

Anarchy, nihilism and liberalism in dostoevksy's demons



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Demons" (Besy, in Russian, variously translated as "The Possessed" and "Devils") is a fundamentally political and social novel. It draws directly on the true story of a murder committed in 1869 by Russian anarchist and nihilist Sergei Nechaev (Saunders 324). The peasant reforms (Dostoevsky 370), the third department (Dostoevsky 361) and the emergence of the zemstvo (Dostoevsky 211) all enjoy passing mention. However, it is the Nechaev-like anarchists and older liberals who are the primary players in the Russia of "Demons". In addition to the facts of the murder, "Demons" depicts a much wider social and political conflict in Russia. Dostoevsky depicts a Russian society divided between ideologies: The westernizing liberals of the 1840s, Slavophiles (Russian isolationists and nationalists), and nihilists. Dostoevsky's sentiments clearly do not lie with the latter, as "Demons" offers an often satirical and always unflattering portrait of the Russian radical revolutionary movement of the 1860s and 1870s. Dostoevsky's treatment of the ideological divide between pro-Western liberals and nihilists can be more generally characterized as a generational divide. Stepan Trofimovich best represents the older generation of liberal westernizers, who called for gradual modernization in Russia rather than a radical and rapid transformation of the autocracy and Russian society. While the liberals of Stepan's generation (the 1840s) engage in vigorous debate, the narrator remarks on the nature of liberalism in Russia during this period: For a while there was talk of us around town, that our circle was a hotbed of freethinking, depravity, and godlessness; and this rumor has always persisted. Yet what we had was only the most innocent, nice, perfectly Russian, jolly liberal chatter. "Higher liberalism" and the "higher liberal" that is, a liberal without any aim are possible only in Russia.

<https://assignbuster.com/anarchy-nihilism-and-liberalism-in-dostoevksys-demons/>

(Dostoevsky 33) Stepan's westward-looking character is established early in the novel, and indeed early in his life: " he managed to publish...in a monthly and progressive journal, which translated Dickens and preached George Sand, the beginning of a most profound study" (Dostoevsky 9). Furthermore, Stepan's speech is satirically filled with individual French phrases and interjections, reflecting the tendency of the intellectual classes' use of French. Stepan's use of French is later parodied as Kirillov composes his suicide note, abandoning Stepan's francophone niceties in favor of the fiery language of revolution. The narrator notes that Stepan's theses on European history attract the ire of Slavophiles. The invocation of the Slavophiles and their ability to strip him of his lectureship demonstrates the divide between the nationalist Slavophiles and the westernizing liberals. Dostoevsky does, however, temper the apparent power and influence of the conservative faction by adding that Stepan " could have gone on...if he had simply given the necessary explanations" (Dostoevsky 11). The Slavophiles play a marginal role in the central generational conflict between liberals and nihilists, but their early role in antagonizing Stepan Trofimovich (and vice versa) illustrates the presence of a philosophical debate that is underway in Russia well before the birth of Pyotr Stepanovich. Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky, son of Stepan Verkhovensky, represents a more extreme-left faction of Russian thought than his father. As a nihilist and anarchist, Pyotr advocates the violent demolition and reconstruction of Russian society. His " revolution" would establish Stavrogin as the tsarevitch-in-hiding, who would lead the insurgency. Pyotr's extremism stands in stark contrast to the relatively passive " higher liberalism" of his father. However, despite the poor relationship between father and son, Dostoevsky establishes several

<https://assignbuster.com/anarchy-nihilism-and-liberalism-in-dostoevksys-demons/>

important links between the two generations of Verkhovensky men. Pyotr and his generation of nihilists, in their revolutionary fervor, reject the more purely intellectual nature of Stepan's "cultural" liberalism in favor of dramatic and even violent action. Thinkers of Stepan's generation, speaking in more moderate tones, find equally distasteful the extremes to which the anarchists are anxious to explore. Pyotr's character is clearly based on the real anarchist Sergei Nechaev, who planned an insurrection against the authority of the tsar during the late 1860s. During a brief period of exile in 1869, Nechaev and Bakunin penned "The Catechism of a Revolutionary", outlining the goals and mechanisms of a revolution. Upon his return to Russia later that year, Nechaev attracted a number of followers at the Petrovskaya Agricultural Academy in St. Petersburg. Among these followers, Ivan Ivanov was believed to be less than loyal, and was considered a threat to the organization (Saunders 324). In winter 1869, Nechaev and several associates murdered Ivanov. The circumstances resemble those found in "Demons", as Pyotr and members of the anarchist circle murder Shatov. If one accepts that Nechaev is in fact the model upon which Pyotr Verkhovensky is based, it is difficult to argue that Dostoevsky is sympathetic to the anarchist and nihilist cause. Indeed, "Demons" is a strong indictment of the revolutionary movement. Dostoevsky's unflattering portrait of Pyotr's ideals and methodology takes two important forms. Pyotr's organization, a clear parody of Nechaev's, is a satirical and often amusing blend of chaos and extremism. The individuals involved in the organization - the vocal representatives of nihilism - are severely flawed and are largely unsympathetic characters. "With Our People", chapter seven of Book Two, recounts a typically disorganized and often hilarious meeting of the

