

RICHARD PEACE

Bristol University

## The Depiction of the Russian Sects in “Vremia” and “Epocha”

In the 1860s in the spirit of a new liberalism and freedom of enquiry, the question of the sects, i.e., all native Russian deviations from Orthodoxy, became a fashionable issue, but in the words one of the contributors to Dostoevsky’s “Vremia”: “Someone recently expressed the view, that the question of the sects had become fashionable. This is not true: rather it is necessary to see in it one of the vital questions of the time”.<sup>1</sup> It is this view which is strongly reflected in the articles about the sects, also referred to as the *raskol* (schism), on the pages of “Vremia”.

One may ask why Dostoevsky as a former political prisoner, who was still under secret surveillance, should not consider such material dangerous for his journal “Vremia” since it could be interpreted as challenging the authority of both the Church and the State. The articles of one of his principal contributors, A. P. Shchapov, strongly reflected this dual challenge, although in an historical context. Shchapov had himself been arrested for political activity in 1861 and was under police surveillance. Nevertheless, Dostoevsky was not content with printing others’ articles, he himself joined the argument on the sects in his article “Two Camps of Theoreticians” (Два лагеря теоретиков [по поводу «Дня»] и кой-чего другого), published in “Vremia”, 1862, No.2. The two ideological camps in question are those of the Slavophiles (who because they nourished an ideal of an Orthodox Russia, could not countenance the idea of the people

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<sup>1</sup> N. Ya. Aristov, (Po povodu novykh izdaniy o raskole, *Vremia* 1862, No.1) [ p.10]. The page references in square brackets (as here) and in the text, are to the print out of the relevant article in the online publication of the contents of *Vremia*, (Petrozavodskii universitet, kafedra russkoi literatury i zhurnalistikii) Online available at <<http://philolog.petrus.ru/filolog/vremja.htm>>.

betraying Orthodoxy) and the Westernisers (who judged Russia by western standards – “and merely saw in the *raskol* Russian petty tyranny [*samodurstvo*]”): “It is not surprising, because, judging things by theory, it is easy to close one’s eyes on a great deal, it is easy to assume a certain sort of blindness, and this fact of Russian stupidity and ignorance, in our view, is the greatest phenomenon in Russian life and the best pledge of hope for the future in Russian life” (20, 21).<sup>2</sup> These words look forward to views enunciated by Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*: “Just think, with us even highly educated people have joined the sect of the Flagellants. Yes, but why then are the Flagellants worse than nihilists, Jesuits, atheists? They may be even more profound. That is what anguish leads to” (8, 453).

Commenting on Dostoevsky’s apparent endorsement of the sects in “Two Camps of Theoreticians”, Nechaeva writes: “This statement of F.M. Dostoevsky appears like the leitmotif of a whole group of articles of ‘*Vremia*’ on the *raskol*.”<sup>3</sup> What she apparently has in mind is the journal’s emphasis on the social rebellion manifested by the sects, something clearly brought out in the articles of Aristov and Shchapov. Her statement, however, is true in another sense: Dostoevsky’s intervention opened up the positive endorsement of the sects in *Vremia* that we see in the later articles of Shchapov and Rodevich.

The first review was of a book by A.I. Brokovich – “Inventory of Some Works Written by Russian Schismatics in Favor of the Schism: The Notes of Alexander B.” (Описание некоторых сочинении написанных русскими раскольниками в пользу раскола: Записки Александра Б.) – which appeared in *Vremia* 1861, No. 10. Nechaeva thinks that the author of the review was Strakhov,<sup>4</sup> who took Brokovich to task for the naivety of his views on the schism and his failure to see its social origins. This theme of the sects as a response to social conditions is an idea strongly argued in subsequent articles on the sects in *Vremia*.

The theme was taken up by the next reviewer of books on the *raskol*, N. Ia. Aristov’s “On New Publications about the Schism” (По поводу новых изданий о расколе), *Vremia* 1862, No.1). A disciple of A. P. Shchapov, Aristov followed his mentor’s approach and very firmly linked

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<sup>2</sup> The references in parentheses are to volume and page of F.M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972-1990).

