

The “Rehabilitation” of F. M. Dostoevsky During the Thaw

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Abstract. This article is about the “rehabilitation” of Fyodor Dostoevsky during the Thaw (which lasted in the USSR from roughly 1953 to 1968). Before then, the Soviet authorities had actively opposed the popularization of Dostoevsky’s legacy. In December 1947, on the personal instructions of Joseph Stalin, an anti-Dostoevsky campaign was unleashed in the USSR, since the Soviet leader considered the writer’s ideas “reactionary” and corrupting the country’s youth. From 1948 to 1954, not a single film adaptation of Dostoevsky’s works was produced in the USSR, not a single scientific monograph devoted to his work was released, his books nearly stopped being published, he practically ceased to be studied in schools and universities, etc. This article examines how in the context of the new policy and a certain warming of relations with the West during the Thaw, the authorities’ attitude toward Dostoevsky changed dramatically, which manifested itself in a variety of areas of culture, science, and public life. After 1956, when the famous 20th Congress of the CPSU took place and Stalin’s personality cult was condemned (and the 75th anniversary of Dostoevsky’s death was widely celebrated), the Soviet authorities never again tried to completely ignore or ban the great writer; instead, they increasingly sought to appropriate Dostoevsky’s global significance and skillfully use it as a tool of soft power.

Keywords: F. M. Dostoevsky, Thaw, V. Ya. Kirpotin, A. S. Dolinin, Thaw theater and cinema, Yuri Lyubimov, Yu. F. Kariakin, 75th anniversary of Dostoevsky’s death, Innokenty Smoktunovsky, 1956.

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Before jumping into a description of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky's "rehabilitation" during the Thaw, amid the profound changes that affected Soviet culture, science, and public life from 1953 to 1968, it is worth briefly outlining the general atmosphere and attitude toward the great Russian writer in the preceding historical period. By the end of Joseph Stalin's rule, Dostoevsky had gained a reputation in official publications as a writer who was semi-banned, harmful, and extremely inimical to Soviet power. Although there was never a blanket prohibition on mentioning, reading,¹ or possessing the works of the classic (the writer's Apartment-Museum in Moscow remained open throughout this time, and pre-revolutionary editions of his works could be purchased from secondhand booksellers), efforts by the authorities to popularize his legacy were effectively minimized.

The darkest and densest period of the suppression and "denunciation" of Dostoevsky in the USSR occurred between 1948 and 1954. As Dostoevsky scholar Yelena Dryzhakova recalls, several articles about him appeared as late as the autumn of 1946 in connection with the 125th anniversary of Dostoevsky's birth. Official critics (David Zaslavsky, Aleksandr Yegolin, Nikolay Pksanov) gave public lectures on the writer. However, by late 1947, an anti-Dostoevsky campaign had begun [18, p. 461]. The scholars most eager for the opportunity to write freely about Dostoevsky (e.g., Arkady Dolinin) even attempted to ascertain Stalin's personal attitude toward the writer at that time [Ibid.], but to no avail. Nonetheless, the Soviet dictator's stance on the objectionable classic can be established indirectly through memoir accounts.

For example, according to the recollections of Yugoslav politician Milovan Djilas (1911-1995), during a dinner with a Yugoslav delegation attended by Stalin in January 1948 in Moscow, the conversation unexpectedly turned to Dostoevsky. Djilas expressed his bewilderment over the attacks on Dostoevsky's work in the USSR:

From my youth, I considered Dostoevsky in many respects the greatest writer of our time, and I could not agree with the Marxist attacks on him. Stalin replied simply: 'A great writer – and a great reactionary. We do not print him because he is a bad influence on young people. But he is a great writer!' [45, p. 495].²

