

Returning Revolutionaries: Collective History and Limiting the Modern Cosmopolitan

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Abstract:

In the novel *Demons*, a group of revolutionary young men corrupted by Western ideals descend on a small town in the Russian countryside and disrupt the locals with their crimes against each other and their indecencies to the community at large. Although Dostoevsky cast the novel as a warning to Russia on the dangers of Western Enlightenment, his presentation of the relationship between one's nation of birth and the moral cost of living abroad offers a powerful way to approach the recent phenomena of Western citizens travelling to foreign countries to engage in acts of terrorism. By first developing the novel's account of the spiritual cost to living exiled from one's home country, *Demons* can then be used to discuss both the Russian revolutionaries of Dostoevsky's time and the recent concerns of returning ISIS combatants. It will be argued that *Demons* offers a conceptualization of citizenship that opposes the West's privileging of the autonomous and rational individual by broadening the duties of a citizen. This paper presents Dostoevsky's novel as a critique of the Western notions of individualism by emphasizing a relationship between citizen and state built on a responsibility to collective history as a means to reject the universal and progressive understanding of justice central to a revolutionary project. As a result, the presentation of westernized Russians returning home can be used to help understand the moral significance of the present day reality of terror tourism.

In the novel *Demons*, Fyodor Dostoevsky tells a story of citizens returning home from abroad. Seemingly corrupted by their time in the West, Russian radicals unmoor the social conventions of a quiet country town and, in the process of doing so, destroy both the community and themselves. While Dostoevsky presents the novel as a warning to Russia on the dangers of Western enlightenment, the work has enjoyed new interest as a means to critique contemporary scholarship on terrorism.¹ In some respects this choice should come as no surprise. The novel's plot was inspired by the widely publicized 1869 murder of Ivan Ivanov, a student killed by fellow members of a secret society who feared he may become a government informant.² Characters in the novel were explicitly modeled after participants in the murder, not least of which was the fictional leader of the 'demonic' revolutionaries, Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky, who was modeled after his real life counterpart Sergei Nechaev - the leader of the murderous gang.³ As is often noted, Dostoevsky was himself involved in the Petrashevsky Circle - a liberal utopian secret society. His participation saw him condemned to death, followed by a pardoning from Tsar Nicholas I, and, subsequently, a sentencing that sent Dostoevsky to a Siberian labour camp.⁴

¹ Nina Pelikan Strauss argues that "Dostoevsky's novel probes fantasies that those who seek to understand terrorism now approach via social science," and goes on to suggest that the "social and political theory, which government officials presumably "keep up," cannot fathom the erotically charged relations that drive suicide terrorism" ("From Dostoevsky to Al-Qaeda: what fiction says to social science" in *Common Knowledge* 12.2 (2006): 197-8). Similarly, Robin Morgan claims "fiction writers reveal what remains a mystery to terrorism experts" (*The Demon Lover: Roots of Terrorism* (New York: Washington Square, 1989): 19). For other examples, please see: John Moran, *The Solution of the Fist: Dostoevsky and the Roots of Modern Terrorism* (Toronto: Lexington Books, 2009), Patricia Laurie Zodi, *A Creative Passion: revolutionary terrorism in Dostoevsky's Demons and beyond, 1981-1916* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 2002), Claudia Verhoeven, *The Odd Man Karakazov: Imperial Russia, Modernity and the Birth of Terrorism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009): 85-103, and Elisabetta Brighi, "The mimetic politics of lone-wolf terrorism" in *Journal of International Political Theory* Vol. 11(1) (2015):145-164.

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary, volume 1: 1873-1876*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994): 279-292.

³ Co-authored with anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, Sergei Nechaev's *Catechism of a Revolutionist* offers perhaps the best description of the character Pyotr: "The Revolutionists is a Doomed Man. He has no private interests, no affairs, sentiments, ties, property, not even a name of his own. His entire being is devoured by one purpose, one thought, one passion – the revolution."

⁴ For more on his time in the prison camps, see: Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: the years of ordeal, 1850-1859*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

Although he moved away from Western ideals as he came to embrace the Gospels and the Orthodox Church while in the camps, Dostoevsky nevertheless associated with numerous political dissidents who would later serve to inspire characters in his literary corpus. Finding personal peace in religion, Dostoevsky nevertheless continued to confront the presence of a utopian ideal – uniformly assumed to come from the West - that demanded revolutionary overthrowing of the established Russian identity. However, unlike modern commentators who read into *Demons* an individually radicalized psychological assessment of a terrorist’s mind (something, perhaps, more easily found in *Crime and Punishment*), I will argue that Dostoevsky uses the work to articulate a robust political philosophy intended to privilege a collectivized history under the stewardship of a national theology.

