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Dostoevsky after Bucha

Достоевский после Бучи

Abstract. This article challenges the widespread intuition that Dostoevsky would have become a leading apologist for the current Russia-Ukraine war, and for contemporary Russian imperialism in general. Without downplaying Dostoevsky's imperialistic and chauvinistic statements as found both in his literary and journalistic works, this article argues that they should be read in light of the more fundamental ethical idea-feelings from which they were derived. The physiognomy of today's Russian imperialism and the circumstances of the current war make it highly improbable that Dostoevsky would have arrived at similar imperialistic political conclusions. It is more likely that his idea-feelings would have caused him to adopt a radical anti-war stance.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, Russia-Ukraine War, imperialism, chauvinism, idea-feeling

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Introduction: Dostoevsky accused

Is Dostoevsky possible after Bucha? Was the great novelist not also an imperialist pundit who referred to non-Russian peoples and cultures in denigrating terms? In today's Russia, conservative and nationalist circles are more than happy to appropriate him for the sake of justifying the authoritarian turn that aims to suppress the liberal spirit at home and impose Russian domination abroad (Berest; Lysûk; Bogač).

Indeed, as soon as Russia launched its wide-scale attack against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the question of Dostoevsky's complicity in the event was raised. Just a week after the invasion, historian and cultural scientist Alexander Etkind posted on his Facebook account: "There is Dostoevsky's Russia, and there is Navalny's Russia; and there will never be a third one" (Etkind, electronic source). Inverting ironically the old canonic formula of Russian Orthodox exceptionalism – "there will never be a fourth Rome" – Etkind made Dostoevsky into the symbol of Russian aggressiveness and anti-Westernism, while contrasting him with Alexei

Navalny who by then had secured the image of himself as the symbol of the pro-democratic pro-Western anti-war camp, even if he too had a record of past nationalist and imperialist statements.

Such an attitude was not new. For over a decade, the regime's pro-Western opponents, alarmed by an increasing appropriation of Dostoevsky by the Russian cultural officialdom, have been busy demolishing his moral credentials. As early as 2013, Alexander Nevzorov, a popular TV pundit who had once been close to fascist and nationalist circles but later became an oppositionist to the regime and a militant critic of the Russian Church and religion in general, wrote the following about Dostoevsky: "As we remember, it is he whom Black Hundreds insistently declared as their idol. And they turned out to be absolutely right: he has practically no other audience left" (Nevzorov, electronic source). And the writer Dmitry Bykov echoed this view in 2021: "Feodor Mikhailovich is the terrible phenomenon of Russian thought... Don't you see that it is the beginning of Russian fascism?... No one brought more harm to humankind in the nineteenth century than he" (ŽZL s Dmitriem Bykovym, electronic source).

After the war started, such voices became commonplace. Even those who had been previously fascinated by Dostoevsky found it wise to distance themselves from his legacy. Well-known Latvian theater director Alvis Hermanis who had staged *The idiot*, recently called Dostoevsky in an interview "the founding father of the contemporary Russian fascism" ("Latyškij režisier Alvis Hermanis..."), electronic source), whereas British journalist Samuel Earle added in his penetrating analysis of *The brothers Karamazov* in *The new statesman* that "Dostoevsky's politics often drifted in precisely that [fascist] direction, and one can't help but wonder whether, had been alive, he'd have been cheering on fascism's rise" (Earle, electronic source).

Many Dostoevsky scholars joined the soul-searching process. Thus Sarah Hudspith, an expert on the national idea in Dostoevsky's writings, referred to her previous work stating: "I now understand that my study, in discussing «Russianness» as an unproblematic and interesting object of study, and in using untranslated and archaic terms without sufficient scrutiny, itself took a colonial and orientalist position" (Hudspith, electronic source). And at the beginning of the war, an Italian university went even further, and considered postponing the scheduled course on Dostoevsky altogether ("Italian university suspends...", electronic source).

Others, however, did not give up their attachment to the Russian writer and his ideas so easily. And the scholarly community was reproached by Julia Berest for not sufficiently revisiting Dostoevsky's political legacy and for its tendency to soften his message or make excuses for him, instead of embarking on a "decolonial" critique. Now, whether or not one agrees with her about the imperative of such a critique, it is quite natural and unsurprising that a scholarly community dedicated

to the study of an author is not unanimous in ultimately denouncing such an author. What is, however, more interesting and noteworthy than the position of the international scholarly community is that in the Russian cultural space Dostoevsky was never the exclusive property of the conservative opinion. Among the scholars, the educated elite and the general reading public, there have always been those who combined their liberal or even radical political convictions with their fascination with Dostoevsky. We find such reception as early as the Silver Age, for example, in the writings of Dmitry Merezhkovsky. And in the late Soviet years, an entire tradition of interpreting Dostoevsky as a “humanist” developed, promoted by liberal and moderately socialist scholars and publicists, such as Yuri Karyakin (see Karâkin), whose world view was formed during the “Thaw” years of Khrushchev’s rule (Dmitriev). For example, the addressee of the aforementioned quotation from Bykov was history teacher Tamara Eidelman, an heir to just that tradition, whose liberal opinion did not diminish her appreciation for Dostoevsky.

