

*Introduction: the many worlds of Dostoevsky**Olga Maiorova and Deborah Martinsen*

Fyodor Dostoevsky lived in many worlds – artistic, journalistic, political, religious, and economic, to name a few – worlds which differed from each other so profoundly that they frequently occupied opposite ends of the social and ideological spectrum. Dostoevsky spent most of his life among the intellectuals of St. Petersburg, debating in journals and in person over philosophical, political, aesthetic, and social issues. But for four years as a political convict he lived in leg-irons at hard labor in a Siberian stockade, alongside lower-class, illiterate criminals. Upon release, he was forced into the life of a soldier: made, as a private, to endure military drills and to sleep in the confined space of an army barracks in a remote town on the Kazakh steppe, with few books and little control over his life. After returning to Petersburg, however, Dostoevsky was able to travel extensively across Europe, explore its cultural treasures, and pursue the activities of his choice. He experienced the joy of literary creation, yet endured incapacitating epileptic seizures. For eight years, Dostoevsky suffered from compulsive gambling, hoping to change his fortune by pursuing a system at the roulette tables. Yet he spent another eight years as a disciplined editor, working around the clock to produce periodicals in a timely manner. In his youth, Dostoevsky joined a revolutionary circle and for the rest of his life remained sympathetic to radicals' aspirations for a harmonious society, seeing revolutionaries as truth-seekers and self-sacrificers gone astray. After returning from Siberia, however, he wrote novels directed against the thinking that informed revolutionaries' actions. He was a wholehearted believer in monarchy and the Russian people's devotion to the tsar and in later years gravitated toward the conservative establishment that exerted substantial influence at Court, although he always maintained his ideological independence. At various times Dostoevsky took on still other roles such as translator, literary critic, amateur actor, and public speaker. Perhaps the most unusual was his role as sole author, editor, and publisher of the monthly journal *The Diary of a Writer*, where he freely conversed with

the public about a wide range of topics – from the most heated political controversies and pressing social problems to his literary projects and personal reminiscences – with the ultimate goal of becoming a voice that could reconcile conflicting political positions. Dostoevsky held all these roles in different ways, at different times, and to varying degrees. While his worlds occasionally clashed, they all nourished his mind and inspired his creative genius: Dostoevsky narrated, fused, and transmuted these worlds into his own multidimensional and polyphonic universe, a universe that encompassed so many of the challenges and ambiguities of his time that we often call it “Dostoevsky’s Russia.”

This volume explores the Russia where the great writer was born and lived. We focus not only on the Russia depicted in Dostoevsky’s works, but also on the Russia that he and his contemporaries experienced: on Russian social practices and historical developments, political and cultural institutions, religious beliefs, ideological trends, artistic conventions, and literary genres. Our contributors illuminate this broad context, offer insights into Dostoevsky’s reflections on his age, and examine the expression of those reflections in his writing. Each chapter investigates a specific context and suggests how we might understand Dostoevsky in relation to it. Since Russia took so much from Western Europe throughout the imperial period, many entries address the complex, multidimensional assimilation of Western thought and practices into the Russian experience. The drama of Russia versus the West, which provoked excitement, anxiety, resistance, ambiguous attitudes, and tumultuous discussions about Russia’s place in the world, is central to Dostoevsky’s work and constitutes one of this collection’s overarching themes.

Generations of scholars have read Dostoevsky in historical and literary context: both his fiction and his journalism refer and allude to literary texts, ideological tendencies, social issues, foreign and domestic affairs, as well as the quotidian challenges facing his contemporaries. Working from various perspectives, they have uncovered, explained, and deciphered such allusions, reconstructing appropriate contexts for Dostoevsky’s writings and proposing insightful interpretations of his works. Joseph Frank’s monumental five-volume biography of the writer is the most systematic and forceful reading of Dostoevsky in the context of his time. Now, deeply indebted to all this previous research, we endeavor to expand the scholarly agenda by focusing on the context itself. While scholars usually examine Dostoevsky’s artistic and philosophical meditations on the phenomena of his age, here we examine the phenomena themselves and offer an in-depth study of the worlds

in which Dostoevsky lived in order to situate these worlds – and the writer’s reflections on them – in a larger historical frame.

Focusing on the broad social and intellectual contexts of Dostoevsky’s era allows us to transcend the writer’s standpoint and read him from our own perspective, yet keep our interpretive parameters congruent with his works. Moreover, as new research into history and culture reveals overlooked and understudied aspects of nineteenth-century Russia, this context-based approach sheds new light even on canonical texts. This is exactly what this volume seeks to achieve. Our contributors, leading experts in history and literary studies, discuss Dostoevsky in context from the perspectives of their own innovative research and thus offer fresh insights into his worlds. They not only re-examine well-studied contexts (such as Christianity, realism, serfdom, legal practices, revolutionary terrorism, and the “woman question”), but also explore emergent contexts (such as Islam, empire, childhood, gambling, symbolic geography, penal practices, race, and biology). As our modern world evolves and we face new challenges, our vision of the past changes. This collection inevitably reflects the limits of our current knowledge and is thus only a phase in the perpetual process of re-reading Dostoevsky.