This paper seeks to draw out Dostoevsky’s political thought on the matter of terrorism. In no small part, his presentation of the relationship between one’s nation of birth and the presumed moral cost of living abroad would appear to expand on the work of those who currently privilege the psychological profile of a terrorist in the text. While the two approaches are not incommensurable, the former draws out of *Demons* an account of history that significantly challenges western readers. It suggests that Dostoevsky is using the novel to articulate normative standards of practice for the Russian people. Such a distinction confronts an individualistic-leaning reading of *Demons* because it suggests a conclusion opposite a typically western liberal democratic solution; present approaches to the text assume the western paradigm whereby properly manicured psychological health generally leads to law-abiding and morally upright citizens. By developing the novel’s account of the spiritual cost to living in exile, it can be argued that *Demons* offers a conceptualization of citizenship that opposes the West’s account of the autonomous and rational citizen by broadening the duties of citizenship itself. Fundamentally, the novel critiques Western

individualism through its emphasis on the relationship between citizen and state predicated on a shared responsibility to collective history; *Demons* serves as a means to reject the progressive understanding of justice central to a revolutionary project. As a result, Dostoevsky's presentation of westernized Russians returning home can be used to offer an account of the potential analytic significance to the present day reality of terrorist activity through analogy with the account, in *Demons*, of the necessary localizing of man into the particularized history of the Russian nation-state.

Collective History

It is not a new observation that people who return from an extended time abroad can be surprised to find that their home has changed. In Ancient Greece, Homer tells of Odysseus' return from the battle of Troy (by way of a lengthy detour) only to discover his estate burdened with suitors for his wife's hand. Alternatively, a return home from time spent abroad can reveal the changes in oneself. Gulliver is quick to board new vessels after each trip home, finding England insufficiently interesting in the face of his many adventures.⁵ It is also possible to combine the two. In the opening scene to *August 1914*, Solzhenitsyn describes the alien German countryside as it appears to the invading Russian army and notes that, "newly acquired views also helped to make [one] feel a stranger."⁶ Upon the soldiers' return, not only had they themselves changed over the course of the war but the Russian homeland had as well. The subsequent books in the *Red Wheel*

⁵ After his voyage to Lilliput, Gulliver left England after two months. Returning from his voyage to Brobdingnag, he waited only ten days before heading back to sea. Gulliver's return from the Houyhnhnms, however, offers something striking. He writes: "My reconciliation to the Yahoo-kind in general might not be so difficult, if they would be content with those vices and follies only which nature hath entitled them to. [...] but when I behold a lump of deformity and diseases both in body and mind, smitten with *pride*, it immediately breaks all the measures of my patience. [...] I dwell the longer upon this subject from the desire I have to make the society of an English Yahoo by any means not insupportable; and therefore I entreat those who have any tincture of this absurd vice, that they will not presume to come in my sight."

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, (New York: New American Library, 1999), 311.

⁶ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Red Wheel I: August 1914*, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1989), 5.

series then serve to chart the cause and consequences of the Russian revolution of 1917 as a response to the initial war-driven alienation that bifurcated citizen from state.⁷

Solzhenitsyn similarly articulated this possibility in his 1978 Harvard Address: “A World Split Apart.” While those in the audience expected a speech on the effects of the Cold War from the Russian dissident and at the time current political exile, they were instead given a meditation on the growing schism between man and Spirit, Church and state, and the divide between earthly and heavenly. Although beginning his talk by criticizing many aspects of American life – among them the press, a lack of courage, a lack of willpower, and heady materialism – Solzhenitsyn quickly drew parallels between the symptoms and a larger issue:

This means that the mistake must be at the root, at the very basis of human thinking in the past centuries. I refer to the prevailing Western view of the world which was first born during the Renaissance and found its political expression from the period of the Enlightenment. It became the basis for government and social science and could be defined as rationalistic humanism or humanistic autonomy: the proclaimed and enforced autonomy of man from any higher force above him. It could also be called anthropocentricity, with man seen as the center of everything that exists.⁸

Solzhenitsyn believed that the modern age was, in many ways, the result of a turn away from the religious submission found in the middle ages and towards the unqualified hubristic belief in mankind’s ability to serve as master and maker of the world around him. This turn, however, did not necessarily have to conclude with a spiritual crisis, even if one had currently emerged.⁹

Looking to the American founding, he went on to claim:

[A]t the time of its birth, all individual human rights were granted because man is God’s creature. That is, freedom was given to the individual conditionally, in the assumption of his constant religious responsibility. [...] Subsequently, however, all such limitations were discarded everywhere in the West; a total liberation occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice. State systems were becoming increasingly and

⁷ For an alternative take to Solzhenitsyn’s on the Russian divide, see: Howard Stein, “Russian Nationalism and the Divided Soul of the Westernizers and Slavophiles” *Ethos*, vol, 4(4) (Winter 1976): 403-438.

⁸ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard: the address, twelve early responses, six later reflections*, (Washington: University Press of America, 1980)

⁹ I rely on Tom Darby’s use of ‘spiritual crisis’ here. For more, please see: Tom Darby “On Spiritual Crisis, Globalization, and Planetary Rule” in *Faith, Reason, and Political Life Today*. Eds. Peter Augustine Lawler and Dale McConkey (New York: Lexington Books, 2001).

totally materialistic. The West ended up by truly enforcing human rights, sometimes even excessively, but man's sense of responsibility to God and society grew dimmer and dimmer.¹⁰

