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The Debate around Nihilism in 1860s Russian Literature

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The city of St. Petersburg erupted in flames in the spring and summer of 1862.[1] Students of St. Petersburg and Moscow Universities, acting on an upsurge of revolutionary activism, had begun demonstrating their frustrations. Fyodor Dostoevsky blamed Nikolai Chernyshevsky, who at the time was a radical writer. The tale goes that Dostoevsky went to the home of Chernyshevsky to plead to him to stop fuelling the fires. While Chernyshevsky was no arsonist, this story is symptomatic of the 1860s atmosphere. This period was a time of great social and economic upheaval within Russia and nowhere were these issues so passionately argued as in the novels of the country's leading writers.[2] Fourteen years after the 1848 Revolutions spread across Europe, Russia was facing its own internal problems. The work of authors and critics during this period all demonstrate their desire for progress within Russian society, but reflects their uncertainty on how to go about realizing it. This period saw a new generation of literary critics who criticised the process of reform and raised a series of "accursed questions" about Russian life more generally.[3] The literary establishment was frantically looking for "intellectual" solutions to "political" problems.

The works of literature I have selected are as follows: Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* I have not attempted to cover all of Russian literature, or read the extensive criticism available as there is such an abundance. These authors are particularly interesting and noteworthy as much of their writing provides a canon of work with the message of their novels being intertwined through their reactions to each other. Each piece offers an explicit critique of Russian society. They are representative of different aspects of Russian society, and were focusing on different criticisms thereof. Although I address them as individuals, a writer can be viewed as part of a larger section of society and the views and opinions they deliberately, or unwittingly, express tell us much about the opinions of

[1] Catherine Evtuvhov and Richard Stites, *A History of Russia since 1800* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), p.114.
[2] Jane Barstow, 'Dostoevsk's Notes From Underground Versus Chernyshevsky's What Is To Be Done?', *College Literature* 5 (1978), p. 24.
[3] Evtuhov and Stites, *A History of Russia*, p. 114.

society at this time. The authors were representative of sections of society, and they were typical of their classes in certain ways. For example, Turgenev stemmed from a wealthy background and his manners and habits were those of a born aristocrat.[4] Dostoevsky differed in that he belonged to the 'literary proletariat,'[5] and he came from much lowlier origins than was typical for writers of this period. With the exception of Nikolai Gogol, Dostoevsky represented a departure in Russian literature from the land-owning classes.[6] By 1848 Chernyshevsky had already entered in his diary that he had become a "partisan of socialists and communities and extreme republicans - a decidedly Montagnard,"[7] and among his fellow students he had earned the nickname Saint-Just. Chernyshevsky's position as a radical in society stemmed mainly from his education and lifestyle. These different backgrounds and upbringings moulded the opinions and ideologies of these writers and interpretations of their works must take this into account. In looking at them from different class perspectives it is interesting to note which parts of society they comment upon, and which parts they feel more comfortable, and better able, to critique.

The significance of literature in Russia was different from that in Western Europe. Whereas in Europe professional academics shaped professional academics of Europe were in Russia replaced by non-academics who acted as society's original and influential thinkers.[8] Up until the twentieth century, the majority of Russian thinkers were not professors, but literary critics. The term 'literature' in Russia has been conceived very broadly, not just to include the novel, poetry, and short stories, but also political and philosophical commentary. Russian novelists were political, social, and cultural critics as well as literary critics. In Russia, more than anywhere else, writers have concerned themselves with the perennial 'problems of man.' Literature of this period challenged old beliefs and sought new ones; it came to work for society by working against it. Literature acted as a forum for political discussion as the more obvious government channels remained closed within Russia.[9]

The role of literature in this period was markedly different from others due to the instability of the time. The reason I have chosen to begin from 1860 was because this was a time of reform within Russia, which led to much discussion over how Russia was and

[4] Joe Andrew, *Russian Writers and Society In The Second Half Of The Nineteenth Century* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982), p. 6.
[5] Ibid., p. 44.
[6] Ibid., p. 47.
[7] E. Lampert, *Sons against Fathers: Studies in Russian Radicalism and Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) p. 94.
[8] James M. Edie, James P. Scalan and Mary-Barbara Zeldin, *Russian Philosophy, Volume II* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), preface.
[9] Andrew, *Russian writers,* p. xiv.

should be progressing. The period commonly referred to as the "1860s" in Russia actually began in 1855, after the death of Tsar Nicholas I.[10] Tsar Alexander II enacted a program of overarching reform following Russia's performance in the 1856 Crimean War. Their crushing defeat ushered in a new era and compelled Russians to conduct a reappraisal of their country.[11] They understood that the routing of their troops was not just due to their military problems. These other problems included the backward state of Russia's industry and communications, and the precarious condition of the country's finances. Furthermore, a lack of scientific advancement meant that they were unable to manufacture new rifles to match their adversaries. Much of what was available, in terms of food and weapons, struggled to reach the battlefield as the roads, which connected the empire, amounted to little more than muddy tracks.[12] The Crimean War had manifested the issue of reform and removed the taboos on discussing the fragile order and the need for radical change. Geoffrey Hosking explained how "for the first time since the early eighteenth century, radical reform seemed less dangerous than doing nothing."[13]

While these issues were highlighted during this period, the real issue which was becoming glaringly obvious, was serfdom. The emancipation of 1861 affected 50 million serfs, approximately 80 per cent of the Russian population.[14] The consensus and enthusiasm which filled the immediate period after was short-lived, and the period that followed proved tumultuous and filled with political tension. Along with the emancipation, there was an overhaul of the political, educational, and economic systems. The introduction of the *zemstvo* in 1864, an organ of local government, gave greater power to the 34 provinces of European Russia. The university system was also reformed in 1863 and the universities were granted considerable rights of self-regulation. National journals became widespread and increased in circulation amongst most urban middle class households, which generally subscribed to two or three illustrated weeklies.

