Confronting Dostoevsky's *Demons*

Anarchism and the Specter of Bakunin in Twentieth-Century Russia

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INTRODUCTION

Dostoevsky's *Demons* as Polemic

Few works of literature have seen a more dramatic reversal of official fortune in Russia than Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Demons* [Бесы]. Beginning with its first complete publication in 1873, *Demons* enjoyed decades of renown as Russia's most scathing fictional treatment of destructive tendencies in the revolutionary movement. With the consolidation of Stalin's dictatorship by the end of the 1920s, however, *Demons* failed to appear in print for nearly thirty years, and the number of scholarly studies of the text diminished sharply. Despite greater scholarly recognition during the Dostoevsky jubilee celebration of 1956, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the writer's death, the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras produced only two editions of *Demons*, both of them subsumed within larger sets of the author's collected works. The novel's circulation in Russia did not begin to meet popular demand until the final years of *perestroika*, which saw the first separate edition of *Demons* in nearly a century.[1] Over the next six years, from 1989 through 1994, Russian publishing houses produced at least eighteen new editions of *Demons* with a combined circulation of 1,870,000 copies, an impressive figure during the economic duress of the early 1990s.[2] By the end of the twentieth century, *Demons* had emerged from official obscurity to become one of Dostoevsky's most widely publicized works.

In view of the great interest in *Demons* at the dawn of the post-Communist epoch, an obvious paradox arises from Dostoevsky's well-known vow to sacrifice his novel's "artistic side" for the sake of polemical goals. However they may have compromised the work's aesthetic integrity in the eyes of contemporaries, Dostoevsky's tendentious aspirations for the work helped to secure the topicality of *Demons* for future generations. Whether reactionary or truly "prophetic," as so often described, *Demons* owes its notoriety in Russian literary culture, above all, to the remarkable endurance of its political critique. Originally inspired by the violent spirit of the young radical Sergei Nechaev, who in 1869 compelled a small group of adherents to murder a suspected renegade, in time the fictional conspiracy in *Demons* began to reflect the greater upheavals of the twentieth century; for if the movements of Dostoevsky's own day failed to effect any major political change, then the event in which they finally culminated—the October (Bolshevik) Revolution of 1917—became a defining moment in Russia's modern era. After 1917, Dostoevsky's *Demons* remained irrevocably situated within the context of Bolshevism and its triumph.

In one sense, the fate of Dostoevsky's *Demons* in post-revolutionary Russia may be construed as mostly negative. The novel's reactionary spirit damaged its author's reputation in progressive circles and even threatened his

status among "great Russian writers." To the regret of some readers, excessive concern with the historical basis for *Demons* also tended to conceal its more formal, intrinsic merits and, therefore, to impede or complicate objective analysis of the text itself. Yet while its overtly political aspects hindered scholarly study of *Demons* as a work of art in Russia, at the same time they clearly reinvigorated the novel's potential to illuminate the Russian revolutionary experience. Thus in 1921, in honor of the one-hundredth anniversary of the writer's birth, the scholar Valerian Pereverzev proclaimed the "contemporary" relevance of Dostoevsky for Soviet Russia and underscored the necessity of pondering "the psychology of revolution" which Dostoevsky depicted so vividly in *Demons*.[3] For the same occasion another leading critic, Iulii Aikhenval'd, declared *Demons* "a living epigraph to today's bloody chronicle" and a "reality…which we, together with its author, seem to compose anew."[4] As Russian culture entered its new transitional era of the 1920s, the text of *Demons* began a second life.

The polemical vitality of *Demons* found perhaps its boldest expression in a literary and historical controversy of the early post-revolutionary years. On 25 February 1923, a group of Soviet scholars in Moscow heard an unexpectedly provocative lecture by one of Russia's rising young philologists and specialists on Dostoevsky. Speaking before the Society for the Appreciation of Russian Letters at the Historical Museum, Leonid Grossman (1888–1965) declared that Dostoevsky's *Demons*, traditionally considered a depiction of "Nechaevism," also served as the "first monograph" on the father of Russian anarchism, Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876). Through his fictional Nikolai Stavrogin, Dostoevsky managed "to lift the mask from the face of Bakunin," to reveal Bakunin's true "spiritual nature," and to resolve the "great mystery" of Bakunin's personality. By demonstrating similarities between Stavrogin and his historical prototype, as well as Dostoevsky's own interest in Bakunin, Grossman went on to define Dostoevsky's novel as "one of the most outstanding interpretations" of Bakunin in world literature.[5] The implication of Grossman's revelation would have been obvious to any politically conscious listener: according to Grossman's reading, Dostoevsky managed not simply to condemn the "nihilist" spirit of a minor conspiracy, but also to demonize one of the pioneering advocates of international social revolution.