This reception is in a way more interesting than the sympathy for Dostoevsky among Western scholars and readers. The foreign interest in Dostoevsky tends to mirror conservative opinion in Russia, because it is often driven by a similar motivation: the search for an alternative to liberal Western values. Hudspith, for example, provides the following explanation for her fascination with Dostoevsky and his ideal of Russianness: “As a lapsed Catholic, I may have been looking for something to believe in; Donald Rayfield, reviewing my book... described me as «not just a sympathizer or a focused critic» but as «a believer»” (Hudspith, electronic source).

However, this is not the motivation behind Dostoevsky’s appeal to many liberal readers in Russia itself. I am not referring to the general appreciation of his artistic talent, but rather to the tendency to defend his moral authority, to admire him as a prophetic voice against all injustice, against every “tear of a child”, if one uses the well-known expression that has become a moralistic cliché, especially popular in liberal circles. It seems that Dostoevsky is rather unique here and that no other great Russian author evokes a similar attitude. Consider Mikhail Bulgakov, for example. He is indeed very much esteemed by the Russian liberal intelligentsia. Yet mentioning his imperialist sympathies does not usually push such liberal or radical opinion-holders into an apologetic mode, since they know how to differentiate between political convictions and cultural achievement. With Dostoevsky, matters are different, as attitudes towards him are rarely neutral, and appreciating his work often takes the form of downplaying or even denying those aspects that violate liberal sensibilities.

There may indeed be many good reasons for Dostoevsky’s broad appeal that do not require his “liberalisation”. For example, the overwhelming aesthetic effect of his work, the kind of texts the general reading public is familiar with, or the

peculiarities of the historical context within which his reception took place, so that he was often read as a diagnostician and critic of totalitarian reality. All these reasons still allow us to dismiss the intuition of many of his liberal admirers who refuse to accept what at first glance appears as proofs of Dostoevsky's militant chauvinism. But what if there is some basis for this intuition? To use imagery from Dostoevsky's own work, what if, as the case of Dmitry Karamazov suggests, the reality is different from what the overwhelming evidence points to?

The purpose of this article is precisely to explore this possibility. It will take the liberal intuition seriously and ask whether there may be more truth in it than seems to be. What if the case against Dostoevsky from the anti-imperialist point of view is not as strong, and what if more can be said in his "defence"? To put in plainer terms, is it really certain that Dostoevsky would have emerged today as an advocate for the Russia-Ukraine war?

One should not confuse this question with a somewhat different one. It is *not* the purpose of this article to discuss the alleged responsibility of the historical Dostoevsky for the current war by exploring the impact that his actual writings may have had among the elite and the people in their forming an opinion favourable to the war. I am rather sceptical about the possibility of establishing responsibility across centuries, and in any case this is an enterprise for reception scholars. My task is of another kind: to examine whether, and to what degree, Dostoevsky's moral and political world view, as we know it, is compatible with support for the current war, and consequently to offer an assessment of what Dostoevsky's attitude to it would have likely been. Dealing with counterfactuals of this kind can be valuable as a contribution to the contemporary debate on Dostoevsky's heritage, both in terms of his personality and the legacy of his work.

The perspective I apply here is that of a thought experiment through the lens of intellectual history rather than that of philology or literary studies in general. From this angle, there is no and can be no strict separation between the author's own voice and that of his literary works. I do not believe that one can postulate a sharp dichotomy between Dostoevsky's fictional writings and his non-fictional work. Neither can his "polyphony of voices" prevent us from noticing discursive practices that indicate a certain ethical disposition; nor are elements of fiction altogether absent from his non-fictional work. The difference between the various genres of Dostoevsky's work is rather one of degree, and the proper way for an intellectual historian to approach the material at our disposal (which includes literary works, essays, personal writings, biographical details and corresponding intellectual and historical contexts) is to take it in its totality while constantly juxtaposing and weighing its elements against each other in the process of moving towards the most comprehensive interpretation that accommodates both the continuities and disruptions of this totality.

Dostoevsky as a Great Russia imperialist

The purpose of this article is to envisage the anti-war Dostoevsky. Yet the path it takes will differ from that of many other apologists. I do not plan to soften or downplay Dostoevsky's imperialist and chauvinist statements, nor to claim that there were two Dostoevskys, one of whom should be ignored or dismissed. On the contrary, I readily recognise that Dostoevsky did say all these things that can be rightly interpreted as chauvinistic, that he sincerely professed these views, and that he believed that they naturally followed from his general ethical convictions. Instead, I will attempt something more radical. I will argue that it is possible, and even natural, to imagine Dostoevsky as an irreconcilable foe of the current Russian state and of its war, regardless of and despite the fact that a century and half ago his convictions made him the advocate for the Russian state of that time and of its wars¹.

