" comes to Pyotr straight from the pit of hell, as it were, through the mouthpiece of the Destroyer, Stavrogin. His idea is to "persuade four members to do for a fifth on the pretence that he is a

traitor, and you'll tie them all together with the blood they've shed as though it were a knot. They'll be your slaves, they won't dare to rebel or call you to account. Ha ha ha!"^{xiv}

I believe Dostoevsky intended that final expression to be read as satanic laughter. Pyotr, through a series of inspired plans and several strategic lies, carries out Stavrogin's suggestion to a tee. Dostoevsky's chapter "Pyotr Stepanovitch Is Busy" portrays the footman, equipped with hatred, lies and a lust for destruction, carrying out the orders of his true master, not the illusory Internationale. The village was eventually reduced to confusion, and the quintet did murder one of its own. So then, *the Possessed* traces the extension of Nihilism to the general population, but still in the hands of the intelligentsia.

On an earlier occasion, in a tepid outburst, Pyotr pleads with Stavrogin to become a mythical, hero-like leader--the ultimate tactic, he believed, to activate the revolution. His remarks are noteworthy: "We shall penetrate to the peasantry," he exclaims:

The Russian God has already been vanquished by cheap vodka. The peasants are drunk, the mothers are drunk, the children are drunk. . . . It's only a pity we can't afford to wait, or we might have let them get a bit more tipsy. Ah, what a pity there's no proletariat! But there will be, there will be; we are going that way. . . .^{xv}

The Brothers Karamazov is Dostoevsky's snapshot of Verhovensky's perverted dream come true.

Dostoevsky traces the decline of moral sensibilities to one particular family in the *Brothers Karamazov* and to the town in which they live. The trial of Dimitri Karamazov, who is accused of killing his own father, reveals Dostoevsky's thoughts on the degree to which moral consensus would be affected, not only in the intelligentsia, but also in the masses. This study of parricide, and the circumstances in which it took place, represents an utter breakdown of cultural and individual restraint mechanisms.

The dialogues between spectators at Dimitri's trial help demonstrate the degree to which people can become mesmerized after long years of chaos. The prosecutor appealed to the jury's sense of decency by recounting the horror of a son actually killing his own father, and to their sense of duty as "the champions of our holy Russia." But the people's hearts were hardened. One segment of the audience remarked during a break in the trial that, "he tries to frighten us."^{xvi} The defense attorney's allusion to the alarm mounting in other countries over the widespread chaos in Russia prompted the following response from one member of the audience while the court was in recess:

[I]n the English Parliament a member got up last week and speaking about our Russian Nihilists asked the Ministry whether it was was not high time to intervene, to educate this barbarous land.

Not an easy job.

Not an easy job? Why not?

Why, we'd shut our ports and not let them have any wheat. Where would they get it?

In America. They get it from America now.

Nonsense!^{xvii}

A frog in a pot of water that is gradually heated to a boil will, because of his physiology, sit complacently as he cooks. With the parable of the frog in mind, consider the response to the above remark. Dostoevsky tacitly asserts that some of the townspeople attending the trial, much like the frog in the pot of water, had been dulled, by degrees, through prolonged exposure to social chaos.

After the counsel for the defense replied, and while the jury deliberated, "People got up, moved about, exchanged their impressions and refreshed themselves at the buffet." The tenor of most of these exchanges reveals a deep desire to justify the murder--regardless of Dimitri's guilt or lack thereof. Dostoevsky is careful to note that "everyone had counted on a recommendation of mercy at the very least."^{xviii} The court was filled with a deathlike stillness, and then confusion, when that expectation was shattered. Dimitri was found guilty on all counts against him. Many of those present blamed the outcome on the peasants who made up the majority of the jury. "Well," they said, "our peasants have stood firm."^{xix} The closing lines of *The Brothers Karamazov* offer key support for the notion that Dostoevsky's three great novels be read as a progression.

The Karamazov family, socio-economically speaking, represented the closest thing to a middle-class Russia had at that time. Fyodor Karamazov was a landowner by marriage, but a buffoon. His eldest son, Dimitri, was very much like his father; Ivan, though he had gained notice in literary circles, was a member of nothing, let alone the intelligentsia; and Alyosha, the youngest, was a novice in the local monastery. Alyosha fled the Karamazov nature--an almost total lack of self-control--seeking respite in the bastion of orthodoxy. Here is Dostoevsky's picture of Russia, provided through the study of a family that contained "certain fundamental features of the educated class"--not the intelligentsia, and not the "ordinary people"--"only of course in miniature, 'like the sun in a drop of water.'"^{xx} In the Karamazov's loss of restraint Dostoevsky illustrates the widening effects of the attack upon forms that began with the intelligentsia, had been going on for an entire generation, and had now reached critical mass in Russian society. It took its toll, and, in the end, Alyosha was the only Karamazov who remained.

Not only was Alyosha the remnant; he planted seed that Dostoevsky apparently expected to bring forth fruit in the next generation. Kolya, Alyosha's young friend, is Dostoevsky's type of the first generation to be weaned on Russian naturalism and Nihilism. Dostoevsky provides glimpses of the relationship (and debates) between Alyosha and Kolya throughout *The Brothers Karamazov*. Kolya is the leader among a group of young students whom Alyosha befriends, and in the final chapter, Kolya . . . understands. In his intuitive attack upon Nihilism, Alyosha uses the death of one of their peers to sow a "good sacred memory" in their young hearts, because, as he says, "that one memory may keep us from great evil and we will reflect and say: 'Yes, I was good and brave and honest then.'"^{xxi} The memory of one's adherence to a moral standard helps to combat the profligacy that results when moral standards collapse. Alyosha was well aware of the effects of unbridled profligacy--it surrounded and tempted him from his childhood. Observe the sower as he sows:

"And may the dear boy's memory live forever!" Alyosha added again with feeling. . .
 . "Well, let us go! And now we go hand in hand."
 "And always so all our lives hand in hand! Hurrah for Karamazov!" Kolya cried
 once more. And once more the boys took up his cry. "Hurrah for Karamazov!"^{xxii}

Dostoevsky answers the question; "How much destruction can a culture endure?" by juxtaposing, in the final scene, Alyosha's new beginning with the fate of the other brothers Karamazov.

