To Cancel or Not to Cancel? — Questioning the Russian Idea

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Taking its cue from Vladimir Putin's use of Dostoevsky to support his critical view of Western culture, the article challenges the view that Dostoevsky can be straightforwardly corralled into the Russian President's nationalistic and imperialistic agenda. Instead, it follows the approach taken by George Lukacs in response to National Socialism's self-representation as the authentic inheritor of the German cultural tradition, namely, to show that any great cultural work is going to be resistant to the kind of one-dimensional interpretations typical of authoritarian regimes. Particularly, the article focusses on much-debated passages of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (aka *Demons*) to show that the writer has a more nuanced view and that his work contains resources to resist today's ultra-nationalism.

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Nine months after the invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin delivered a speech in which he argued that although Western leaders always claim to be the champions of freedom, Western liberalism was now engaged in the complete suppression of anything that contradicted its view of what was socially and culturally desirable. As he told his audience, "Fyodor Dostoyevsky prophetically foretold all this back in the 19th century" (Putin 2022). Specifically, Putin cites Shigalev, one of the nihilistic conspirators in *The Possessed* (or *Demons*). Shigalev is a gloomy theorist who realizes that his plans for unlimited freedom will result in unlimited despotism (Dostoevsky 1914, 365). "This," says Putin, "is what our Western opponents have come to". Specifically, he applies Shigalev's remark to the so-called "cancel culture" of the West, comparing it to Nazi book-burning and contrasting it with the fact that, even during the Cold War, American and Soviet leaders maintained a respect for each other's cultural achievements (indeed, I remember posters outside one of our local venues advertising the Red Army choir and dancers).

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Probably referring to the cancellation of a course on Dostoevsky at Milan-Bicocca University days after the invasion of Ukraine, Putin told his listeners that even a Dostoevsky is now cancelled in the West—ignoring the fact that the course was swiftly reinstated following a public outcry.

As it stands, the claim is patently false. To take just one counter-example, 2023 was the sesquicentenary of the birth of Sergei Rachmaninov and that year saw a more or less non-stop sequence of concerts, recordings, and documentaries about the composer. Being a regular listener to BBC Radio 3 (BBC radio's classical music channel), I can testify that not only Rachmaninov but Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Khachaturian and other less-well known Russian composers were and are regularly heard on the airwaves. To take a completely random example, last Friday morning's three-hour "Essential Classics" programme (12/01/2024) featured four Russian composers (Borodin, Rachmaninov, Tchaikovsky, and Davydov) and while one can argue about whether this is a "fair" representation (there were eight German-Austrian composers on the list) it is very far from "cancellation". Of course, music could be seen as more politically neutral than literature, but there is little or no real evidence of the great Russian novels falling off either private or academic reading-lists.

For Putin, the purported fact of Western cancel culture reveals a fundamental difference between Russia and the West. As he went on to say, "The erasure of all differences is what underlies the Western model of globalisation". By way of contrast, the Russian world allows for a genuine plurality of world-views and religions to happily co-exist, each following their own path: "for a thousand years, Russia has developed a unique culture of interaction between all world religions. There is no need to cancel anything, be it Christian values, Islamic values or Jewish values. We have other world religions as well. All you need to do is respect each other" (Putin 2022).

Again, the claim is false, even ludicrous. As we entered 2024, Britain had a Hindu Prime Minister and Scotland a Muslim First Minister. There are those who lament this—and I recall seeing an Alternativ für Deutschland poster declaring that "We have lost London" (referring to the election of Sadiq Khan, a Muslim, as Mayor of London). But the fact remains that across Europe people from ethnic, religious, and other cultural minorities are now actively shaping the political and cultural life of the continent. The factual claim is weak, but Putin is here recycling a longstanding element in Russian self-understanding. And although Putin does not directly cite Dostoevsky when proclaiming Russia's respect for disparate world-views, similar themes are found several times in Dostoevsky's writings, as in his comments on the Balkan wars of the 1870s. There he insists that Russia's aim is not to subordinate the West and that "we seek to achieve our own welfare not through the

suppression of national individualities alien to us, but, on the contrary, that we perceive our welfare in the freest and most independent development of all other nations and in brotherly communion with them" (Putin 2022). We find a further development of this idea in the rapturously-received speech that Dostoevsky gave on the occasion of the dedication of the Pushkin monument in Moscow in 1880, a speech that can be regarded as the high-point of Dostoevsky's public reception in Russia in his lifetime. Russia's destiny, he declares, is not narrowly nationalistic but "all-European" and "universal". To be truly Russian is to become a "brother to all", to become "universal"—not through the sword but by the "power of brotherhood". In this spirit, Pushkin's specific genius is the ability to enter into the spirit of other national literatures and reincarnate them in his own writings. He even extends his claim to religion, since, he believes, it will be Russia that is to reveal the true brotherhood of nations in the fellowship of Christ's gospel (Dostoevsky 1984, 959–980).[1]

