

## HERTOG WINTER 2021 SEMINAR

### DOSTOEVSKY'S *DEMONS*

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Completed in 1872, *Demons* is rivaled only by *The Brothers Karamazov* for the place of Dostoevsky's greatest work. A study of political terror and modern ideology, the novel powerfully predicts the revolutionary tendencies that would kill 100 million people – the total, in *The Black Book of Communism*, of the deaths in the 20th century owing to communism. This seminar series will center on a close reading of *Demons* and what the novel can teach about the nature, logic, and social origins of revolutionary politics.

This seminar will meet online weekly on **Tuesdays** from **6 to 8 PM ET**.

#### Course Materials:

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons: A Novel in Three Parts*, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky (Vintage, 1995)
- Course Reader

**Discussion Papers:** Each fellow will be responsible for completing a brief discussion paper (1-2 pages, single-spaced). See below for your assignment. **Papers are due the day before your assigned session by 5 PM ET.** They should be posted on the course Slack channel and will be part of the assigned readings for the session. Paper-writers should be ready to briefly present their ideas during the seminar.

#### Resources:

To learn more about the ideas and figures discussed in this course, we encourage you to explore a project supported by the Hertog Foundation: **The Great Thinkers** (<http://thegreatthinkers.org/>) and **Contemporary Thinkers** (<http://contemporarythinkers.org/>) websites. These sites are aimed at introducing important thinkers in Western thought, with a particular emphasis on politics and philosophy.

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**Tuesday, December 29, 2020**

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**6 – 8 PM ET      Session I: Old Liberals & Young Nihilists**

#### Readings:

- Dostoevsky, *Demons*, Foreword and Part One, Chs. 1–4
- Alexander Pushkin, “Demons” (trans. Irina Henderson)
- Luke 8:26–35

## Questions:

1. What expectations are generated by *Demons'* two epigraphs?
2. Why does *Demons* begin with Stepan and Varvara? What impressions of the old liberal elite might one draw from these characters and their relationship? **(Respondent: Jim Watson)**
3. What is the source of Stavrogin's charisma? How did he come to be so violently unstable? Does he resemble Shakespeare's Prince Harry? **(Respondent: Paulina Ezquerra)**
4. What sort of men are Shatov and Kirillov? What philosophical or religious ideas have "crushed" or gripped them? How do they differ from the likes of Liputin, Lebyadkin, and Virginsky?
5. Why does Dostoevsky write so humorously about the old liberals and young socialists? How does the narrator regard Stepan? What is the significance of the narrator's encounter with Karmazinov? **(Respondent: Robert Bellafiore)**

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**Tuesday, January 5, 2021**

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**6 – 8 PM ET    Session II: Serpents, Earth-Mothers, Antichrists**

## Readings:

- Dostoevsky, *Demons*, Part One, Ch. 5; Part Two, Chs. 1–3
- Vyacheslav Ivanov, "The Enchanted Bride," in *Freedom and the Tragic Life: A Study in Dostoevsky* (New York: Noonday Press, 1959), pp. 53–69

## Questions:

1. Who is the "wise serpent" of *Demons*? What game is Verkhovensky playing? What is the nature of his relationship with Stavrogin? **(Respondent: Jack Nicastro)**
2. Why does Marya reject Stavrogin? How does her character lend mythical and religious depth to the story of *Demons*? **(Respondent: Beatrix Bondor)**
3. How does Christianity inform the thinking of Stavrogin and his disciples Shatov and Kirillov? Is Stavrogin an Antichrist? Is Verkhovensky?
4. Why does Shatov break with Stavrogin?
5. Why does Kirillov speak so strangely? Why does he intend to commit suicide? How does Dostoevsky indicate the tragic contradictions of his plan?
6. What is the point of the duel? Is Stavrogin the victor? **(Respondent: Henrique Neves)**

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**Tuesday, January 12, 2021**

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**6 – 8 PM ET      Session III: Horseback Ironists, Petty Tyrants, Rancorous Radicals**

**Readings:**

- Dostoevsky, *Demons*, Part Two, Chs. 4–8 and “At Tikhon’s” (pp. 681–714)

**Questions:**

1. Is it significant that the major players in the town are women? Why do Yulia and Varvara so readily embrace Verkhovensky? How is his influence on them reflected in their language? **(Respondent: Ceanna Hayes)**
2. What explains the behavior of the circle of young people that forms around Yulia? What is revealed in their visit to the “holy fool” Semyon?
3. How does the way Verkhovensky treats his revolutionaries differ from his behavior toward the old oligarchs, including von Lembke and Karmazinov?
4. What insights into the nature and logic of revolutionary socialism, and the character of those who are attracted to it, are contained in the darkly comic and prophetic chapter “With Our People”? **(Respondent: Avi Siegal)**
5. Why does Verkhovensky need Stavrogin? Does he love him or hate him, respect him or despise him?
6. How does Tikhon differ from Semyon, his Dostoevskian “double”? What effect does Tikhon have on Stavrogin? Why can’t Stavrogin be saved? **(Respondent: Emeline McClellan)**

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**Tuesday, January 19, 2021**

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**6 – 8 PM ET      Session IV: All Bubbles Burst Spectacularly**