The spiritual rot described in Solzhenitsyn's diagnosis transcends the birth of the nation-state. At present there is, he argued, a fundamental divorce between a united people under a common God and the way in which those people perceive reality¹¹: the ordering principle of a community must exist above and beyond the ways in which its participants perceive the world. That is to say, the collective purpose binds a people together and, as a consequence, sublimates their individuality into a community under one God. Community operates in a direct relationship with the transcendental insofar as there is an ordering principle. The perception of reality within that relationship not only shapes the community and the individual's role therein, but, in addition, functions independent of that higher purpose. Put another way, that which draws a community together in actuality and that which is perceived to draw people together are not always the same thing.¹² As other novels in Dostoevsky's body of work suggest, perception and reality may be entirely opposed to each other.¹³ As a consequence, what Solzhenitsyn diagnosis in both Russia and the West is, for him, the same phenomenon. And, although Solzhenitsyn's Harvard address claims that "the Twentieth century's moral poverty was not imagined even as late as in the Nineteenth century," it nevertheless draws heavily from Dostoevsky's attack on Western idealism

¹⁰ *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard*

¹¹ Solzhenitsyn goes on to clarify that that 'common God' or modernity is Science, Progress, and Reason.

¹² G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie, (New York: Dover Publications, 2003). After his release from the camps, the first requests for books Dostoevsky sent included Vico, Ranke, Kant, Guizot, and Hegel.

¹³ See, for example, the 'Myth of the Grand Inquisitor' in *Brothers Karamazov* where the Inquisitor - having captured Jesus - proclaims: "Yes we will make them work, but in the hours free from labor we will arrange their lives like a children's game, with children's songs, choruses, and innocent dancing. Oh, we will allow them to sin, too; they are weak and powerless, and they will love us like children for allowing them to sin. We will tell them that every sin will be redeemed if it is committed with our permission and that we allow them to sin because we love them, and as the punishment for these sins, very well, we take it upon ourselves." Believing himself to be liberating the masses from the earthly burden of toil, the boast reveals the gross infantilizing of members of the Catholic Church.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Brother Karamazov* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 259.

and the latter's attempt to staunch the perception that historical progress inexorably marches forward.¹⁴

For example, *Crime and Punishment* (published in 1866 and three years before the Ivan Ivanov murder that inspired *Demons*), opens with the main character Raskolnikov rationalizing the robbery and murder of his elderly landlady for the purpose of forwarding what he deemed to be a more enlightened use of her estate. During the crime, Raskolnikov is startled by a young woman unexpectedly entering the house and kills her in desperation, along with the landlady. As the novel unfolds, the reader is presented with the murderer's growing spiritual pain, hopelessness, and eventual confession to the crimes. The story ends in a Siberian prison work camp (remember Dostoevsky's own prison sentence) and with the closing lines: "but here begins a new account, the account of a man's gradual renewal, the account of his gradual regeneration, his gradual transition from one world to another, his acquaintance with a new hitherto completely unknown reality."¹⁵ In Dostoevsky's conclusion, the reader is invited to reflect on a soul's capacity for redemption through the punishment of physical labour and renewed submission to an existent but hitherto unknown ordering principle residing beyond the self.¹⁶

¹⁴ Solzhenitsyn, *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard*.

¹⁵ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, Trans. Richard Pevar and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1992), 551.

¹⁶ By contrast, in his earlier work *Notes from Underground*, the reader is given a clear image of man who is blocked from transcendental experience because of his flat soul. As a caricature of modern enlightenment men, the underground man dithers about dithering and accomplishes nothing. Such a claim draws from two passages in particular. In the first example, the unnamed narrator proclaims: "Gentlemen, I am tormented by questions; answer them for me. You, for instance, want to cure men of their old habits and reform their will in accordance with science and good sense. But how do you know, not only that it is possible, but also that it is *desirable* to reform man that way?" Second, in an unnervingly prescient observation that expands beyond the underground man's abilities of self-reflection, he laments: "We are oppressed at being men – men with a real individual body and blood, we are ashamed of it, and we think it a disgrace and try to contrive to be some sort of impossible generalized man. We are stillborn, and for generations past have been begotten, not by living fathers, and that suits us better and better. We are developing a taste for it. Soon we shall contrive to be born somehow from an idea. But enough; I don't want to write more from 'Underground.'" In both cases, whether he realizes it or not, the underground man is fixating on the possibility of an abstract idea overtaking man's relationship with reality. The irony of placing such concerns with this man rests on his inability to act on such prodigious thinking. He eschews the possibility of freeing himself from the bondage of ideas to instead self-aggrandize in a perpetual cycle of worrying about his worry.

Throughout the novel Dostoevsky plays with the concept of lying, writing at one time that “lying is man’s only privilege over all other organisms” and at another point suggesting that “lying in one’s own way is almost better than telling the truth in someone else’s way.”¹⁷ It is up to the reader to determine if such comments are directed at the audience or are indicative of the character’s self-delusion. Either way, one can see echoes of Solzhenitsyn’s formulation that the actual and perceived principles of communal ordering are not necessarily connected, or at the very least not bound by the same rules. Raskolnikov, believing himself to be a ‘great man’ unconstrained by the morals of common people, commits his crimes under the influence of self-deception but eventually comes undone when the previously denied existential order makes escaping punishment not only undesirable but impossible. The reader is led to believe that Raskolnikov acted under a mistaken use of reason and that he suffers moral anguish as a consequence of those actions. His transgressions, however are more nuanced than this initial suggestion.

