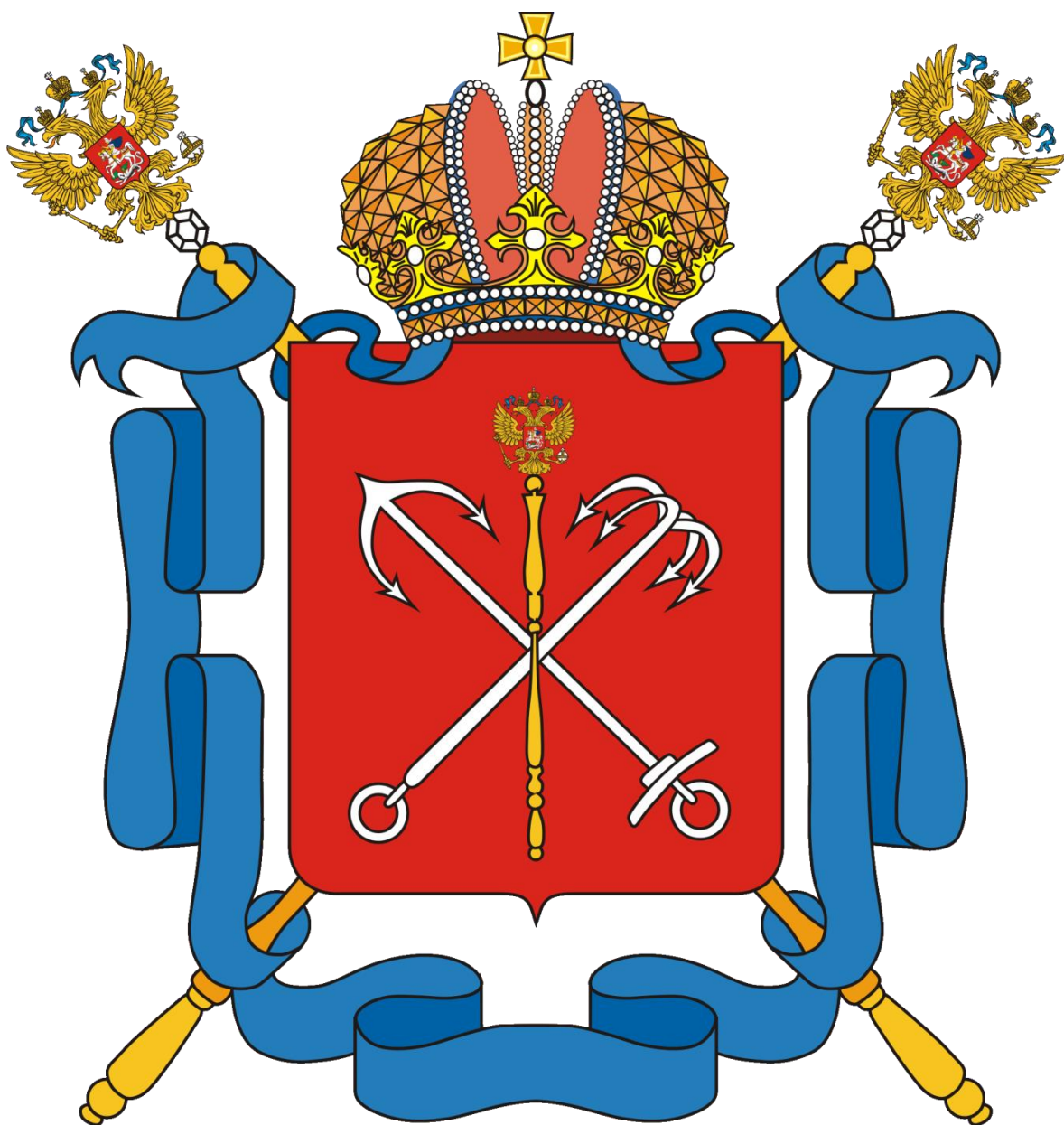


Social ethics of nineteenth century Russia

**The same corrupting influence that Paris had upon France,
St. Petersburg had upon Russia.**



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As the indications in the press all point towards a Russian reign of terror, either before or at the death of the Czar — a bird's-eye view of the constitution of Russian society will enable us to better understand events as they transpire.

