



Feodor Dostoevsky, Prophet of a God-Resisting Revolution¹

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Piotr Verkhovensky: We believe that our program is right and that everyone, upon accepting it, will be happy. Here is why we are resolved on blood, because happiness will be bought with blood.

Stepan Verkhovensky: And what if it will not be bought, what then?

Piotr Verkhovensky: We are certain that it will be bought, and this is enough for us.²

This brief dialogue from Feodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Possessed* sums up the great Russian novelist's dark prophecy about the coming God-resisting revolution. He understood the modern revolutionary to be a person with a new sort of psychology, a person who saw himself as the agent of an apocalyptic end to one age (the age of Christ) and the initiator of another one (the age of universal enlightenment and happiness for the people). Their duty and obligation was to the program of the new age, even if this meant going against the wishes of the people themselves. As the revolutionary Rakitin says to Alyosha's objection that the people will not willingly surrender their Christianity, "Well, then, eliminate the

¹This essay was originally presented in March, 1992, at Saint Olaf College as a lecture for students who were reading *Crime and Punishment*.

²As quoted in Donald W. Treadgold, *The West in Russia and China*, vol. 1, *Russia 1472-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973) 206-7.

people, curtail them, force them to be silent. Because the European enlightenment is more important than the people."³

According to the Russian critic Dmitry Merezhkovsky:

[Dostoevsky] fears and loathes revolution but cannot imagine anything other than this fearful and loathsome revolution. The revolution for him is an absolute, if negative, measure of all things, a universal category of thought. It's all he thinks about, talks about: he's mad about the revolution. If anyone brought the revolution down on Russia, like a magician summoning a storm, it was Dostoevski. From Raskolnikov to Ivan Karamazov, all his favorite heroes are political and religious rebels, criminals before the laws of man and God and, at the same time, atheist-mystics, not simply negators of God but resisters of God.⁴

It is going too far to say, as Merezhkovsky does, that Dostoevsky called down the revolution on Russia. It is going too far to say that modern revolutionary intellectuals caused the Russian revolution. But it is accurate to say with Merezhkovsky that the actual Russian revolutionary intelligentsia exhibited exactly the traits one finds in Dostoevsky's political and religious rebels, who dared to step over the laws of man and dared to resist God on behalf of human happiness. From that standpoint, the communist revolutionaries who arrived in Petrograd thirty-six years after his death proved to be precisely those self-appointed social engineers, whose purpose was to forge new, perfect, and happy anthropological types: the new Soviet men and women. Trotsky, for example, writes that the new revolutionary environment created by Bolshevism is

the shell in which the cultural construction and self-education of Communist man will be enclosed, will develop all the vital elements of contemporary art to the highest point. Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser, subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical. The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.⁵

Such utopian dreaming, Dostoevsky believed, resulted from the attempt of modern revolutionaries to kick God off the throne and to take his place. Thus, when the Russian revolution of 1917 overthrew the tsar, Russian radicals sought to overthrow Christianity along with him, something they showed in their extravagant acts of defilement of sacred objects, including lining up against the wall and shooting icons of the saints, the Holy Mother of God, and Christ. As the newly anointed agents of history, the revolutionaries saw themselves as Christ substitutes taking on the sufferings of an oppressed mankind. Vladimir Mayakovsky's poetry of revolutionary action perfectly expresses the new role:

On the bridge of time,
abused and despised,

³Quoted in Konstantin Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky: His Life and Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) 592.

⁴Quoted in Andrei Sinyavsky, *Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History* (New York: Arcade, 1990) 10-11.

⁵Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1957) 255.

redeemer of earthly love,
I'll keep
my vigil here
and for all be chastised,
I'll pay for all
and for all I'll weep.⁶

No one asked Mayakovsky to weep for all and redeem them through his self-sacrifice. He

was simply delivering on a long-standing Russian revolutionary promise to bring to an end the old testament of Christianity and initiate the new testament of earthly brotherhood, the kingdom of Man, achieved by the few, who are powerfully armed with ideas and determination.

I. REVOLUTIONARY SAINTS

Dostoevsky was the first to understand the religious impulse prompting revolutionaries to assume such awesome responsibilities; to offer themselves as new, living saints and intercessors for humankind. His rebel heroes are fatally wounded by the consciousness that evil and suffering exist in a world about which God is not sufficiently concerned. God is not good enough or merciful enough to deal adequately with this suffering. It is up to those who do care to act in God's place, as Ivan Karamazov tells his brother Alyosha in his little "poem," "The Tale of the Grand Inquisitor."

Dostoevsky's heroic God-resisting rebels become like the Satan of the parable of Job. Satan grants the existence of God, but seeks to test him, provoke him, place him in a contest to see who is better, stronger, more just. And the answer the God-resister, the compassionate God-substitute, reaches is that he is more just, more concerned, more truly capable of attaining human salvation. Not the eternal life of the kingdom of God, of course, that would be a fantasy—the one to which Ivan Karamazov turns in his ticket—but the material happiness and security of the kingdom of Man.

