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Nihilistic Sentiments

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Abstract

In the mid nineteenth century Imperial Russia, a new generation aptly labelled the Nihilist, a new radical movement that would lay the foundation for the Russian revolutionary movement. This youth base movement rebelled against their parent's generation in every way they could. Everything from clothing styles to gender norms was rejected. These young idealistic revolutionaries organized themselves into revolutionary cells to counter the government's secret police. The revolutionaries quickly spiralled downwards to a violent climax which ended the brief nihilistic movement.

In the mid-nineteenth century Russia, a new generation rebelled against their parents and government. In this rebellion these "new people" as they referred to themselves, repudiated all the social mores and beliefs of their parent's generation. They attempted to revolutionize society and the political structure. This younger generation on its quest for rebellion entered a violent and manic revolutionary phase that in the 1860's became progressively violent and bizarre. These excesses ultimately alienated the radical youth against the educated public.

The Russian educated elite were a small minority in the largely agrarian society. This literate minority tended to be from the noble families that composed the Russian aristocracy. Russian Autocracy had a long tradition of being criticized by the intelligentsia, who were the members of the intellectual community interested in political and social issues. The liberals of the 1840s who had dominated the intelligentsia were being usurped by a new generation in the 1860s. The "new people" called for radical change which the older liberal generation abhorred. The older generation labelled them nihilist, or nihilistka in Russian. ¹ Nihilists rejected almost every thing that the older members of the intelligentsia stood for. The term nihilist was used in vague terms, usually as a label for young revolutionaries, which was often not far from the truth. ² Nihilists, or the new people, became a sub-culture of the intelligentsia. The intelligentsia, along with nihilism, was out of touch with the Russian peasantry because of peasant's isolation from western influences. ³

Nicholas' I repressive regime came to an end in 1855, giving the intellectual community relief. The early years of Alexander II reign was characterized by rejoice and hope. During this period Alexander put through the "Great Reforms" of Russia. These reforms modernized the army, legal system and emancipated the serfs. Russia in many ways went from the most conservative nation to in some respects the most liberal one. ⁴ It was in this new climate that the nihilist movement got its start. The universities, which had been so harshly repressed under Nicholas, were now fostering the new resurgence of intellectual life. ⁵ The educated elite had an influx of new members from the *raznochintsy*, who were of common birth. The relaxation of education and new reforms allowed lower class Russians, like clergymen or merchants attain a higher education. These people were not as well educated as their noble counterparts, yet they still had a large influence on nihilism. Many prominent nihilists like Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov, and the fictional Bazarov were *raznochintsy*. Unfortunately historians do not know how many *raznochintsy*'s were nihilists, or how many people were nihilists themselves. ⁶

Authors of the time, nihilists, and modern historians have grappled with the problem of defining nihilism. The "new people" were not the nihilists that appeared later in the century under the leadership of Nietzsche. Russian nihilists did not identify themselves with a particular philosophical school of thought. Nihilism was a cultural, sexual, and political rebellion routed in youth. Most definitions rejected liberalism and romanticism. According to Dmitri Pisarev and Turgenev's Bazarov, nihilism was the almost universal rejection of all tradition. The only authority respected was when it followed the strict tenants of ratiom. Nihilists were to hold reason above all other beliefs and use reason to scrutinize everything. ⁷ This definition was well read by the Russian population but it was not an accurate description of the movement as a whole. This extreme version would only apply to small minority within nihilism that would have a great effect on Russian society. Another

nihilist, Sergei Kravchinskii, gives a much rounder definition. To him

nihilism was negation in the name of individual liberty, negation of the obligations imposed upon the individual. Nihilism was a powerful and passionate reaction, not against the political despotism, but against the moral despotism that weighs upon the private and inner life of the individual.⁸

Kravchinskii's definition was more encompassing because it addressed the cultural and individual side of the nihilism. Nihilism was a complex movement which intertwined many forms of rebellion and resistance into the existing social structure.

The beliefs that nihilists held were generally in opposition to the older generation. The attraction of these beliefs came from the strong urge to rebel against the liberalism.