<sup>3</sup> V.S. Nechaeva, *Zhurnal M.M. i F.M. «Dostoevskikh Vremia» 1861-1863* (Moskva: Nauka, 1972), p. 196.

<sup>4</sup> Nechaeva, *Vremia*, p.197.

the *raskol* to the subjection of the lower classes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Nechaeva comments: "N. Ia. Aristov, Shchapov's devoted pupil (born in 1836), did not so much review the publications indicated, as develop the tenets of Shchapov on the origin of the *raskol* as a protest of the people against the violence used against them."<sup>5</sup>

Aristov also points to the growth of banditry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and like Shchapov, links this form of protest to the religious dissidence of the *raskol*. In effect, however, the identification of the *raskol* with criminality was initiated from the start by the authorities themselves: in official reports and edicts of the time the word *vor* (thief) was almost inevitably linked to the word *raskol'nik* (schismatic).<sup>6</sup> The common people, Aristov argues, had sympathy for such outlaws. They hid such perpetrators of crime and "considered those judged by the law as *unfortunates* (*neschastnymi*)" – a phrase that has resonance in Dostoevsky's own *House of the Dead*.

The *raskol* might have been a rebellion of the poor and the underprivileged, but Aristov also points out that the Priestly Sect (*Popovtsy*) centred on the Rogozhskoe cemetery in Moscow had accumulated great wealth – a capital of twelve million roubles – making them hard to dismiss. Later in *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky will give the rich young merchant with sectarian affiliations the name of Rogozhin. Rather surprisingly, Aristov sees the fragmentation of the *raskol* into diverse sects not as a weakness, but as a strength. They may be prey, he says, to their own fantasies and allegories, but they have achieved their aim sooner than their opponents, who have used weighty syllogisms<sup>7</sup> and police force against them.

In *Vremia* 1862, No. 10, the first of Shchapov's articles on the sects – "Zemstvo and Schism: The Runners" (Земство и раскол: Бегуны) – appeared. In his rather heavy prose style, Shchapov more than once emphasised the link between the growing servitude of the common people and their rebellion against the laws of both Church and State. Particularly important in this respect was the period following the revisions of the lists of serfs tied to landowners in 1762 and 1782. This was a period which gave

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<sup>5</sup> Nechaeva, *Vremia*, p. 198.

<sup>6</sup> See: E.M. Yukhimenko, *Vygovskaya staroobryadcheskaya pustyn': Dukhovnaya zhizn'i literatura*, 2. Vols, *Yazyki slavyanskoy kul'tury*, Moscow, 2002, pp.16-64 *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> See: R.A. Peace: "Dostoevsky and the Syllogism", *Dostoevsky Studies, New Series*, Vol. IX (2005), pp.72-79.

birth, not only to the political rebellion of Pugachev (who was himself linked to the Old Believers) but also to the religious rebellion of various sects.

These Revisions appeared to tie the peasants to servitude through a book, and their introduction by Peter I (1718-25) was a terrible time for them:

Because of the Revision many went over to the schism, saying: ‘Do with us what you will, but we will not be inscribed in books which go against the law, and we do not advise others to do so, for we are inscribed in the living books of the heavenly tsar’ etc. Many ran away and hid in the forests. [p.10]

It is to these “Runners” – *Beguny* – that Shchapov devotes his first article, showing that they were organised and had a system of “safe dwellings”, known simply as “places” (*mesta*). At the same time he showed their relationship to the “robbers” (*razboiniki*), for whom the keepers of the safe “places” would also provide a welcome. In Dostoevsky’s novel *The Devils*, Petr Verkhovensky will seek to exploit these twin forces of dissidence – the sectarians<sup>8</sup> and the robbers (“Fed’ka the Convict”/ *Fed’ka katorzhnyi*) as instruments for his revolution. Nor was it just the peasants who “ran away”: conscripts deserted from the army, and theological students escaped from the harsh conditions of the church schools – the *bursy*.<sup>9</sup>