Salvation might be bloody and the road to the new kingdom known only in terms of unconditional faith—the sort of faith and certainty that leads Raskolnikov to think that with the single murder of an old and disgusting woman, her money

could beget a hundred, a thousand good deeds and fresh starts! Hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives could be put on the right path, dozens of families rescued from poverty, from ruin, collapse, from decay, from the venereal wards of the hospitals—all this with her money! Kill her, take her money, dedicate it to serving mankind, to the general welfare.⁷

And interestingly enough, what the murderer chooses with his free will—the idea(s) he entertains and adopts—is executed as if it were the result of vast impersonal forces (fate, justice, necessity, the general welfare, the European en-

⁶"It" (1923); translation by Dorian Rottenberg in *Mayakovsky*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1986) 126.

⁷*Crime and Punishment* (New York: Signet, 1968) 73.

lightenment, etc.). In Raskolnikov's case, these impersonal forces begin to look like the power of evil to which he has surrendered his will: "When judgment fails, the devil takes a hand," he thinks at one point. He believes the devil is merely offering him a helping hand.

II. CHRIST, THE CHURCH, AND FRATERNITY

Dostoevsky's fear and loathing of the modern political and religious rebel derived from his understanding of humanity and its life as problematic. As he wrote to his brother Michael in

1839, “Man is a mystery. One must solve it...I occupy myself with this mystery because I want to be a man.”⁸ Through Christ—the only source of real freedom—and brotherhood humankind might yet be redeemed in history. Christian values still remained strong enough among the Russian people to serve as a source for reconciliation and freedom among classes, peoples, and civilizations.

Dostoevsky’s task as a writer was to make this possibility known. He took the “soil” of Russia as his point of departure in creating a “Christian philosophy” comprised of Christ and fraternity within the context of the Christian church. The reference to the special Russian relationship of a Christian people to their native soil lent the new philosophy the quality of a Christian nationalism that was at once universal and particular, rooted in love of God and love of neighbor. In this way, Russia might surmount the already apparent disease of a morally sick Europe, cut off since the enlightenment and the French revolution (and Napoleon) from its own older Christian mooring. Modern capitalists of Europe could only build “anthills,” while their critics, the socialists of Europe, who attempted to achieve brotherhood solely by reason and calculation, could only breed other “anthills.” Russia could provide the true Christian brotherhood that might reconcile Russia with Europe and lead to spiritual healing. This was the needed first step toward universal peace: “We are brothers, we are all your brothers, and we are many and strong; be at ease and of good cheer, fear nothing and rely on us.”⁹

Dostoevsky announced his new Christian philosophy in 1861, momentous in Russian history as the year when the serfs were emancipated. Twenty-four million people now gained their freedom at the hands of the Tsar Liberator, Alexander II, from a bondage that was tantamount to slavery. The actual terms of the emancipation settlement, however, seemed to mock the altruistic rhetoric surrounding it. Disillusionment provoked great dissatisfaction among Russian radicals, who saw the emancipation as nothing more than simply hanging new humanitarian placards over the same old slavery made worse by the loss of whatever security the serf system may have provided. Organized underground political parties date precisely from these years, threatening to undermine the very reconciliation between classes Dostoevsky hoped might arise from the opportunity provided by the emancipation.

⁸Quoted in Treadgold, *The West*, 204.

⁹Ibid., 206.

Dostoevsky became alarmed at the new revolutionary movement and launched himself into a series of novels directed against it, beginning with their philosophical preface, *Notes from Underground* (1863). This was followed by *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1868), *The Possessed* (1872), *A Raw Youth* (1875), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-1880); these comprised a sort of tragedy in five acts with *Notes from Underground* as a prologue. In this dramatic presentation, the tragedy of Raskolnikov is a classical one: he is defeated only by fate, to which he has enslaved himself by his estrangement from Christ—in Christ alone there is freedom.

This was scarcely the message Russian revolutionaries hoped to hear from one of Russia’s greatest writers. Nor did they like the portrait Dostoevsky drew of them. But the image proved to be an accurate one. The modern revolutionary God-resister prophesied by Dostoevsky later did undertake the very experiment in assuming the role of God and Christ—God-building,

as it was sometimes called—that directly contributed to a suffering tragedy for the revolutionaries themselves and for millions of others, a suffering perhaps unparalleled in human history. The new Soviet civilization proved not to be the kingdom of Happiness and Freedom, but rather the kingdom of Man, that is, of Pharaoh. The building blocks of reason, calculation, and unqualified belief in the thaumaturgic power of human will only succeeded in building the new pyramids, not solving the mystery of humankind as Dostoevsky understood it.