Censorship was also a key issue of this period. Although censorship had been eased during Alexander's reforms, the Chief Censorship Committee of the Ministry of the Interior could withdraw any publication if considered it of 'dangerous orientation'[15]. The authors were aware of the precarious position they held. Dostoevsky, in a letter to his brother Mikhail Dostoevsky in 1864 complained of the censor when he wrote "the

[10] Charles A. Moser, *Antinihilism in the Russian Novel of the 1860's* (London: Mouton & Co, 1964), p. 13
[11] Evtuhov and Stites, *A History of Russia*, p. 98.
[12] Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia, People & Empire* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1998). p.315.
[13] Hosking, Russia, p. 318.
[14] Evtuhov and Stites, A History of Russia, p. 105.
[15] Hosking, Russia, p. 331.

censors are swine"[16], noting that they deleted parts of his work discussing the necessity of faith and Christ. Turgenev, in a letter to K. Sluchevsky, explained how he removed a section of the *Fathers and Sons's* character Bazarov due to censorship.[17] Chernyshevsky, despite being imprisoned for refusing to moderate his radical journal *Sovremennik*, was allowed to publish his novel *What is to be Done?*[18] The manuscript for the novel was forwarded on to *Sovremennik* by the prison censor and published in 1863. With fantastic irony, the novel, which was to be the most revolutionary work of the nineteenth century, was published without difficulty. The publication has aptly been called "the most spectacular example of bureaucratic bungling in the cultural realm during the reign of Alexander II."[19] Moreover, it was this censoring of Chernyshevsky and his imprisonment that drove him to write his novel. Thus, *What is to be Done?* was a product of Russia's attempts at censorship and without it, may not have had such an impact. Although censorship is widely seen as damaging literature, it can be argued that it gave these texts their deeper meanings. Censorship also led to the inclusion of Aesopian language into literature of this period in order for writers to communicate radical ideas.[20] Chernyshevsky wrote about a method of "drainage"[21] which was widely interpreted as an allegory for revolution. This gave the language of some of these works a political agenda. One of the key issues in this investigation surrounds the topics the authors were not writing about and the extent to which they may have been subject to self as well as state censorship.

The position that literature held within society partly stemmed from censorship. Due to censorship, literature was being used as a forum for social criticisms and political discussion. Literature was being used as a kind of "alternative government,"[22] as the Russian government faced no formal opposition. Turgenev was under no illusions about the effect that literature could have on society. Turgenev wrote to M. N. Katkov, a famous publisher, and said how he was to postpone the publication of his novel, *Fathers and Sons*, because of "the present circumstances."[23] Turgenev was alluding to the serious student demonstrations in Moscow during the autumn of 1861. Turgenev goes on to say, "I am very sorry that it has turned out this way but, particularly with subject matter such as this, one must appear before the reader fully armed." This exemplifies Turgenev's

[16] Fyodor Dostoevsky, 'Selected Letters' in *Notes from Underground,* (New York: Norton & Company, 1989), p. 96.
[17] A. V. Knowles, *Turgenev's Letters* (London: The Athlone Press, 1983), p. 105.
[18] Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What is to be Done?* (London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 14.
[19] Chernyshevsky, *What is to be Done?* p. 23.
[20] Moser, *Antinihilism,* p. 181.
[21] Chernyshevsky, *What is to be Done?* p.182.
[22] Andrew, *Russian Writers,* p. x.
[23] Knowles, A.V., ed *Turgenev's Letters* (London: The Athlone Press, 1983), p. 98.

understanding of the weighty role literature had within society, and in turn, the responsibility of the author.

The authors differed in their opinions on the function of literature. In a letter to Moriz Necheles, a German literary critic, Turgenev wrote "if I had to state the true basis of my writings I might say that "I wrote because it was a real pleasure so to do.""[24] Turgenev explained how he based his literature on "one's own people, human life, the human physiognomy - that is what one takes as one's raw material. The writer makes of them what he can; he cannot do otherwise." Here Turgenev is adhering to the Russian Realism movement; however, despite Turgenev's claim that he based his ideas on real human life, it is virtually impossible for a writer to merely be a mirror held up to society and all writers in some way impose their own ideological views.