The first clue to a deeper reading rests in the relationship between the mastery of circumstance and the whim of chance demonstrated by the murder itself.¹⁸ Intent on acting out his philosophy, Raskolnikov claims:

If the discoveries of Kepler and Newton could not have been made known except by sacrificing the lives of on, a dozen, a hundred, or more men, Newton would have had the right, would indeed have been in duty bound [...] to eliminate the dozen of the hundred men for the sake of making his discoveries known to the whole of humanity. But it does not follow that Newton had a right to murder people right and left and to steal every day in the market.¹⁹

Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, trans. Constance Garnett, (New York: Dover Publications, 1992): 22 and 91, respectively.

¹⁷ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 202.

¹⁸ Raskolnikov’s name derives from the Russian word *kolot’*, which means ‘to split, cleave’ and the prefix *ras-/raz-* ‘asunder.’ Similar to the Greek verb *skhizo*, ‘cleave, split, be divided,’ as in the word ‘schizophrenia,’ one can see the purpose to Dostoevsky’s choice in name whereby he is a man torn between two poles, reason and revelation, or, perhaps more appropriate to the context of Rousseau, artifice and reality.

Charles e. Passage, *Character names in Dostoevsky’s fiction*, (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1982), 58.

¹⁹ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 211.

It is by the use of his reason that Raskolnikov is led to murder. Yet, it is precisely when reason fails to provide him a murder weapon that, by chance, he spies an axe lying around at the necessary moment to complete the deed.²⁰ For Dostoevsky, the limitations of reason are initially hidden by the brief success. For all his reason, Raskolnikov fails to remember to bring a tool for the job at hand. The murder of the landlady and her unsuspecting guest seems to echo the Enlightenment's promise of creating political order - but the deficiencies of the rationalization inevitably come to reveal themselves. For all the grand narrative signalling Newton and Kepler's net benefit to humanity, *Crime and Punishment* devolves the rhetoric to a simply student-robber killing his landlady with an axe. Raskolnikov, as a stand in for the Enlightenment more broadly, is led to believe a self-deception until the instability of the platform is undermined by another, seemingly random, event – his fevers, restless sleep, and delirium.

Raskolnikov's insistence that he act in accordance with reason disguises his true motivation from both himself and the reader. Dostoevsky sees the murders as satisfying a western inspired idea (the freedom of great men to act amorally) and, as a result, Raskolnikov's attempt to satisfy his vision of himself places him at odds with his (Russian) community. His desire for recognition cannot be satisfied by an existence within participatory community but, rather, requires an individualized account of self-imposed importance that emerges in contradistinctions to that particular community. As described in the opening of the novel, Raskolnikov was "so immersed in himself and had isolated himself so much from everyone that he was afraid not only of meeting his landlady but of meeting anyone at all."²¹ The interiority of the deception and the presence of a prideful hubris is revealed through the act of the crime itself. Raskolnikov does not seek the

²⁰ In the scene of the murder Raskolnikov discovers he has shown up without a weapon. In a panic he scans the room and finds an axe laying against a doorframe.
Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 69-70.

²¹ *Ibid*, 3.

admiration of others, for he is terrified of them, and he does not act out of anger towards those he kills. Instead, he murders the old lady precisely to satisfy his idea of ‘great men,’ those few who exist beyond the confines of morality. It is a group of which he believes himself to be a member.²² The self-deception of thinking of himself as one who can live beyond good and evil becomes apparent almost immediately when he falls sick with fever and delirium.²³ The inability to manufacture ordered souls through the psychological rigour of modernity – under the presumption of philosophical demands on amoral great men - is presented as the demonstrable failure of Raskolnikov’s interpretation of Newton and Kepler in particular, and the Enlightenment project in general.²⁴

The true motivations for the murder, that is to say the quest to satisfy one’s desire to be recognized, must be understood through Raskolnikov’s relationship with Sonya. Sofya Semyonovna, a prostitute with whom Raskolnikov becomes acquainted during the events of *Crime and Punishment*, knew the women he killed. Upon learning of his crimes, she pleads for him to submit to the earth by telling him to “go now, this minute, stand in the crossroads, bow down, and first kiss the earth you’ve defiled, then bow to the whole world, on all four sides, and say aloud to everyone: ‘I have killed!’ Then God will send you life again.”²⁵ Sonya repeatedly begs him to “accept suffering and redeem yourself by it” and insists “that’s what you must do.”²⁶ In comparison to one of Dostoevsky’s earliest works, Sonya exists in opposition to the Underground Man.

²² Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 39.

²³ One could be struck by the similarity between Raskolnikov’s immediate reaction to his crime and Nietzsche’s discussion of the pale criminal who is unable to live in accordance to the teachings of Zarathustra and becomes reminiscent of a stillborn. The relationship between the concept of ‘great men’ and the reality of most being unfit for the attempt, like the pale criminal, haunt these enlightened men. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 45. Also cf. Rousseau, “fifth walk,” *Solitary Walker*.

²⁴ Lev Shestov, *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche*, trans. Bernard Martin and Spencer Roberts, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969).