Although his thesis initially enjoyed the support of some leading philologists and historians,[6] Grossman soon collided with vehement opposition. By the time he defended it at the Moscow Press House [Дом печати] roughly two months later, Grossman's thesis met "sharp and categorical objections"[7] from discussants like Viacheslav Polonsky, a leading Marxist literary critic, who argued at length that Dostoevsky's Stavrogin remained "completely independ-

ent" from Bakunin.[8] Undeterred by growing scepticism toward his reading, however, in public appearances and in print Grossman continued to defend his notion of a "primordial link" [исконная связь][9] between protagonist and prototype. The ensuing dispute over Grossman's thesis soon reached the highly visible "thick" journal *Press and Revolution* [Печать и революция] and two respected journals of revolutionary history, *Penal Servitude and Exile* [Каторга и ссылка] and *The Past* [Былое]. It eventually spread to other prominent cultural venues like the Communist Academy, a sponsor of papers on Bakunin, and also the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences, where a Dostoevsky Commission had taken shape within a broader literary section.[10] In 1926 the Leningrad branch of the State Publishing House issued a book of Grossman's and Polonsky's exchanges and formally ordained them "The Debate Over Bakunin and Dostoevsky."[11] Reviewed both in Soviet Russia and abroad, the collection joined a wave of other publications about Bakunin that year. It was followed by an edition of *Demons* for a new set of Dostoevsky's collected works.[12] Thus scholar Pavel Sakulin scarcely exaggerated when he recalled how the discussion over Grossman's thesis "captured the interest of the entire Moscow literary and scholarly community."[13] If in 1923 *Demons* still led an "underground existence," as Grossman insisted that year, then by 1927, thanks in part to recent publicity, Dostoevsky's "lampoon" on the revolutionary movement had begun its return to the canon of Russian classics.

Despite the significant space devoted to formal issues, Grossman's idea owed neither its immediate impact nor its broader significance to problems of literary genesis and historical prototypes. As Grossman's opponents and even Grossman himself acknowledged, most of the characters in *Demons*, including Stavrogin, represent composite types who rarely recall exclusively one specific contemporary of Dostoevsky's and, in any case, invariably reflect the creative fantasy of their author. Grossman and his opponents clearly recognized that the text of *Demons* is not a historical novel in any traditional sense, but a complex, hybrid entity that combines elements of separate, unfinished projects into a synthetic "chronicle" of political conspiracy. It is a work, moreover, in which suicide, rape, grisly murder and sadism mix rather unexpectedly with comedy and even buffoonery. Thus while disagreement over Stavrogin's origins may have motivated some contributions, as a purely literary issue the quest for Stavrogin's prototype hardly explains the lengthy dispute over Grossman's idea. Rather, Grossman's otherwise innocuous investigation of Stavrogin's prototype proved contentious because he transcended formalist literary scholarship and entered the more hazardous territory of Russian revolutionary history, where Bakunin played a particularly problematic role. The infamous "apostle of destruction" and chief political nemesis

of Karl Marx, Bakunin left his political descendants in Russia with a controversial legacy that both attracted and repelled them. As Russia's most legendary apologist for a ruthless struggle against the state, Bakunin earned a permanent place in the pantheon of Russia's revolutionary pioneers; as the principal inspiration of violent anarchist tendencies in the revolution, however, Bakunin's legacy logically stood in uncompromising opposition to the ever-increasing power and centralization of the Communist Party dictatorship. Bakunin was no ordinary historical prototype, but arguably Russia's most powerful modern icon of antistatism and spontaneous popular revolt.