A first response might be to dismiss this as the kind of hyperbole we might expect from a writer well-known both for his patriotism and for his ability as a writer to push ideas and situations to an extreme. In a historical perspective, though, the claim is not so ridiculous. The flowering of Russian literary, musical, and artistic culture in the nineteenth century was received in the West with colossal enthusiasm and, in the early twentieth century, what has been called a "vogue for Russia" swept the cultural scene in Western Europe. Dostoevsky himself was, of course, a major part of this, as were Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov and others. And it wasn't only literature. Probably the most epochal manifestation of Russia's—enthusiastically welcomed—cultural invasion of the West was *The Rite of Spring*, with Stravinsky's music and the Ballet Russe transforming what was possible in dance. Eisenstein and Tarkovsky would later do the same for film—and I have already mentioned the still vital presence of Russian music in the popular classical canon.

Russia, then, was perceived as showing us a new thing—nor are Dostoevsky's claims for Russian Christianity entirely ludicrous if we turn our gaze from the Putin-supporting Patriarch Kirill and consider the effect that the "discovery" of Russian Orthodoxy had on Western Christianity in the twentieth century. Leading theologians from both Catholic and Protestant churches owed a significant debt to Dostoevsky, Soloviev, and the Russian religious tradition more generally, a debt acknowledged in Rowan Williams's recent book, *Looking East in Winter* (2021). This relates especially to the intersection of lived spirituality with doctrinal expression, with particular emphasis on humility and the embeddedness of human existence in cosmic life, as exemplified in Dostoevsky's Elder Zosima (*The Brothers Kara-*

[1] The speech is in the August 1880 edition of the *Diary*.

mazov). Of course, it could be argued that the view of Russian Christianity presented here is in part a literary invention (as when the figure of the holy Elder Zosima in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* is taken as speaking for real-life Orthodoxy) and in even larger part a product of the theologians and philosophers of the exile, whose "Orthodoxy" was often an idealized version of Russian reality—often, but not always, and figures such as Anthony Bloom and Alexander Men show that fact can, on occasion, follow fiction, while the icons of Andrei Rublev and the Prayer of the Name have become valued elements in the universal Christian heritage.

Yet even if modern Western culture has been shaped in significant ways by Russia, should we now change tack and do what Putin has been accusing us of doing: should we cancel Russia? And should we extend that cancellation retrospectively from contemporary collaborations with Russian cultural actors to curtailing the dissemination and teaching of past Russian culture, on the grounds that it has shaped the imperialist ideology of the present? It is of course entirely understandable that many of those directly affected by the war in Ukraine—the dispossessed, the refugees, the grieving, and the traumatized—will have developed a profound and visceral aversion to anything Russian. The point has been nicely put by Ada Wordsworth, a graduate student of Russian literature at Oxford University who travelled to Ukraine in the early weeks of the war to work with the displaced. Weighing the argument that what is now needed is not cancellation but a more critical approach to the tradition, she acknowledges that "In principle this seems like the right approach, but for now, enjoying the same Russian literature that is used by Russian elites to defend their maniacal war feels, for me, impossible" (Wordsworth 2022, 36).

And yet cultures do not and cannot flourish in isolation from each other and from their own histories. The "clash of civilizations" thesis embraced by some Russian World ideologists is, in my view, profoundly mistaken. The world in which we live today is not made up of a set of distinct cultures but of cultures that have become what they are and that continue to develop through constant interaction with others as well as through internal development. Since at least the seventeenth century our world has become very like the Hellenistic world in which Christianity, Judaism, and Islam began to take shape—a world of constant and dynamic interactions, appropriations, transformations, and reconstructions.