The romantic emphasis on emotions was rejected and replaced with reason and science, which were the immutable laws of nature. Scientism was very popular among nihilists which the Tsarist government unknowingly reinforced by structuring the curriculum of gymnasia towards science. In the radical pamphlet of *The Catachism of the Revolutionary* Nechaev states that the revolutionary should only know the sciences that are beneficial to the revolution⁹. Nihilism was part of the greater trans-European movement of realism, which reinforced the rejection of religion.¹⁰ The nihilists in Dostoevsky's novel *Devils* were portrayed typically as atheists. Bazarov in one of his many repudiations of liberalism said that "[a] decent chemist is twenty times more useful than a poet".¹¹ Poetry along with art was criticized and unappreciated by nihilists. This criticism did not stop nihilist from reading poets like Shakespeare or Pushkin. Out of the arts prose was met with grudging respect because books like *What is to be Done?* were capable of spreading the ideas of nihilism.¹² Nihilists believed that only revolutionary change to the Russian government could bring about a better society based on logic and science.

Reason was also applied to society as well. Nihilists demanded liberty and equal rights. Propagandists found examples to promote their political cause in the peasant communes. The nihilists interpreted the proto-democratic tradition of electing elders to a council as a sign of progression. Political pamphlets questioned the hypocrisy of the Russian government, to them "if communes have the right of administering justice in civil cases and of police enforcement, why should the rest of Russia not enjoy these same rights of election and self government?"¹³ In other political pamphlets, the nihilists demanded equal rights for both men and women. Women under the influence of nihilism went under a sexual revolution that broke all gender norms. Women eagerly joined the many growing radical circles of nihilism. The political revolution was a common cause that united most nihilists. Through political pamphlets nihilist urged the population to rise up into revolution. This was fed by the belief that the revolution was imminent. In Chernychevsky's book *What is to be Done?* there are allusions and hints to the coming revolution. This belief in the revolution can be seen in the disappointment felt for the multiple failures of the movement.¹⁴ Nihilists had a naïve belief that they could "serve society" or help "the people". Many men and especially women would go through great lengths for the "new ideas". Young girls often had to either enter a civic marriage or flee abroad for an education to pursue their ideals. The youth movement in their rebellion estranged themselves from their parents.

For many, nihilism was a form of agency in the rigid social atmosphere of Russia. These young intellectuals used a whole verity of methods to rebel against their parents' generation. The most visual method was the style of clothing, the new men and women changed their garb drastically. Nihilist women rejected the flamboyant clothing that was traditionally worn, and instead wore sober clothing and their hair inconceivably short while men alternatively grew their hair out. The "new woman" went even farther, "[h]er dress and her habit of going about streets unescorted, smoking in public, and asserting her rights in a verity of ways... seemed to renounce family life, a woman's most sacred calling".¹⁵ Women had little or no independent legal rights under Russian law. Their father or husband had almost virtual control over every aspect of their lives. Women could escape their fathers through civic marriage, which was when a "new woman" married a "new man". The husband was supposed to give the woman free reign over her life which often allowed women to go abroad and attain an education which was discouraged by families and impossible in Russia. Men were encouraged to emancipate their fellow women from their bonds of servitude through civic marriages. Not only was the fidelity of these marriages was not important, sexual promiscuity was encouraged by nihilist. The nihilist leaders lead the way in civic marriages by example; unfortunately the vast majority of them had bizarre complicated love lives.¹⁶ Chernyshevsky spearheaded the movement of emancipating women from their traditional roles with his writings in his journal and more importantly his book *What is to be Done?*.

The nihilist movement from its conception had undertones of revolution. The extreme rebellion against traditional Russian culture pushed them into the revolutionary movement. The naïve ideal to sacrifice oneself for the revolution was taken to extremers levels. The nihilists were believed that only a revolution was able to successfully change in Russian. They also believed in voluntarism, which was that a small minority could change society. With this idea secret societies were organized in Russian cities with the intent of revolution. The early revolutionaries looked to the peasants to "lift up the axe" and lead the revolution for them. Their only action was the distribution of revolutionary pamphlets to incite the revolution. The later revolutionaries were increasingly militant and called for violent action. This can be seen in the proclamation *Young Russia*. The author believed that if they had to

slaughter a hundred thousand landowners in order to realize our aspirations-the distribution of the land among the common people-we would not be afraid of that either. Nor would this really be such a terrible thing.¹⁷ |

Only a selective few in the radical groups advocated for this kind of revolution. The feeling of obligation to the people manifested itself in the form of revolutionary action. This obligation was taken advantage of by several ambitious revolutionary leaders.

