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Dostoevsky's Seminal Trauma as a Blueprint for National Mythology

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Abstract

This article argues that Dostoevsky's traumatic personal "near-death" experience was the main factor behind formulating the writer's unique messianic ideology for the Russian nation. His ordeal was more than a trigger for a spiritual rebirth; the trial Dostoevsky endured became a template for a broad vision he projected onto his homeland to interpret its past and to envisage its future. His vision left a marked cultural impact on Russia's self-perception. Psychohistorical in approach, the article analyzes an intricate inner process in which Dostoevsky transformed his private trauma into an ideology, which to this day scores of his compatriots perceive as prophecy.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, near-death experience, post-trauma, national identity, ideology formation.

1. Introduction

Contrary to his later status as a pillar of the Russian ultra-conservative, nationalist thought, in his youth Fedor Dostoevsky belonged to the "progressive circles." The aspiring writer joined a closely-knit group of young intellectuals, who would meet at the home of their leader, Mikhail Petrashevsky, a utopian socialist. Members of the "Petrashevsky Circle" read Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen — all banned in Nicholas I's Russia — and gathered on Friday evenings to eat, drink, and reaffirm their distaste for political and religious oppression. The lamentable state of Russia's domestic affairs they juxtaposed to a vision of a beautiful future of equality and justice. Years later, Dostoevsky remembered how easily they assimilated the idea that socialism was a modern spiritual path and an improved version of the outmoded Christianity. Their involvement had to more to do with utopian dreaming than with a genuine political action (Dostoevsky, 1873: 153-154); none of them were radicals-by-the-deed. Nonetheless, on April 23, 1849, thirty-five members of the Petrashevsky Circle were arrested and charged with subversion.

2. Results

They spent months of incarceration in St. Petersburg's infamous Peter and Paul fortress, designated for dangerous political prisoners. At the trial, Dostoevsky, together with others, was convicted of conspiracy and "abusive remarks about the Orthodox Church and Government." On December 22, 1849, they were taken to the Semenovkii parade-ground to hear their verdict: immediate execution by firing squad. A few hours later Dostoevsky wrote to his brother: "we were told to kiss the Cross, our swords were broken over our heads.... and no more than a minute was left for me to live" (Dostoevsky, Farewell Letter).

Suddenly, a courier galloped to the execution square. A messenger handed the officer-in-charge a dispatch from the Winter Palace. In line with a premediated arrangement, Nicholas I had subjected the condemned men to the dreadful ritual of capital punishment and then commuted their death sentence to Siberian hard labor.

The near-death experience was devastating. One of the convicted went mad and the others had to find a way to live with the deep trauma, the inner torment, "the horrible, immeasurably terrifying minutes of

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waiting for death” (Dostoevsky, 1873: 157). Dostoevsky also sought to construct a comprehensive account of the last-minute survival. Intellectually and spiritually not sufficient as an episode of amazing luck, it required a reflective elucidation as to *the reason why* it happened - quite in line with what Viktor Frankl and other psychologists have known about the nature of trauma: constructing a meaningful narrative about a traumatic event structuralizes the incoherent, painful ordeal, diminishes inner chaos, and thus serves as an uniquely beneficent coping mechanism, for “suffering is produced and alleviated primarily by the meaning people attach to their experiences.” (Crossley, 2000: 533, 541).¹ The narrative had to render Dostoevsky’s suffering worthwhile and uniquely fitting his near-death experience, if it were to be transformative and fulfilling.

The future, too, had to contribute to a meaningful life story. Dostoevsky already knew the setting for the next chapter: four years of hard labor and then obligatory military service as private in a Siberian regiment. Not yet sure what the plot would be, he articulated the primary theme of his overall narrative—a struggle between the material and the spiritual. “I have already gone through so much in life that now hardly anything can frighten me,” he wrote to his brother; “life in prison has already sufficiently killed in me the demands of the flesh which were not wholly pure... Now privations are nothing to me... I am not down-hearted... hope has not deserted me. ... There has never yet been working in me such a healthy abundance of spiritual life as now” (Dostoevsky, Farewell Letter).