Notwithstanding his ostensible dismay at the vehement objections to his idea, evidence suggests strongly that Grossman sought to exploit the unfavorable side of Bakunin's legacy as a means of rehabilitating Dostoevsky's allegedly counterrevolutionary novel. By identifying a leading villain in *Demons* with Bakunin, Grossman effectively invited readers to reconsider Dostoevsky's novel as a polemic against Russian anarchism, arguably the most threatening anathema within Russia's revolutionary heritage. By doing so, however, he naturally provoked reactions from the growing sphere of post-revolutionary "Bakuniana," or Bakunin studies, where the issue of anarchism and its meaning for Communist Russia was more than simply academic. For Grossman's chief opponent Polonsky, the author of a major study of Bakunin, the dispute over *Demons* provided a convenient means to reassess the traditional Marxist conception of Bakunin's thought. To the anarchist scholar Aleksei Borovoi, the adversary of both Grossman and Polonsky, *Demons* offered a unique opportunity to dispel myths about the Bakuninist notion of destruction, and to articulate an alternative, constructive conception of the human need to rebel. Viewed in light of their complex motives, which extended beyond merely scholarly interest, the opposing commentaries by Grossman and his opponents comprise not simply a spectrum of different approaches, but a series of opposing strategies for securing the integrity of two controversial legacies in Russian literary culture.

With the aim of illuminating the impact of *Demons* on post-revolutionary Russian discourse, throughout this study I devote space principally to the remarks, ideas and motives of Russian thinkers themselves, rather than to interpretations in recent Western scholarship on Dostoevsky which, of course, is immense. Because my main interest lies in the political aspect of *Demons*, I do not attempt in this study to revisit the many artistic and philosophical issues that arise from Dostoevsky's complex novel. Thus while much of my analysis centers on discussions of *Demons* in Russian literary circles of the 1920s, readers will find no more than a passing reference to Mikhail Bakhtin, the renowned Russian philologist who contributed so much to the study of Dosto-

evsky's art. Finally, in this study I do not consider the originality or significance of *Demons* within the broader context of Dostoevsky's entire literary output, a dimension of which English-speaking readers may find detailed treatment, for example, in the fourth volume of Joseph Frank's monumental biography.[14] At the same time, readers familiar with the career of Bakunin will find but little discussion of the formative stages of his career in the 1840s and its contribution to the culture of Russian romanticism, a subject examined recently in John Randolph's study of the Bakunin family.[15] At the risk of doing insufficient justice to the two vast topics of "Dostoevsky" and "Bakunin," I have attempted, instead, to focus on the mutual interaction of both literary and political issues within a single dimension of a single text from the perspective of the post-revolutionary Russian reader. For that reason my analysis proceeds from the conviction that any study of cultural legacies in modern Russia requires a close consideration of the nature and orientation of official thought.

To my knowledge *Confronting Dostoevsky's Demons* serves as the first study of the critical strategies and ideological concerns that motivate competing interpretations of the novel in twentieth-century Russia. Following my examination of the novel itself, throughout the book I demonstrate how different approaches to *Demons*, each informed by opposing conceptions of the Russian revolutionary experience, have fostered and sustained the novel's enduring reputation as a political critique. Contrary to the traditional view, which assumes a decline in the influence of Bakunin's thought in Russia under Communism (1917–1991), I insist that a certain apotheosis of Bakunin evolved out of disputes over the value of his legacy. Thus although a secure, dictatorial Communist state logically demanded the suppression of Bakunin's anti-authoritarian spirit, I argue that early Soviet Russia instead witnessed a concerted effort by both Communists and their opponents to preserve it. As I discovered in my research, a number of leading Russian publicists, journalists and historians sought to commemorate and even rehabilitate the "apostle of anarchism" for post-revolutionary Russia. Their efforts found expression in studies of Bakunin's stormy career, as well as in debates over the nature and extent of its reflection in *Demons*. Taking advantage of an important tradition in Russian public life, Soviet-era commemorators of both Bakunin and Dostoevsky utilized a number of important anniversary dates as an opportunity to celebrate their legacies: the 100th anniversary of Dostoevsky's birth (1921); the fiftieth anniversary of Bakunin's death (1926); the fiftieth anniversary of Dostoevsky's death (1931); the seventy-fifth anniversary of Dostoevsky's death (1956); the 150th anniversary of Bakunin's birth (1964); the 150th anniversary of Dostoevsky's birth (1971); the 100th anniversary of Bakunin's death (1976); and the 100th anniversary of Dostoevsky's death (1981). Each

chronological landmark provided a convenient occasion to reconsider the intellectual heritage of these two internationally acclaimed Russian thinkers.