This stance of Stalin, viewing Dostoevsky primarily as a "great reactionary," became key in assessments of the writer by scholars, journalists, and writers loyal to the Soviet authorities. According to cultural historian Pyotr Druzhinin, it was Stalin himself who personally instigated the anti-Dostoevsky campaign that abruptly erupted in the press in December 1947. The researcher believes that the leader's displeasure may have been provoked by the excessive promotion of Valery Kirpotin's ideologically "immature" book *Young Dostoevsky* (1947), which was supported by General Secretary and Chairman of the Board of the Union of Soviet Writers Aleksandr Fadeyev (allegedly, the book was even considered for the Stalin Prize) [17, p. 372]. Stalin considered the book harmful to the mindset of Soviet young people and ordered Andrey Zhdanov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), to take the necessary

steps to deal with the issue. Zhdanov, in turn, passed on the order to Dmitry Shepilov, First Deputy Head of the Department of Propaganda and Agitation of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party.

Shepilov later recalled how Zhdanov relayed the leader’s supreme will regarding Dostoevsky:

Yesterday, Comrade Stalin drew attention to the fact that in recent literature, the issue of Dostoevsky’s work and sociological views is being presented in a very one-sided and often incorrect manner. Dostoevsky is depicted only as an outstanding Russian writer, an unparalleled psychologist, and a master of language and artistic imagery. Indeed, he was all of that. But to say only that is to present Dostoevsky in a very one-sided way and to mislead readers, especially young people. What about the sociopolitical aspect of Dostoevsky’s work? After all, he wrote not only *Notes from the House of the Dead* or *Poor People*. What about *The Double*? And the infamous *Demons*? After all, *Demons* was written specifically to discredit the revolution... [17, p. 373].

As a result, orders were issued to “correct” the public perception of Dostoevsky through sharp public criticism of his ideas from a communist standpoint.

The victims of the anti-Dostoevsky campaign, which was swiftly launched in December 1947 and continued until the very end of Stalin’s rule,³ included many figures in science and culture. Philosopher Grigory Pomerants (1918-2013) recalls that after his arrest in 1949, the investigator demanded during interrogations that he confess that his old term paper on Dostoevsky was “not only anti-Marxist but explicitly anti-Soviet” [32, p. 6]. He was ultimately not allowed to defend his dissertation. Career Dostoevsky scholar Arkady Dolinin (1880-1968), who taught at the Leningrad Pedagogical Institute in the late 1940s and early 1950s, faced a policy already in place that prohibited teaching special courses on Dostoevsky [47, p. 26].

The authors of monographs on Dostoevsky published in 1947, Dolinin⁴ and Valery Kirpotin (1898-1997),⁵ were fiercely attacked for their “erroneous” assessment of Dostoevsky. Kirpotin described the events of that time in a letter to Vyacheslav Molotov, member of the Presidium of the CPSU Central Committee, dated April 24, 1955:

This is about Dostoevsky. For many years now, literary studies and criticism have acted as if this writer does not exist. In 1947, I published the book *Young Dostoevsky*. I recall that when I began working on Dostoevsky, the late [Pavel] Lebedev-Polyansky advised me: ‘Why do you need this? You will get nothing but problems, hassles, and a drubbing...’

The book was discussed at the Gorky Institute of World Literature and the Union of Soviet Writers. In both instances, my work was approved. A. Fadeyev gave a positive review of the book. Positive reviews also appeared in the press, particularly in *Literaturnaya gazeta*. But by the end of December 1947, everything changed abruptly. Articles in *Literaturnaya gazeta* and *Kultura i zhizn* sharply criticized my work. The book *Young Dostoevsky* was part of a planned project of the Gorky Institute of World Literature, where I was working at the time. It was the first part of a large monograph. After D. Zaslavsky’s and V[ladimir] Yermilov’s critical articles, the institute’s director, Yegolin, removed the topic of Dostoevsky from the institute’s plans, and I was effectively deprived of the opportunity to complete my work [26, p. 614].