The continuation of Shchapov’s article – “Zemstvo and Schism: The Runners, II, III” – was printed in *Vremia* 1862, No.11. Here he deals with the foundation of the sect of the *Beguny* by a runaway soldier, Efimii, and the relation of the sect to others such as the *Fedovseevtsy* and the *Filippovtsy*. In *The Idiot*, a novel with many sectarian allusions, the Apocalypse plays an important role particularly in its interpretation by Lebedev. Shchapov shows that sectarian attitudes to the temporal and religious powers were strongly influenced by their reading of the *Apocalypse*. Efimii argued that Aleksei Mikhailovich, the tsar under whom the split in the Russian Orthodox Church had first occurred, was the first

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<sup>8</sup> Petr Stepanovich refers to Danilo Filippov, the “God Savaoth” of the *Skoptsy* (Castrates), and claims: “We shall spread a legend better than the Castrates” (10,325).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. N.G. Pomyalovsky, “*Beguny i spasennye bursy*”, (in “*Ocherki Bursy*”), *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy* (ed. and commentary I. Iampol’skii), Moscow/Leningrad, 1935, Vol. II, pp.100-154.

horn of the two-horned beast of the *Apocalypse*, and the second horn was Peter I, under whom the lower classes had suffered greatly. Peter had proclaimed himself emperor, and, using a corrupted version of *imperator*, and giving it a numerical significance, the *Beguny* could arrive at 666 – the number of the Beast of the *Apocalypse*.<sup>10</sup> Peter had instituted a Senate, and by a similar process the number 666 could also be derived from "Senators". Moreover, 1666 – the year in which the Church Council deposed their arch-enemy Nikon – could also be seen as containing the "mark of the Beast". Their own reaction to these troubled times appeared to be backed by the authority of the *Apocalypse*: Chapter 12, vv. 7 & 14 were read as justifying "flight".<sup>11</sup>

Another Peter, however, Peter III – the murdered husband of Catherine II – was widely believed to have contemplated freeing the serfs, and was rumoured to be still alive. Both strands of the opposition to the government produced figures claiming to be Peter III – the Castrates in their leader Kondratii Selivanov, and the robbers (*razboiniki*) in Emelian Pugachev. Shchapov makes much of this double movement of opposition: on the one hand, "a powerful physical force" in the armed uprising of Pugachev, and, on the other, a more spiritual, mystical movement represented by the "Flagellants" (*Khlysty*) and the Castrates (*Skoptsy*, *Lyudi bozh'i* and *Selivanovshchina*) "and in general all the so-called mystical and prophesying sects" [p.3].

Nevertheless, Selivanov himself spoke in military terms, albeit metaphorically calling his movement a 'spiritual cavalry' of which he was the commander (*polkovod*), though the more usual description of their communities was that of a ship (*korabl'*) of which he was the helmsman (*kormchii*). In their songs Selivanov himself is depicted as the "saviour" (*iskupitel'*)<sup>12</sup> as well as a general on a miraculous white horse [p.4].<sup>13</sup>

Shchapov quotes a song, which begins on what seems more like a note of pagan earth worship: «У нас было на сырой земле»/ "It happened to us

<sup>10</sup> In Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (Bk. III, part 1, chapter 19), Pierre Bezukhov uses similar reasoning to equate Napoleon with the Beast of the *Apocalypse*.

<sup>11</sup> V. 7. И произоишла на небе война. Михайль и ангелы его воевали против дракона, и драконъ и ангелы его воевали *против нихъ*. V. 14. И даны были жене два крыла большаго орла, чтобъ она летела в пустыню въ свое место от лица змея, и там шталась бы въ продолжении времени, времянь и полвремени.

<sup>12</sup> See Laura Engelstein, *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folktale* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999) pp. 31-33 for Selivanov as saviour and the confusion between *iskupitel'* (saviour) and *skopitel'* (castrate).