Three distinct elements compose what is now known as the Russian aristocracy. These may be broadly said to represent the primitive Slavonian, the primitive Tatar, and the composite Russianized immigrants from other countries, and subjects of conquered states, such as the Baltic provinces. The flower of the *haute noblesse*, those whose hereditary descent places them beyond challenge in the very first rank, are the *Rurikovich*, or descendants of the Grand Duke Rurik and the aforesaid separate principalities of Novgorod, Pskov, *etc.*, which were welded together into the Muscovite empire. Such are the Princes Baryatinsky, Dolgoruky, Shuysky (now extinct, we believe), Shcherbatov, Urussov, Viazemsky, *etc.*² Moscow has been the centre of the greater part of this princely class since the days of Catherine the Great; and though, in most cases, ruined in fortune, they are yet as proud and exclusive as the blue-blooded French families of the Quartier St. Germain. The names of some of the highest of these are virtually unknown outside of the limits of the Empire. For dissatisfied with the reforms of Peter and Catherine, and unable to make as fine a figure at

¹ [This article was published the day before the assassination of Emperor Alexander II, which took place March 1st, according to the so-called "old style" or Julian Calendar current in Russia at the time. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

² [Some additional information about these families may be of interest to the student.

The Princes Baryatinsky are descendants of St. Mihail, Prince of Chernigov (ca. 1179–1246), having originated from Prince Alexander Andreyevich Mezetsky, surnamed Baryatinsky, on account of the lands bearing that name, which he owned on the river Kletoma in the uyezd of Meshchevsk (in the present-day Province of Kaluga). One of the later representatives of this Family was Prince Alexander Ivanovich Baryatinsky (1814–79), Field Marshal and Viceroy of the Caucasus, 1856–62.

The Princes Shuysky originated from the Princes of Suzdal', and descended from Prince Yuriy Vasilyevich Shuysky in the 14th century. They became extinct in the middle of the 17th century.

The Princes Shcherbatov are related to the Princes of Chernigov, and are descended from the great-grandson of Prince Constantine Yuryevich Obolensky, named Vassiliy Andreyevich Shcherbaty, who lived in the 15th century. Among other well-known men, to this family belonged also the renowned historian, Prince Mihail Mihaylovich Shcherbatov (1733–90), whose work entitled *Russian History from the Earliest Times* (7 Vols. in 15 books) is a vast compendium of heretofore unknown archive material, up to the year 1610.

The Princes Urussov are of Tatar origin and descend from the well-known Yedigüey Mangit, a favored army leader of Tamerlane, who played a considerable role in the Golden Horde and was later a ruling prince of Nogaïsk. In the middle of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th centuries, one of his descendants was Urusshan, the founder of the Urussov Family. The Princes Yussupov stem also from the main trunk of the Urussov line.

The Princes Vyazemsky descend from Prince Rostislav Mihail Mstislavovich Smolensky (d. 1166), grandson of Vladimir Monomah. The great grandson of the latter, Prince Andrey Vladimirovich (killed in 1224 on the river Kalka), surnamed "Dolgaya Ruka," which means "long hand" (not to be confounded with the Dolgorukov Family), ruled at Vyazma, and was the originator of this princely family. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

the court as those whom they delighted to call *parvenus*,³ it has been their proud boast that they have never served in any subordinate capacity, and have not been brought in contact with Western Europe and its politics. Living only upon their remembrances, they have made a class apart and dwell on a sort of high social table-land, whence they look down upon commoner mortals. Many of the old families are extinct, and many of those that remain entirely reduced to genteel poverty.