An article by one of the instigators of the anti-Dostoevsky campaign, David Zaslavsky (1880-1965),⁶ was tellingly titled “Against the Idealization of Dostoevsky’s Reactionary Views” (*Kultura i zhizn*, December 20, 1947). In it, Dostoevsky was labeled “one of the most fervent opponents of socialism, revolution, and democracy,” while the authors of new books about the writer – Dolinin and Kirpotin – were accused of “falsifying Dostoevsky’s true artistic and ideological image, attempting to paint him as a ‘socialist’ ” [49, p. 467]. A pamphlet with the text of a lecture by another prominent critic of those years, Vladimir Yermilov (1904-1965), bore a similar title: “Against the Reactionary Ideas in Dostoevsky’s Work” (1948). In his article “F. M. Dostoevsky and Our Criticism” (*Literaturnaya gazeta*, December 24, 1947, No. 66), Yermilov called for a reassessment of the prevailing attitude toward the writer:

All our researchers and critics who have worked on Dostoevsky’s oeuvre must reconsider much in their assessments, reject liberal sentimentality, and advance Marxist-Leninist studies of this complex, contradictory, and significant writer, who raised many acute social issues, including the issue of ‘corners,’ slums, and plagues of the capitalist city – but he raised those issues incorrectly, based on a false, reactionary ideology and a subjective-psychological artistic method that broke with many of the most important realist traditions of Russian literature [17, p. 375].

A witness to those events, poet Olga Berggolts (1910-1975), wrote the following in her diary on January 28, 1948:

Perhaps this whole cumbersome system of terror, humiliation, boorishness, flattery, and corruption is designed solely to erase the human being, the personality, in me? After all, this is what was intuited by Dostoevsky, who is being persecuted here now, as well as Zoshchenko and even Tolstoy [7, p. 380].

Here, Dostoevsky is compared to Zoshchenko solely based on the zeal with which he was persecuted, much like the living Soviet writer.

In 1950, a denunciation against literary scholar Aleksandr Beletsky (1884-1961), who was nominated for membership in the Academy,⁷ mentioned among other things a “compromising” fact: In Beletsky’s article “Russian Science on Western Literatures,” published in *Uchyonye zapiski* of Moscow State University in 1946 (philology series), he

preaches cosmopolitanism, admires Dostoevsky’s reactionary views, fawns over bourgeois literature, and takes an anti-Marxist stance on key issues. At the beginning of the article, Prof. Beletsky fondly quotes Dostoevsky’s anti-patriotic words: ‘Europe was as much our homeland as Russia’ [44, p. 579].

A gauge of the party authorities’ attitude toward Dostoevsky in the late Stalinist period is the entry about Dostoevsky in Volume 15 of the second edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (the volume was slated for publication in September 1952 but released in 1953). In particular, it stated:

Affirming a reactionary, pessimistic idea of the supposed eternal duality of human nature, the writer argued that in man, along with positive moral aspirations, there supposedly also exists an inevitable selfish and evil element [16, p. 149].

The entry concluded with references to the authority of Vladimir Lenin and Maxim Gorky, who pointed out Dostoevsky’s “hostile” ideology with respect to socialist revolutionaries:

In 1913, M. Gorky opposed Dostoevsky’s views and their idealization. V. I. Lenin, condemning the ‘utterly vile emulation of the utterly vile Dostoevsky,’ spoke out against writers who tried to ‘paint horrors, frighten both their imagination and the reader’s, and beat down themselves and the reader.’ While acknowledging Dostoevsky’s creative talent, Gorky opposed his ideas, which were hostile to the revolution, and protested against any attempts to revive them. Gorky’s struggle against the reactionary elements of Dostoevsky’s work and their canonization by the champions of modern foreign reaction is continued by Soviet writers and Soviet literary criticism [Ibid.].⁸

After Stalin’s death in March 1953, the attitude toward Dostoevsky at the highest party level remained almost unchanged until October 1955, when the Bureau of the World Peace Council decreed that the 75th anniversary of Dostoevsky’s death be considered a significant cultural event to be commemorated worldwide. It is quite telling that in Ilya Ehrenburg’s programmatic novella *The Thaw* (1954), which reflected the first noticeable trends of the emerging new era, the names of various classic writers (Shakespeare, Pushkin, Lermontov, Dickens, Chekhov, and others) are mentioned, yet Dostoevsky is conspicuously absent. Ehrenburg, who had loved Dostoevsky since his youth [22, p. 109] and had a keen sense of the political climate, was fully aware that the highest-level ban on Dostoevsky’s name had not yet been lifted.

