

Michael Chekhov

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THE POSSESSED by DOSTOYEVSKY

The historical background and some of the ideas underlying the play as described by Eugene Somoff.

(Mr. Somoff said he would endeavor to outline something of the Revolutionary Movement in Russia in relation to The Possessed.)¹

The Russian Revolutionary Movement originated in the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. The revolutionary ideas which were flourishing in France, slowly penetrated all over Europe, and finally reached Russia, where the first revolutionaries were members of the aristocracy and the most highly educated people of the time. Catherine the Great carried out many liberal ideas as the result of her intense correspondence with many French liberal thinkers such as Voltaire. Her immediate entourage adopted some of the new ideas and these ideas finally spread throughout the educated circles of Russia.

The first outburst of revolution in Russia happened about thirty-five years after the French Revolution among members of the very select Imperial Guard, who wanted to ameliorate the situation of the peasants and middle classes. Two illegal societies were formed among the members of the Imperial Guard, one in the North and the other in the South, quite independently.

At that time the Czar Alexander I died - he had

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been rather liberal at the beginning of his reign and had wanted to give some freedom to the government, but under the influence of reactionary governors, he changed his mind and regardless of the advice of his more brilliant aides, he decided not to give the Constitution to the Russian people. When he died, his brother, Nicholas I, became Czar.

Nicholas had been brought up in an entirely different atmosphere from his brother who was the favorite grandchild of Catherine the Great - outside the Court in purely military circles. He had not the slightest idea of the new liberal movements and was against it both by nature and education. During his reign the two societies took this opportunity to start a very small revolutionary movement. They decided the time had come to go before the Czar and ask for a Constitution for the Russian people. They brought their regiments and presented their demands to the Czar for freedom and for liberation of the serfs. This was easily put down by the military forces of Nicholas I, and their leaders were condemned to hard labor or executed.

The whole movement was suppressed, but it was brewing among the middle classes and the younger people and students of the universities and gymnasiums. After a reactionary period of twenty or thirty years, the revolutionary movement started to show itself again, especially among the intellectual classes and men of the liberal professions.

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Those who adopted the new creed were pure idealists - they did not pursue any personal aim in trying to spread their ideas among the lower classes because they believed they were the advance guard bringing their ideas which would live after them and which would bring freedom and better ideas of living for the 150 million people of Russia, of whom 80 percent were completely illiterate.

Russia was a purely agricultural country, and, therefore, the percentage of the proletariat was very small. At the same time a similar scientific approach to liberal ideas was being made in Germany and in England, and a scientific doctrine of Socialism was being worked out, particularly in the writings of Karl Marx, who was a philosopher and idealist but a very impractical man. His followers tried to improve his ideas and to adapt them to local conditions.

In Russia, Karl Marx's ideas were divided into two groups - pure Social Democrats who followed him entirely, and Social Revolutionists - two large bodies of idealists who tried to carry on his ideas and apply them to the life of the time. The Social Democrats were a kind of abstract thinkers who tried to disregard the actual and specific conditions which existed in Russia and which were quite different to conditions existing in other countries. In Germany, for instance, over fifty percent of the lower classes were pure proletariat, forty percent agricultural, and ten percent

"white collar" workers.

Therefore, the ideals of Karl Marx, his purely scientific approach to the problem, were not accepted by the large majority of Russian Socialists in their pure form, but they were changed in accordance with Russian needs. For instance, the basis of the Revolution in France, Germany, and America was the proletariat, a class which was interested in nothing but its own well-being. In Russia the majority of the people were peasants or farmers and strictly individualistic, with their own property, their own houses, and they did not believe in communal sharing.

This phase of the Russian life was taken by the Russian Revolutionists who said that Russian freedom could be gained only if the peasants became the masters of the earth and everything which was produced by the earth. They said that factories, shops, and all other institutions which existed in the cities must not be the main basis of Russian life but must be secondary. Therefore, they based all their revolutionary movement on the peasant, as an individual, as a proprietor. They argued that if a man could work twenty acres, he could have them, but the man who had a hundred acres and rented them must be destroyed.

The Social Revolutionists went to the rural population and explained their wrongs to them, while the Social Democrats went to the cities and factories and did the same

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thing. They were, of course, persecuted and exiled, but the Revolutionists became stronger and stronger and decided to avenge their comrades by fighting the government with their own weapon by force and terrorism. They argued that if they terrorized the members of the Czar's government, they would not only be more lenient, but no one would be willing to accept the post of a governor because they would be risking their lives at the hands of the Revolutionists.

All this was very noble and very clean in its original intention, but as always happens, the original ideas became degenerated by men without scruples, and with a desire for power. Men who desired to give commands, regardless of what it cost or how they achieved their aims. They had a certain aim which they must achieve, and every means good or bad must be employed to attain it. They tried to undermine the structure and the pillars on which the society of Russia existed at that time - the autocratic government of the Czar, the Russian religion, and the family. They started teaching the young people that religion was the "opium" of the people and that any kind of government was against the normal law of man. They said that the animals lived happily without government so why should man be forced to have it. They proved that there was no absolute knowledge about the existence of God, and, therefore, there was no religion, and there must not be because it was retrogressive. The family, they said,

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was a small government of its own. Why should a father have any right over a son who did not ask to be born. Therefore, everyone was free.

This teaching brought very bad results in the general morale of the young people for whom there was nothing sacred. The Latin word "nihil," or nothing, was used and from this spread the philosophy of "Nihilism" - the denial of everything, everything permissible, everything good if it was good for you, regardless of what it did to others. Some of the people who were educated in this way were idealists, but the majority of them, like Verkovenski, were men who had the urge to control something and attained it by any means within their power.

When the two original idealistic movements degenerated in this way, the thinking minds in Russia tried to show to everyone what lay behind this so-called liberal movement. One of the greatest thinkers was Dostoyevsky, and he approached this subject in many of his writings, and particularly in The Possessed. He took as a basis for the novel actual happenings in Moscow, such as the killing of Shatov. While Stavrogin was an invented personality, he has many of the traits of revolutionary leaders who existed at that time. Verkovenski is almost a portrait of one of the well-known revolutionaries who even created a whole school of men who knew only one thing - destroy everything if it suits you, and every means becomes legitimate if you know how to apply them.

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At the present time we have a strong example of the degeneration of the idealistic movement in Russia, in Stalin and the present regime. Stalin claims to be a Social Democratic Bolshevik, but all his actions deny every principle of his master Lenin, who himself was a greatly degenerated teacher of Social Democratic philosophy. But they cannot survive - as with Vorkovenski, life will not bring the results which they expect.

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