One event that furthered the radicalization of the revolution movement was the Emancipation Act of 1861, which ended serfdom in Russia. The serfs were initially confused at the Edict because of its complexity than disappointed at the failure of the Edict. Instead of helping the serfs, it in many cases it caused more harm. Furthermore the Act was grossly in favor of

the landholders who were paid by the state and the surfs for their lost land. The surfs were not the only ones disappointed; the radicals were disappointed from the lack of revolution, and the peasants trust in the Tsar.¹⁸ For the radicals they could not wait any longer and started to take matters into their own hands. To the "new people" it was obvious that the Alexander's reforms were only going to go so far. Nihilists looked to terrorism as a means of achieving their goals. The radicals in the 1860s saw a series of conspiracies progress or digress towards a bizarre and violent climax.

The first large scale revolutionary organization started in 1861 called Land and Freedom. It was initiated by Alexander Herzen and Nicholas Ogarev in London who had been attempting to form a revolutionary organization as early as 1857. The exiles in London organized the conspiratorial circles which had cropped up in Russia. This organization was primarily composed of students and army officers.¹⁹ The Third Department only became aware of Land and Freedom in 1862 when Herzen, at a large party in England, divulged information about the revolution in Russia. The Third Department apprehended Chernychevsky and Nicholas Serno-Solovievich in consequence to Herzan's blunder. Chernychevsky's involvement with the Land and Freedom was dubious at best but his arrest was more due to the Third Departments keen interest in him. The two men were both imprisoned for two years before the trial because of insufficient evidence. Even with this lack the government sentenced both men to hard labour and exile in Siberia. Chernshevsky martyrdom antagonized the already violent relations between revolutionaries and government.²⁰

Despite this blow to the revolution, Land and Freedom continued on. The movement was banking on two events to bring down the imperial government. The first and unrealistic one was a massive peasant rebellion. The second and more realistic hope was a revolution in Poland. Ironically when the insurrection occurred in 1862, Land and Freedom did virtually nothing to aid their Polish comrades. This was due to a lack of communication and organization on both sides. By 1863 Land and Freedom was leaderless and in the 1864 the organization officially dissolved itself. The revolution only achieved in distributing political pamphlets during its short career which had little impact. The organizations true legacy was the laying the ground works for the revolution movement in Russia.²¹ Land and Freedom's dissolution and failure contributed to the increasingly radical measures of the revolutionary movement.

The next phase of the Nihilists revolution movement saw a series of revolutionaries that were driven by an insatiable desire for death. These various nihilist revolutions all exhibited strong self destructive patterns. The new waves of revolutionaries were cynical and far from the liberty seeking members of Land and Freedom. In the wake of Land and Freedom's dissolution, many of the conspiracies cells started to look at acts of individual violence as a viable means of revolution. The leaders of these cells were to some extent or another mentally deranged.²² In the ensuing years two revolutionary cells, started by Ivan Khudyakov and Nicholas Ishutin, set the tone for the revolutionary climate. Ishutin's revolutionary group was not very imaginative, they named their society Organization, but as their name implied they were more organized than Khudyakov's. The two groups merged under leadership of Ishutin. Ishutin clouded Organization in a haze of secrecy and mystery, especially the sub section called Hell. This section was devoted to speculating on hypothetical terrorist acts which would further the revolution. Organization made a breach with its predecessor when Hell decided that the most logical option was regicide. Uncharacteristically of Hell, the plan came into being when Ishutin conscripted an insane and suicidal youth named Dmitri Karakozov to do the job. The plan was for Karakozov to assassinate the Tsar and than take his own life leaving the Third Section a dead trail. Not surprisingly the attempted assassination was a complete disaster along with the trail which cost Ishutin and Karakozov their lives and many other accomplices exiled to Siberia. The trail's verdict only created another martyr for the radical nihilists.²³