That doesn't mean that we should be merely passive in relation to the past in all its diversity. Back in the 1930s, George Lukacs wrote that "The battle for heritage is one of the most important ideological tasks of antifascism in Germany. ... The demagogy of mass propaganda has no qualms about turning every great figure of the past into a simple forerunner of Na-

tional Socialism ... " And, with reference to Goethe and Wagner, he adds, "a non-fascist, anti-fascist analysis which reveals the true character and significance of such figures in the history of German culture has an importance transcending the purely literary" (Lukács 1964, 144–145). Lukacs's point is that the appropriation of figures as Goethe and Wagner by the National Socialist culture warriors often involved the typical distortions used by demagogues, including turning a blind eye to anything in their sources that played against the National Socialist narrative. Lukacs too, it should be said, made some rather bad political calls, but what I am proposing here is something like his programme of an anti-fascist interpretative strategy and I agree with his claim that this has become one of the most urgent intellectual tasks of the present. Russia should not be cancelled, but "the Russian idea" that pervades its literary and political culture needs a critical rereading that, at the same time, is attentive to where the past resists conscription into the politics of the present.

Putin likes to cite Dostoevsky and the writer provides an exemplary case-study. On the one hand, Dostoevsky continues to compel our attention as a writer with singular insights into the complexities of being human and is eloquent in the cause of universal human values. Nevertheless, there are clearly problematic elements, especially in his political writings. Writing in 1887 in his *Diary of a Writer*, he states that while the maxim "peace and not blood" is generally true and even "holy", it is not applicable to Russia, which, in the particular historical moment of the war with Turkey constitutes an exception to the rule. The claim parallels Kierkegaard's proposal that Abraham's willingness to kill his son Isaac at God's command could be regarded as a "justified exception" to the universal laws of ethics, a claim politicized in a Carl Schmitt's idea of sovereignty. The trouble with such claims is that while such a "suspension" of the ethical may be put forward as necessary for just this one historical moment, this one historical moment has a habit of replicating itself and what is done under the banner of a momentary exceptionalism then has to be defended and carried through to its conclusion.

Such exceptionalism is perhaps the ultimate stumbling-block in any alien literature or history (though, I suspect, most of us most of the time fairly easily overlook it in our own literature and history), since its real-world consequences become only too clear in events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Once seen, it is hard to unsee and is likely to infect everything it touches. Thus it is now for those who see chauvinism and colonialism in virtually every word of Russian literature—but does this mean we just have to close the book and relegate it to the shelves for the foreseeable future?

Putin, we have to say, is not entirely mistaken in quoting Dostoevsky as he does. Dostoevsky's exceptionalism is there on the page, as is his Anti-

Semitism, his Anti-Westernism (no matter how conflicted), and other more or less disagreeable features. But the Dostoevsky he quotes is not the whole Dostoevsky and (I suggest) our response should not be to cancel Dostoevsky because he is used in this way but rather to re-commit ourselves to reading Dostoevsky's and other relevant texts in their proper literary context: perhaps—certainly!—more suspiciously than before 2022 but with clarity as to all the possibilities of the text in question.

Take for example Putin's reference to Dostoevsky's Shigalev in support of the view that Western freedom has ended in today's supposed cancel culture. Shigalev's speech takes place during a meeting of nihilistic saboteurs, who are simultaneously sinister and absurd. They are sinister insofar as they are being used to foment unrest in the provincial town in which the novel is set and some (including Shigalev) will be enlisted in the murder of one of their own former comrades. They are absurd insofar as these "fine champions" of social revolution (as the narrator sarcastically refers to them) are depicted by Dostoevsky as a bunch of rather pitiful losers: half-educated, resentful, vain, cantankerous, and easily led. In the middle of the meeting, Shigalev stands up. As Dostoevsky describes him, "he slowly rose from his seat with a gloomy and sullen air and mournfully laid on the table a thick notebook filled with extremely small handwriting" (Dostoevsky 1914, 364). This turns out to be the manuscript of a "system of world organisation" that, unfortunately for him, is not even taken seriously by his fellow conspirators, one of whom declares that Shigalev is mad. In the few preparatory remarks that he is able to make before he is howled down, he asserts that all previous thinkers who have tried to solve the social problem have been "dreamers, tellers of fairy-tales, fools who contradicted themselves, who understood nothing of natural science and the strange animal called man" (Dostoevsky 1914, 365). Shigalev himself doesn't get further than a few sentences into the exposition of his system before he too succumbs to contradictions, admitting that he is perplexed by his own data and the fact that his conclusion directly contradicts the point from which he began—the very contradiction taken up by Putin and applied to the extreme liberalism (as he sees it) of the West: "Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrive at unlimited despotism", adding that, nevertheless, "there can be no solution of the social problem but mine" (Dostoevsky 1914, 365).