From 1935 to 1955, not a single film adaptation of Dostoevsky’s works was released in the USSR. Although the writer’s absence from cinema was not absolute during this period (for example, in Grigory Aleksandrov’s film “Spring” (1947), Faina Ranevskaya’s character mentions she will take *The Idiot* with her on the trolleybus to avoid boredom, and the pre-revolutionary edition of the book is shown on screen [21, p. 115]), such nods to Dostoevsky, aimed at a mass audience, were rare exceptions, and such references were generally discouraged by the authorities.

During the Thaw, a shift in attitude toward Dostoevsky became evident, including in cinema. In 1955, permission was granted to release the first films about Dostoevsky in 20 years. In 1956, the documentary film “Dostoevsky” by Samuil Bubrik was released (see [37, pp. 432-437]), receiving extensive coverage in the press. A series of film adaptations of Dostoevsky’s works followed: “The Idiot” (1958),⁹ “White Nights” (1958), and “The Brothers Karamazov” (1968)¹⁰ by Ivan Pyryev; “White Nights” (1958) by Merab Dzhaliashvili; “A Gentle Creature” (1960) by Aleksandr Borisov, and others. From 1958 to 1966, at least seven film adaptations of Dostoevsky’s works were released in the Soviet Union.

Characters from Dostoevsky’s works also occasionally surfaced in contemporary Soviet cinema. According to several scholars, the main character in Eldar Ryazanov’s film “Beware of the Car” (1966), Yuri Detochkin, “enacts a contemporary version of Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin – the Idiot here and now” [35, p. 267]. In fact, Detochkin’s fiancée directly compares him to an “idiot” in the film: “Look at yourself. You’re an idiot!!” [35, p. 307]. This association was

partly based on the audience's impression of the masterful acting of Innokenty Smoktunovsky, who played Detochkin and had earlier gained fame in the late 1950s by brilliantly portraying Prince Myshkin on stage.¹¹ The voiceover in Ryazanov's film was done by Yuri Yakovlev, another well-known actor who had portrayed Myshkin in Pyryev's adaptation of "The Idiot." According to Alexander Prokhorov, "Detochkin's insanity echoes the holy insanity of Dostoevsky's Christ-like positive hero" [35, p. 308].

The situation in Soviet theater with regard to Dostoevsky largely mirrored that in cinema. The last major event in Dostoevsky's theatrical history under Stalin was *Humiliated and Insulted* at the MKhAT Second Studio in 1932. Then, until the onset of the anti-Dostoevsky campaign in 1947-1948, there were only episodic references to Dostoevsky: Anton Schwartz performed readings of the story "Bobok" on stage; Vladimir Yakhontov created the composition "Nastasya Filippovna" (1934); the Petukhov Studio in Novosibirsk staged "The Mordasovians" (1936) based on the novella *Uncle's Dream*; actors Vasily Kachalov and Ivan Moskvina performed scenes from *The Brothers Karamazov* in their concerts; and Aleksandr Glumov presented *The Gambler* on stage, but no new productions were staged [29, pp. 310, 314].

Only in 1956 did everything change dramatically, as the anniversary of Dostoevsky's death was celebrated. Many of his novels and novellas were staged in theaters, including *Uncle's Dream*, *The Village of Stepanchikovo and Its Inhabitants*, *Humiliated and Insulted*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Gambler*, *The Idiot*, and others. In these productions of the 1950s, as Galina Lapkina notes, Dostoevsky was portrayed almost exclusively as a "social writer," and the characters depicted were often overly one-dimensional [29, pp. 318-319]. Notable exceptions to this trend were the productions of *Humiliated and Insulted* (Leningrad Lenin Komsomol Theater, 1956) and, especially, *The Idiot* (Leningrad Gorky Bolshoi Drama Theater, 1958) by Georgy Tovstonogov. The latter became the major theatrical event of that period. Raisa Benyash attributes that primarily to the fact that the production struck audiences with its "mysterious coincidence" with their own moral dilemmas at the time [6, p. 335].