During his lifetime, Dostoevsky was a committed Russian patriot, and the way he expressed this patriotism was often offensive to non-Russian countries and peoples. He engaged in judgemental classifications of national characters from which the Russian one emerged as potentially superior in spirit, even if this assessment was often accompanied by a devastating critique of its condition at present. The most notorious literary example of such an approach is *The gambler* where all the personas act in fact as representatives of their national types (Frank 1993). The author seems to have delegated the Poles to the bottom rung of the ethical hierarchy, with the Jews faring just slightly better, whereas the Englishman, the most sympathetic of all the foreigners, takes first place, although he too is not without faults.

This kind of dilettante judgement of cultures, nations, religions and civilisations is even more salient in Dostoevsky's journalistic work. Non-Orthodox Europeans are not the only targets of his rhetorical attacks. Despite all the talk about Slavic "brotherhood", Dostoevsky is often condescending, if not outright hostile towards other European Orthodox Slavic peoples. As for the Orthodox Slavs within the Russian Empire itself, Dostoevsky denies their cultural distinctness, and there are testimonies that he was quite uneasy about any suggestion of the differences in mentality between Great Russians and "Southern" ("Little") Russians, that is, Ukrainians (Frank 2002; Sokolov).

And his occasional treatment of non-European peoples is even more problematic. "The master of the Russian land is the Russian", Dostoevsky (Dostoevsky 450) once wrote in reference to the "Tatar" (i.e. Muslim) population

¹ For one of the most recent studies on the contribution of Dostoevsky to the Russian imperial imaginary, see Djagalov; on Dostoevsky as a reactionary, see Grossman.

of Russia, thus explicitly excluding it from Russianness. During the Balkan war, he engaged in a virulent rhetoric against the Ottoman Turks. And later he praised and supported the campaign against Turkmens in Central Asia using purely colonialist arguments without any regard to the local population. In the end, by upbringing and culture Dostoevsky was a European to the bone. Despite his frequent diatribes against Europe and the Europeans, or even occasional fantasies about Russia's push to the East or its connection to Asia, he was keenly aware of his own Europeaness and treated Russia's rivalry with Europe in Asia as a home affair of sorts.

The root of this rivalry was a grand battle between Catholicism and Eastern Christianity. According to the general cultural scheme that gradually crystallised in Dostoevsky's mind, reverberating also in his novels such as *The idiot* and *The adolescent*, Catholicism was the principal civilisational danger for humankind, and France was its main instrument in the political sphere. The major spiritual force capable of foiling the Catholic schemes was Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and its social and political embodiment, Russia or the Russian people. Dostoevsky predicted that the European order dominated by Catholicism (of which socialism was only the latest and basest expression), would in the end crumble under the weight of its own contradictions, and then Russia ("the East") would play its own world-historical role. This role was of course not merely restraining or defensive. Dostoevsky's Russian nationalism was expansive and "universalistic" in its core, and he assigned the function of the world's arbiter to Russia on the basis of a unique trait that he claimed to have found in the Russian psyche: universal responsiveness².

Now, there is no doubt that this outlook seemingly fits well in the ideological and geopolitical aspirations of the current Russian regime with its expansive imperialism buttressed by the ideology of the "Russian world". In fact, many advocates of its policies often evoke Dostoevsky as the spiritual authority, even though it is indeed possible to dissect Dostoevsky's arguments in such a way that would exonerate him of xenophobic or aggressive motivations, and some commentators attempt to do just this.

In my mind, however, all these debates, regardless of which side gained the upper hand, are irrelevant to the question of Dostoevsky's stance on Bucha. Even if one accepts the line of interpretation that each and every occasion when Dostoevsky expressed support for a military campaign or lashed out at a foreign country, foreign people or national minority within Russia itself can be explained by good circumstantial reasons, and that subjectively his motivations were genuinely benign, why should one exclude the possibility that in the case of the

² On Dostoevsky's "Russian idea", see, for example, Scanlan 197–230.

current war he would have also indulged in a similar exercise of benign self-deception and found equally good reasons for even more problematic policies? For today, there is no shortage of voices among Russian intellectuals who, even without any recourse to Dostoevsky-like conservatism, have become apologists for imperial ideas of that or another sort and who remain in their own eyes *bona fide* liberals³.

For my line of interpretations, however, it is completely immaterial whether Dostoevsky of the 1860s and 1870s was an imperialist and chauvinist. My argument for the claim that had he lived today, he would have likely become the greatest critic of the war is based on a completely different logic. I claim that the reasons that made him support Russian imperialism a century and half ago are no longer valid *in his own terms*. That is, Dostoevsky's own ethical principles would have entered into such strong tension with contemporary Russian imperialism, that he would have been forced to choose between the two. And by observing his ethical behaviour and his principles as they were evinced in many different situations, one can argue that he would have chosen to stay loyal to his personality and principles. In other words, the assumption behind my argument is that for Dostoevsky, Bucha would have been a qualitatively different case which would have led him to revisit his political beliefs.