Rurik as it is well known, was not a Slav by birth, but a *Varago-Rooss*, though his nationality, as well as that of his people who came with him to Russia, has been a matter of scientific dispute for several years between the two well-known professors at St. Petersburg, Kostomaroff and Pogodin — the latter now dead. Implored by the Slavs to come and reign over their country, Rurik is reported to have been addressed by the delegates in these ominous words: “Come with us, great prince, . . . for vast is our motherland; but there is little order in it” — words which their descendants might well repeat with as much, if not more, propriety now as then. Accepting the invitation, Rurik came in A.D. 861 to Novgorod, with his two brothers, and laid the foundation of Russian nationality. The “Rurikovitch,” then, are the descendants of this prince, his two brothers and his son, Igor, the line running through a long succession of princes and chiefs of principalities. The reigning house of Rurik became extinct at the death of Fedor, the son of Ivan the Terrible. After a period of anarchy, the Romanoffs, a family of petty nobles, came into power. But, as this was only in 1613, it was not without reason that the Prince P. Dolgoruky, a modern historian of Catherine II (a book prohibited in Russia), when smarting under the sense of a personal wrong, taunted the present Emperor with the remark:

Alexander II must not forget that it is little more than two centuries since the Romanoffs held the stirrups of the Princes Dolgorouky.

And this, despite the marriage of Mary, Princess Dolgoruky,⁴ with Michael Romanoff after he became Czar.

The Tatar princely families descend from the Tatar Khans and Magnates of the “Zolotaya Orda” (Golden Horde) and Kazan, who so long held Russia in subjection, but who were made tributary by Ivan III, father of Ivan the Terrible, in 1523–1530. Of the families of this blood which survive, the Princes Dondukov, whose head was formerly Governor-General of Kiev, and more recently served in Bulgaria in a similar capacity, may be mentioned.⁵ These are, more or less, looked down upon by the “Ru-

³ [Derogatory term for individuals of humble origin who have gained wealth and influence.]

⁴ [The first Emperor of the House of Romanov was Michael Fyodorovich (1596–1645). He married in 1624 Princess Maria Vladimirovna Dolgorukova, the daughter of Prince Vladimir Timofeyevich Dolgorukov (d. 1633), who was a “boyar” and a judge. She died four months after the wedding, and may have been poisoned. There was no issue from this marriage. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

⁵ [The Princes Dondukov-Korsakov originated from the Kalmik Han Ho-Urlyuk of the 16th century. His great grandson, Han Ayuk-Taydzhi (1646–1724) brought his Torgutsk Kalmik tribes under Peter the Great, and was a favorite of the latter. The grandson of Ayuk was Han Donduk-Ombo (d. 1741). His widow, Dzhan, from Kabardinia, went to St. Petersburg and was baptized with the name of Vera Dondukova. Her son, Yona Dondukovich, was granted an estate in the Province of Mogilev. His daughter, Vera, married Col. Nikita Ivanovich Korsakov. The latter became Prince Dondukov-Korsakov, by order of Emperor Alexander I (July 15th, 1802). Their only daughter, Princess Mary Nikitishna, married Col. Michael Alexandrovich Korsakov, who, by ukaz of Alexander I (September 10th, 1820), took the title and name of Prince Dondukov-Korsakov. He was Vice-President of the Academy of Sciences. One of his sons, Prince Alexander Mihaylovich (1820–93) was a close friend of H.P. Blavatsky and her family, He was first aide-de-camp to Prince Michael Semyenovitch Vorontzov (1782–1856), viceroy of the Caucasus. In 1869, he became Governor-General of the Provinces of Kiev, Podol’ and Volin’; in 1878,

rikovich,” as well as by old Lithuanian and Polish princely families, who hate the Russian descendants of Rurik, as these hate their Roman Catholic rivals. Then comes in the third element, the old Livonian and Esthonian Barons and Counts, the Courland nobles and *freiherrs*, who boast of descending from the first crusaders and look down upon the Slav aristocracy; and various foreign families invited into the country by successive sovereigns, a western element engrafted upon the Russian stock. The names of the latter *immigrés* have been Russianized in some cases beyond recognition; as, for instance, the English Hamiltons, who have now become the “Homutoff”!⁶

We have not the data which would enable us to give the numerical strength of either of the above classes; but an enumeration, made in the year 1842, showed a total of 551,970 noblemen of hereditary, and 257,346 of personal rank. This comprised all in the empire of different degrees of noble ranks, including the princely families and the under-stratum of nobility. There is an untitled nobility, the descendants of the old Boyars of Russia, often prouder of their family record than those who are known as princes. The Demidoff family, for instance, and the Narishkine, though frequently offered the rank of prince and count, have always haughtily rejected the honour, maintaining that the Czar could make a prince any day, but never a Demidoff or a Narishkin.⁷