Scholars are not of one mind about the famous conversion of Dostoevsky from a subversive to a traditionalist thinker and -- for numerous conservatives in Russia until today -- a prophet. While most researchers, including Jamefors P. Scanlan, who focuses specifically on Dostoevsky’s ideas, believe that the transition began to take place during his penal servitude in Siberia (Scanlan, 2002; see also Walsh, 2013: 25), there have been voices of dissent. In her analysis of the “fundamental mental paradigm shift” in Dostoevsky, Robin Feuer Miller shows that it had occurred while he still was in St. Petersburg, following the mock execution (Miller, 2007: 5-7). Indeed, having not yet repudiated his former convictions, Dostoevsky seemed to have already renounced his identity of a rebel, referring to Nicholas I as “His Imperial Majesty.” Hours after the existential ordeal, Dostoevsky engaged in self-evaluation and penitence: “When I look back at the past and think how much time has been wasted in vain... lost in delusions, in errors, in idleness, in ignorance of how to live... my heart bleeds. ... Now, I am being reborn into a new form. ... I shall be reborn...” (Dostoevsky, Farewell Letter).

His journey of rebirth began two days later when, his hands and feet in irons, Dostoevsky was on his way across snow-covered Russia to Siberia. He was a convicted criminal, yet determined to reach atonement and to preserve his “spirit and heart in purity,” as he had sworn to his brother. Miller ventures that it was not God but the wholesome and pure Russian people who were on his mind at that point (Miller, 2007: 6), but the spiritual blueprint to guide him along the course of righteousness Dostoevsky did find in the Gospels, the only book prisoners were permitted to keep.²

Years later, Dostoevsky remembered his conversion as a long journey from the scaffold, where he and other members of the Petrashevsky Circle listened to their death “sentence without the slightest repentance.” Far from denying their convictions, they had felt like martyrs dying for a holy cause (Dostoevsky, 1873: 156-157). Suddenly, it was rendered less lofty by the royal decision to refuse their sacrifice. Nicholas I had no intention of executing the convicted, wishing only to humiliate and to frighten them extremely – something Dostoevsky obviously did not know. For him, the tsar’s grant of life was a miracle. The miraculous revival from the near death caused him to retreat to his essence, to reconnect to his past, his childhood and the deeply integrated Christian values of his family.

The religious principles Dostoevsky had been ingrained deeply indeed, even though prior to his imprisonment he had neglected Christianity. He significantly differed from many of his peers in the educated strata of the early 19th century, who were raised primarily with the values of the French Enlightenment. For them, Russian Orthodoxy was a tribute to the national tradition, at best. Dostoevsky, however, was brought up in a truly observant family and received religious education. “His upbringing “immersed him in the spiritual and cultural atmosphere of Old Russian piety” (Frank, 2009: 23; Scanlan, 2002: 24-25). Religion in general and the Orthodoxy in particular were for him a constant point of ethical reference (Frank, 2009: 23; Scanlan, 2002: 16-17).

While his name “has become so inalterably associated with that of St. Petersburg,” his birthplace and spiritual home was Moscow, the heart of Russian popular religious tradition (Frank, 2009: 24-25). It was also the birthplace of the late 15th-early 16th century core state myth of “Moscow – the Third Rome.” A pivotal officially-sanctioned narrative depicted Moscow as the spiritual heir of both Rome and Constantinople which had fallen to the infidels due to their citizens’ numerous transgressions. The new center of the Orthodox world, Moscow was destined to turn into the capital of the entire Christendom, and under its tsar, the guardian of the only true faith, lead the entire Christian world to final redemption (Duncan, 2000: 11).

¹ “First-person narratives are meaning-making devices that can be used as powerful tools to direct developmental changes” (Jansen, Haavind, 2001: 68). Among numerous works on the subject, see, for example, Smyth et al., 2001: 161-172.

² Scanlan argues that Dostoevsky never really “disbelieved” or rejected faith. Facing what he and other condemned thought “to be imminent death, he reportedly cried out: ‘We shall be with Christ!’” (Scanlan, 2002: 17).

The tsars' claim to power over Russia and Russia's claim for imperial status both were based on adherence to the religious Orthodoxy and its church's global mission. In the 18th century Peter the Great sidelined this tradition to a secular Westernized vision, in which the tsar was an absolutist ruler of a mighty European empire, proud of its territorial size and military victories (Tolz, 2001: 24). Still, for many Russians, their sovereign was God's messiah, in line with the old state myth, which has become central to the popular ethos (Hoskings, 1997: 39, 230; Tolz, 2001: 24, 40-42).