²⁵ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 420.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Antithetical to the spiritual deepening of man through suffering and the marked ascent from baseness that defines Raskolnikov in the conclusion of *Crime and Punishment*, the pathetic inhumanness described in *Notes from the Underground* reveals a man who retreats into himself and burrows, like a worm, away from community, moral choice, and suffering. Whereas Raskolnikov is told that he must open himself up to the ordering principle of community (God) by embracing the pains of earthly existence, the reader of *Notes* is presented with the lowest possible form of man. The psychological representation of the disordered soul throughout Dostoevsky's work demonstrates the depths to which men can sink and the saintly heights to which the few can rise. Sonya, by imploring Raskolnikov to go out into the world, demonstrates a knowledge of the natural limits to man, presented as the contest between a soul's full openness to the eternally present ordering principles of community and restricting oneself to the utterly limiting boundaries of the self.

By having Sonya as the driving force in Raskolnikov's rehabilitation, Dostoevsky corrects the erroneous motivation of external recognition in the ideal of moral autonomy. Sonya's own submission to the world invites Raskolnikov to do the same. She presents herself as a part of the world and, by extension, affirms the reality of a community's shared principles in God. In so doing, she removes Raskolnikov's ability to treat her as a means to an end (as he did the landlady) when he begins to pursue his salvation in the labour camps and submit himself to embracing the same earth as the crossroads that Sonya initially implored him to seek out. As a consequence, Raskolnikov's spiritual health only improves in her absence from the daily work of the prison camp.²⁷ Their relationship, opposite the rationalized utilitarian relationship with his landlady that

²⁷ During the Epilogue to *Crime and Punishment*, Sonya has followed Raskolnikov to Siberia. There are visitation hours, which renew him each time, but it is in when he is alone during the working day that Raskolnikov comes to find himself purged of his western ideas of 'liberation'.

Raskolnikov invents, functions such that neither is dependent on the other and, in so doing, both exist independently while maintaining a sublimated relationship with the community as a whole. The unconsummated longing in the world that remains of their relationship to one another appears to survive the fragility of mankind because they treat each other as a mere participant in the world, thus acknowledging the transitory meaning of their individual activities within the community. Raskolnikov's healing comes from the fact that he was "ashamed precisely because he, Raskolnikov, has perished so blindly, hopelessly, vainly, and stupidly, by some sort of decree of blind fate, and to reconcile himself and submit to the 'meaninglessness' of such a decree if he wanted to find at least some peace for himself."²⁸ Prior to the confessions of his crimes, Raskolnikov echoes the opening of *Notes from Underground* and the incredible smallness of isolated men.²⁹ But, where the story of redemption is missing for the Underground Man, Sonya's symbolic presentation of a properly ordered soul offers Raskolnikov a path he can take to salvation that does not privilege his own self-motivations.

Demons

Demons, like *Crime and Punishment*, underscores the dichotomy between submission to a community and the false promise of liberation through Western ideals of liberation. In a scene in which the character Nikolai Vsevolodovich, son to the matriarch of the rural community, had just finished guaranteeing the suicide of a fellow member of the revolutionaries, a conversation with

²⁸ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 543.

²⁹ "I am a sick man... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver is diseased. However, I know nothing at all about my disease, and do not know for certain what ails me. I don't consult a doctor for it, and never have, though I have a respect for medicine and doctors. Besides, I am extremely superstitious, sufficiently so to respect medicine, any (I am well-educated enough not to be superstitious, but I am superstitious). N, I refuse to consult a doctor from spite. Of course, I can't explain who it is precisely that I am mortifying in this case by my spite: I am perfectly well aware that I cannot "pay out" the doctors by not consulting them; I know better than anyone that by all this I am only injuring myself and no one else. But still, if I don't consult a doctor it is from spite. My liver is bad, well – let it get worse!"

Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, 1.

an old acquaintance echoes the presentation of Raskolnikov's earlier self-motivated delusions.

Recounting his years abroad, the acquaintance Shatov tells Nikolai:

“You're an atheist because you're a squire. You've lost the distinction between evil and good because you've ceased to recognize your own nation. A new generation is coming, straight from the nation's heart, and you won't recognize it, neither will son or father, nor will I, for I, too, am a squire. Listen, acquire God by labour; the whole essence is there, or else you'll disappear like vile mildew; do it by labour.”³⁰

Like Sonya's exclamation to Raskolnikov upon learning of his murders in *Crime and Punishment*, there is a call to preserve the wayward soul through suffering the exertions of physical labour. However, unlike Raskolnikov's Enlightenment-inspired self-delusion, the language of *Demons* has brought forward an explicit relationship between an individual's soul and the consequence of distance from its nation. In this regard, Dostoevsky is offering the definition of a nation's history by the suffering of its citizens. He is bridging individual spiritual growth with the collective public good. Community is thus presented as self-referential due to the necessary amalgamation of individual participation within the broader whole. When individuals cease to participate they lose their way, as in the case of Nikolai's travels abroad, and at the same time, they can spiritually reorder themselves by submitting to the community, as seen with Raskolnikov in the labour camps.