The role of literature was seen to be something quite different by Chernyshevsky. While incarcerated in the Peter-Paul Fortress, Chernyshevsky in a letter wrote how he planned to write a novel and described that task as "a writer's most serious undertaking."[25] However, Chernyshevsky went on to write "the frivolity of the form must be compensated for by the solidity of the thought." The contrast here is typical of the radicals' approach to literature – that literature was only good if it could be described as 'socially useful.' Chernyshevsky's first major work, his Master's dissertation entitled *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality* was published in 1855, and contained a critique of the reigning Hegelian aesthetics.[26] Chernyshevsky believed that the problem lies in placing art above reality, and that in man's striving for beauty within art, one can only create artificial embodiments of true beauty. In order to counter this separation of art from life, Chernyshevsky attempts to apply "Feuerbach's ideas to the solution of the fundamental problems of aesthetics."[27] Chernyshevsky believed that art was a poor substitute for reality. Upon reading works from the more radical side of the intelligentsia, it is often wrongly thought that their position was profoundly hostile to art, viewing it as worthless and dispensable. This opinion is understandable, especially when looking at the titles of some of these works, such as Pisarev's *The Annihilation of Aesthetics.*[28] However, this interpretation overlooks how they distinguished the term 'aesthetics' from 'art'. Pisarev and Chernyshevsky attached the term 'aesthetics' to art that was frivolous, something that

[24] Knowles, *Turgenev's Letters,* p. 249.
[25] Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What is to be Done?* (London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 22.
[26] James M. Edie, James P. Scalan and Mary-Barbara Zeldin, *Russian Philosophy, Volume II* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), p. 12.
[27] Edie, Scanlan and Zeldin, *Russian Philosophy,* p. 12.
[28] Ibid., p. 2.

was a product of "sheer caprice, habituation, or inertia," something that had no enduring foundation in human life. Chernyshevsky held the belief that a good artist will present or solve a problem within society, and is by no means "a passive mirror of reality, or a neutral purveyor of content."[29]

Applying a judgement or an ideal to art gives it a moral dimension, thereby justifying art. This was Chernyshevsky's "realistic" utilitarian message about aesthetics. These new thinkers valued work they regarded as socially useful. But this phrase 'socially useful' would have different meanings to different people and is a term that is virtually impossible to define. While they are all writing for different reasons, there was one common purpose amongst them all: to shape the Russian identity and contribute to society's progress.

There are many different approaches to defining the role of the critic. Literary criticism in Russia at this time became the main forum for veiled political discussion.[30] This applies even more so to the critical reaction to a writer's work, especially in Russia, where after 1830 almost all literary criticism was implicitly or explicitly ideological.[31] We cannot fully comprehend the role of literature without careful consideration of how and why certain books were acclaimed or vilified. It is important to look at criticism to see who was reading the texts, and why. This can also help to show whether authors were catering to known demands or whether they were looking to invoke fresh responses from the public. The author and the critic can be seen to disagree on what their role and function was. Turgenev wrote how "critics, in general, do not quite correctly conceive what goes on in an author's soul, they are convinced that all an author does is "convey his ideas"; they do not wish to believe that to reproduce the truth, the reality of life accurately and powerfully, is the literary man's highest joy, even if that truth does not correspond to his own sympathies."[32] Pisarev, a prominent critic, explained, however, that he was neither concerned with either the partisan sympathies nor antipathies of the author, nor with the trends which run through the work.

He wrote that "as a critic, he was guided primarily by the principle of truthful reflection of objective reality, "of the phenomena of social life."[33] In Pisarev's criticism of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* he wrote how "I observe and ponder these events,

[29] Ibid., p. 11.
[30] Joe Andrew, *Writers And Society During The Rise Of Russian Realism* (Hong Kong: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982), p. 97.
[31] Andrew, *The Rise of Russian Realism*, p. xii
[32] Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons* (New York: Norton & Company, 1989), p. 171
[33] Vladimir Seduro, *Dostoevsky in Russian Literary Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), p. 21.

trying to understand how one derives from another, trying to explain to myself to what extent they are caused by the general conditions of life, and in doing this I completely leave aside the personal views of the narrator."[34] For Pisarev, the value of a piece of work lay in how accurately it could depict reality. Nevertheless, it is also important to acknowledge how the critics were generally writing for journals, as these journals were ideologically based. For example, Pisarev wrote for *The Contemporary*, which was a leading organ of Russian radicalism. This would undoubtedly have influenced their criticism as the readers of the journals would have been looking for interpretations to match their own views.

THE NIHILISM MOVEMENT IN LITERATURE

One of the key points of contention in Russian society in this period was the growth of the Nihilist movement. As authors began to address this new movement within literature, this created a canon of work, beginning with Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons,* published in 1862. In his novel, Turgenev depicted nihilist youths and their beliefs. Using Chernyshevsky's, *What is to be Done?*, published in 1863, and Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, published in 1864, this chapter will analyse the underlying dialogue between the writers on nihilism in Russian society. Turgenev's novel provoked Chernyshevsky[35] who felt he needed to clear the name of the young generation depicted in Turgenev's novel. Dostoevsky's novel was, in turn, an angry response to Chernyshevsky's rosy depiction of the impact of rational thought. The tones of these works and the receptions they received showed how tense this discussion had become. In this heated, combative atmosphere of the 1860s many of Russia's greatest novels emerged. While Turgenev's novel produced a retaliation in literature, there was also widespread disdain from literary critics. Turgenev's novel is intriguing as he claimed it was so widely misinterpreted and it invoked much anger from the young generation of Russians. *What is to be Done?* is said to have directly influenced the young Russian generation, in particular, a young Vladimir Lenin, who claimed it as his favourite.[36]

[34] Seduro, *Dostoevsky Literary Criticism*, p. 22.
[35] Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What is to be done?* (London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 22.
[36] Edie, James P. Scanlan and Mary-Barbara Zeldin, *Russian Philosophy, Volume II* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), p.15.