A methodological remark on interpreting Dostoevsky's politics

I am now about to address the question of Dostoevsky's ethical principles and their application to the world of politics. However, before outlining them, I would like to add a methodological observation regarding how Dostoevsky's thinking on politics should be interpreted.

As I see it, Dostoevsky's political mind was characterised by two seemingly contrasting attitudes. On the one hand, Dostoevsky was keenly interested in politics, and not only was his knowledge of political events superior to that of other top-ranking Russian writers of the time, but also his familiarity with up-to-date social and political thought. I find it difficult to agree with Richard Pipes's assessment that "of politics in the ordinary sense of the word Dostoevsky knew little and understood even less" (Pipes 136).

Yet in order to make sense of the strangeness of Dostoevsky's political vision which puzzled Pipes and many others, another feature of his thinking should be taken into consideration: his intellectual disposition was fundamentally *unpolitical*, that is, he never considered it imperative to develop a full-scale political world view,

³ For example, writer and journalist Yulia Latynina.

let alone ideology, if by “ideology” one understands a more or less comprehensive vision of institutions and practices for a good society. Politics interested him only in so far as an aspect of it could reflect on the issues of personal ethics which were of more fundamental importance to him. An ideologue, though driven by ethical concerns, is forced to recognise the pre-eminence of the “political” as soon as he is committed to maintaining a comprehensive scheme for a good society, even if this scheme pretends to abolish “politics” in the ordinary sense. In contrast, a moralist of Dostoevsky’s sort is concerned with protecting the centrality of the ethical, and he intervenes in politics only when the sphere of the political directly clashes with his fundamental ethical beliefs.

And it is this combination of interest and uninterestedness in politics which may account, without any recourse to the cliché mentionings of “polyphony”, for the apparent tensions and contradictions found in Dostoevsky’s political positions. Two examples will suffice to illustrate this point.

One is Dostoevsky’s famous “conversion”: the process of his abandoning the socialism and radicalism of his younger years in favour of the Christian anti-radicalism (some would say conservatism) of the period that followed the years of imprisonment and exile (Frank 1986: 3–7; Guski 104–112). Of all the divergent understandings of the degree of radicality in Dostoevsky’s break with the past, the following one appears to be most convincing for me. Beneath a seemingly sharp transformation on the level of political and theological opinions, lay ethical sentiments that remained relatively unchanged. One of them was the feeling of keen protest against the regime’s cruel treatment of the Russian peasantry. The other was the pre-eminence of personal loyalty over political considerations. In the 1840s, the sense of disgust with the current state of affairs brought Dostoevsky into a group of political radicals, whereas the sense of personal attachment positioned him nearer to the secret circle within the group, that was apparently committed to revolutionary action. And yet, the same attitudes pushed Dostoevsky into a different direction in the 1860s, when his feelings of euphoria about the serfs’ liberation and of gratitude towards the government responsible for this liberation were offended by the prevailing sense of resentment and alienation among the radical opinion, and as the younger generation of radicals appeared to betray the ethics of high-minded loyalty that he himself had displayed during the years of trial and punishment. This moral downfall was masterfully depicted in *The devils*.

Another example is the ideological chaos in *The brothers Karamazov* that allows for a variety of readings regarding the question of the true nature of Dostoevsky’s attitude towards the regime and the state, as they vacillate between accusations of servility and the suspicion of subversiveness. Again, on the one hand, the text can be read as an affirmation of the truth of Eastern Christianity and of the special calling for Russia to stand as the bulwark against the machine

of Western Catholicism trampling on human freedom, while masquerading as humanitarianism. This line finds its clearest expression in the story of the Grand Inquisitor. Yet, the same story can be read in a very different way, as it contains many hints that the critique is directed against the statist nature of the Russian Church itself. It has even been suggested that the figure of the Inquisitor is a caricature on none other than Konstantin Pobedonostsev, Dostoevsky's friend and patron and the future Over-Procurator of the Most Holy Synod⁴.

But here too, the question of tension would be misplaced. Dostoevsky's driving motivation was ethical rather than political. His main concern was the attainment of spiritual freedom within the true church, and specific political attachments were of no real significance to him. In my reading, the book leaves the answer open as to whether the government or the revolutionaries are more capable of securing the social conditions beneficial to attaining personal spiritual freedom, and therefore only the future will decide whether loyalty or subversion is the proper ethical choice.

To use Dostoevsky's own terminology, his political attitudes can be best described as "idea-feelings". These idea-feelings should be understood as constantly-lived ethical inclinations that require no foundations other than they themselves. They do not form a fully-fledged ideology which settles tensions and incongruities between its parts. Rather, they are just instant sparks of enlightened sentiment, sparks that remain dormant potentialities most of the time, yet become operative when this sentiment is grossly offended. This is why Dostoevsky is not easily predictable as a thinker, since it is difficult to be entirely sure how his ever-active mind would interpret this or another event and at what point the sense of propriety of his ethical sentiment would feel itself grossly violated.

