

# Serfdom essay sample



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The institution of serfdom within Russia was abolished in the year 1861. By that time most “enlightened” people within Russia realized the necessity of this act. The need for change in the Russian system was made apparent by the defeat in Crimea, and the numerous rebellions that had taken place over the past centuries. While nearly everyone agreed that change was necessary, the disagreement was over what change to enact. In “Father and Sons” Turgenev portrays the differing views of the Russian intelligentsia on the problem of reforming Russia.

Two sides are shown, divided along generational lines; the fathers believing in gradual reform of the system using Western models and maintaining certain traditional values, in comparison to the sons who advocate the complete destruction of the old system and the revocation of all values. The generation known as the Fathers was men who believed in progress and innovation. They advocated the adoption of Western technology and ways of ordering society. The idea of the well-ordered police-state was very popular among this generation, as well as the institution of autocracy.

Raised on the ideas of Hegel, the intelligentsia of this time believed in science and that everything could be explained rationally. These men sought to reform the system of land use in order to bring freedom and equality to the peasantry. “I have done well by the peasants, set up a model farm, so that all over the province I am known as a radical.” (Turgenev, 119) Nikolai loses a great deal of money in his attempt to modernize his farm, but he does it because he believes it to be right.

Herzen was a member of this generation, and he extolled the virtues of the peasant commune and the peasant himself. The Russian peasant has no morality except what naturally, instinctively flows from his communism; this morality is deeply rooted in the people; the little they know of the Gospel supports it; the flagrant injustice of the government and the landowner binds the peasant still more closely to his customs and to his commune. (Cracraft, 332) Herzen describes the peasant commune as the true heart of Russia, and the peasant as embodying the greatness that Russia will become.

A second institution that the men of the earlier generation rely upon is the Russian family. When Pavel is asked to name an institution that does not call for repudiation he names the Russian family saying, “ Take the family, then – the family as it exists among our peasants! ” (Turgenev, 128) The family is viewed as being the core of the society, and it is believed that if one were to go back to this core Russia would thrive. Nowhere are the ties of the blood relationship, the unity of the family and its natural extension, the commune, so clearly revealed as in the Russian people.

Family unity and the common ownership of property represented the original character of Slavic society. (Cracraft, 304) The peasant commune and the Russian family are two institutions that the Fathers rely on for the change they view as necessary within Russia. They wish to modernize by enhancing tradition and relying on principles. “ We of the older generation think that without principles taken as you say on trust one cannot move an inch or draw a single breath. ” (Turgenev, 94)

Bazarov states: “ I repudiate, cause the most useful thing one can do is to repudiate. (Turgenev, 69) The generation known as the sons was believers in the destruction of all institutions not beneficial to the common good, and since they viewed all institutions to not be for the common good, they were for the destruction of all institutions. They believed that by destroying all institutions and values that were obstructing progress they would open up Russia to future progress. When asked what their plans were following the destruction, they answer that someone else will figure that out. These men called themselves nihilists, claiming that they believed in nothing.

The nihilists believed that only that which is practical and useful should remain. Art and music had no value to them, only science was valued.

Bazarov states: “ A decent chemist is twenty times more useful than any poet. ” (Turgenev, 97) They viewed the Fathers as being too sentimental and impractical. Also, they called for action against the government rather than simple discussion as the Fathers had done. “ Allow me, Pavel Petrovich, Bazarov put in, you say you respect yourself and you sit with your arms folded: what sort of benefit does that do the bien public? (Turgenev, 122) Many times in the novel possible violent action by the nihilists is hinted at.

“ Aren’t you just talking like all the rest? We may have our faults but we are not guilty of that one. ” (Turgenev, 126) Bazarov quickly changes the subject, but it is obvious that he and Arkady had some inkling of future action that they did not want to discuss. The men of the Sons generation planned to destroy all institutions and to do it themselves, this sets them very drastically apart from the Fathers. On various occasions throughout the

novel the Fathers and the Sons argue with each other about the future path of Russia.

These two generations have very differing plans for the future of Russia, and neither is able to understand the other. The Fathers believing in reform based on key institutions such as the commune and the Russian family is aghast at the idea of destroying all values within Russia. Pavel states: I cannot believe that you two really know the Russian people, that you represent their needs and aspirations! No, the Russians are not what you imagine them to be. They hold traditions sacred, they are a patriarchal people – they cannot live without faith... (Turgenev, 124)

The sons view the Fathers as being hopelessly out of date. They see them as being muddled in the past, and obsessed with discussing but never taking action. Bazarov describes Nikolai Petrovich as such; “ Your father’s a good man, said Bazarov, but he’s old-fashioned, he’s had his day. ” (Turgenev, 118) Neither Sons nor Fathers can understand the other’s position. Both wish to reform Russia, but they vary greatly in their views on how to do it. One question that one must ask throughout the novel is: What view on reform within Russia does Turgenev himself believe?

Through his novel Turgenev in many ways supports the views of the Fathers. He appears to the reader to be a moderate man, who advocated gradual reform and change. The only character who truly believes in Nihilism is Bazarov. Arkady certainly is not a true Nihilist, in that he enjoys music, and nature. When he takes his leave of Bazarov he stops thinking nihilistically, and instead starts to enjoy his life with Katya. The third Nihilist portrayed in

the novel is Sitnikov; however, Sitnikov is shown to be a fool who simply claims to be a Nihilist because it is trendy.

As for Bazarov in the end he realizes how useless his life has truly been. “

Russia needs me.... No, clearly she doesn't. And who is needed? The cobbler's needed, the tailor's needed, the butcher... sells meat... ”

(Turgenev, 289) In the end the people who are happy are the moderates.

Arkady goes to live with his Father, and together they reform the farm so that it becomes prosperous. Arkady gives up Nihilism and finds happiness, and by showing this development to us Turgenev is clearly advocating on philosophy over the other. Turgenev is a Father, but he understands the Sons.

Turgenev manages to create characters in “ Fathers and Sons” that embody their generations. Pavel is the perfect representative of the Fathers. He extols the virtues of the peasant commune, and the Russian family. Firm in his convictions and desirous of gradual reform he is a true moderate.

Bazarov is also a perfect representative of Nihilism. He truly believes in the destruction of everything and the value of science alone. In the end like Nihilism itself he dies. Turgenev gives us the reader an accurate and descriptive depiction of the conflict between these two generations; the Fathers versus the Sons.