It was Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* that gave the word "nihilist" to Russian literature.[37] The word nihilist itself was not new, but it was Turgenev who attached it to these "new men" of the sixties, men such as Chernyshevsky, Pisarev and Nikolai Dobrolyubov, who were the faces of the movement. Russian nihilism was typified by its intellectual and social iconoclasm and its embrace of rational thought. It stemmed from a fascination with the continually unfolding capacities of science within Europe.[38] Theoretical breakthroughs such as Darwin's theory of evolution challenged the very bases of Russian Orthodox thinking, and these new scientific ideas naturally led to a new way of thinking. Not only was science revered for its solutions to scientific and technological problems, but it was also looked to for its potential effects upon society and in the realm of metaphysics. The movement took their intellectual pabulum from Feuerbach and the German materialists, John Stuart Mill and utilitarian thought, and the French Socialists[39]. The nihilists had a new take on aestheticism within Russian art and literature, as addressed earlier. Their opinions were that it was a stronghold for sentimentalism, emotionalism, rationalism, spiritualism and waste of expenditure on "useless frills."[40] Social unrest in the 1860s was linked to moral and metaphysical discontent,[41] and for this reason the nihilists were blamed.

The term 'nihilist' itself held both positive and negative connotations in this period. Turgenev, in his Apropos to *Fathers and Sons*, explained how he did not mean to offend with the term, indicating the stigma the word had acquired during this period.[42] He explained how the term 'nihilist' was only used by those who sought to stop the movement taking possession of Russian society. Turgenev explained how "it was turned into a weapon of denunciation, of irrevocable condemnation, - almost as a brand of shame." Although the doctrines espoused by these radicals were the same whether they were called 'nihilists' or as they preferred, 'new men', the quarrel over what terminology to apply to the new radicals was highly significant.[43] In giving a name to this new movement, Turgenev was bringing it new levels of awareness within society. The radicals, such as Chernyshevsky and Pisarev expended much effort in producing articles and fiction

[37] Ibid., p. 3.
[38] Catherine Evtuvhov and Richard Stites, *A History of Russia since 1800* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), p. 115.
[39] Edie, Scanlan and Zeldin, *Russian Philosophy,* p. 5.
[40] Ibid., p. 9.
[41] Edith Clowes, *The Revolution of Moral Consciousness* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1988), p. 31.
[42] Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons,* p. 173
[43] Charles A. Moser, *Antinihilism in the Russian novel of the 1860's* (London: Mouton & Co, 1964), p. 21.

defining the intellectual outlines of the 'new men' who embodied the ideals of this radical generation.

While not a prolific movement, Nihilism nonetheless spawned much discussion, both amongst its proponents and critics. Furthermore it can be identified as a forerunner to Marxist-Leninism.[44] In describing this movement, Oscar Wilde said "the nihilist, that strange martyr who has no faith, who goes to the stake without enthusiasm, and dies for what he does not believe in, is a purely literary product. He was invented by Turgenev and completed by Dostoevsky."[45] An alternative interpretation could argue that Russian literature did not invent the nihilist, but in fact attempted to present, and possibly mould, a movement that was already present.

The first Russian novel to depict this movement was Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. Turgenev painted the 'sons' of the novel, Bazarov and Arkady, as archetypal nihilist youths. The 'fathers' of the novel, Nikolai Petrovich and Pavel Petrovich were characteristic of the older "men of the forties," the Westernisers. The term 'nihilist' first arises in a discussion had by Arkady, Nikolai and Pavel, where Arkady is trying to explain their beliefs. "He's a nihilist" stated Arkady, and Nikolai breaks the term down, "that's from the Latin, *nihil*, nothing; the word must mean a man who.... accepts nothing?"[46] Pavel interjects "who respects nothing." Arkady attempts to explain how it is someone who "regards everything from the critical point of view, who does not take any principle on faith...who does not bow down before any authority," to which Pavel quips "is that not the same thing?" This conversation highlights the differences between the generations of Russians, the older Westernisers, while wanting reform, were not yet ready to quash all beliefs. The general opinion of the radical youth of this period is also portrayed in this dialogue, in that they were too extremist and without a core belief.

Turgenev also depicts Bazarov's preoccupation with science, an area commonly associated with the nihilism movement. Bazarov explains how "I shall cut the frog open, and see what's going on in his insides, and then, as you and I are much the same as frogs, only that we walk on legs, I shall know what's going on inside us, too."[47] Turgenev here was seen to be painting Bazarov as one of the key nihilists, Pisarev. Pisarev compared the

[44] Edie, Scanlan and Zeldin, *Russian Philosophy,* p. 10.
[45] William Mills Todd, *Literature and Society in Imperial Russia* (California: Stanford University Press, 1978),. p. 152.
[46] Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons,* p. 17.
[47] Ibid., p. 14.

ideal human society to a beehive, just as Bazarov equated people with frogs.[48] Bazarov is depicted throughout the novel as being far more interested in science than he is in anything else, especially human interaction. Pavel mocks Bazarov with "here is Sir Nihilist coming to honour us... he has no faith in *principles*, but he has faith in frogs."[49] Bazarov furthers this preoccupation with science in stating "a good chemist is twenty times as useful as any poet."[50] Along with Bazarov's reverence of science, is his disregard for art, he stated how "to my mind, Raphael's not worth a brass farthing."[51]