Peter the Great, having abolished the princely privileges of the Boyars, and made the offices of the empire accessible to all, created the *chin*, or a caste of municipal *employés* and government officials, divided into fourteen classes, the first eight of which confer hereditary nobility upon the person holding one of them, and the six latter give but a personal nobility to the incumbent, and do not transmit gentility to the children. Office does not increase the nobility of incumbents already noble, but does lift the ignoble into a higher social rank (*chinovnik*, government *employé*, was for years a term of scorn in the mouth of the nobles). It is only since Alexander came to the throne that an old edict was done away with, which deprived of noble rank and reduced to the peasantry any family which, for three successive generations, had not taken service under the Government. Those were called *Odnodvortzi*, and among them some of the oldest families found themselves included in 1845, when the Emperor Nicholas ordered the examination of the titles of nobles. The nice distinctions among the above fourteen classes are as puzzling to a foreigner as the relative precedence of the various buttons of Chinese mandarins, or the tails of the Pashas.

Imperial Russian Commissar in Bulgaria; in 1882–90, he was Director of Civil Authorities in the Caucasus, and in command of the military armed forces of the Caucasian military district. His highest rank was General-of-Cavalry. He was a distinguished administrator and a man of great courage and technical knowledge in his chosen field.

Quite a number of letters written to him by H.P. Blavatsky from India may be found in the volume entitled *H.P. B. Speaks*. Vol. II (Adyar Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1851). — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

⁶ [There were at least three noble families of the name of Homutov. One of them, according to tradition, stems from a Thomas Hamilton of Scotland who emigrated to Russia in 1542, with his son Peter. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

⁷ [The Demidovs originated from David Antufyev who was a master-smith at the armament factory at Tula. His son, Nikita Demidovich Demidov (1656–1725) was the founder of the great wealth of this family.

The Narishkins descend, according to tradition, from a Crimean Tartar named Narishka, who arrived at Moscow in 1463. Emperor Alexey Mihaylovich Romanov chose for his second wife Natalya Kirillovna Narishkin (1651–94), daughter of Kiril Poluektovich Narishkin; the marriage took place in 1671, and from it was born Peter the Great. This family produced a number of renowned statesmen through the centuries. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

Besides these conflicting elements of high and low nobility, the direct descendants of the Boyars of old — the Slavonian *peers* in the palmy days of Russia, divided in petty sovereignties, who chose for themselves the prince they wanted to serve and left him at will, who were vassals, not the subjects, had their own military retinue, and without whose approval no grand-ducal “ukase” could be of any avail — and the ennobled *chinovniks*, sons of priests and petty traders, there are yet to be considered 79,000,000 of other people. These may be divided into the millions of liberated serfs (22,000,000), of crown peasants (16,000,000), and of town peasants (about 10,000,000), who inhabit cities, preferring various trades and menial service to agriculture. The rest comprise:

- 1 The *meshtchanis*, or petty bourgeois, one step higher than the peasant;
- 2 The enormous body of merchants and traders divided into three guilds;
- 3 The hereditary citizens, who have nothing to do with nobility;
- 4 The black clergy or the monks and nuns; and the secular clergy, or married priest — a caste apart and hereditary; and
- 5 The military class.

We will not include in our classification the 3,000,000 of Mohammedans, the 2,000,000 of Jews, the 250,000 Buddhists, the pagan Izors, the Savakots, and the Karels, who seem perfectly well satisfied with the Russian rule, thoroughly tolerant to their various worships.⁸ These, with the exception of the higher educated Jews and some fanatical Mohammedans, care little as to the hand that rules them. But we will remind the reader of the fact that there are over one hundred different nations and tribes, who speak more than forty different languages, and are scattered over an area of 8,331,884 English square miles;⁹ that the population of all Russia, European and Asiatic, is not above ten to the square mile; that the railroads are very few and easily controlled, and other means of transport scanty. How far it would be possible to effect a complete revolution throughout the Russian Empire, may well be a subject of conjecture. With so little to bind the many nationalities into one movement, it would seem to a foreigner an undertaking so hopeless as to discourage even an Internationalist or a Nihilist. Add to this the unquestionable devotion of the liberated serfs and peasantry to the Czar, in whom they see alike the benefactor of the oppressed, and the vicegerent of God, the head of their Church, and the case seems yet more problematical. At the same time, we must not forget the lessons of history, which has more than once shown us how the very vastness of an empire, and lack of a common unity among its subjects have proved at some supreme crisis the most potent elements of its disruption. The heart of Russia beats at Moscow, though the brain plots at St. Petersburg; and any movement to be successful must carry these two centres.

