

Book Salon on Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*

Tuesday, September 26, 2017, at 3 p.m.
Alumni Center Salon, Ronald Tutor Campus Center 302

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

- Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) is widely regarded as one of the best novelists of all time. He is best known for the novella *Notes from Underground* and the novels *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.
- Dostoevsky's nineteenth-century works of fiction (both novels and short stories) had an enormous influence on twentieth-century literature. Literary modernism, existentialism, psychology, theology, and literary criticism have all been profoundly shaped by his work and ideas.
- Dostoevsky's insights into human psychology have led him to be regarded as one of the greatest psychologists in the history of literature.
- His works are also considered "novels of ideas" for dealing with timeless themes of philosophy and politics.
- During his lifetime, Dostoevsky was a renowned journalist. He was also well known for three highly publicized events in his life that clearly influenced his work: a mock execution, imprisonment in Siberia, and epileptic seizures.
- Dostoevsky differed from other famous Russian writers of his time (e.g., Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev) in that he was not a member of the landed gentry but rather depended on his work for money and was often in financial struggle.
- Dostoevsky was an Orthodox Christian.

ABOUT THE BOOK

- *Notes from Underground* (in Russian, *Zapiski iz podpolya*) is a novella that was published in 1864.
- It is considered to be the first existentialist novel.
- Narrated by an unnamed protagonist, the book addresses psychology, determinism, free will, law, utopianism, human nature, and other enduring themes of human existence.

NOTES
from
UNDERGROUND

MOCK EXECUTION, IMPRISONMENT, AND SEIZURES

In the late 1840s, motivated by his disapproval of serfdom, Dostoevsky became involved with a utopian socialist political group called The Petrashevsky Circle. It was a literary group that discussed banned books, opposed censorship, and wanted to see serfdom abolished. In 1849, he and the other members of the group were arrested. Dostoevsky spent eight months in prison until, one day, the prisoners were led to Semyonovsky Square. There, a sentence of death by firing squad was pronounced. Last rites were offered, and the prisoners were about to be shot. At the last moment, an announcement was made that the tsar had decided to spare their lives. This mock execution ceremony was part of their punishment. Dostoevsky was then sentenced to four years in a prison labor camp in Siberia. In prison, Dostoevsky experienced epileptic seizures that would continue throughout his life; just before a seizure, he would experience a heightened and seemingly out-of-time perception of the harmony of all things. After his time in Siberia, Dostoevsky was committed to the principle of individual freedom and felt that radical ideas were dangerous. He was thus an object of Bolshevik resentment and Soviet suspicion.

TSARIST RUSSIA AND THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

Tsarist autocracy is a kind of autocracy particular to Russia, in which all power and wealth are controlled by the tsar. Tsarist aristocracy originated in 1440 with Ivan III and continued until the communist revolution of 1917. It persisted through several different eras, including the Tsardom of Russia (1547–1721) and the Russian Empire (1721–1917). The Russian Empire was one of the largest empires in world history, surpassed only by the British and Mongol empires. It played a major role in defeating Napoleon's imperialist ambitions.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- Notes from Underground attacks many conventionally held beliefs. Were any of your beliefs challenged?
- How do you think Dostoevsky's imprisonment and mock execution affected his worldview and work?
- Where do you think Dostoevsky would fit in today's political and ideological categories?
- Do you see the influence of Dostoevsky's Christian faith in *Notes from Underground*?
- What do you make of the fact that the narrator is unnamed?
- Did you find any humor in *Notes from Underground*? If so, what amused you?

TO LEARN MORE, EXPLORE THESE RESOURCES:

- Other works by Dostoevsky, including *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*
- Twentieth-century existentialist novels such as Albert Camus's *The Stranger* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*
- The works of Dostoevsky's influences, including Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens, Aleksandr Pushkin, Sir Walter Scott, Friedrich Schiller, and William Shakespeare

DEFINITIONS

DETERMINISM: The theory that all events, including human action, are determined by external causes; the opposite of the idea of free will.

EXISTENTIALISM: A philosophical theory that emphasizes individual free will and responsibility. In the existentialist view, humans define their own meaning of life, and try to make rational decisions in an irrational universe. It is primarily associated with late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers, including Kierkegaard and Sartre. Existentialism was most influential in Europe from about 1930 to the mid-twentieth century.