<sup>13</sup> The white horse stood for the purity of castration. Engelstein, 149-50.

on the damp earth”; and later «Пустыня моя матушка вторая»/ “The wilderness is my second mother”, and «Отвещает мать-пустыня/ и архангельским своим гласом»/ “And mother-wilderness replied/ and with her archangelic voice” [p.9]. In *The Devils*, Mar’ia Lebiadkina meets a nun who has been sent to a monastery as a penance for “prophesying” (the Flagellants and the Castrates were often known as the “prophesying” sects). She tells Mar’ia that “The Madonna is the great mother, the raw earth, and in this there is a great joy for men”. Under her influence Mar’ia kisses the ground and weeps whenever she makes full obeisance (10, 116). Falling down and kissing the earth is also advocated by the monk Zosima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Shchapov tells us that the sect of the *Beguny* looked back to two persecuted elders of the White Sea Monastery, the saints Zosima and Savvatiy: “For we are Christians of the only confession of the universal gatherings of the fathers and holy martyrs of the Solovetsky dwelling who suffered for the ancient piety; this same confession do we hold” [p.22]. As we know also from the novels of Mel’nikov-Pechersky the Priestly Sect – *Popovtsy* – also traced their origin to these two saints,<sup>14</sup> and it seems interesting, at least, that Dostoevsky should choose the name Zosima for his saintly monk in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Moreover, Shchapov’s positive assessment of the role of the sects and of *Pugachevshchina* in Russian history complements Dostoevsky’s own evaluation in No.2 of the journal for the same year. It seems as though Shchapov is echoing Dostoevsky when he writes: “Yes, they do mean something in the people’s history, in the development of the folk spirit, world outlook, aspirations and ideals. They do mean something such monstrous phenomena as *Pugachevshchina*, *Khristovshchina*, *Selivanovshchina*, political imposture and religious imposture” [p.5].

Rodevich’s review of the history of the Preobrazhenskoe Cemetery and the life of Avvakum published in *Vremia* 1862, No. 12, gives an account of the founding of the cemetery in 1777 to cope with the many deaths caused by the plague. Its founder, Il’ia Kovylin, also set up a society there of the sect of the *Fedoseevtsy*. Rodevich follows Shchapov in stressing that the time has passed when the *raskol* was seen as merely a religious phenomenon, and he follows the line of Shchapov and of Dostoevsky himself in suggesting that the sects have something positive to offer: “In this respect the *raskol* is the most significant and greatest phenomenon in

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<sup>14</sup> See: P.I. Mel’nikov-Pechersky, ‘V lesakh’, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, Moscow, 1963, Vol.II, p.321.

Russian life. The *raskol* was not forced on our people from outside, as were the majority of the important phenomena of its historical life, but it arose organically from the people themselves, and only *amid* phenomena that was foreign to them: the *raskol* itself is the most vital, energetic denial of these phenomena that are foreign to them ... The *raskol* is the folk consciousness" [p.1]. He goes on to say, in an obvious jibe at the Westernisers: "The *raskol*, however has not even disappeared from civilization, because it itself is its own form of civilization, and the gentlemen who think that the *raskol* is frightened of civilization, and is an opposite phenomenon to it, understand the civilization of the people in general in a very narrow way" [p.2]. Rather surprisingly Rodevich sees Kovylin, who was quite an eccentric figure, as the personification of the general sense of the *raskol*.

The Fedoseevtsy were a priestless sect, who under the leadership of the sexton Fedoseev, broke away from the Pomorskaia sect in the Vygoretskii Monastery, in revolt against their willingness to pray for the tsar. The lot of the break-away sect was not enviable until they were taken up by Kovylin, who managed to avoid the clutches of the Orthodox Church by achieving civil status for his cemetery. His influence extended beyond the bounds of the cemetery; the police were in his pay, and he had ties with influential people, but he was also a practical joker. In 1812 the Fedoseevtsy showed their non-allegiance to the Russian State by sending an embassy to Napoleon, requesting his protection; a request which he granted [5].

Kalaturzov's article "An Essay on the Way of Life and the Beliefs of the Castrates: From the Accounts of a Female Wanderer" (Очерк быта и веровании Скопцов: из рассказов странницы) was published in Dostoevsky's second journal *Epokha* in 1865, No.1.<sup>15</sup> It is (or claims to be) the account of a milder sectarian, a "Wanderer" (*strannitsa*), allowed to live in a Castrate community.<sup>16</sup> Her name Rodionova suggests, perhaps, purely nominal kinship with the "instructor" (*nastavnik*) Rodion Mikhaylov, who features in Shchapov's account of the wandering sects. In his novel *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky will associate the name with *raskol'nik* in his hero Rodion Raskol'nikov.