St. Petersburg is in reality the aristocratic *Parc aux Cerfs*, a place of shameless profligacy and riotous excesses, with so little that is national in it that its very name is

⁸ By the last statistics, the Mohammedans have 4,189 mosques and 7,940 *muftis* and *mullahs* in the Empire of Russia; the Buddhists 389 places of worship and 4,400 priests, the Jews 445 synagogues and 4,935 rabbis, etc.

⁹ According to the calculation made in 1856 by G. Schweitzer, Director of the Observatory of Moscow.

German. It is the natural port of entry for all the Continental vices, as well as for the loose ideas about morality, religion and social duty, which are becoming so widely prevalent. The same corrupting influence that Paris has upon France, St. Petersburg has upon Russia. An influential Russian magazine, *Russkaya Ryetch*, gave us only the other day the following picture of St. Petersburg society:

Russian society slumbers [it says] or rather it feels heavy and somnolent. It lazily nods, only now and then opening its lifeless eyes, as might one, who, after a heavy dinner, forced to sit in an unnatural position, cannot resist a lethargic drowsiness, and feels that he must either unbutton his uniform and draw a full breath, or — suffocate. But the dinner is an official one, and his body pinched in a State uniform too tight for him. The man is overcome with an irresistible somnolence; he feels the blood rushing to his head, his legs tremble and his hand mechanically fumbles the buttons of his uniform to get one gasp of breath that would interrupt the unendurable torture. Such is the present condition of our society.

But while it is nodding under its threatened apoplexy, from a surfeit of indigestible food, those carnivorous jackals, who are always ready to eat and drink, and can digest whatever they pick up, do not sleep. The violation of the seventh commandment, intellectually as well as physically, having debased body, mind, and soul, is nestling in the very heart of the public. Adulterers of body, adulterers of thought, adulterers of knowledge and science, adulterers of labour — reign in our midst, are creeping out from every side as the representatives of society and the public, boasting of their brazen hardihood, successful wherever they go, having flung away all shame, cast aside to at least conceal the nakedness of their deeds, even from the eyes of those upon whom they speculate, from whom they squeeze all that can be squeezed, only from such a fool as — man. Government and treasury pilferers; embezzlers of public and private properties; blacklegs and swindlers subsidized by numberless bubble companies, by stock companies and fraudulent enterprises; thimble-riggers and violators of women and children whom they debauch and ruin; contractors, money-lenders, bribed judges and venal counsel, bucket-shop keepers and sharpers of all nationalities, every religion, every social class — this is our modern social force. Like beasts of prey, hunting in packs, this force, gloating over its quarry, satiating itself, noisily crunching its restless, tireless jaws, imposing itself upon everyone, dares to offer itself as the patron of everything — science, literature, arts, and even thought itself. There it is, the kingdom of *this* world, *flesh* of the *flesh*, blood of the blood, made in the image of the *animal* from which the first germ of man evolved.

Such are the social ethics of our contemporary Russia, on Russian testimony. If so, then it must have reached that culminating point from which it must either fall into the mire of dissolution, like old Rome, or gravitate towards regeneration through all the horrors and chaos of a “Reign of Terror.” The press teems with guarded complaints of “prostration of forces” among its representatives, the chronic signs of fast-impending social dissolution, and the profound apathy into which the whole Russian people seem to have fallen. The only beings full of life and activity, amid this lethargy

of satiety, seem to be the omnipresent and ever-invisible Nihilists. Clearly there *must* be a change.