In Chapter One I examine the polemical aspect of *Demons* in light of the extrinsic sources from which it derives its verisimilitude as a political novel. Following my analysis of the conspiracy in the text of *Demons*, I identify the extent to which prominent motifs and allusions in the text recall the thought and activity of Bakunin. Here I argue that the "Bakuninist" dimension of *Demons* strengthens the cogency of Dostoevsky's political critique while at the same time upholding his artistic interest in the archetypical "ideologue" as the moving force behind illicit acts. In Chapter Two I describe how the Bolshevik Revolution and Civil War (1917–1921) offered a new contextual framework for *Demons* as a political novel. Central to Chapter Two is my analysis of the anarchist impulse in the Revolution and the reappearance of Bakunin as a cultural icon. In the wake of the social upheavals of 1917, anarchist tendencies in Russia strengthened and became widespread until acts of terror and armed resistance against the Bolsheviks compelled the latter to repress the anarchists for good. Although the vestiges of the movement retreated underground after 1921, evidence indicates that the aspirations of Russian anarchism endured within the public commemoration of Bakunin, its foremost ideological progenitor. Throughout the early Soviet period Bakunin's spirit of revolt received significant attention, for it offered at once an inspirational model of revolutionary passion to many Communists, and also a doctrinal basis for the anti-statist principles of surviving anarchists. As I argue in Chapter Two, the anarchist dimension of the revolution, together with the revival of Bakunin's controversial image, prompted a reassessment both of *Demons* and its polemical target. By reconstructing the politically-charged atmosphere in which *Demons* appeared after 1917, I demonstrate how Dostoevsky's novel began to challenge the architects of Soviet culture to confront their Bakuninist heritage.

The issue of Bakunin's legacy and its impact found expression in three distinctive approaches to the polemic in Dostoevsky's novel. I maintain that each of these approaches, the subjects of Chapters Three, Four and Five, manifested a distinctive critical strategy for rehabilitating a problematic legacy, but with contrary aims and motivation. The first approach, which became a catalyst for the remaining two, belonged to Grossman who sought to illuminate Stavrogin's fatalistic, pseudo-revolutionary character by transposing him onto the historical Bakunin. While scholarship has never completely accepted the core of Grossman's thesis, it has also overlooked the validity of much of Grossman's analysis which, as I show, subsequent Soviet scholarship employed for a quite different critical agenda, the subject of Chapter Six. More significantly, to my knowledge commentators have never explored the reasons

for Grossman's radical claim, for which he suffered much criticism. As I demonstrate in Chapter Three, Grossman's thesis must be understood not as an overly scholastic investigation of fictional prototypes, as often perceived, but principally as a means of exonerating the renegade Dostoevsky of his political errors. In an effort to return *Demons* to a respectable place in the Russian literary canon, Grossman attempted to move the more threatening dimension of the Bakuninist legacy to the center of Dostoevsky's critique.

By transcending the bounds of formalist literary scholarship, Grossman unwittingly landed in the more hazardous field of "Bakuniana," or Bakunin studies, one of the last legal refuges of Russian anarchist ideology after 1921. In Chapter Four I examine the Russian anarchist treatment of *Demons* against the background of a more positive interpretation of Bakunin, most thoroughly articulated in the early Soviet period by the remarkable philosopher and writer Aleksei Borovoi (1875–1935). Drawing upon a repressed but still living tradition of anarchist thought in Russia, Borovoi countered Grossman's approach to *Demons* with an alternative strategy that favored the reputations of both Dostoevsky and Bakunin alike. As I argue in Chapter Four, Grossman's thesis on *Demons* effectively supplied the anarchist Borovoi and his supporters with a legitimate opportunity to resuscitate and publicize a remarkably anti-authoritarian, pro-Bakuninist conception of the Russian revolution. The writings of Borovoi and his supporters assumed an international dimension, moreover, for they coincided with commemorative eulogies to Bakunin among exiled Russian anarchists abroad. In light of its interpretation by Borovoi, by the mid 1920s Dostoevsky's *Demons* suddenly provided a means of advancing and defending an anarchist agenda.