Yet, his mind was not completely chaotic, and with regard to great and fateful events, a certain logic can still be discovered. It is very likely that the current war is one such event. Here, I will try to make a few predictions as to how Dostoevsky's idea-feelings might react to it.

Dostoevsky's ethical ideas in relation to politics

Several motifs remain relatively constant in Dostoevsky's treatment of ethical-political questions. I will emphasise five of them:

a) *Compassion and freedom*. Dostoevsky's principal ethical-political idea-feeling can be described as "compassion mitigated by freedom". The issue of

⁴ This is a suggestion of Bykov (Bykov, electronic source). On possible subversionary interpretations of *The brothers Karamazov*, see Buchanan; Volgin.

compassion was central to him because he believed that the human world was prone to excessive cruelty. The causes of cruelty and its associated suffering lay, in his view, in the isolation of the “I” from the world, in other words, in egoism that knows no limits. Compassion was the way to mitigate the effects of this egoism. Dostoevsky’s moral world view can thus be compared to that of Schopenhauer’s who diagnosed the world as a place of ever-intensifying suffering. Compassion was the governing idea of Schopenhauer’s ethics that is supposed to ease the rapaciousness of the individual’s will that fails to recognise its own fundamental oneness with the will of all other individualities⁵.

Dostoevsky’s emphasis on compassion, however, did not evolve into the call to abolish all cruelty and egoism, which were, for him, an ineliminable part of the human condition. Any utopian project of this kind, any war to abolish all suffering would result in more suffering, even if such suffering were to take the mental rather than the physical form. For the price of the illusory abolition of suffering would be the destruction of human freedom, and in Dostoevsky’s view, the state of unfreedom was unbearable for any human being. As a commentator aptly noted in a recent article, the importance Dostoevsky assigns to compassion does not cause him to adopt the politics of pity (Lykins).

b) *Rejection of the egoism of “political economy”*. Dostoevsky was repelled by any ethical programme based on the premises of egoism, and one such programme in particular evoked in him nothing but hatred: radical economic liberalism based on utilitarian ethics. He considered this doctrine to be the extreme form of egoism which would inevitably lead to the greatest amount of human suffering. “Money” and its appeal was indeed an issue that continuously preoccupied him, just to mention *The gambler* or *The adolescent* with its “Rothschild idea”. Curiously, the only complete villain in *Crime and punishment* is Petr Petrovich Luzhin, an unabashed proponent of “political economy” that espouses a sort of “private vices, public virtues” morality. Empathy reserved for the likes of Svidrigailov and Marmeladov completely vanishes when Dostoevsky describes Luzhin. The latter is depicted as the basest and cruellest person possible. Though he is not violent in the ordinary sense of the word, his cruelty already contains the potentiality of violence which is actualised in Raskolnikov’s soul. Every major character in the novel is in a sense a double of one particular aspect of Raskolnikov. Luzhin’s egoistic impropriety posing as political economy just mirrors that side

⁵ The topic of Dostoevsky’s relation to Schopenhauer is not sufficiently researched in the literature, partly because we do not possess clear evidence that he was familiar with Schopenhauer’s original works. Yet it is certain that he read about Schopenhauer’s theory as reported by various Russian authors of the time, and it is difficult to ignore the similarities in their view of ethics. For a comparison of Dostoevsky and Schopenhauer, see Belopol’skij; Moril’as.

of Raskolnikov's soul which is in charge of the ethical rationalisation of his own brutal egoism.

c) *Christian love*. The path to overcoming the egoistic disorder lies in the moral intuitions of Orthodox Christianity. It is difficult to establish to what extent Dostoevsky was a true believer, and there are reasons to suspect that he was always torn by serious doubts about his faith. It is certain, however, that he considered Orthodox Christian beliefs to be a great mitigating force capable of putting limits on the excesses of egoism, without suppressing human freedom. Thus, for him these beliefs constituted the best form of reconciliation between the individual personality and the community. Dostoevsky maintained that they were ever present, even if in a rudimentary form, in the deepest layers of the national soul of the Russian people.

d) *Conditional nationalism*. However, this belief in the existence of the seed of Christian compassion in the Russian soul should not mislead us with regard to the nature of Dostoevsky's nationalism. His praise for the Russian people was highly idiosyncratic and lacked typical signs of ethnic cultural essentialism. Thus, in *The devils*, Dostoevsky is quite reserved towards Shatov's deification of the Russian people, and his description of the common folk towards the end of the novel is far from complimentary; it certainly contains nothing similar to the tender admiration typical of many Russian populists of the time.