CONCLUSION

Whether Dostoevsky held a strong conviction, or whether it was merely a paper prayer, a current of hope runs through the entire length of Dostoevsky's three great novels. Alyosha rises to influence the next generation from the ashes of the Karamazov travesty, and the novel ends on a positive note. Dostoevsky was careful to note that, "our peasants have stood firm. They have condemned our Dimitri."^{xxiii} One must remember to distinguish, as Dostoevsky did, between a crisis among the intelligentsia and a crisis among the masses. Due to the very nature of their thought life, intellectuals are (whether or not they realize it) more dependent upon strong moral standards, and Dostoevsky knew that, "when moral standards collapse or [are] destroyed," degeneration is "far more likely to occur among the educated elite than among the people."^{xxiv} As William Hubben notes, "The enormous reservoir of spiritual power in Russia's plain people was Dostoevsky's romantic obsession."^{xxv} This faith in the people, along with his presentiment that Nihilism would self-destruct, formed the basis of Dostoevsky's hope for the future well-being of Russia and is observable in the pathetic reactions of many of his characters to the consequences of their misguided actions.

For example, nearly all of the participants in Shatov's murder rushed to purge their consciences the very next day. In fact, if one reads closely, it is clear that the scene was actually over as soon as it began, and "Pyotr Stepanovitch was the only one who preserved all his faculties."^{xxvi} One of the inner circle, Lyamshin, went mad at the scene of the crime, and began screaming uncontrollably. Another one of the new initiates could only repeat; "It's not the right thing, it's not, it's not at all."^{xxvii} When intelligible means for expressing remorse are destroyed, all that remains is the inchoate wail of the untended conscience. The important point here is, if these individuals who represented the elite inner-circle of a secret society were themselves unable to carry Nihilism to its end, then the prospect of such an idea infesting the "plain people" is unlikely. Or, consider Raskolnikov, who:

fails to realize his ambition of entering the ranks of "Napoleons" precisely because he cannot totally suppress the workings of his moral conscience--a conscience that has become so grotesquely twisted by the radical ideology of the 1860s that it can justify murder.^{xxviii}

Raskolnikov's conscience had indeed been seared, but all along Dostoevsky builds a testament to the strength of the conscience's will to endure. Because of that strength and despite Raskolnikov's extreme affront to his own moral conscience, his punishment began long before sentence was passed. Dostoevsky apparently put a great deal of stock in the strength of the individual conscience and, subsequently, culture, (the wellspring of individual conscience,) to withstand attack.

Richard M. Weaver wrote that "culture is a protection against fanaticism both of the political and the religious kinds."^{xxix} The programmatic attack against the older forms began in Dostoevsky's day, and if anyone had reason to expect an utter collapse, it would be he. Yet he seemed steadfast in his hope that the political fanatics of his day would, like the swine who received the devils from the Gadarene demoniac, destroy themselves rather than "holy Russia." Would we be foolish to embrace Dostoevsky's hope today? Dostoevsky's vision ranged beyond the cultural disintegration that resulted from the Bolshevik revolution, to grasp the defensive power of the treasures vouchsafed by God in the hearts of Russia's plain people. His gift was great; his hope worth embracing. Our attempts to restore the old forms of our own beleaguered culture should be informed by such a reading of Dostoevsky's three great novels.

NOTES

ⁱJoseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt; 1821-1849*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press) 1976, p. 254.

ii _____, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation; 1860-1865*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press) 1986.

iii Ibid., p. 6.

iv Fyodor M. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, translated by Constance Garnett, from the introduction by Joseph Frank, (New York: Bantam Classics) 1987, p. xi. (All references to *Crime and Punishment* are from the same work and will be hereafter referred to by page number only.)

v Napoleon III explicates his doctrine of the "exceptional man" in the preface to the *History of Julius Caesar* :

When extraordinary deeds testify to high genius what can be more repulsive to common sense than to attribute to this genius all the passions and all the thoughts of an ordinary man? What can be more false than not to recognize the superiority of these exceptional beings who appear in history from time to time like shining beacons, dispelling the darkness of their epoch and lighting up the future?

Frederich Nietzsche's "superman" embodies precisely the same notion.

vi p.225

vii p.227

viii pp. 227-8.

ix pp.360-1.

x p. xvii.

xi *The Possessed*, p. 470.

xii Ibid., p.557.

xiii Ibid., p.43.

xiv Ibid., p. 393.

xv Op cit., p. 427.

xvi Fyodor M. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Constance Garnett, (New York: New American Library, Inc.) 1980, p. 665.

xvii Id.

xviii Ibid., p. 682

^{xix} Ibid., p. 683.

^{xx} Ibid., p. 630.

^{xxi} Ibid., p. 699.

^{xxii} Ibid., pp. 700-01.

^{xxiii} Ibid., p. 683.

^{xxiv} *Crime and Punishment*, p. x.

^{xxv} William Hubben, *Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kafka: Four Prophets of Our Destiny*, (New York: Collier Books) 1962, p. 74.

^{xxvi} *The Possessed*, p. 614.

^{xxvii} Ibid., p. 615.

^{xxviii} *Crime and Punishment*, p. xvii.

^{xxix} Richard M. Weaver, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time*, (Baton Rouge, L.A.: Louisiana State University Press) 1964, p.153.