Although scholars continually uncover new contexts for studying Dostoevsky, this by no means implies that his artistic universe can be reduced, even theoretically, to a conglomeration of contexts. This is not merely a methodological issue of how to research Dostoevsky. In his major works, Dostoevsky himself powerfully resists such reduction by transcending the transient and transforming it into the metaphysical. For him all contexts – and earthly life as a whole – ultimately manifest the supreme power of God, and he firmly places the ephemeral in a Christian framework. Dostoevsky’s novels also resist a deterministic reading: the worlds that his characters experience affect their mindset, but never determine it. Dostoevsky the writer never defines his characters by their social environment. He believed, in Joseph Frank’s words, in “the power of personality as an autonomous force.”¹ And of course no context could define Dostoevsky himself – it could only inspire him.

Notwithstanding these important limitations concerning Dostoevsky’s relation to historical contexts, he was a man of his age, and the profound transformations that Russia underwent in the nineteenth century informed his works and underpinned his intellectual trajectory.

Dostoevsky was born in 1821, just a few years before Nicholas I (1825–55) assumed the throne, and he died about a month prior to the assassination of Alexander II (1855–81). The almost sixty years of Dostoevsky’s lifetime

thus stretched over these two consecutive – and sharply contrasting – reigns. The authoritarian regime of Nicholas I stifled Russian society and deprived it of a sense of agency. To protect his country from revolutionary ideology, Nicholas tried to isolate Russia from Europe and, toward the end of his reign, drastically limited his subjects' opportunities to travel abroad. Alexander II, on the contrary, permitted a more open atmosphere, removed the ban on foreign travel, and, during his first years as tsar, engaged educated society in a dialogue with the government. While backwardness and corruption marked the regime of Nicholas I, Alexander II introduced the changes that propelled Russia onto the path of modernization. His government emancipated the serfs (1861) and introduced a Western-type court system and local self-governance (1864), thereby launching the era of the Great Reforms (1860s–70s), a period that profoundly altered the fabric of Russian life, as new institutions emerged and the largely agricultural country faced the advent of capitalism. Alexander never relinquished the prerogatives of the absolutist monarch, but he departed from Nicholas's restrictive policies on education, the military draft, censorship, and legal punishment. During Alexander's era, intellectuals were allowed to establish new periodicals; a number of famous Russian writers, banned under Nicholas, now appeared in print, and the independent press gained unprecedented power in shaping public opinion. In short, Alexander II repudiated – especially in the opening decade of his rule – the basic principles of Nicholas I's authoritarianism, and the sharp contrast between these two reigns produced the historical drama that irrevocably shaped Dostoevsky's life.

In the final, extremely gloomy years of Nicholas's rule, Dostoevsky was sentenced to death for participating in the socialist Petrashevsky circle*. While he and fourteen others were in their death shrouds awaiting execution, their sentences were commuted, and Dostoevsky's was changed to four years' hard labor (1850–4) in Siberia instead. At the beginning of Alexander's era, Dostoevsky returned to Petersburg to resume his literary career. Arriving in 1859, just before the serfs were liberated, he thus witnessed the undoing of the social evil that had prompted him to join not only the Petrashevsky circle but its radical wing. In this era of reform, Dostoevsky was able to travel abroad, enjoy relaxed censorship, and, most importantly, participate in the exciting public debates raging in Russia's increasingly vocal print media. Fyodor and his brother Mikhail eagerly joined the fray, editing two journals: *Vremya* (*Time*, 1861–3) and *Epokha* (*Epoch*, 1864–5). Although Dostoevsky's name could not be displayed on the masthead because he was a former political prisoner, he not only

served as the managing editor of both journals but also provided major works of fiction, editorials, and ideological direction for them. After Mikhail's death in 1864 and the collapse of *Epoch* in 1865, Dostoevsky took on the debts for both, and he and his wife Anna Grigorievna moved to Europe to escape his creditors. From 1867 to 1871 he avidly followed events in Russia from afar. On returning to Petersburg, he plunged back into the journalistic world first as editor of *Grazhdanin* (*The Citizen*), the conservative weekly periodical in which he began his column "Diary of a Writer" (1873), and then as sole author of his own periodical under the same name – the monojournal *Diary of a Writer* (1876–7, 1880, 1881). The *Diary* enhanced Dostoevsky's public stature, making him an even more highly visible and revered figure whose opinions carried much weight with readers across the political spectrum. From the depths of prison under Nicholas I, Dostoevsky thus rose to the heights of fame under Alexander II.

Dostoevsky's ideological agenda was strongly influenced by his ten years of penal servitude and exile, which had brought him into close contact with ordinary Russians, mostly peasants. As a nobleman, Dostoevsky was painfully exposed to the class hatred of his fellow inmates, an experience he recounted in his semi-autobiographical *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1860–2), which he published in *Time*. Yet he also discovered spiritual strength among the inmates, and the Russian peasant masses (the *narod**) came to embody for Dostoevsky a repository of genuine Christian feeling and moral values that could enrich, if not transform, the entire nation. He believed that the emancipation of the serfs would heal the deep divide between Russia's educated minority and the *narod*, thereby creating conditions for a strong and cohesive Russian nation to emerge.