Dostoevsky did not believe in some authentic and superior Russian ethnic culture whose purity should be preserved. At times, he was very critical of purist phantasies and forced folklorisms. Once he laughed at the suggestion that the peasants themselves would be interested in reading native peasant-friendly texts; instead, he suggested giving them the novels of Alexander Dumas (Dostoevskij 1979: 53). And in his polemics against Nikolai Leskov, he lashed out against the latter's artificial folklorisation of the people's language (Dostoevsky 97–98).

Dostoevsky's Russian nationalism should rather be termed nationalism on credit: it provisioned a future formation of Russian culture that would be true to the people's mission. Meanwhile, Russia was still a rough and formless soil which, only after a period of cultivation, would acquire a limited and recognisable shape, even though this culture was not supposed to remain narrowly national, as its destiny was to evolve into a universal synthesis that absorbed and reconciled the best of all humanity, which, if we believe the Pushkin speech, was the true calling of the Russian people. Paradoxically, Dostoevsky's approach to Russianness turns out to be not dissimilar to that of the Bolsheviks in the following century, as they too regarded Russia more as a national tool for advancing a universal project than a cultural artefact to be cherished and preserved for its own sake.

e) *Suspicion towards statism*. Unlike Dostoevsky's belief in the Russian people that, even if conditional, was deeply ingrained in him, his attitude towards

the Russian state was much more circumspect. Even if he never completely subscribed to the romantic dreams of Russian Slavophiles and never considered the popular instincts and forms of life as the seat of truth and moral authority, and even if he did recognise the beneficial impact of the state-led modernisation and of Europeanised education, nevertheless he was keenly aware of the harm and injustice that could result from the state wishing to impose its will on the spontaneous forms of the people's life. For him, it was indeed the Russian state that was guilty of enslaving the Russian people for more than 150 years, and therefore it was the state's moral duty to change its ways and learn to act in concord with the nation.

Dostoevsky: The future Ukrainian patriot?

Now let us try to reflect on how these motifs could play out with reference to the current war.

a) It is true that Dostoevsky's opposition to cruelty and his emphasis on compassion did not make him a pacifist and opponent of all use of force. Not only did he often speak as a hardened realist who recognised the inevitability of punishment, repression and war; at times he even suggested that war might play a positively beneficial role (Dostoevsky 666–668). Indeed he applauded various military undertakings by the Russian state, such as the Crimean War or the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878.

This however does not mean that he would have automatically supported any war, or that he did not possess any notion of a just war both in respect of its rationale or its conduct. In his war apology, he put an emphasis on the value of the soldiers' self-sacrifice and altruism and went on record saying that conquest *per se* was not a legitimate purpose of war. In his own words:

Ask the people; ask the soldier: Why are they rising? Why do they go to war and what are they expecting from it? Everyone of them, as one man, will tell you that they are going in order to serve Christ and to liberate the oppressed brethren, and not one of them is thinking about usurpation. Quite so: precisely during this war we shall prove our idea concerning Russia's future mission in Europe; specifically we shall prove it by the fact that after liberating the Slavic countries we shall acquire for ourselves not even a scrap of land (as Austria is dreaming on her behalf), and that, on the contrary, we shall watch over their own mutual accord and protect their liberty and independence, be it even against all Europe (Dostoevsky 668).

Russia's wars in Europe, waged using the humanitarian pretext, at least provided him with the appearance of not violating his own maxims.

There is an exception though, and it relates to the cases in which territories were taken from non-Europeans. And whereas Dostoevsky's call for the occupation of

Constantinople and his hatred of the Turks (Dostoevsky 902–908) could still be read in the context of the rhetoric of “liberation”, the same cannot be said about his support for the Russian push into Central Asia that reached its bloody peak in the 1881 battle of Geok Tepe, which was accompanied by a massacre. Shortly before his death, Dostoevsky penned an article praising the conquest on the basis of standard colonialist arguments. Leaving aside the question of Dostoevsky’s knowledge in real time of the details of the event, it should be noted that what we have here seems to be a common case of limited moral empathy when a distant “other” is ignored or excluded from the application of one’s own ethical standards. Dostoevsky here is a typical European of his time who fails to apply his own criteria to the “non-Europeans”, such as the Ottomans and Turkmens.

But none of this is valid in the case of Russia-Ukraine war. First, whatever else it may be, it is a declared war of conquest initiated without any provocation. Unlike the preceding smaller-scale invasions, the 2022 aggression was not even justified on the ground of defending the “suffering” population. In any case, providing excuses of this sort would have required Dostoevsky to display such a degree of willful ignorance that he would have turned into a full-time propagandist. Second, from the very beginning this war took very cruel forms, as acts of violence were regularly committed against the civilian population, be it the massacre in Bucha or air-bombing campaigns against the civil infrastructure. Given Dostoevsky’s attentiveness to cruelty, denying these facts would have required him to show a high degree of intellectual dishonesty. Third, the Ukrainians, a European people closely related to the Great Russian Slavs, were without doubt within the orbit of Dostoevsky’s moral empathy, and I find it difficult to imagine him using colonialist arguments to justify the conquest.