Sociologist Boris Firsov (1929-2024) recalls how television, which was rapidly becoming part of Soviet society's daily life during the Thaw, engaged in cultural education by broadcasting recordings of relevant theater productions. In particular, the Leningrad Television Studio (LTS)

was able to show one of Tovstonogov's greatest theatrical successes – the production of *The Idiot*, which helped make the actor who played Prince Myshkin, Innokenty Smoktunovsky, popular with the masses, capturing Dostoevsky's image of Petersburg and the heroes of his works in the audience's minds. At that time, Dostoevsky's grandson¹² was still alive, and he quickly became a television star and the subject of a program about his famous grandfather [19, p. 50].

According to Firsov, "it was television that restored the writer to living collective memory not only in Leningrad but also among [broader] Soviet audiences" [19, pp. 50-51].

The primary propaganda slogan for commemorations marking the 75th anniversary of Dostoevsky's death, widely celebrated in the USSR in 1956, was "a great Russian writer" (most commemorative articles published about the writer in Soviet newspapers on February 9, 1956, bore this title). It is worth noting the series of exhibitions dedicated to the writer, organized ahead of February 9, 1956, in the leading libraries of the country. For example, the V. I. Lenin State Library of the USSR showcased first editions and publications of Dostoevsky's works produced during his lifetime, critical and bibliographic studies about him, photocopies of manuscripts, and various illustrations for his novels. The All-Union Library of Foreign Literature presented translations of his works into English, German, French, Chinese, Turkish, Serbian, Hungarian, and other languages. A special exhibition was also held at the State Public Historical Library and in other libraries.¹³

In the same year, 1956, for the first time in Soviet history, a memorial plaque with a relief portrait of Dostoevsky was installed on the house in Leningrad where the present-day F. M. Dostoevsky Literary-Memorial Museum is located (Kuznechny Lane, building 5/2). That year also saw the release of the first Soviet postage stamp featuring Dostoevsky, bearing the inscription "a great Russian writer," as part of the "Figures of World Culture" series. This series also featured stamps with images of W. A. Mozart, P. Curie, H. Ibsen, H. Heine, G. B. Shaw, and others from October 17 to December 25, 1956 [34, p. 221].

While in Stalin's day Dostoevsky was often disparaged in official publications through carefully selected quotes from Maxim Gorky, now other statements by Gorky about Dostoevsky were used to praise the writer. For instance, Leonid Grossman's article "A Great Russian Writer: On the 75th Anniversary of the Death of F. M. Dostoevsky," published in *Vechernyaya Moskva* on February 9, 1956, began with the words: "According to Gorky's well-known remark, 'Dostoevsky's genius is undeniable, his descriptive power perhaps rivaling only Shakespeare's.'" ¹⁴ Even though Grossman's article included caveats about the contradictions in Dostoevsky's worldview, he nonetheless stated that it was "improper" for a Soviet person not to know Dostoevsky, portraying the classic as a critic of Europe and an opponent of capitalism. V. Dorofeyev's article in *Sovetskaya kultura* emphasized that

the memory of the great Russian writer is honored by all progressive humanity, along with the Soviet people, who value Dostoevsky as a stern realist and a critic of social evils produced by the exploitative system, and as a bard of the humiliated and insulted.¹⁵

A small note on Dostoevsky in *Pravda*, the most influential Soviet publication, similarly stated: "The reports coming in from everywhere are vivid testimony to the writer's immense popularity among millions of Soviet people."¹⁶

During the Thaw, the treatment of Dostoevsky in Soviet school literature textbooks also changed significantly. Since the early 1940s, Dostoevsky had been excluded from the list of authors studied in schools (though brief mentions of him remained in textbooks). As Yevgeny Ponomarev notes, Dostoevsky was reintroduced into the Soviet school curriculum only in 1956, "after the writer's rehabilitation in Soviet ideological literary criticism" [33, p. 616]. In the ninth

grade literature textbook by Aleksandr Zerchaninov and David Raykhin (15th edition, 1956), Dostoevsky was still criticized, but he was nonetheless presented as a symbol of the global prestige of Russian literature [33, p. 618].