LITERARY MODERNISM: Originating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, literary modernism is characterized by a self-conscious break with traditional modes of writing, prompted by the massive disruptions of industrialization and World War I. Characteristics include a self-aware first-person narrator, stream of consciousness, and a distrust of certainty and conventional narrative forms. T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf wrote key works of modernist literature. Dostoevsky was an important precursor.

MATERIALISM: A philosophical doctrine that holds that matter is fundamental, and that even human consciousness and will result from material interactions or physical processes.

SERFDOM: A form of slavery. Serfs were people who belonged to the lower classes in feudal systems, who worked the soil and were subject to the will of the owners of that soil. Serfdom developed in Europe in the Middle Ages and lasted until the nineteenth century. The term *serf* described unemancipated tillers of soil owned by others especially in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe and Russia.

SOCIALISM: Any of various theories or social or political movements advocating that the means of production and distribution of goods should be owned and/or governed by the community as a whole.

TSAR (OR CZAR): An emperor or king who has absolute authority. Specifically, a Russian monarch prior to the revolution of 1917.

UTOPIAN SOCIALISM: A term often applied retroactively to nineteenth-century socialist idealists whose visions of an ideal society were disconnected from material realities and who did not believe in class struggle or revolutionary change. Utopian socialists held more stock in moral persuasion to motivate the voluntary surrender of capitalist owners.

DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

DANIELLE MIHRAM of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about Fyodor Dostoevsky and his *Notes from Underground*. Except where a call number is given, these are electronic resources, which you can access through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at libraries.usc.edu.

RECOMMENDED REFERENCE SOURCES

- Lanz, Kenneth. *The Dostoevsky Encyclopedia*. Westport Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004.
DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY: PG3328 .A09 L36 2004
- Leatherbarrow, William J. (editor). *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY: PC3328 Z6 C27 2002 (also available online)

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*. Translated by Robert G. Durgy. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982.
DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY: PG3326 .Z4 1982
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*: Translated by Michael R. Katz. New York : Norton c2001.
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- Frank, Joseph. *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821–1849*. London: Robson Books, 1977.
DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY: PG3328 .F7 1977
- Jackson, Robert Louis. *Dostoevsky: New Perspectives*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984.
DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY: PG3328 .Z6 D629 1984
- Lord, Robert. *Dostoevsky; Essays and Perspectives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970.
DOHENY MEMORIAL LIBRARY: PG3328 .L6

SELECTED SCHOLARLY ARTICLES

- Brombert, Victor. "Dostoevsky's Underground Man: Portrait of the Paradoxalist." *Raritan* 15, no. 1 (1995): 67–81.
- Roberts, Peter. "The Stranger within: Dostoevsky's Underground." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 45, no. 4 (2013): 396–408.
- Scanlan, James P. "The Case Against Rational Egoism in Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 3 (1999): 549–567.

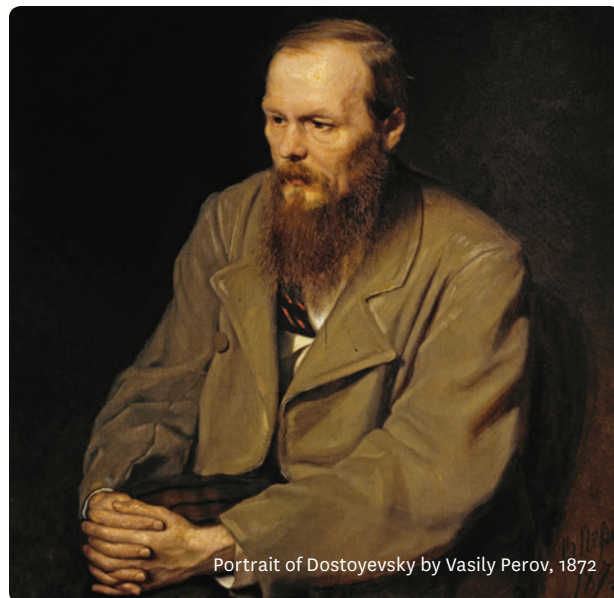
RECOMMENDED DATABASES

MLA International Bibliography

Index to scholarly publication in literature, languages, linguistics, and folklore from over 4000 journals and series published worldwide. Indexing only: no full text.

ProQuest Multiple Databases

It simultaneously searches dozens of subject areas, indexes thousands of general and scholarly titles, and provides full-text for a significant number of the articles included from a variety of contemporary research databases. It is an excellent starting place for research for a paper, particularly if one isn't sure where to begin their research.



Portrait of Dostoevsky by Vasily Perov, 1872