In other words, it is more likely that the shameless and cruel character of the current war would have offended Dostoevsky’s moral sensibilities, rather than that he would have enlisted to serve as its willing propagandist.

b) The Russian state of Dostoevsky’s time was an autocracy, as it is in our days. But the nature of that autocracy was different. The Imperial Russia of the period of the Great Reforms was ruled by a good-natured monarch to whom Dostoevsky felt gratitude both for his own liberation and for that of the peasants. Russia was then an aristocratic country in which privileges were related to land ownership. It is true that the country was on its way to speedy liberal modernisation which would inevitably lead to the rise of a new bourgeois class, and Dostoevsky dealt with this transformation in *The adolescent* and other writings. But it is precisely because he feared what the bourgeois world might bring with it, that he was suspicious of limiting the Tsar’s autocracy and introducing parliamentary reforms, hoping to find alternative forms of political modernisation that would circumvent the dangers that he associated with the bourgeois order.

The current Russia regime, by contrast, emerged out of the chaos of the 1990s, as the security apparatus, busy with attaining control over the oligarchs' property, also absorbed their "neo-liberal" life values. The leading figures of the current regime started their careers in the shadowy atmosphere that combined the worship of money with the worship of violence, when the difference between business and criminality all but disappeared. To apply here Dostoevsky's imagery, the Russian regime gradually transformed itself from that of Luzhins to that of Raskolnikovs, or more precisely it produced a Raskolnikov-Luzhin tandem, as the adoration of sheer power for the sake of personal enrichment gave way to the adoration of sheer power for the sake of conquest.

It is again difficult to see how Dostoevsky would have been able to ignore this exemplification of bourgeois immoral rapaciousness which he detested and which he attributed to Western Europe, and what attachment, if at all, could he have professed towards this regime and towards these rulers.

c) Dostoevsky considered Russia to be the embodiment and protector of Eastern Christianity. Yet, today Russia wages war against a country in which the majority of the population are Orthodox Christians, and in which church attendance is arguably higher than in Russia itself. Admittedly Dostoevsky occasionally wrote unpleasant things about non-Russian Orthodox Slavs, but he never faced the situation where Russia fought a war against a fellow Orthodox people. It is worth noticing that the current Russia-Ukraine war has further intensified the institutional split within Eastern Christianity and brought about a deterioration of the Moscow Patriarchate's relationship even with a relatively loyal "Ukrainian Orthodox Church" (Palinchak, Bokoch). It is by no means obvious that Dostoevsky would deem such a war defensible.

d) Dostoevsky never thought about "Little Russians" as a separate nation. He clearly subscribed to the notion of the unified Russian people, of which Great Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians were just parts: "Great Russian, Little Russian, White Russian – they are all the same" (Dostoevsky 450). But one of the preconditions as well as effects of the current war has been the growing "ethnification" of Russian nationalism (Kolstø), in which Russianness is reduced to contemporary Russia and its culture and which seeks nothing less than the complete imposition of its own cultural characteristics on Slavic, and if possible non-Slavic, minorities. This turns the current war into an existential conflict from the point of view of the Ukrainian nation, thus excluding the possibility of its cultural cohabitation with the Russian nation and strengthening the cultural rift between Russians and Ukrainians. And precisely because Dostoevsky did not consider them as two different peoples, and given his reservations about the ethnic dimensions of nationalism, he would have hardly acquiesced to what would be in his eyes an act of willfully tearing apart the nation.

e) Dostoevsky believed that the Russian state and its quasi-European elite were responsible for the enslavement of the common people and for diverting Russia from the path of healthy gradual development. The reforms of the 1860s could thus be seen as an atonement for this historical sin, a true revolution that offered Russia the chance of national reconciliation. The outburst of war patriotism was for him a sign of such reconciliation, of true national awakening, and it is for this reason that he was so enthusiastic about the 1877 campaign.

None of this is relevant today. The gap between the ruling elite and society in contemporary Russia is as wide as ever. When the Russian government started its current invasion against Ukraine in 2022, it did not count on the widespread sentiment of popular enthusiasm that characterised the attitude of the broader Russian public towards the conflict with Ukraine in 2014; on the contrary, for a long period it even tried to deny that it was waging a “war”. And it is fair to say that whereas the Russian populace is on the whole reconciled to the war, its support for it is rather passive and reluctant and does not resemble at all the public sentiment of the 1870s. While Ukrainian society displayed during the war a remarkable ability for bottom-up self-organisation, this ability seems to be altogether absent in today’s political culture of the Russian citizenry. The current Russian regime is extremely statist, and this also includes the official Moscow Church, whose corrupt and unbelieving clergy seems to follow the precepts of the Grand Inquisitor even more closely than the Russian Church of Pobedonostsev’s time.