In portraying the nihilist's relationship between reason and emotions Turgenev shows how reason cannot stand up against our passions; Bazarov's rejection of emotion was not compatible with our human nature. When Bazarov is shown to fall in love with Odinstova, romantic love takes over from ideology. Here Turgenev appears to be saying that a society based solely upon reason is not feasible. In the novel Turgenev depicts the breakdown of Bazarov as he struggles with his emotions for Odinstova. Turgenev wrote how "the real cause of all this "newness" was the feeling inspired in Bazarov by Odintsov, a feeling which tortured and maddened him."[52] Although Bazarov had a great love for women and for feminine beauty, love in the romantic sense, or as he called it, "gibberish, unpardonable imbecility" he regarded as something like a disease. Bazarov described how "he expressed more strongly than ever his calm contempt for everything romantic; but when he was alone, with indignation he recognized the romantic in himself."

In perhaps the most damning aspect in the depiction of Bazarov, and in turn the nihilists, is the scene where the main characters are discussing how nihilism will tackle the problems within society. The 'fathers' of the novel are accused of contributing nothing, that their "perpetual talk" has led to nothing but "banality and doctrinarism."[53] However, the 'sons' solution to curing societies woes is depicted as action through destruction. Arkady confidently states "we shall destroy, because we are a force."[54] Pavel responds by asking "but destroy without even knowing why?" Here the nihilists are shown to be an almost uncontrollable force, one that could be highly damaging to Russian society through their destructive nature. This further highlights one of the perceived problems within the nihilism movement; they were looking to destroy, without knowing how to rebuild. Pavel states that "in old days, young men had to study; they didn't want to be

[48] Clowes, *Moral Consciousness,* p. 31.
[49] Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, p. 18.
[50] Ibid., p. 19.
[51] Ibid., p. 42.
[52] Ibid., p. 42.
[53] Ibid., p. 40.
[54] Ibid., p. 41.

called dunces, so they had to work hard whether they liked it or not. But now, they need only say, 'Everything in the world is nonsense!' and the trick's done. Young men are delighted. And, to be sure, they were simply blockheads before, and now they have suddenly turned nihilists."[55]

Turgenev explained that he was not attacking the nihilism movement in his Apropos to the novel, published in 1869, and that he was merely depicting what he saw. Turgenev said he thought of the novel while sea-bathing in the Isle of Wight in 1860. "For my part I must confess I never attempted to "create a figure"[56] unless I had a living character rather than an idea, to whom appropriate elements were gradually added and mixed in." Turgenev explained how at the basis of the main character, Bazarov, was the figure of a young provincial doctor who had struck him, and that "this remarkable man embodied in my view that barely nascent still fermenting principle that was later called nihilism." This idea of realistically depicting what you saw in society around you was a key component of Russian realism. Turgenev went to say how he was disturbed that "I did not even find a hint in any work of our literature of what I seemed to see everywhere." He was writing to depict nihilism, as it was becoming prominent and he had not yet seen it depicted in literature. However, this portrayal led to Turgenev being vilified across Russian society. Turgenev discussed this further and wrote how, "when I returned to St. Petersburg, the very day of the notorious fires in the Apraksin Palace, the word "nihilist" had already been taken up by thousands of voices, and the first exclamation that burst from the lips of the first acquaintance I encountered on the Nevsky was "See what *your* nihilists are doing! They are burning Petersburg!"[57] Turgenev, in a letter to M. Hartmann wrote how "things started to go badly for me with my Fathers and Sons. I am now possibly the most unpopular man in the whole of Russia. I have insulted our national pride and that is more unforgivable than anything."[58]

In another letter to Ludwig Pietsch, a German critic, he wrote how "the young people in Russia are far *too* sensitive,"[59] which shows Turgenev may not have been prepared for this reaction within society, and believed it was uncalled for. Turgenev wrote how "so much abuse has been poured over my head. A Judas who sold his soul for silver, an idiot, an ass, a poisonous toad, a spittoon are the *least* I've been called." Turgenev was

[55] Ibid., p. 42.
[56] Ibid., p. 169.
[57] Ibid., p. 170.
[58] Knowles, A. V.,ed. *Turgenev's Letters* (London: The Athlone Press, 1983), p. 147.
[59] Knowles, *Turgenev's Letters,* p. 161.

accused of offending not just the younger generation within society, but the older generations too.

"A witty lady said to me - "*Neither Fathers nor Sons*, that is the real title of your book - and you are a nihilist yourself."[60] Whilst reading the novel, it seemed to be clear that Turgenev was not painting the nihilist movement in a positive light. However, Turgenev dedicated the novel to the memory of Belinksy who was an idol of young liberals in the 1830's and 1840's, and this dedication implied an allegiance to the highest ideals of progressive thought, which shows that Turgenev could have been conflicted.[61]

It is both important and interesting to note how widely misinterpreted Turgenev's works were, and the anger this interpretation caused within contemporary Russian society. While the novel was an immense success, due to its topicality,[62] opinions on the novel varied hugely. He had outraged the radicals, who believed the novel was a calumny on the 'sons' and a glorification of the 'fathers'.[63] With the more conservative reactions Turgenev was generally praised for his supposed attack on the nihilists.[64] Two interesting reactions to the novel came from the critics Pisarev, a leading critic of the journal *The Russian World*, from the radical camp, and N. Stakhov, who published a review in the conservative journal of the Dostoevsky brothers, *Time*. Their interpretations are interesting because they fall outside of what you would expect from their ideological norms.