Moscow was also the capital of the 19th-century Slavophile movement, the conservative nationalist reaction to the European Enlightenment (Hosking, 1997: 272). The newly-emerged Russian intelligentsia was keenly aware of its disempowering isolation from both the official spheres and the rest of the nation, especially the overwhelming peasant multitude. Self-conscious as a tiny minority with an undefined social role, the intellectual elite owed a great deal to the European Romantic movement, perhaps the most influential intellectual current at the time. The Romanticism mandated that one's destiny was inseparably linked to that of a larger "organism," to which he belonged –his homeland, the nation-state; with its "historical purpose" he had to harmonize his own life journey. For the Russian intellectuals, the effort to formulate a national narrative thus entailed a dominant personal agenda—to attain the perpetually craved for *raison d'être* as part of the disquiet and anxiety-ridden process of identity development (Hosking, 1997: 39).

Russian identity developed always in relation to the "other"— be it East or West; be it for or against. Unlike their liberal and socialist rivals, the so-called Westernizers, who argued that Russia should overcome its backwardness by following the European sociopolitical development, the Slavophiles claimed that Russia's unique culture rendered it superior to that of the West. In their eyes, it was plagued by rationalism, spiritual poverty, selfishness, and class antagonisms. Russia, therefore, must return to its pre-Petrine traditional roots and thus attain harmonious relations among the common people, the tsar, and the church (Hosking, 1997: 272-273; Pipes, 2005: 109). The Slavophiles resurrected the messianic myth of "Moscow - the Third Rome," which reemerged as part of Russia's intellectual discourse.

For Dostoevsky, the Russian popular tradition and the European intellectual fashions of the day paradoxically turned out to be a perfect match. The German Romantics' longing for supreme ideals resonated with Russia's traditional messianic myth. The commitment of their romantic colleagues in France to alleviate social ills coincided with the Russian Orthodoxy's claim to compassion for the unfortunate. The essential values of Romanticism thus appeared to be rephrasing in modern terms the very sentiments that had stirred Dostoevsky profoundly as a young man (Frank, 2009: 54). He has been exposed to the most prominent 19th-century French writers at home, and at the Military Academy, where he studied on his father's insistence, professors deepened his knowledge of the contemporary French fiction and literally indoctrinated him with Schelling poetry, along with an array of German romantic doctrines (Frank, 2009: 35, 51). Importantly, he absorbed the "Romantic proclivity for casting his personal problems into cosmic terms" (Frank, 2009: 56).

The Romantics emphasized one's connection to grassroot heritage, if he were to share his nation's identity and fate. Under their influence, Dostoevsky "set off for prison in Siberia with the expressed intention of discovering humanity, in the form of the Russian people there," turning towards the simple folk (*narod*) as "the key to the spiritual salvation of Russia" (Miller, 2007: 7). Indeed, years later, Dostoevsky attributed his steady disengagement from his earlier humanistic, universalist, "unRussian" outlook to "direct contact with his fellow-inmates, and "brotherly unity with them in our common misfortune." He ascribed his ultimate conversion to his return to national "roots, to knowledge of the Russian soul, to recognition of people's spirit (Dostoevsky, 1873: 157). Emotionally, he has always been "close to the beliefs and feelings of the illiterate peasantry still untouched by secular Western culture" (Frank, 2009: 24-25). Like them, in a murderer and a thief he saw the Gospels' criminal crucified with Jesus and granted admission to heaven for his trust. From there, it was only a step to his idea that the long-suffering Russian folk was a sacred "God-bearing people," a vessel and a sole guardian of the genuine Christian spirituality (Ivanits, 2008: 3).

His faith crystallized while he served his term of hard labor. He wrote to his brother about "the strengthening of religious sentiment" (Dolinin, n.d.), which acquired the distinct Russian Orthodox form. Quite within the traditional mainstream, Dostoevsky emphasized personal redemption through purifying pain: "Forlorn in my soul... I re-evaluated all my bygone life... thought about my past, judged myself... mercilessly and harshly and at times even blessed my fate for sending me this seclusion, without which either this trial of myself, or this severe reassessment of my previous life would not have taken place" (Grossman, 1963). His punishment of hard labor—like the retribution of his key characters in future novels—was deeply meaningful; it served to restore goodness in his tainted soul.