<sup>15</sup> See: <<http://smalt.karelia.ru/~filolog/epokha/1865/scopycy.htm>>. The page references which follow in square brackets are to this version.

<sup>16</sup> Such figures were important in relaying the ascetic ideas of folk religion from place to place. See: Engelshteyn, p.32.

Kalatzov describes Rodionova as a “wanderer” “by the rights of a person of God” (*na pravakh bozh'ego cheloveka*), which might add another dimension to her identity, as the term “the people of God”/ “*bozh'i lyudi*”, was how the Castrates described themselves. The Castrates also called themselves “Christians of Sion” (*Sionskie Khristiane*) and outwardly they professed the official Orthodox faith, but in the privacy of their community they observed quite different rituals.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, we are told that Smerdiakov: “had suddenly and quite unexpectedly grown older, had become wrinkled out of all proportion to his age. He had grown yellowish, and begun to look like a Castrate” (14, 115). On first joining this new sect, Rodionovna is surprised by the extreme paleness of a young man without a beard who looks like a corpse, and she asks whether he is suffering from a fever. He is, of course a Castrate. Castration itself is called a “seal” (*pechat*). There is the minor operation (removal of the testicles) and the full one (removal of the penis) called the “big seal” (*bol'shaia pechat*), which can obviously go wrong and have serious consequences. Such unfortunates are unable to retain their urine and can always be distinguished by their unhealthy look and their smell [p.8]. Female castration also takes place: the minor seal involves the cutting off of the nipples; the major seal is the removal of both breasts. The biblical justification for this is to be found in Mathew, 19, v.12: «Ибо есть скопцы, которые из чрева матерного родились такъ; и есть скопцы, которые оскоплены отъ людей; и есть скопцы которые сделали сами себя скопцами для царства небеснаго. Кто может вместить; да вместить.» This last sentence – “He who can implement it; let him implement it” – lends castration a divine authority, and it takes place in a secret location below the bathhouse, known variously as the ‘City of David’, the ‘Study’ (*kabinet*), ‘Sion’, and ‘Jerusalem on High’ (*gornyy*).

One of the chief rituals of the Castrates (as of the Flagellants/*Khlysty*) is the *radenie* – a whirling around like Dervishes, which takes place in the large pre-bath area, and is often referred to as a “spiritual bath” (*bania dukhovnaia*) [p.19]. The *radenie* is often called a “conversation” (*beseda*) in imitation of Christ’s conversation in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he prayed to the point of sweat and blood [p.15]. The participants wear white surplices and stockings, which are an important part of this attire. Rodionovna frequently refers to them and actual sews them herself. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan is suddenly confronted with the reality of his own guilt in his father’s death, when the Castrate-like Smerdyakov produces the money from a white stocking. It is to this stocking that Ivan



appears to react: "You frightened me ... with that stocking." he said strangely smirking' (15, 60).

Rodionovna says that the Castrates consider themselves gods. The icons they venerate are of men without beards – particularly esteemed is the icon of St George on a white horse slaying the dragon of lust. Like Shchapov, Kalatuzov points to pagan survivals of earth worship embodied in the goddess *Mat' syra zemlia* (Mother Raw Earth) in their songs. One quoted by Rodionovna ends with the words: "Of the destructive force on the damp earth" (силы губельной на сырой земле) [p.14], and another song refers to the earth as "mother", "mistress", "nourisher" (матушка, сударышка, кормилица) [p.18].

In *Vremia*, and elsewhere, Dostoevsky puts forward a positive endorsement of the Russian *raskol*. Yet, given the barbaric practices of the Castrates, it is difficult to see how he could approve of this branch of sectarianism. It is, however, noteworthy that in his use of the "sects" as symbolic thematic material in his novels, it is in the association of his characters with the Castrates – the house of Rogozhin (*The Idiot*), Stavrogin/Petr Verkhovensky (*The Devils*) and Smerdiakov (*The Brothers Karamazov*) – that we always see a distinctly negative connotation.