Pisarev, who famously dismissed most art for its lack of any practical value, insisted that his interest in Turgenev was utilitarian, and that he was trying to show society the right direction. On these grounds, Pisarev, who regarded the writer Alexander Pushkin to be worth less than a pair of boots,[65] reasoned that Turgenev's novel was useful. Pisarev embraced Bazarov as representative of his own generation and praised the novel as a great work of art.[66] Pisarev wrote how Turgenev did not understand nihilism as the young generation did, and explained how "if you go up to a mirror, which while reflecting objects also changes their colour a little bit, then you recognise your own physiognomy in spite of the distortions of the time."[67] Pisarev explained that Turgenev has regarded these ideas from his own point of view, that he saw nihilism differently to the younger generation. Pisarev went on to write how "if Bazarovism is a disease, then it

[60] Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons,* p. 172.
[61] Ibid., p. 1
[62] Andrew, *Russian Writers,* p. 31.
[63] James Woodward, *Turgenev's Fathers and Sons* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1996), p. 5.
[64] Andrew, *Russian Writers*, p. 29.
[65] Knowles,*Turgenev's Letters,* p. 139.
[66] Todd, *Literature and Society in Imperial Russia*, p. 157.
[67] Turgenev, *Father and Sons*, p. 195.

is a disease of our time, and must be endured to the end, no matter what palliatives and amputations are employed. Treat Bazarovism however you please - that is your business; but you will not be able to put a stop to it; it is just the same as cholera."[68] "Bazarovism" here is a reference to the new young radicals within society and Pisarev is saying that he did not think they could be dissuaded.

Pisarev described how many of the readers were up in arms against Turgenev because he did not sympathise with Bazarov and did not conceal his blunders from the reader.[69] The radical readers would rather Bazarov had been presented as an irreproachable man, thereby proving the superiority of realism to all other schools of thought. However, Pisarev's states that "realism is indeed a fine thing; but let us not, in the name of this very realism, idealise either ourselves or this movement. We coldly and soberly regard all that surrounds us, let us regard ourselves just as coldly and soberly…we are far from perfect." Pisarev wrote that Turgenev did not fully sympathise with anyone or anything in his novel. He wrote that the "the meaning of novel emerged as follows: today's young people become carried away and go to extremes; but this very tendency to get carried away points to fresh strength and incorruptible intellect; this strength and intellect will lead these young people onto the right road."[70] Pisarev acknowledges that Turgenev did not invent the Russian nihilist, and that as an artist be must have observed them. Pisarev wrote how *Fathers and Sons* was a successful novel that stirred the mind and forced the reader, especially the radical reader, to reflect in the hope of improving themself.

In Strakhov's interpretation, the Slavophile view of the intellectual as an alienated figure framed his response to the novel.[71] Strakhov viewed Bazarov primarily as a tragic figure, a radical whose ideals are in conflict with his most basic needs. While Bazarov, as an intellectual, stands above the other characters, they stand above him in terms of human life, "the life which breathes through them." Bazarov is victim to nihilism, forcing him to suppress his feelings and dismiss them as romanticism. Strakhov explained how despite all of Bazarov's views, he "cannot be a cold abstract man"[72] as his heart demanded fullness and feeling. Turgenev, Strakhov explained, depicted life under the deadening influence of theory. Strakhov wrote that "in short Turgenev stands for the eternal principles of human life…all his attention is concentrated on the general forces of life. He has shown us how

[68] Ibid., p. 200.
[69] Ibid., p. 206.
[70] Ibid., p. 217.
[71] Woodward, *Turgenev's Fathers and Sons*, p. 9.
[72] Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons,* p. 225.

these forces are embodied in Bazarov, in that same Bazarov who denies them."[73] Strakhov believed that Bazarov was a casualty of this movement, one that was denying young Russians their basic human elements.

Comparison of these two criticisms shows clear differences in beliefs regarding the nihilist movement. While Pisarev was hoping the nihilism movement could reflect and grow with the criticism, Strakhov was explaining that as nihilism involved a suppression of our natural instincts, it could never work within Russian society. However, they hold some interesting similarities in that Turgenev accepted both Pisarev's and Strakhov's criticism. Turgenev thanked Strakhov for the 'kind words' his journal had published, and wrote that Pisarev had 'almost completely grasped everything I wanted to say with Bazarov."[74] While both of these critics managed to twist the message of the novel to fit their own ideologies, despite coming from different ideological backgrounds they both show a desire for Russian society to change; whether that be to embrace the new radical movement, as Pisarev envisions, or for society to reject these new ideals as they were not practical as Strakhov explains.