Likewise, patient acceptance of coercion, economic misery, and burdens of serfdom seemed to authenticate wholesomeness and purity of the Russian nation in Dostoevsky's eyes. Through centuries of pain, the nation's soul has been cleaned to holiness, he suggested. More than anyone else perhaps he was aware of the hatred and cruelty of the would-be saints: in the hard labor prison, peasant criminals mistreated and humiliated him as a nobleman (*barin*), as if seeking to make him pay for all social injustice and abuse the gentry inflicted on the simple folks. Privately, in letters to his brother, Dostoevsky acknowledged their depravity and complained of being ill-treated, despite his best effort to befriend his crude companions in misfortune. Although as a novelist, he also sometimes depicted the *narod* as ignorant and sinful, Dostoevsky-the prophet stubbornly insisted: "bow down before the people's truth" (Ivanits, 2008: 6; see also Ruttenburg, 2008: 5-6).

That a human being was not a “free radical” but part and parcel of his homeland, sharing its destiny, Dostoevsky probably took for granted in line with a vital Romantic postulate that one must align his goals with those of his nation-state to render his life fulfilling. Evidently, he was not conscious of the logical leap in assuming also the reverse -- that the fate of a nation could reflect the spiritual path of its devoted son. Dostoevsky’s life story provided a specific script and a template narrative about Russia’s near-annihilation, remorse, reparation, and ascent to greatness. The Romantic consciousness certainly did not warrant a projection of his inner experience onto Russia as a whole; yet, psychologically it made a great deal of sense: his arduous road to spiritual fulfillment was to be so much more momentous, if mirrored by the historical course of his nation.

While some scholars do consider his seemingly miraculous, last minute survivals to be a trigger for a religious reawakening, none connect it to the expressly Dostoevskian version of nationalist messianism at the core of his new personal ideology. Many omit it entirely, accentuating other “central episodes in the formation of the mature writer – arrest, Siberian imprisonment, and exile” (Ivanits, 2008: 8). It is essential, however, to understand the importance which psychologists attribute to “the founding trauma... that is transformed or transvalued into a legitimizing myth of origins. A crisis or catastrophe that disorients and harms... the individual may miraculously become the origin... of the myth and serve an ideological function in authorizing acts... that appeal to it for justification” (LaCapra, 2014: xii).

Having served his sentence of hard labor, followed by five years as a private soldier in a Siberian infantry regiment, in 1859 Dostoevsky was free to return to public life. A devout Russian Orthodox, he had definitively rejected his past cosmopolitan worldview in favor of patriotism blended with chauvinism. The grueling process of conversion led to a self-diagnosis: like many of his contemporaries, he had been “contaminated” (*zarazhen*) by a “dreamy delirium” of socialist brotherhood of men and “seduced” into the “darkness and terror” (*mrak i uzhas*) of disbelief. His sins led him to the scaffold; yet, he was granted life so that he would tell the tale of his “illness” (Dostoevsky, 1873: 154), which could have been fatal, had it not been for the torturous therapy of purification through suffering. Having discovered the cure of atonement, he could delineate the path of healing for his people.

The near-death experience came to define Dostoevsky’s mission to show a way out of Russia’s ethical and spiritual wretchedness towards redemption. He was to become his people’s prophet.¹ He did embrace the old “Moscow – the Third Rome” tradition, along with many Slavophile ideas; yet, it is Dostoevsky’s personal trauma that yielded a unique vision of national messianism - Russia’s near-obliteration, penitence, and salvation.

His message was that the generate Western civilization was on the verge of an apocalypse.² “The West has lost Christ and that is why it is dying,” Dostoevsky wrote in his *Notebooks* (Cited in De Lubac, 1995: 269). The old world was living its last days, for the “final battle,” as outlined in the Revelation of St. John, was due to occur, with the millennium to follow. Russia too was in grave danger: as punishment for the depravity and spiritual poverty of its leaders, it would nearly perish with the rest of the Christian civilization. In other words, it would go through a near-death experience, but then be miraculously revived and granted a compassionate second chance for spiritual recovery. It would be forced to go “between the straights,” to attain purification and salvation by the traditional Orthodox way of hard trials and suffering. Russia would then become the “light upon the nations;” its sanctified citizens be the new “chosen people.” They would save not only themselves but the entire world by leading it along the road of salvation to the “Kingdom of Heaven,” when, Dostoevsky predicted, the nations would “succumb to the triumphant Orthodox idea” (Morson, 1981: 33-35).