After the Karakozov episode, the Russian regime became more reactionary. The nihilist self destructive pattern consumed itself with its last and most convoluted case when Serge Nechaev took up the revolutionary torch. The Nechaev case put an end to the rebellious revolutionary sentiments of the nihilists. Nechaev appealed to the nihilist's sense of duty to the people. He did not adhere to the ideas of the nihilist; he only used them as a means to obtain an end.²⁴ He created a structured revolutionary system of independent cells that operated through a council which coordinated them. Secrecy was of the utmost importance in this system. Revolutionaries were recruited into groups of five, those five were supposed to recruit another five and lead that cell. The theory was that any individual cell operated on a need to know basis, so they were ignorant of the other cells. The whole system was commanded by a central committee that demanded extreme obedience. In *Devils*, Dostoevsky captures the idea which was "a system of spying. Every member of the society spies on every other one and is obliged to inform".²⁵ Unfortunately the council was just a fabrication of Nechaev's fantastic imagination. When I. I. Ivanov questioned the existence of the said central committee, Nechaev had the man murdered for his insubordination. Ironically, the whole secret society became extremely public when Nechaev was arrested and put on trail for the murder of Ivanov. The revolutionary movement immediately came to an abrupt halt when the Nechaev case became public. The nihilist and their supporters were horrified by Nechaev's unscrupulous use of the revolutionary ideal.²⁶ Necheav along with Ishutin redefined nihilism, which "in the popular stereotype, became a revolutionary who believed that the end justified any means, including terror"²⁷

The revolutions of the 1860s solidified nihilism as a popular term for destructive revolutionaries in Russia. The rebellious energy of the nihilists was harnessed by mentally unstable leaders who organized them into doomed revolutions. The "new people" along with the public were disenchanted with the ideas of a romantic rebellion. Revolutionaries from this point on would disassociate themselves from the Nechayevian system. The individualistic concept of volunteerism was discarded for the populist movement, which replaced nihilism. Populism rebelled against the violent revolution. The original ideals of nihilism or the "new people" persisted on through another wave of rejections to the previous generation.

About the Author

My name is Jan Jones I was born and raised on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. I am currently a history major in my fourth year at the University of Lethbridge. I will be graduating in the spring of 2008 and will be continuing my education at the Graduate level in French Colonial history. I would like to thank Christopher Burton for requiring and inspiring me to write this paper for his Politics of Europe class.

Endnotes

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2. Ulam, Adam B. *In the Name of the People*. New York: The Viking Press, 1977, 131.
3. Lampert, Evgenii. *Sons against Fathers: Studies in Russian Radicalism and Revolution*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965, 87-88.
4. Engels, Barbara Alpern. *Mothers and Daughters: Women of the Intelligentsia in Nineteenth-Century Russia*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000. Originally Published New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 45; Ulam, 145.
5. Lambert, 4-5; Ulam, 53.
6. Engels, 64-68; Lambert, 94, Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov were sons of parish preists. Turgenev, 24. Bazarov was the son of a leech, presumably a surgeon.
7. Turgenev, 25; Ulam, 135.
8. Engels, 63; Rogers, James Allen. "Darwinism, Scientism, and Nihilism." *Russian Review* 19, No. 1. (Jan., 1960), 10-23, 13.
9. Nechaev, Sergei. *Catachism of the Revolutionary*. 1869. [[www.marxists.org/subject/anarchi ...](http://www.marxists.org/subject/anarchi...)] (March 03, 2006)
10. Roger, 11.
11. Turgenev, 29.
12. Lambert, 333. Pisarev mentions he would rather be a shoemaker than Raphael.
13. M. I. Mikhailov and N. V. Shelgunov.. *Saint Petersburg: 1861*. [[tspace.library.utoronto.ca/citd ...](http://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/citd...)] (September 13, 2006)
14. Ulam, 232-233, 363; Prawdin, Michael. *The Unmentionable Nechaev: A key to Bolshevism*. London: George Allen &Unwin Ltd., 1961, 85-86.
15. Engels, 64.
16. Ulan, 53-55; 58-59, 150. Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov, and Shelgunov all had complex love lives.
17. Mikhailov, M. I. and N. V. Shelgunov. *To the Younger Generation*. Saint Petersburg: 1861. [[tspace.library.utoronto.ca/citd ...](http://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/citd...)] (September 13, 2006)
18. Ulam, 67, 77-81; Lambert, 23-26.
19. Lambert, 121. Zemlya I volya is Land and Freedom in Russian.
20. Ulam, 111-114.
21. Ulam, 117-130.
22. Ulam, 142.
23. Ulam, 154, 156-159, 164.
24. Lambert, 39, 68.
25. Dostoevsky, 442. Though this was Shigalyov's theory for a society its origins lies in Nechayev's revolutionary cell structure.
26. Prawdin, 35-37,67-68.
27. Ulam, 135.

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