One of the key responses to Turgenev's novel can be seen within another piece of literature. Chernyshevsky was so outraged by the depiction of Bazarov, ergo the nihilist movement, that he wrote the novel *What is to be Done?*[75] It was intended as a direct response to Turgenev from a member of the younger generation he had depicted in Bazarov. Chernyshevsky was not looking to portray a more positive character through a counter-depiction of Bazarov, but instead he designed the characters in the novel as models for reproduction in real life. The novel was to be a positive program for the behaviour of the young nihilists. Chernyshevsky wrote how "all the prominent traits by which they [the new men in the novel] are marked are traits, not of individuals, but of a type."[76] Chernyshevsky believed Bazarov's nihilism was merely destructive, he aimed only to clear the ground and lacked a program of reform, for this reason he was an unflattering portrait of the "new men."[77] In *What is to be Done?* Chernyshevsky portrays this rationally ordered society in a sewing workshop, created by the main character, Vera. In this sewing workshop Vera uses these new ideals in a constructive and successful way. In this respect, Chernyshevsky takes nihilism one step further than Bazarov who merely looks to destroy the old order, without proposing a solution. Chernyshevsky also considered Bazarov to

[73] Ibid., p. 229.
[74] Woodward, *Turgenev's Fathers and Sons*, p. 10.
[75] Irina Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism* (California: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 15.
[76] Paperno, *Chernyshevsky,* p. 15
[77] Chernyshevsky, *What is to be done?*, p. 26.

be a dastardly caricature of Dobrolyubov, a fellow radical and a close friend to Chernyshevsky.

One of the ways Chernyshevsky looked to dispute Turgenev's depiction of nihilism was with the reconciliation of "rational egoism" with romantic love. Chernyshevsky tried to transform Bazarov's messy romantic feelings into a "rational" love, which did not contain the self-destructive urge Bazarov displayed.[78] The love between Vera and Lopukhov, then Vera and Kirsanov is not depicted as destructive, but practical, fulfilling and largely happy. The main theme running through Chernyshevsky's novel is that of a rationally ordered society. A society built upon rational thought, where the interests of individuals coinciding with the common good, creating a society of "decent people."

When addressing the issue of science in his novel, Chernyshevsky referred to Crystal Palace, an innovative building of glass and steel erected in Hyde Park, London in 1851. For Chernyshevsky this building symbolised the transformation of society through science and technology.[79] Chernyshevsky extensively described the aluminium of this new building, detailing "how elegant it all is! Aluminium and more aluminium." Aluminium was used by Chernyshevsky to praise these new scientific advancements, a principal proponent of the nihilism movement he advocated. The Crystal Palace would also, in Chernyshevy's ideal, become home to many people, "men and women everywhere, old people and young, together with children", all working together.[80] Here Chernyshevsky is portraying Fourier's influence with his idea of a self-sufficient commune, which he felt was a crucial aspect of a rationally ordered society.

Chernyshevsky also discussed medical students in his literature, Bazarov had also been a medical student, and it was a characteristic career of young nihilists. Chernyshevsky wrote how "it's a curious thing: in the last ten years or so a number of our best medical students have decided upon graduation not to practice medicine."[81] He wrote how at the first opportunity they drop medicine and "take up one of its auxiliary sciences - physiology, chemistry." Chernyshevsky explains how this was due to the underdeveloped state of medicine in Russia. Medical students, rather than treating patients, believed it was more important to prepare for the future so that doctors could possess the skill to administer treatment. He wrote how they "they reject wealth, even

[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., p. 370.
[80] Ibid., p. 371.
[81] Ibid., p. 92.

prosperity" to sit in hospitals making scientific observations. Chernyshevsky draws attention to the work they do dissecting frogs,[82] as if to apply reason and logic behind Bazarov's obsession with studying frogs.

Chernyshevsky wrote how, if as readers, you considered his main characters, Vera Pavlovna, Kirsanov and Lopukhov to be heroes, and people of a higher nature, "perhaps even idealised figures"[83] then you would be mistaken. Chernyshevsky explained that "it's not they that stand too high, but you who stand too low." If as a reader of Chernyshevsky's novel these characters appeared to be "soaring above the clouds" then that was only because "you're sitting in some godforsaken underworld." It was a novel aimed at 'fixing' the ills within society, aiming to educate those who were not yet within the nihilism movement. Chernyshevsky wrote that it was necessary for him to write the novel as the "good, strong, honest, capable people" have only just started to appear among us, and that if they were to be his only readers, there would be no need to write.[84] Chernyshevsky knew literature could reach more people and in writing his novel wanted to inspire a generation, and especially those alienated by the figure of Bazarov.

Completing this 'dialogue between writers' was Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* in 1864. This was Dostoevsky's first attack in literature on ethical rationalist, utilitarian and utopian socialist thought and this novel acted as a mouthpiece for Dostoevsky's orthodox opinions.[85] The novel was a direct assault on Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* and contains a sharp parody of the ideas expressed in the novel. Chernyshevsky's heroes are guided by this new morality in which self-interest is identical to the common good, and this produces a society of decent citizens. Dostoevsky ridicules Chernyshevsky's rationalistic philosophy of happiness and well-being, and shows his portrait of the "new men" and his utopian dreams as an absurd simplification of human nature. The main character of Dostoevsky's novel is the 'Underground Man,' a man who is depicted as having fallen victim to these rational ideas which have brought him misery. In a commentary to the text, written by Dostoevsky, he explains that in writing these 'notes' "people like the author of these notes not only may, but must exist in our society"[86] and that "he's a representative of the current generation." The opening line to

[82] Ibid., p. 92.
[83] Ibid., p. 313.
[84] Ibid., p. 49.
[85] Robert L. Jackson, *Dostoevsky's Underground Man in Russian Literature* (The Netherlands: Mouton & Co, 1958), p. 24.
[86] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (New York: Norton & Company, 1989), p. 3.

the novel states "I am a sick man"[87] and this is indicative of Dostoevsky's opinions of these new ideas within society. Dostoevsky saw rational thought as a kind of disease within society, one which was spreading amongst the younger generation.