Now, if we put together all these considerations, the conclusion appears to be that the tension between Dostoevsky’s idea-feelings and the current war would have likely reached breaking point, and that he would have been forced to choose between his years-long loyalty to the country and state called Russia and his ethical-political sentiments. Most human beings facing such a dilemma would tend to choose the former because the attachment to particularistic identities generally prevails over more basic principles. But Dostoevsky was not an ordinary person. We know him as a man capable of radical turns and actions and as a writer who displayed broad empathy to a very wide range of political and social viewpoints and commitments. If the events demanded yet another *conversion*, it would be precisely Dostoevsky from whom one would expect it, and certainly more from him than from many conformists of his and other generations.

Why would it be impossible to imagine him making an entire journey towards becoming a committed Ukrainian patriot? A conversion of this sort would certainly suit his ethical-political dispositions: his disgust with cruelty, egoism and statism, his attachment to Orthodox Christianity, and even his Russian nationalism of sorts. It is certainly not implausible to imagine him transferring his notion of universal “mission” on the Ukrainians, him seeing them as the unique nation of the future that

reconciles between the West and the East, whereas Russia becomes irredeemably lost in ethnified nostalgia. If that were to happen, Dostoevsky's support for Ukraine could have turned out to be even more radical than that of ordinary pro-Western liberals; its forms would have perhaps offended liberal sensibilities no less than they are offended now by Dostoevsky's Great Russia chauvinism.

Not every reader will find this leap of imagination convincing. It may appear to be too detached from Dostoevsky's actual polemical texts that unambiguously point to the opposite direction. But is this really the case? Let us take the historical Dostoevsky as he was: a Russia apologist often dismissive of other nationalities. And let us look at a real text written by him which is indeed full of Russophile sentiment and of condescension towards Slavic "brothers". We will find there the following passage:

Russia will never, must never, think of enlarging her territory at the expense of the Slavs, of annexing them politically, of carving Russian provinces out of their lands, etc. Even now all Slavs, much like all Europe, suspect Russia of such aspirations; they will suspect them for a century hence. But God guard Russia against these aspirations, and the more political disinterestedness with regard to the Slavs she manifests, the more surely she will subsequently succeed in uniting them around herself – one hundred years hence. However, by providing the Slavs, from the very beginning, with as much political freedom, by withdrawing herself from tutelage and supervision of any kind; by merely announcing to them that she will always be ready to draw her sword against those who may threaten their freedom and nationality, Russia may thereby rid herself of the dreadful troubles and commotions of *enforcing* this tutelage and her political influence upon the Slavs, which, of course is hateful to them and always suspicious to Europe. Even so, by manifesting the fullest disinterestedness, Russia will thereby conquer and finally attract the Slavs to herself (Dostoevsky 900).

I see no good reason to believe that the author who penned this passage then, would have become an apologist for the Russian aggression today.

Concluding remarks

More than a hundred years ago, Dmitry Merezhkovsky declared that Dostoevsky should be seen as a revolutionary prophet: "When for the sake of this battle started not by us, we raise this sword sharpened not by us, when we pronounce this cutting word – autocracy is from the Antichrist – we speak, I repeat, seemingly against Dostoevsky, but in fact for him; we are doing what he would himself have done had he brought to the end his religious consciousness" (Merezhkovskij 42). The present article follows Merezhkovsky's sentiment in allowing the Dostoevsky of today, as it were, to speak against the historical Dostoevsky, but in fact for him.

The question can be raised, however: what is the benefit of this thought experiment? Even if the case for the anti-war Dostoevsky turns out to be convincing, how can it enlighten us? I wish to address this question in my concluding remarks.

In my view, there are two reasons why this thought exercise may be interesting and fruitful. The first is that by hypothesising about today's Dostoevsky, we may shed light on Dostoevsky as he really was. As a political thinker he remains grossly misunderstood, and his political texts are often taken at face value as expressions of Russian chauvinism and imperialism *per se*. Pulling Dostoevsky out of the context and examining his beliefs under different circumstances may lead us towards a better understanding of the fundamental spring of his political beliefs.

The second reason is related to our understanding of the complex dynamics between ethical sentiment and political judgement. Typically, human political judgements are relatively stable and impervious to immediate ethical considerations. But at some pivotal moments in history, pure political judgement ceases to be sufficient, and it is in such moments, when ordinary loyalties and commitments disintegrate, that the need for fundamental ethical decisions springing from the very roots of our ethical personality is most acutely felt.

The Bolshevik coup may serve as an illustration of such a moment. Remarkably, the logic of choosing between either making peace with the Bolsheviks or remaining their implacable foe did not follow familiar political divisions. In both camps, we find people of all stripes: socialists, liberals or conservative monarchists. It is very likely that the current Russia-Ukraine war is another such event, and here too strange fellows can be found in both camps.

The case of Dostoevsky is interesting, in my opinion, because judged by ordinary political standards, he should have joined the war camp. Yet, this would have contradicted the very source of his ethical personality. For this reason, I dare to suggest that had he lived today he would have become one of the most prominent and most interesting voices against the war and would have been ready to pay a heavy personal price for this opposition.

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