<https://assignbuster.com/anarchy-nihilism-and-liberalism-in-dostoevksys-demons/>

revolutionary group. Shigalyov's attempts to organize the assembled guests are thwarted by the stupid, drunken, or otherwise uncouth interjections of his audience. Dostoevsky's depicts these revolutionaries as a bumbling, panicked, and generally motley group of fools. A typical exchange from "With Our People" offers a fair example of the flawed and frequently ridiculous meeting: "No, I understand," a third one shouted, "hand up if it's yes." "Yes, but what does yes mean?" "It means a meeting." "No, not a meeting." "I voted a meeting," the high-school boy shouted, addressing Madame Virginsky. "Then why didn't you raise your hand?" "I kept looking at you, you didn't raise yours, so I didn't either." (Dostoevsky 399) Comments such as that of the high-school boy reveal a subtler and perhaps more damning indictment of Pyotr. Several of the nihilists are very young, and still more, such as Lebyadkin, are very stupid. Since these individuals would not likely organize themselves into a group of anarchistic revolutionaries on their own, it falls to Pyotr and Shigalyov to bring them together. In this sense, Dostoevsky portrays Pyotr, and by implication, Nechaev, as talented manipulators, and relegates most other characters to the role of the foolhardy bystander. While they are guilty of nihilism, they are perhaps more guilty of a youthful impetuosity and naivete that appears to pervade the rank and file of the group. The character of the leaders of the group is much more thoroughly questioned. Among these leaders, Dostoevsky does not create a single sympathetic character. Stavrogin often exhibits bizarre and impolite behavior in unsuspecting company, which leads to an abortive duel. Dostoevsky exposes Stavrogin's sinister manipulation in a conversation between Nikolai Vsevolodovich and Lebyadkin: "Lebyadkin, experienced in the role of buffoon, remained a bit uncertain until the last moment whether

<https://assignbuster.com/anarchy-nihilism-and-liberalism-in-dostoevksys-demons/>

his master was really angry or only teasing” (Dostoevsky 268.) Pyotr himself is frequently emotionally and morally vacant, falsely bringing his father under the suspicion of the authorities at the conclusion of Book Three. The apotheosis of this inhuman detachment is, of course, the murder of Shatov. Dostoevsky’s treatment of the nihilist anarchists is considerably different from his treatment of Stepan’s brand of “higher liberal”. Stepan is relatively harmless and charming, and lacks the murderous cold that his son possesses in abundance. However, Dostoevsky maintains an important link between Stepan’s circle of liberals and Pyotr’s group of revolutionaries. In many respects, Pyotr’s group is an extreme-left parody of the “higher liberals” of the 1840s. An important element of the parody lies in the international nature of each organization. Stepan’s liberals find their inspiration and conversational fodder in writings from the west. The Russian audiences express admiration for Western thinkers and authors, and Dickens, George Sands, Goethe, and Fourier are mentioned throughout Part One. This admiration for the west and desire to cultivate similar intellectual advances in Russia during the 1840s is continued into Pyotr’s generation, but on an entirely different scale. The influence of the west in the 1870s, as presented in the context of the revolutionary group, is a far more sinister force. Stravrogin and Pyotr spend a considerable amount of time abroad; Dostoevsky frequently invokes Switzerland as a source of revolutionary publications and ideas. Nechaev fled to Switzerland, where he and Bakunin co-authored revolutionary pamphlets. The fugitive Nechaev likely chose Switzerland due to its free press and stability. Despite this historical fact, the role of Switzerland in “Demons” reinforces the link between Pyotr

Stepanovich and Nechaev. Membership, real or perceived, in an international
<https://assignbuster.com/anarchy-nihilism-and-liberalism-in-dostoevksys-demons/>

organization considerably elevated the status of the revolutionary group in a provincial town. Once again, Pyotr and Stavrogin play the role of manipulators: “ You’ve no doubt presented me there as some sort of member from abroad, connected with the Internationale, maybe an inspector?” Stavrogin suddenly asked.” No, not an inspector; the inspector won’t be you; you are a founding member from abroad who knows the most important secrets that’s your role.” (Dostoevsky 386)In addition to adding credibility, an exaggerated international affiliation would have increased the conspiratorial air among the group’s members. Legitimate international influences – Stavrogin and Pyotr’s early but philosophically formative experiences abroad – as well as imagined international supporting organizations are major implements by which Pyotr retains control over the group. As a supposed element of a large international organization dedicated to anarchistic overthrow of government, Pyotr demands absolute secrecy from members of the group. While there is a secret police presence (which Stepan also manipulates when framing his father), Pyotr actively exaggerates and lies about the necessity of absolute secrecy among members of the group. Clandestine practices increase the divide between Stepan’s relatively open and casual intellectual circles and Pyotr’s artificially secretive group. In addition, such secrecy facilitates the unflattering link with Nechaev and drives the plot of the novel: Shatov is lured away to retrieve a strategically concealed printing press.” Demons” is Dostoevsky’s satirical reaction to the nihilistic anarchism of the Nechaev movement. It depicts a generational divide in the Russia of the 1870s, and neatly places Stepan, an intellectual of the 1840s, against Pyotr, his revolutionary, nihilistic son. In his descriptions of Pyotr’s group, Dostoevsky directly parodies the anarchist <https://assignbuster.com/anarchy-nihilism-and-liberalism-in-dostoevksys-demons/>

organization and revolutionary violence of Nechaev's movement. His caricature of a violent, chaotic, and morally corrupt organization places it in direct opposition to the liberal movement of the 1840s, and the tension between these two creates the societal and intellectual divide central to the novel. Though the two movements are opposed, there is a link between them. While it would be difficult to argue that the nihilist movement grew directly out of the liberal movement of the 1840s, Dostoevsky establishes a literary connection in the relationship between Stepan and Pyotr: the two people (and movements) are ideologically disparate and relations between them are strained at best, but they are nonetheless genetically linked. Dostoevsky's patterned demonization of Pyotr and the depiction of his society as generally buffoonish soundly reject the principles and the violence of Nechaev, in favor of a more moderate time and temperament. Works Cited Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Demons*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. 2E New York: Vintage Books, 1994. Saunders, David. *Russia in the Age of Reaction and Reform: 1801-1881*. New York: Longman Publishing, 1992.