A significant event between 1956 and 1958 was the release of a 10-volume set of collected works of Dostoevsky under the general editorship of L. Grossman, A. Dolinin, V. Yermilov, V. Kirpotin, Vera Nechayeva, and Boris Ryurikov, with a print run of 300,000 copies. The previous edition of Dostoevsky's collected works, a 13-volume set edited by Boris Tomashevsky and Konstantin Khalabayev, had been published from 1926 to 1930. It was in this collected works that *Demons*,¹⁷ suppressed by Soviet criticism, was published for the first time since 1928. Between 1948 and 1953, only three of Dostoevsky's novels were published in the USSR: *Crime and Punishment*, *Humiliated and Insulted*, and *Poor People* [5, p. 30]. Playwright Yevgeny Shvarts (1896-1958) recorded in his diary on August 18, 1955:

Dostoevsky dreamed how the ideas of the 19th century would turn into action in the 20th. Sometimes prophetically. Sometimes with all the absurdity of the dream world. And prophecies, when they come true, as life loves to do, are fulfilled in ways that could never be dreamed of. The unification of the Slavs happened. But not as expected. Some dark prophecies came true. But what no prophet expected or predicted – and if he had, he would have been laughed at – is the great significance of Dostoevsky in Germany of all places. In Russia, his collected works from secondhand sellers are expensive. The so-called anniversary edition costs over a thousand [rubles]. He is read, but his works are published in mass printings with caution. As if they fear him [40, p. 203].

Such an attitude toward a Russian literary classic in his homeland puzzled many foreigners visiting the USSR – a sentiment reflected in internal documents of the Soviet government apparatus. For example, that issue was raised in the “Report of the Leningrad Regional Committee of the CPSU on the meeting of Leningrad writers, including M. M. Zoshchenko and A. A. Akhmatova, with a delegation of English students” from May 27, 1954, addressed to the Science and Culture Department of the CPSU Central Committee. In the document signed by Secretary of the Leningrad Regional Committee of the CPSU Nikolai Kazmin, it was reported that the English students asked various “provocative” questions, including: “Why are the works of a major writer like Dostoevsky not being published?!” [3, p. 215]. In September of the same year, the project plan of the State Literature Publishing House (Goslitizdat) already included the release of a new 10-volume collection of Dostoevsky's works [21, p. 158].

After the official press's denunciation of Dolinin's and Kirpotin's books in 1947, no monographs or collections on Dostoevsky were published in the USSR from 1948 to 1955. Even a large album of Dostoevsky's illustrations, prepared by the Iskusstvo publishing house in 1948, was not released [21, p. 115]. However, in 1956 alone, no fewer than seven books and pamphlets about Dostoevsky were published, including the collection “F. M. Dostoevsky in Russian Criticism.” This collection, released by the State Publishing House of Artistic Literature [GIKhL] with an introductory article by Abram Belkin, undeniably increased interest in the writer's work. Yet, as Lyudmila Saraskina noted,

a vast array of literature about Dostoevsky, including remarkable and innovative studies, was left out of the collection, completely distorting the perspective on Dostoevsky’s legacy in Russia. The artificial division of Dostoevsky into a genius artist and a reactionary thinker became the dominant approach in Soviet literary criticism during the first Thaw. The class-based approach to the works of Russian classics, including Dostoevsky, for a long time obscured the deeper meanings of their works. The perspective on Dostoevsky’s fate and his works, seen through the lens of ‘permitted’ criticism and journalism, was limited, and what was seen was often interpreted incorrectly [37, pp. 439-440].