Early in the reform era, Dostoevsky's contemporaries across the political spectrum shared similar aspirations for national unity and believed that the newly freed peasants would become citizens, gradually assimilating into all spheres of Russian life. Alexander II himself fostered such hopes. In the opening years of his reign he had allied himself with educated society at critical moments in order to win its support, thereby creating the impression that he was committed to involving society in decision making and to conferring legal rights on his subjects. His policies raised persistent hopes (even among some high-ranking officials) that a constitution would be granted and representative institutions established. But as the reforms proceeded, Alexander II failed to fulfill the hopes of wider political participation that he had aroused, and all educated society became disillusioned. Liberals, and radicals to an even greater extent, began to

distrust Alexander, a trend that ultimately strengthened the revolutionary movement and fueled the terrorism that ended his life.

Like the broader public, Dostoevsky was initially enthusiastic about the reforms, even outdoing many with his exalted hopes, and like them, he was disillusioned. Unlike his liberal and radical contemporaries, however, Dostoevsky was not concerned with legal rights or a constitution. He increasingly championed the Christian morality of the masses as the foundation for national unity, and he expected the reforms to close the gap between Russia's educated minority and uneducated majority. As those hopes were dashed, he became ever more skeptical about imposing institutions borrowed from the West on the Russian people. He also worried about the social turbulence and anxiety that accompanied the reforms, and he portrayed the uncertainties of the period in his novels.

From the late 1860s onward, as his hopes for the reforms' potential to transform society faded, Dostoevsky began to articulate his ecstatic expectations regarding the future of the Russian nation in eschatological terms. He came to believe – and propounded with increasing specificity in the 1870s – that the Russian people had been chosen as the Christ-bearing nation. He also came to believe that Russians were distinguished by their universalism, which he understood as an ability to absorb other nations' cultural achievements. Finally, he came to believe that the innate Christianity and universalism of the Russian people rendered them a natural conciliatory force that would establish a harmonious Christian society on earth.

Within this utopian framework, Dostoevsky addressed what he understood as the profound challenges and ambiguities of the nineteenth century: the ends and means of progress, the tyranny of rationalism and abstraction, the conflict between the Christian morality of love and enlightenment ethics, the lack of personal freedom in both bourgeois societies and socialist projects. His philosophical and artistic meditations on these issues yielded his most celebrated works, from *Notes from Underground* (1864) to *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–80). All these issues were to be resolved, he believed, in the future, when Russia would stand at the vanguard of tectonic world transformation. Dostoevsky focused keenly on the sociopolitical developments of his age in the hope of discerning in them the first signs of the profound change that would culminate in a better life for humanity.

While some chapters of this volume examine key issues of the reform era and others discuss Dostoevsky's eschatological thinking, this essay brings

together both topics, to lay bare the connection between them: even his religious utopianism and his belief in Russia as a nation liberating the world – the aspects of Dostoevsky's ideological agenda that seem completely detached from the reality of the absolutist empire in which he lived – can be perceived within the context of the historical drama engendered by the major reforms that unfolded during his lifetime.

As our contributors demonstrate, Dostoevsky's works interacted with his time in many ways, both reflecting the historical developments of his age and shaping them. While this volume focuses on the Russia where Dostoevsky lived, it also yields insights into the Russia he depicted. Yet if we try to juxtapose these two Russias or even to demarcate the Russia of Dostoevsky's novels from nineteenth-century Russia as we know it today, we will fall into an epistemological trap, because our understanding of the world in which Dostoevsky lived is to some extent influenced by the way he perceived it – just as it is influenced by the perspectives of other great writers of that time, such as Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, and Anton Chekhov. It is often their novels and stories that initially introduce us to the Russia of their time, and the magic of their writing is so powerful that we remain under its spell. Moreover, it is Dostoevsky's artistic universe that has stimulated many to study Russia. Many of us know (or want to know) about Petersburg because we read *Crime and Punishment*. Many of us want to learn about Russian Orthodox thinking, the revolutionary movement, or suicide in nineteenth-century Russia because Dostoevsky immortalized them all. Dostoevsky is not only a great writer but also a powerful thinker who exerted a profound and enduring influence on the philosophy and psychology of the next century – as well as our own. If we assume that Dostoevsky was shaped by the world around him, we may equally assume that our world was shaped by him. This might be a theme for another *Dostoevsky in Context* book, to situate him in the contexts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries or to explore the ways in which his works interact with our time.

This volume reflects the strengths of its contributors, all experts in their respective fields. We hope our readers will find it stimulating and our suggestions for further reading helpful. Given that readers might not be familiar with some time-specific and Russia-specific phenomena, we have provided a glossary, thereby eliminating the need to offer detailed explanations in each entry. Nonetheless, for the convenience of readers who consult the book in pursuit of information on specific topics only, we have tried to make each chapter self-sufficient and have thus allowed

some basic but limited information to be repeated throughout the volume. Following the format of the *In Context* series, this book also provides a brief chronology of Dostoevsky's life and works.

Notes

- 1 Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860–1865* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986): 4.