By contrast, Kirillov's suicide (that was guaranteed by Nikolai)³¹ is all the more hideous. Concerned that suspicions will begin to fall on the revolutionaries for the flurry of recent disruptions around town, it was determined that one of them would need to step forward. Kirillov, already interested in leaving the secret society, volunteers to kill himself and take the blame in service of the cause.³² Right before the deed is done, Kirillov discusses his ambitions to die for

³⁰ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, (New York: Everyman's Library, 2000), 255.

³¹ It is worth mentioning the *Demons* ends with Nikolai committing suicide as well. The closing sentence of book observation that: “our medical men, after the autopsy, completely and emphatically ruled out insanity.” Ibid, 678.

³² In some ways this is a bizarre anticipation of Kojeve's argument for a perfectly gratuitous suicide. Recognizing the only true demonstration of freedom requires one to forsake the natural impulse to save oneself, it is suggested

something larger than himself – for an idea- and Pyotr remarks: “know that it was not you who ate the idea, but the idea that ate you.”³³ Contrasted to Raskolnikov, who was ultimately able to rehabilitate himself through forced labour, a suicide would preclude such a possibility. The notion that Kirillov has been eaten by an idea serves to heighten the stakes between Russian citizens and the perceived horrors of western Enlightenment. While Raskolnikov murdered in the service of an ideal, Kirillov is going further by murdering himself. Most troubling, both Nikolai and Pyotr at the time of the suicide retain for themselves the ability to follow Raskolnikov towards salvation while denying the same possibility to Kirillov.

To be clear, suffering is not exclusively found in the submission to physical labour. *Demons* also presents it as a condition that follows when living in the absence of one’s place of birth and their natural community. Nikolai suffered spiritually abroad, which in turn led to his soul’s corruption, while Raskolnikov healed spiritually by suffering, first through the existential terror of failing to live up to the ideals of ‘great men’ and subsequently by laboring in the Siberian prison camps. For Dostoevsky’s argument to be coherent, this understanding of suffering must flow both ways. It is through suffering that people interact with the divine, so far understood to be the collective principles that unknowingly bind a community. When a character transgresses, they are presented with the ability to experience the revelation of the *a priori* ordering principle of the community in both their alienation and rehabilitation.³⁴ That is to say, if suffering only served as a form of individual rehabilitation, Dostoevsky would not be able to claim that human existence

that only a causeless suicide could be considered a true act of freedom. For Kirillov, the inherent meaninglessness of life is conquered by dying for an idea – in this case the idea of the revolutionary group’s activities.

Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: lectures on the ‘Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 162-3.

³³ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 646.

³⁴ The implications of salvation in time (as a historically revealed event) are discussed at length in Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History: the theological implications of the philosophy of history*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1957).

operates within the realm of the transcendent. The act of suffering must be present in both the health and corruption of the soul or the process is rendered meaningless by virtue of being a merely utilitarian punishment.³⁵ It is for this reason that Dostoevsky privileges the spiritual dimensions of suffering.

Dostoevsky's account of suffering is best exemplified by a further conversation between Nikolai and Shatov. At one point needing the former to loan him money to return home, Shatov has been forced to spend an extended period of time living in America. The experience, similar to Solzhenitsyn's Russian army or Gulliver's return from the land of the Houyhnhnms, has left Shatov lost in his own country. Recounting the contents of a letter that Nikolai had sent him while in America, Shatov proclaims:

The aim of all movements of nations, of every nation and in every period of its existence, is solely the seeking for God, its own God, entirely its own, and faith in him as the only true one. God is the synthetic person of the whole nation, taken from its beginning and to its end. It has never yet happened that all or many nations have had one common God, but each has always had a separate one. It is a sign of a nation's extinction when there begins to be gods in common. When there are gods in common, they die along with the belief in them and with the nations themselves. The stronger the nation, the more particular its God. There has never yet been a nation without religion, that is, without an idea of evil and good. Every nation has its own idea of evil and good, and its own evil and good. When many nations start having common ideas of evil and good, then the nations die out and the very distinction between evil and good begins to fade and disappear. Reason has never been able to define evil and good, or even to separate evil from good, if only approximately; on the contrary, it has always confused them, shamefully and pitifully; and science has offered the solution of the fist.³⁶

Nikolai, as the original author of the letter, is articulating something rather odd. His presentation of God suggests it is something that comes into being after, or at the most alongside, the founding of a community and suggests that the existence of God is entirely dependent on the nation. There

³⁵ It would become, at least for Dostoevsky, exclusively a form of social control. Put another way, if one lived in community solely so as not to suffer alone, Dostoevsky begins to approach the Hobbesian argument for a social contract. Alternatively, if meaning is only given through suffering itself (and therefore self-originating in the act itself), Dostoevsky comes to resemble Nietzsche's argument in part three of the *Genealogy of Morals*. Neither extreme is suitable here, although both are present to some extent.

³⁶ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 250-251.