Shigalev, then, is no simple mouthpiece for Dostoevsky, although—and this is where it gets complex—Dostoevsky was not above putting his own views into the mouths of some of his more absurd and morally dubious characters. Just because Shigalev is gloomy, conceited, blind to the complexities of social development, and entirely lacking in critical self-awareness doesn't mean that we glimpse nothing of Dostoevsky's own thought in his

wretched speech and it may be that the author would indeed have subscribed to the proposition that total freedom would lead to total despotism. The problem—and this is where the characterization of Shigalev becomes relevant—is that as a purely theoretical proposition this, in effect, says nothing about any given configuration of social affairs, in the West or in Russia. Shigalev's system has no empirical basis and no real practical application. He is not presented as a critic of the West but as a parody of any attempt to "solve" the social problem by pure theory.

Now it may be—and Dostoevsky may well have thought—that the West was more prone to purely theoretical approaches to social challenges than Russia, but the point of Shigalev's theorizing is that this is a way of thinking that is not unique to the West. The small nihilistic circle to which Shigalev belongs reflects a distinctively Russian kind of extremism—and many have seen his portrayal of these "possessed" revolutionaries as anticipating what would befall Russia under the Bolsheviks. However, in some ways this is no more illuminating than applying it to the West in general. As a sheer abstraction it can be applied to anything and everything and proves nothing.

The difficulties of simply mining Dostoevsky (or any other major writer) for ready-to-use quotes are further illustrated in one of the best-known tropes that Dostoevsky formulates in *The Possessed*: the idea of Russia as a "god-bearing" nation—an exceptionalism that is probably unsurpassable. This is put forward by the character Ivan Shatov, who will later be murdered (by Shigalev, amongst others). Shatov declares that Russia is a "'god-bearing' people … destined to regenerate and save the world in the name of a new God" and it is to this people that "the keys of life and of the new world" are to be given (Dostoevsky 1914, 223). He rejects the objection that this reduces God to an attribute of nationality. "On the contrary," he says, "I raise the people to God" (Dostoevsky 1914, 227). He claims that every great nation has been defined by faith in its own divine calling. But, he continues, "there is only one truth, and therefore only a single one out of the nations can have the true God, even though other nations have great gods of their own. Only one nation is "god-bearing", that's the Russian people … " (Dostoevsky 1914, 228). But is Shatov's profession of faith Dostoevsky's?

Many have thought so. In a still influential article from 1945, Hans Kohn describes the author's and character's shared view as "The exclusive fanaticism of a racial God", which, he continues, "is proclaimed here, as in most primitive antiquity, without any trace of the ethical sublimation into the God of universal justice demanded by the Hebrew prophets" (Kohn 1945, 403). A 2014 television adaptation implicitly validates Shatov's speech by changing the setting from night to day and having him speak against a background dominated by the golden domes of a Russian Church, reflecting the sun that

often has associations of divinity in Dostoevsky's writing, thus visually linking the speaker's "Russian God" to Orthodoxy (Kuznetsova 2017, 154–162). However, at least until recently, Shatov's ideas would be unrecognizable to any "orthodox" Orthodox theology, the starting-point of which is the Trinitarian revelation of God in Christ rather the self-elevation of a human collectivity to divine status.[2]

This invites the further question as to whether Shatov's big idea is in fact a variant of the nihilism that the novel is dedicated to unmasking? In the conversation itself we learn that Shatov had originally learned this idea from Stavrogin, the Byronic idol of the nihilistic circle to which Shigalev belongs and when pressed as to whether he actually believes in God, Shatov can only stutter "I will ... I will believe in God" (Dostoevsky 1914, 229). Importantly, the whole conversation takes place in a section of the novel entitled "Night" and immediately follows after another of the nihilists, Kirillov, has explained his ambition to become God by committing suicide and thus freeing humanity from religion. It seems not implausible, then, that Dostoevsky is taking us on a short tour of the varieties of self-deification to be found amongst those who have left Orthodoxy behind, with Kirillov representing the deification of the individual, followed by Shatov representing the deification of the nation. Starting with its nocturnal setting and the atmosphere of near-hysteria that Dostoevsky creates, the text itself gives reasons to doubt Shatov's visionary but uncertain messianism.

