

## Instruction Dostoevsky Essay

One of the advantages of this course is that we have the opportunity to read two excellent works of Russian fiction, one by Dostoevsky and the other by Leonid Andreev. Russia has contributed many things to world culture—including, arguably, terrorism!—but Russian literature is surely one of the most important. So one of the goals of this exercise is simply to have you read some Russian literature, with the hope that you will enjoy it and profit from it intellectually.

More immediately, I am asking you to write a relatively short paper based on your reading of the novel. This assignment is based on the proposition that we get the most out of any reading when we reflect on it, and nothing requires us to reflect more than writing.

The question then arises: What precisely am I looking for? At its core, your paper should attempt to connect the novel to the historical events and processes that we have been studying in this course. If you have been even marginally attentive you will have noticed in several of our readings the assertion that *Devils* represents a fictionalized account of the Nechaev affair. This should probably serve as your starting point. The question is: how precisely does Dostoevsky account for this bizarre episode? What lessons are to be drawn from it? For example, one Russian colleague of mine writes that Dostoevsky “regarded the Nechaev Affair as a symptom of a profound spiritual illness that had seized the revolutionary intelligentsia. . . . Subsequent events proved him correct.”<sup>1</sup> Should we agree with this statement? In what sense was Dostoevsky correct? What are the elements of “spiritual illness” recounted in the novel, and how do we see them manifested in the revolutionary activity that followed? Might there be grounds for arguing *against* Dostoevsky’s position? Does Dostoevsky inform us about the nature of terrorist activity even in the early twentieth century, as described by Anna Geifman and other sources – that is, long after his own death in 1881? Or is his account relevant only for the revolutionary terrorism of the late 1870s and early 1880s? In short, Dostoevsky provides a particular vision of what terrorism in Russia was and how to understand it. But you also have a good deal of historical material at your disposal now, with which you can reflect critically on Dostoevsky’s propositions. The goal, then, is to bring the novel and the historical material into conversation with one another.

The ways in which you can do this are infinite. But any good paper will seek to make an argument—that is, articulate a thesis, a central idea, that it will demonstrate using evidence from both the novel and the other readings of the course. It needs to be emphasized that the only acceptable paper is one that makes use of *both* the novel itself *and* the required readings for the course. To be sure, it will probably be impossible to include all of the required readings, but you should also be sure to do more than just rely, for example, on Yarmolinsky alone. Think about the major points that you draw from the novel and think about how these relate to what you know about the history of the

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Polunov, *Russia in the Nineteenth Century: Autocracy, Reform, and Social Change*, 1814-1914 (New York, 2005), 146.

revolutionary movement and terrorism in Russia. Then organize your essay around these points, using evidence to fortify your assertions. *It is absolutely critical that you do not attempt to retell the story of the novel*, though there may be a temptation to begin doing so. Aside from the fact that rewriting the novel in a short essay is utterly impossible, such an approach is completely uninteresting. In other words, your essay should have a strictly *analytical* approach as opposed to a narrative one.

In formal terms, your essay should be about four pages in length. Anything shorter than three pages or longer than five pages will be rejected outright, and resubmitted essays will be considered late by the original calendar for submission. The length designations here assume a paper that features double-space, with 12-point font, and margins of 1-1.25 inches. The paper should have a good title, well-structured paragraphs, an introduction that offers an argument, and evidence presented from the novel and other readings. You should not use bloc quotations, and indeed no quotation should be more than 2-3 lines of text—and in most cases a good deal shorter than that.

Each essay must be typed or computer printed. Your name should appear on the essay (the date and the course number are irrelevant and should not be included). Under your name, please include your e-mail address. References to required reading for the course should take the simplest form: (Verhoeven, 101). You need not include “p.” or “pg.” – just the page number. You should include the title only if you have two or more works by the same author, which is unlikely to be the case. If you use a source not from the required reading, then you need to cite that in full, preferably in a footnote.

I ask that students submit their essays electronically. In order to do so, there are *two fundamental requirements*: 1) the name of the document **MUST** be your last name (you can add anything you wish after that, but the name of the document **MUST** begin with your last name); 2) your e-mail address must be included under your name. Any paper that does not meet these two requirements will be sent back to the author with the remark “NO GOOD.” Anything submitted thereafter will be considered late by the original schedule for submission. I prefer but do not require that papers be saved in .doc format rather than .docx.

One last note—on plagiarism. There is obviously a ton of stuff on Dostoevsky and *Devils* swishing about on the internet. I do not have any intrinsic opposition to you consulting such things, though I do think they will tend to lead you astray and may actually end up wasting your time. Keep in mind any idiot can publish on the web, so you cannot assume that anything there is more than idiocy (the process of peer review places some limits on this in the case of books and articles). Most importantly, note that I will be very vigilant in looking for plagiarism on this exercise, and I will not hesitate to fail you unconditionally and ignominiously for the entire course if I detect it. Remember that I am asking you to link the novel *to the specific readings for this course*. Thus any paper that does not engage seriously with the required readings for this course will immediately generate suspicion. But if you have to go through the trouble of incorporating our readings into a plagiarized essay, then why bother to plagiarize in the first place? Idiocy, indeed...