For more (and whose title comes from this quote), see: John Moran, *The Solution of the Fist: Dostoevsky and the Roots of Modern Terrorism*, (Toronto: Lexington Books, 2009).

is again an element of utilitarianism in this explanation insofar as this understanding of God is “taken from its beginning and to its end” and “dies along with the belief in him.”³⁷ Nikolai’s God is not Dostoevsky’s Russian God – a localized God found through labour in service to the community.³⁸ There is nevertheless some truth in the argument. As Shatov demonstrates, communities find expression in God but relate to Him differently depending on how the people perceive and choose to interact with their reality, much like the individualized self-delusion of Raskolnikov. Although the Abrahamic faiths claim there is but one God, there are innumerable community-specific ways to practice the faith. Shatov is moved by the argument in the letter precisely because he is living in a community that, like Russia, is ordered under an interpretation of the divine. Shatov’s experience within another ordered community forces a confrontation with his atheism. The ubiquitous existence of an ordering relationship between community and the transcendent – a reality shared by America and Russia, which Solzhenitsyn similarly noted at Harvard over a hundred years after *Demons* is published - demonstrates an aspect of human existence that requires the reality of the divine. This observation forces Shatov to reconsider his previous non-belief.

Nikolai, by comparison, wrote the letter while traveling through France and Switzerland. The unwritten irony of Nikolai’s letter rests in the observation that France was a self-professed secular nation claiming to be built on the values of fraternity, equality, and liberty. For Nikolai to make claims about the universal need of nations to have a God would have required him to experience nations similar in form to Protestant America and Orthodox Russia, which he had not.

³⁷ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 250-251.

³⁸ George Grant makes an interesting point when he discusses the Russian word for freedom, ‘sroboden,’ and its proximity to the word for God. As he notes, both are closely related with one another and, as such, one should read Dostoevsky as expressing a parallel between freedom in God as openness to eternity instead of the West’s conception of freedom as the removal of all external impediments. George Grant, *Athens and Jerusalem: George Grant’s Theology, Philosophy, and Politics*, 237.

The God of France, and the Enlightenment more generally, is not divinity in the sense that Shatov understands it to be. Instead, Nikolai, like Raskolnikov, mistakes Western ideals for God and demonstrates a comparatively hollow treatment of existence. The difference between the two understandings of God is made apparent in the text.

“[You say] I reduce God to an attribute of nationality?” Shatov cried. “On the contrary, I raise the nation up to god. Has it ever been otherwise? The nation is the body of God. Any nation is a nation only as long as it has its own particular God and rules out all other gods from the world. Thus all have believed from the beginning of time, all great nations at least, all that were marked out to any extent, all that have stood at the head of mankind. There is no going against the fact.”³⁹

The God being described here is the same God that Sonya invokes when telling Raskolnikov to “stand at the crossroads, bow down, [and] kiss the earth which you have defiled.”⁴⁰ It is the same God that permeates the attic where the conversation is taking place.⁴¹ This account of God is one where He exists within all of Russian reality. The Russian God does not merely grow out of nationhood as an expression of good and evil, as Nikolai claims, but is the ideal under which communities come into being. The nuance between individual nations, as seen in the implicit comparison between America and Russia or Enlightenment Europe and Russia, is how the people engage reality and the history they share. The character of nations is wholly dependent on the people and it is their collective searching for divinity that defines them. Moreover, it is the aggregate communal suffering that gives any nation its history.

Given the nature of the relationship between national history and national God, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish living abroad from exile. Once communities are understood in terms of their divine ordering, existence beyond the community becomes trauma to the citizen's soul. Problematically, foreigners are not merely out of place but are seen to be cancerous to the

³⁹ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 251.

⁴⁰ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 420.

⁴¹ The scene begins with Nikolai standing at the base of a set of stairs in total darkness only to become illuminated from the light filtering down from Shatov's attic.

community.⁴² In *Demons*, while it is not particularly surprising that Dostoevsky presents Russia as a proverbial Eden given his view that God permeates creation (albeit at a national level), the serpentine characterization of Pyotr Stepanovich is noteworthy.⁴³ Not only does he corrupt Nikolai abroad when they meet in America but he is also the chief antagonist of the revolutionary group. Born in Russia, Pyotr is described as having been educated in the West. The novel opens with the group of radicals returning home with Pyotr, having met in Switzerland. However, the metaphor of tempting knowledge in the Russian Eden does not account for the fact that these characters left Russia in the first place. And, although it is clear that Dostoevsky believes the West to be antagonistic to Russia's spiritual health, such a reading does not make sense of how some characters become lost abroad, while others find God, and why some find salvation in Siberian work camps, while others remain spiritually barren.

In one of the speeches cited above, Shatov remarks that "a new generation [of Russians] is coming" that neither he nor Nikolai will recognize.⁴⁴ Those who leave Russia, like the group of revolutionaries, are never able to fully return. The necessarily participatory nature of communal ordering under a nation-God suggests that time away cleaves one from their community in an unavoidable way. Living abroad inculcates elements of foreignness in the soul, not only because of the Western influences the characters are exposed to, but because they have fallen out of sync with the Russian national spirit. These men become true exiles for they have lost themselves to the West without the possibility of ever becoming part of it, and have lost their country to the passing

⁴² It should come as little surprise that Dostoevsky scholarship is polarized on the extent and sincerity of his xenophobic and national-messianistic overtures. One of the more level headed accounts can be found in Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983): 181, 199, 206.

⁴³ From the text: "His head is elongated towards the back and as if flattened on the sides, giving his face a sharp look. His forehead is high and narrow, but his features are small- eyes sharp, nose small, lips long and thin. The expression of his face is as if sickly, but only seems so. He has a sort of dry crease on his cheeks and around his cheekbones, which makes him look as if he were recovering from a grave illness." Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 179. The section is even titled "The Wise Serpent."