His prophecy may not appear as random as it does, if considered as a derivative of his experience, projected onto his nation verbatim. Dostoevsky’s approach has been termed “writerly mythopoesis” (from the Greek “myth-making”), in which the author creates an imaginary mythology. In the process, he may transform his “subjective experiences into central mythologemes of [his] epoch” (Klimova, 2007: 57 cited in Teper, Forthcoming Paper). It might have been so for Dostoevsky-the novelist; yet, he seems to have been utterly oblivious of superimposing the narrative of his life onto Russia, when formulating the new national mythology.

That his prophecy might be arbitrary never occurred to him. For all his powerful intellect, Dostoevsky’s writings revealed barely-concealed juvenile excitement about the impending Armageddon. He held fast to his doomsday forecast: Russia’s ascent from near extinction to salvation and to fulfillment of its global mission served to validate his private story, to deepen its meaning, and to invest it with a far-reaching significance.

Already during Dostoevsky’s lifetime and especially over the decades following his death, the “writer has become an icon” and the ideological pillar of the Russian messianic political conservatism. For a century-and-a-half, Dostoevsky’s fervent message not only has retained a formidable intellectual influence, but also endured as part of Russia’s national mythology and presently has been officially endorsed and partially

¹ As a publicist, he was “speaking in the voice of a prophet” (Morson, 1981: 33).

² Dostoevsky believed that in Europe, the corrupt, heretical Catholicism, having dispensed with the religious component, evolved into godless nihilism and subversive socialism, while Protestantism resisted this process ineffectively in the name of individualism (Walsh, 2013: 25).

incorporated into state ideology (Teper, Forthcoming paper).¹ The question remains as to why countless educated Russians have retained fascination with his as-yet unfulfilled prophecy no less than with his fiction.

Students of the Russian history and culture have emphasized the nation's perpetual problem in formulating identity.² Some consider the unsettled issue of the common national narrative to be a key predicament of Russia's history.³ The country's intelligentsia has been preoccupied, indeed obsessed, with the perpetual controversy about the meaning of Russia's past and the national goals. Amid the confusion and the never-ending dispute, Dostoevsky's insights, emphasizing both Russian exclusiveness and the country's universalism (Teper, Forthcoming paper),⁴ provided the coveted explanation, affirmation, solace, hope, and pride. His version of the Russian messianism accentuated the ultimate spiritual objective, over-compensating for the nebulous down-to-earth meanings and goals.

3. Conclusion

Identity formation is never static; it is a development which requires time to evolve. Throughout history, time and again the Russian leaders abruptly interrupted the natural flow of this process for the sake of ideological experimentations—typically at the great expense of the people: from superimposing eastern Christianity onto the pagan masses; to involving them in a confusing, centuries-long sociocultural (and political) relationship with the “Peoples of the Steppe;” to a religious Schism, provoked from above; to Peter the Great's fixated effort to turn the Russians into the Europeans overnight; to the equally neurotic determination of Nicholas I to prevent their corruption by exposure to the “radical West.” The faux “constitutional experience” of 1905 era caused a great deal of bloodshed and still greater confusion about the nation's goals. Then came the fatal Bolshevik revolution, followed by the Civil War, which destroyed the last hope for a national consensus about Russia's future. Finally, having fabricated a new species known as “homo soveticus,” the country's leaders have dismantled the Communist state, which shortly gave way to a flawed democracy, striving to attain national prominence.

When dust settled after the initial years of *perestroika*, the Russians found themselves traumatized, perplexed and again hopelessly divided about both their historical experience and political destiny. Currently, the Kremlin's ideological slant has been increasingly aligned with Dostoevsky's messianic creed to justify the official claim for Russia's “unique greatness.” Amid the lingering national identity quest of the new political elites and the intellectuals, Dostoevsky's beliefs about Russia's near-death, spiritual revival, and impending universal contribution have come to be expedient indeed.

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¹ “He became the most cited ... and, on balance, the most opportune Russian classical [writer] for the authorities” (Poroshin, 2014).

² For discussion and references see Hiekonen, MA Thesis.

³ As late as the end of the 1990s scholars were still wondering whether Russia could ever become a nation-state (Hosking, 1998: 5 cited in Teper, Forthcoming Paper).

⁴ “Yes, the Russian destiny is incontestably all-European and universal” (Cited in Neumann, 1999: 19).

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