Grossman and Borovoi together provoked a third and vastly different treatment of Dostoevsky's novel by the prolific journalist and literary critic Viacheslav Polonsky (Gusin, 1886–1932). Chapter Five identifies Polonsky's reading of *Demons* as an unusual Marxist strategy built on a more careful and qualified rehabilitation of Bakunin. As an official Communist critic and editor of two of Soviet Russia's most visible, state-supported literary journals, Polonsky's response to *Demons* carried a substantial degree of cultural authority; yet Polonsky's contributions to the discussion betrayed an official ambivalence toward Bakunin that lingered within Russian Marxist historiography well after the consolidation of Soviet power. As I demonstrate in Chapter Five, while Borovoi appropriated the discussion of *Demons* in the interests of the anarchist perspective, Polonsky utilized Dostoevsky's novel to confront the lingering problem of the Bolsheviks' "Bakuninist" heritage and its effect on post-revolutionary Russia. For Polonsky and his Marxist co-thinkers, Grossman's interpretation of *Demons* inevitably recalled accusations, both at home

and abroad, that the Revolution represented the victory of primitive, criminal tendencies reminiscent of Bakuninism, a problem to which Polonsky and other leading Soviet researchers devoted much of their pioneering scholarship of the 1920s–30s. With Polonsky's entry, the discussion of *Demons* merged finally and irrevocably with debates on the ideological origins of Bolshevism.

As I explain in Chapters Four and Five, both the anarchist and Marxist perspectives in effect employed Dostoevsky's novel as a means of extricating their shared "Bakuninist" legacy, albeit in fundamentally different ways, from an emerging counterrevolutionary narrative of the Bolshevik triumph, while at the same time reclaiming *Demons* for the canon of Russian literature. Chapter Six, by contrast, shows the implausibility of both these critical paths along the shifting trajectory of cultural development under Stalin's control (1930–1953). The chapter opens with an analysis of the repercussions of the Bakunin debate after 1928, when Grossman attempted to defend his "Bakuninist" reading of Stavrogin once again. With reference to the views of Anatolii Lunacharsky, Maksim Gorky and other cultural authorities of the early Stalin period, I then discuss the stigma of *Dostoevshchina* and its role in the eventual fall of *Demons* from the official canon by the late 1930s, best exemplified by the collapse of plans, spearheaded by Grossman (among others), for a separate, deluxe Soviet edition of the novel in 1935. A crucial factor leading to the official rejection of Dostoevsky's novel, I maintain, is the Stalin era's final extirpation of the Russian anarchists themselves, as well as the literary vestiges of Bakunin and his original biographers.

In the final part of Chapter Six I analyze the reappearance of *Demons* in print and official cultural discourse after Stalin's death, an event which presented the Russian literary intelligentsia with new opportunities for the novel's reassessment. While it followed partly from a more liberal cultural policy, I maintain that the return of *Demons* to the literary canon during the Khrushchev period demanded a convincing scholarly justification of the novel's counterrevolutionary potential. Like Grossman in the 1920s, Dostoevsky scholarship of the post-Stalin years discovered the required strategy within a renewed Communist campaign against Bakunin's legacy and its growing international allure. Free of opposition from anarchists, all but exterminated before Stalin's death, Soviet apologists for Dostoevsky finally succeeded in fulfilling Grossman's original plan to resurrect *Demons* as a progressive polemic against anarchism. In the conclusion I review the rebirth of *Demons* as a literary classic in the post-Communist era, when it reached the zenith of its popularity in Russia, along with the renewal of Russian interest in anarchism and its implication for the legacies of both Bakunin and Dostoevsky.