⁴⁴ Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 255.

of time. Their suffering, both existentially and in terms of the ability to rehabilitate, is now different because they now have a personal history; they have become a history of one. In this sense, they have truly become atheists.⁴⁵ New generations of Russians are foreign to those abroad because they have come into being with a different history. As such, the spiritual rehabilitation of *Crime and Punishment* found in Raskolnikov's time in the labour camps is no longer available to the radical of *Demons*, even though they have returned to Russia. While the labour camps remind individuals of their Russian souls, the endeavour demands historical symmetry between the individual and the nation. By contrast, only an exile – someone who has lived abroad at a distance from their place of birth - can truly comprehend the loss of community. In *Demons*, where exclusion was undertaken willingly, the flow of Russian history and the resulting access to the Russian God is lost. In many ways, that risk of annihilation provides the revolutionaries (and, by extension Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn themselves, who both lived in political exile), a privileged vantage point in the observation of the Russian national soul.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Dostoevsky articulated a view that suggests spiritual completeness can only be found in a community ordered under the divine. From this founding principle one begins to see how

⁴⁵ It is quite possible that it is on this point that Albert Camus can claim that *Demons*, as opposed to *Crime and Punishment*, is a correct work of philosophy. Whereas Raskolnikov finds redemption in the labour camps (having fallen for western ideals through a process of self-delusion), the radicals of *Demons*, among them Pyotr, Nikolai, and Shatov, are beyond salvation (having lived in the West and removing themselves from the flow of Russia history). It may well be fruitful to compare Camus' *Plague*, where a town is quarantined by an infestation of diseased rats, and *Demons*, if for no other purpose than to see if Camus' presentation of exile similarly mirrors the loss of belonging in *Demons*. Clearly, the redemption of *Crime and Punishment* on the conclusion that God remains the ordering principle of Russian community is hugely problematic for Camus' philosophy. However, if *Demons* is largely an inversion of the same principles, demonstrated by the inverted denial of redemption for the radicals, then it is not entirely unreasonable to see parallels with Camus (although certainly not in the way that he would have envisioned it).

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991): 104-112.

community and individuals interact with each other. Further still, we see how spiritual health is derived from the participatory nature of community and collective experiences. We can see how the decision to live outside of one's community disorients and, at times, completely annihilates the existential aspect of homeland. However, in that risk of annihilation comes profound insight into the nature of that community. There would be no Dostoevsky without exile. As Solzhenitsyn's Harvard address notes, we live in a time where communities are transitory, Gods are relative and individuals are homeless. We do not believe that our individual histories contribute to a national soul. We do not accept that our place of birth explicitly orders our existence. Modernity is the age where people and place are interchangeable and this is our spiritual suffering. The modern West finds itself a God in the form of science, progress, and rationalism. And yet Dostoevsky shows these universalizing ideals, the very same that seduced Raskolnikov and the revolutionaries of *Demons*, to be local Gods of West – alien to Russia. Dostoevsky's novels, therefore, confront us with a question: How can we be a global community - how can we be global citizens - when nations and their participatory suffering function independently of one another? There is an explicit demand to acknowledge the limitations of community. Dostoevsky asserts that it cannot be made to span the globe. He tells us it is an intimate and wholly insular experience. He warns us that, by expanding our concept of community we (the West) are, in a sense, unmooring our souls and that, as Dostoevsky would say, will cost us our history.

To conclude, let us return to the modern terrorist. Framed as a psychologically unstable enlightenment liberal, terrorists attempting to violently overthrow their own communities through revolution would appear to seek their own end to history. According to Dostoevsky, that is the inevitable conclusion of all Western ideals. Raskolnikov's murders were precisely the attempt to ascend into the realm of the ahistorical Newtonian *Übermensch*. But, Dostoevsky's argument

offers another possibility. Seemingly cut off from God by the lack of participation in a communal history and unable to enter into an already established history as an outsider, terrorism seeks to found a new history within which members can find spiritual purpose. These acts of terrorism are a homecoming insofar as they, like the revolutionaries of *Demons*, attempt to recreate a facsimile of their old God. They are also serving as the attempt to kick-start the process of spiritual healing from the pain of isolation by establishing a new God and, by extension, a new nation-state. Neither attempt is acceptable to Dostoevsky.

The normative content of Dostoevsky's argument, for the Russian people, is to participate in the constant and mutual regeneration of a localized God through the submission to a national history. The attempt to bring into being a new God through a re-founding is dismissed as a wholly western ideal. Consequently, those who have become lost to the flow of their national history (by travelling beyond the boundaries of the local God) are simply lost. While Raskolnikov can be rehabilitated because he never left and, therefore, his reality continues to contribute to the Russian whole, the radicals of *Demons* are offered no such salvation. The alternative, as Dostoevsky sees it, is to invite a perpetually unstable cycle of re-foundings dependent on an individualized understanding of a citizen. With each spiritual discomfort, the justification for new Gods becomes available. If nothing else, Dostoevsky's political thought offers reason to reflect on the potential dangers to the assumptions of a cosmopolitan soul.

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