The overriding theme from Dostoevsky's work is that man is irrational. The 'underground man' asserts that reason alone can neither comprehend nor fulfil society, and that it alone would destroy the human spirit.[88] Dostoevsky wrote that "reason is a fine thing, gentlemen, there's no doubt about it, but it's only reason, and it satisfies only man's rational faculty, whereas desire is a manifestation of all life, which includes both reason, as well as all of life's itches and scratches."[89] He further wrote how "man has always been somewhat afraid of this two times two makes four"[90] and that "two times four is no longer life, gentlemen, but the beginning of death." Dostoevsky was explaining how rational thought would lead to the downfall of society. Dostoevsky wrote that as soon as man finds rational thought, "there'll be nothing left to search for." This contrasts with Chernyshevsky's model of rational thought and a rationally ordered society that will produce a strong, happy society. Dostoevsky is accusing Chernyshevsky of oversimplifying human nature, and alludes to how dangerous this could be. In Dostoevsky's opinion, human nature overrides science. Dostoevsky described how Cleopatra used to stick gold pins into the breasts of slave girls, and take pleasure in their screams, and although man has now learnt to see more clearly than in barbaric times, "he's still far from having learned how to act in accordance with the dictates of reason and science."[91]

Dostoevsky mocks Chernyshevsky's Fourierist, utopian vision of the future, making reference to the rational masterpiece that was the Crystal Palace. Dostoevsky described how after the Crystal Palace had been built, this rational, communal, scientifically calculated society would lead to terrible boredom, "there won't be anything left to do, once everything has been calculated according to tables.... why, even gold pins get stuck into other people out of boredom."[92] This is furthered with an attack on Chernyshevsky's idea of "decent people." Dostoevsky wrote "tell me who was the first to announce, first to proclaim that man does nasty things simply because he doesn't know his own true interest; and that if he were to be enlightened ... he would stop doing nasty

[87] Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground,* p. 3.
[88] Jackson, *Dostoevsky's Underground Man*, p. 41.
[89] Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground,* p. 20.
[90] Ibid., p. 24.
[91] Ibid., p. 17.
[92] Ibid., p. 18.

things at once and would immediately become good and noble, because being in so enlightened and understanding his real advantage, he would realise that his own advantage really did lie in the good."[93] Dostoevsky was attacking the heroes of Chernyshevsky's novel who expound a theory of rational egoism.[94] The Underground man is not described sticking pins into people, but his hysterical outbursts and irrational ramblings are examples of his attempts to escape the boredom and frustrations that his rationally ordered lifestyle has brought.[95]

CONCLUSION

This investigation has shown the extent to which literature and criticism was politically charged in this period. Ideology was clearly present within both literature and literary criticism, despite claims to the contrary. Pisarev, despite his claims to view a text without ideology, in his criticism demonstrated his preference for the Nihilist movement to which he belonged. The fact that Turgenev's novel sparked such a furore shows how tense society was during this period. The controversy caused shows the extent to which Russia was in need of reform through the degree of division in the national response. Turgenev explained how "one critic even brought forth the fact that I made Bazarov lose at cards to Father Alexey. "He just doesn't know how to wound and humiliate enough! He doesn't even know how to play cards!" There is absolutely no doubt that if I had made Bazarov win, the same critic would triumphantly exclaim: "Isn't it clear? The author wants to suggest that Bazarov is a cheat!"[96]

With Oscar Wilde's assumption that the nihilism was a literary product "invented by Turgenev and completed by Dostoevsky," I would have to disagree. Turgenev was depicting the movement as he saw it in Russian society, portraying a movement already taking hold of the younger Russian generation. Dostoevsky, however, in presenting his take on the nihilism movement, was not forming a movement, but reacting to one. Alexander Herzen, a contemporary Russian author and critic, however wrote that "young Russians were almost all out of *What is to be done?* after 1862, with the addition of a few of Bazarov's traits."[97] This was a far more accurate take on what how the nihilism movement

[93] Ibid., p. 15.
[94] Jackson, *Dostoevsky's Underground Man*, p. 42.
[95] Ibid., p. 45.
[96] Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons,* p. 171 footnotes.
[97] Paperno, *Chernyshevsky,* p. x.

intertwined with Russian literature. Chernyshevsky hoped his novel would help mould the nihilists. As Chernyshevsky would have hoped, the nihilists did not look to his novel in terms of its aesthetic value, but as a program for social action. *What is to be Done?* only proved to the young radicals that Alexander II's reforms had not gone far enough, and that Chernyshevsky's utopian, rational society could be achieved through revolution.[98]

As a movement, Nihilism barely outlasted the sixties. By the end of the decade the major figures were either dead or had been banished. However, it was through this movement that the secularization and radicalization of the Russian intelligentsia took place. [99] With this a major step had been taken towards the development of the Russian Marxists, the nihilists were the forerunners of Marxism-Leninism in Russia.

[98] Chernyshevsky, *What is to be done?* p. 32.
[99] Edie, Scanlan and Zeldin, *Russian Philosophy.* p. 9.

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