From all this social rottenness, the black fungus of Nihilism has sprung. Its hot-bed has been preparing for years, by the gradual sapping of moral tone and self-respect and the debauchery of the higher class, who always give the impulse to those below them for good or evil. All that lacked was the occasion and the man. Under the passport system of Nicholas, the chances for becoming polluted by Paris life were confined to a mere handful of rich nobles, whom the caprice of the Czar allowed to travel. Even they, the privileged of favour and fortune, had to apply for permission six months in advance, and pay a thousand roubles for their passport, with a heavy fine for each day in excess of the time granted, and the prospect of confiscation of their entire property should the foreign stay exceed three years. But with Alexander everything was changed; the emancipation of the Serfs was followed by numberless reforms — the unmuzzling of the press, trial by jury, equalizing the rights of citizenship, free passports, *etc.* Though good in themselves, these reforms came with such a rush upon a people unaccustomed to the least of these privileges, as to throw them into a high fever. The patient, escaping from his strait jacket, ran wildly about the streets. Then came the Polish Revolution of 1863, in which a number of Russian students participated. Reaction followed and repressive measures were readopted one by one; but it was too late. The caged animal had tasted liberty, though ever so brief, and thenceforward could not be docile as before. Where there had been but one Russian traveller to Paris, Vienna and Berlin under the old reign, now there were thousands and tens of thousands; just so many more agencies were at work to import fashionable vice and scientific scepticism. The names of John Stuart Mill, Darwin, and Büchner, were upon the lip of every beardless boy and heedless girl at the universities and colleges. The former were preaching Nihilism, the latter Women's Rights and Free Love. The one let their hair grow like *muzhiks*, and donned the red national shirt and *kaftan* of the peasantry; the other clipped their hair short and affected blue spectacles. Trade unions, infected with the notions of the International, sprang up like mushrooms; and demagogues ranted to social clubs upon the conflict between labour and capital. The cauldron began to seethe. At last the man came.

The history of Nihilism can be summed up in two words. For their name they are indebted to the great novelist Turgenyev, who created Bazaroff,¹⁰ and stamped the type with the name of *Nihilist*. Little did the famous author of *Fathers and Sons* imagine at that time into what national degradation his hero would lead the Russian people twenty-five years later. Only “Bazaroff” — in whom the novelist painted with satirical fidelity the characteristics of certain “Bohemian” negationists, then just glimmering on the horizon of student life — had little in common, except the name and materialistic tendency, with the masked revolutionists and terrorists of today. Shallow, bilious, and nervous, this *studiosus medicinae* is simply an unquiet spirit of sweeping negation; of that sad, yet scientific scepticism reigning now supreme in the ranks of the highest intellect; a spirit of materialism, sincerely believed in, and as honestly preached; the outcome of long reflections over the rotten remnants of man and frog

¹⁰ [Yevgeny Bazarov, a nihilist who rejects the old order, is a character in Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862) a novel on the growing divide between the two generations of Russians.]

in the dissecting-room, where the dead *man* suggested to his mind no more than the dead frog. Outside of animal life everything to him is nihil; “a thistle,” growing out of a lump of mud, is all that man can look forward to after death. And thus this type — Bazaroff — was caught up as their highest ideal by the university students. The “Sons” began destroying what the “Fathers” had built . . . And now Turgenyev is forced to taste of the bitter fruits of the tree of his planting. Like Frankenstein, who could not control the mechanical monster that his ingenuity had constructed out of the putrefactions of the churchyard, he now finds his “type” — which was from the first hateful and terrible to him — grown into the ranting spectre of the Nihilist delirium, the red-handed socialist. The press, at the initiative of the *Moskovskiya Vedomosty* — a centenarian paper — takes up the question and openly accuses the most brilliant literary talent of Russia — one whose sympathies are, and always have been, on the side of the “Fathers,” with having been the first to plant the poisonous weed.

Owing to the peculiar transitional state of Russian society between 1850 and 1860, the name was hailed and adopted and the Nihilists began springing up on every side. They captured the national literature, and their new doctrines were fast disseminated throughout the whole empire. And now *Nihilism* has grown into a power — an *imperium in imperio*.¹¹ It is no more with Nihilism with which Russia struggles, but with the terrible consequences of the ideas of 1850. *Fathers and Sons* must henceforth occupy a prominent place, not only in literature, as quite above the ordinary level of authorship, but also as the creator of a new page in Russian political history, the end of which no man can foretell.



¹¹ [State within state.]