**Readings:**

- Dostoevsky, *Demons*, Part Two, Chs. 9–10 and Part Three, Chs. 1–4

**Questions:**

1. To what extent is Yulia responsible for von Lembke’s breakdown, and more generally for the fateful events of the novel? **(Respondent: Jacob Frankel)**
2. Has Stepan changed since being subjected to his son’s abuse at their first meeting? Does his speech at Yulia’s fête merely repeat views he voiced during his days in Petersburg? Can his position withstand criticism? **(Respondent: Deven Mukkamala)**

3. In the chapters on the fête, comedy and pathos reach a pitch unsurpassed in any other modern novel. Why did Dostoevsky choose to write about shocking and terrible events in such a manner?
4. What does the spectacular bursting of bubbles in *Demons* teach us about the sickness of Russian society—and of our own?
5. Why does Liza rush off to Stavrogin? How and why does Dostoevsky employ religious symbolism in describing her death? What did she mean to Stepan?  
**(Respondent: Victoria Xiao)**

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**Tuesday, January 26, 2021**

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**6 – 8 PM ET      Session V: Murder, Suicide, & Healing**

**Readings:**

- Dostoevsky, *Demons*, Part Three, Chs. 5–8
- Joyce Carol Oates, “Tragic Rites in Dostoyevsky’s *The Possessed*”

**Questions:**

1. Why does Fedka turn against his “natural master” Verkhovensky? Are the novel’s young “progressives” any more decent to former serfs and other social inferiors than their supposedly liberal parents?
2. Erkel is described as “sentimental, tender, and kindly.” What explains Verkhovensky’s influence over such men, including some who are vehemently opposed to Shatov’s murder but nonetheless participate in it? **(Respondent: Serena Cho)**
3. Does Kirillov succeed in becoming a man-god? How does his anguished death help to establish the identity of socialism and nihilism? **(Respondent: Sean Coomey)**
4. Oates claims that Stavrogin becomes “a hero” through his “magnanimous” suicide. Do you agree? Is it significant that Verkhovensky alone escapes punishment? **(Respondent: Sophie Cardin)**
5. In the epigraph from Luke, the formerly mad Gadarene, purged of demons, sits healed at Jesus’s feet. To whom do these words of salvation refer in *Demons*?
6. To what extent is *Demons* a mirror of our times? Does the novel leave us with grounds for hopefulness?

## Dostoevsky's *Demons*: Background and Characters

No one understands late-modern liberal oligarchs and their nihilistic children better than Dostoevsky. Turgenev attempted to do so in *Fathers and Sons*, which portrays the old liberals and young radicals of the early 1860s as exhausted, ineffective opponents. The relationship between the generations is less antagonistic in *Demons*, but far more volatile.

The story is set in a provincial Russian town around 1870. Its main characters include elite landowners and governors—liberals and romantics—and their radically “progressive” offspring, who mock their parents’ liberal illusions. These “nihilists”—a term that referred specifically to young Russian socialists of the 1860s who advocated the violent destruction of the social order with nothing to replace it—communicate a kind of general madness to their all-too-receptive elders and ordinary folk, too. They finally engulf the town in riot, arson, and murder.

Dostoevsky draws material from an infamous murder in 1869, orchestrated by the nihilist leader Sergei Nechaev. As a young man Dostoevsky was strongly attracted to socialism, and he was personally familiar with revolutionaries and their underground cells. His involvement in the radical Petrashevsky circle led to his arrest in 1849. He was ultimately sent to a Siberian prison camp, where he embarked upon a lifelong path of anguished and struggling Christianity.

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*Demons* presents special challenges because the relationships that bind its main characters are initially shrouded in mystery. It will therefore be useful to clarify some of these.

**Stepan Verkhovensky** is an old liberal, sometime professor, tutor, occasional writer, sponger, and muddle-headed romantic. He is financially supported by **Varvara Stavrogin**, the wealthiest woman in town. Varvara and Stepan had spouses who are now dead. Both have one son each.

**Pyotor Verkhovensky** was abandoned as a young child by his father Stepan; his character is based on Nechaev. **Nikolai Stavrogin**, who was tutored as a youth by Stepan, is a wild man, a charismatic intellectual, a seducer, and the inspiration for Verkhovensky’s radicalism. The two men had much to do with one another abroad, some years before the novel’s main events.

Stavrogin has influenced many of the other main characters of the novel. **Shatov** and his sister **Darya** were serfs who belonged to Varvara and were freed—along with all the serfs in Russia—in 1861. (Stepan tutored both; Darya is in love with Stavrogin.) **Kirillov**, who along with Shatov was a disciple of Stavrogin’s, is an engineer. **Lebyadkin**, with whom Stavrogin slummed and caroused in Petersburg, is a former serf

who was lost in a card game by Stepan. Stavrogin has secretly married Lebyadkin's lame, mentally disturbed sister **Marya**. Members of Verkhovensky's revolutionary cell include **Liputin**, **Lyamshin**, **Virginsky**, **Erkel**, and **Shigalyov**, a theoretician of the socialist revolution. (The word "Shigalyovism" entered the Russian language after the publication of *Demons*.)

Other members of the older generation include the new provincial **governor von Lembke** and his wife **Yulia**, and **Praskovya Drodzhov**, a wealthy lady whose stepdaughter **Liza** is in love with Stavrogin (and was also tutored by Stepan). Yulia and Varvara are rivals, and both are enormously influential figures in the town. The tragic events of the novel would not have been possible but for their indulgence of the ugly pranks, scandalous libertinism, and incendiary radicalism of the young nihilists.