However, Shatov is not the only Dostoievskian character to speak of Russia as a god-bearing nation; indeed, the holy Elder Zosima uses the same expression (Dostoevsky 1912, 327).[3] This seems worrying, but, versus Shatov, Zosima assumes that God does indeed exist: it is God who will answer the monk's prayer and who will save Russia. The truth that the monks preserve is the truth kept "from the times of the Fathers of old, the Apostles and the martyrs" (Dostoevsky 1912, 325) and their task requires "obedience, fasting, and prayer" (Dostoevsky 1912, 327). Russia will reveal this truth to the world—as Zosima puts it "That star will arise from the East" (Dostoevsky 1912, 325)—but it did not invent that truth. This distinction may seem flimsy, especially on a purely secular reading. However, a people who is the vehicle of God's coming into existence is very different from a people called to serve God in humility. But can there be a "politics of humility"? And just

[2] The "Declaration on Russian World Teaching" issued on March 13th 2022 and signed by over 1500 Orthodox theologians, condemns what it calls the heresy of "ethno-phyletism", that is, the Russian Patriarch Kirill's view that God's cause in the world can be identified with a particular nation. The declaration notes that this was already condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 1872.

[3] Garnett's translation obscures this point, saying only that "he [the peasant] has God in his heart".

how might we distinguish between narratives of national humility and the narratives of national humiliation that have often fed the ressentiment that drives states to vengeful self-assertion?

Certainly, Dostoevsky's hopes for Russia are idealized—but idealized literary images of a nation are not always what they seem. The valorisation of an ideal Russia (Britain, USA, India, etc.) can seem like a gesture of superiority and even hostility. Yet it can also serve as a challenge to the nation concerned to live up to its own best possibilities. William Blake's poem "Jerusalem" is a striking example: today it is often sung on occasions such as the Last Night of the Proms, to a stirring patriotic tune penned during the First World War and accompanied by flag-waving and other manifestations of what some see as an embarrassingly retrograde jingoism, all suggesting that England is indeed fully engaged in "building Jerusalem" in its "green and pleasant land" as Blake calls us to do. Blake, however, conceived it as a quasi-revolutionary challenge to England's powers-that-be and a call to build a different kind of society from the one emerging out of the "dark, satanic mills" of the early industrial revolution. In other words, Blake's patriotic ardour was not directed to celebrating what England *was* but what it *could—and ought to—become*. That Dostoevsky understood this rhetorical move is illustrated in *The Idiot*, when the eponymous idiot, Prince Myshkin, delivers a hyperbolic speech about the virtues of the Russian aristocracy to an audience of aristocrats who are infinitely far from embodying the virtues he is praising. Myshkin is naïve, but his author makes clear that his "praise" of the aristocracy is in fact an indictment of them—as long as they fail to be what they could be and do what they could do for Russia (Dostoevsky 1951, 540–543). It is not difficult to extend the example to Russia as a whole.

It may be that the case of Dostoevsky is undecidable—but when was it ever possible to give a "final judgment" on any great work of literature or philosophy? My argument in this article has not been with the aim of vindicating Dostoevsky on all counts but simply that, following Lukács, we should not let Russian neo-imperialism have all its own way in claiming that it is the true inheritor of the Russian literary and culture tradition or that its ideas are indeed to be found ready to hand in the works of Dostoevsky and other representatives of that tradition. To the texts themselves! And what is true of Dostoevsky—perhaps the most obviously Anti-Western and unashamedly patriotic of the great Russian novelists—is surely true of other representatives of Russian culture. In Russia—as in Germany, France, Britain, and across the developed world—the nineteenth century was deeply imbued with affirmations of nationhood alongside aspirations to a more universal co-humanity. In Britain today we now see that this was inextricably tied to slavery and Empire and, largely as a result of Putin's invasion

of Ukraine, Russian culture too must be subjected to a similar critique. In the longer term, however, we do not help ourselves when we simply jettison the culture of the past. We must live with it in all its moral and political ambiguity and maintain the hope that anything that has lasting value will be a resource against the flattening of intellectual and cultural life that is the invariable accompaniment of authoritarian and imperialistic regimes.

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