

Mother Russia by Rachel Douglas

Dostoevsky's 'Devils'

The Soviet party paper Pravda says this Satanic novel shows the very essence of perestroika.

Probably many people in the Soviet Union right now feel as if they were living in a Dostoevsky novel. Life grows more hellish: There is no edible sausage to be found, cheaply built apartment buildings collapse in an earthquake to crush and entomb the people who lived in them, scores of children catch AIDS from contaminated syringes in the hospitals. Meanwhile the Moscow bosses proclaim that the country is undergoing *perestroika*, getting restructured, which is a purification and improvement for all.

The contrast recalls 19th-century writer Fyodor Dostoevsky's theme, that the greater the wretchedness and degradation a person plunges into, the nearer he comes to God.

On Dec. 29, 1988, the Communist Party paper *Pravda* wrote that Dostoevsky was indeed the writer for today. Boris Lyubimov's theater review, "The Russia of Dostoevsky on Stage," welcomed recent productions of two plays (one of them by the French existentialist Albert Camus) based on Dostoevsky's novel *Besy*, translated as *The Possessed* or, better, *Devils*.

According to Lyubimov, these stage performances are timely, because of "the deep consonance of *Devils* with today's political and cultural situation and [because of] the ability of the theater and the audience to enter, for the first time in many years, into a dialogue with Dostoevsky the prophet, who drove out 'devils' and healed the possessed." He is pleased that "the rich idea" comes through on stage: "In one of his drafts for the novel, Dostoevsky noted, 'The main idea of the Prince [Stavrogin], by which

Shatov was struck and which he fully, passionately assimilated, was the following: the point is not industry, but morality, not the economic, but the moral rebirth of Russia,' as opposed to 'a bourgeois solution to the problem of comfort.' For Dostoevsky, 'moral strength is more important than economic.' "

A useful thought, I expect *Pravda* means to suggest, for anyone who might be wondering where his next sausage will come from.

"Only our time," intones Lyubimov, "with its pathos of repentance and purification, of striving to look inside *our own* soul, *our own* sins, permits us to say aloud what was always thought and understood by some: *Devils* is about our life, about them and about us, about thee and about me."

Soviet authorities used to denounce *Devils* as "socially obnoxious and detrimental to the cause of socialism," because the plot hinges on a conspiracy by a band of nihilist revolutionaries, to murder one of its members.

Devils, however, was never the anti-socialist tract that Soviet critics claimed. It came out in 1871-72, when Dostoevsky was already deep in study with the monks of Optina Pustyn monastery, on how the atheist revolutionaries were "doing God's work." *Devils* was part of a planned opus, *The Atheist*.

Later, in *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoevsky elaborated on how the revolutionaries could be the best instrument for preserving Russian Orthodoxy, against the Westernization he

hated. He wrote, "Our most ardent Westerners . . . became at the same time the negators of Europe and joined the ranks of the extreme left. . . . And thus . . . they revealed themselves as most fervent Russians—as champions of the Russian spirit."

In *Devils*, the atheist is Stavrogin, a hereditary prince who inspires the nihilist band in mysterious ways, who unwittingly wields the heavy cross of Orthodoxy against the hated West. His name suggests the Greek *stavros*, "cross," and Russian *rog*, "horn." Dostoevsky said: "Everything is contained in the character of Stavrogin—Stavrogin is *everything*."

The author's admission, and Lyubimov's embrace, points to the essence of the Bolshevik Revolution, as it was foreseen by masters of cultural warfare like Dostoevsky and his hosts at Optina Pustyn. Of a piece with the New Age movement launched in the late 19th century by the crazed Friedrich Nietzsche from Venice and the Crowleyite spiritualists in Britain, the "purifying" revolutionary cataclysms Dostoevsky sought were explicitly Satanic.

Stavrogin, who sojourned with the monks of Mt. Athos in Greece, asserts, "I believe canonically in a personal, not an allegorical devil." When he bursts into wild activity, Dostoevsky writes, "Then the beast unsheathed his claws." And this hero is obsessed with recollection of and supposed repentance for having raped a little girl who worshipped him, after which she hanged herself.

For the theater production of this great guide to repentance and purification, *Pravda* writer Lyubimov gives thanks. He compares Dostoevsky with Christ, whom the mob drove away, after He exorcised devils. Now, let Russia not drive Dostoevsky away again, concludes the Communist Party daily *Pravda*.