Ironically, among the first Soviet literary critics to “rediscover” Dostoevsky in 1956 were the same infamous figures, Yermilov and Zaslavsky, who had recently played a role in denouncing “Dostoevism.” Nevertheless, after the pivotal year of 1956, a steady stream of books on Dostoevsky were published in the USSR.

Here are some examples of how these changes were perceived by contemporaries. Screenwriter Arkady Dobrovolsky (1911-1969) wrote to writer Varlam Shalamov, his former prison camp comrade, on March 10, 1956:

I am more or less aware of the hubbub over Dostoevsky. I read, I listen to the radio – I do both. In my opinion, no better proof is needed of the effectiveness of the pressure of world public opinion on the Yermilovs than the forced galvanization of this great fame. Perhaps this is proof positive of the exhaustion of the method (and is it only literary?) fueled by vulgar materialist ideas – not even ideas but mere spinal reflexes. To acknowledge Dostoevsky as great means to simultaneously recognize Faddey Bulgarin and Grech as insignificant – right? I read chapters from Yermilov’s book on Dostoevsky in *Novy mir*. From them, it’s hard to understand what exactly made Dostoevsky great. Was it that he revealed the dialectic of self-negating ideas (any and all!) with unparalleled force, or that even Yermilov himself had to recognize him?... I’m waiting for the books. His and Zaslavsky’s. I will read [them] with interest. I would like to know your opinion. You can judge more objectively what is happening in Russian minds between the two congresses and what to expect after the last one [41, pp. 130-131].

In his letter to Dobrovolsky dated March 30, 1956, Shalamov sarcastically commented on Zaslavsky’s new work on Dostoevsky:

I looked through Zaslavsky’s pathetic pamphlet on Dostoevsky.¹⁸ From it, one can see that the greatest achievement of Soviet science is considered years of archival research (successful, of course) aimed at proving that Dostoevsky’s father was killed by his serfs for cruelty. This ‘contribution’ does honor to our literary studies, with Mr. Zaslavsky as its unexpected representative [41, p. 137].

Romen Nazirov (1934-2004), a future Dostoevsky scholar living in Ufa, noted in his diary on February 4, 1956, how the general attitude toward Dostoevsky in the country had changed:

I read some chapters from Yermilov’s new monograph on Dostoevsky in issue No. 12 of *Novy mir* for 1955. Yes, Yermilov, the renegade, has abruptly flip-flopped again. A former ardent admirer of Dostoevsky, during the years of stagnation he declared that Dostoevsky was ‘on the other side of the barricades,’ that he was our enemy, and therefore concluded: Don’t publish him and don’t read him. It got to the point that once, in the Republic Library’s reading room, a scrawny, gaunt librarian with fanatical nostrils refused to let me check out *The Adolescent* under some lame pretext. Europe shamed us. Even Jean-Paul Sartre,

in an interview with the newspaper *Libération*, thoroughly analyzed the Soviet attitude toward Dostoevsky. Now our big people are reconsidering many things, and they have reconsidered this, too [31].

Around the same time, Dostoevsky scholar Kirpotin recorded similar observations in his diary entries from February 6 and February 26, 1956:

After Stalin's death, Dostoevsky's name is returning to Russian literature.... In the journal *Kommunist*, No. 2, an article by B. Ryurikov, 'The Great Russian Writer F. M. Dostoevsky,' was published. The article concludes with the words: 'The Soviet and world public are commemorating the 75th anniversary of F. M. Dostoevsky's death. The World Peace Council included this date among the anniversaries celebrated by peace supporters worldwide.' That's all they know about Fyodor Mikhailovich: that he's a great writer, that he died 75 years ago, and that the World Peace Council, and therefore Fadeyev, decided to commemorate this date... [26, p. 620].

Viktor Shklovsky, who had once called Dostoevsky a "traitor" at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 [11, p. 1018], now, in his new book *Pro and Contra: Notes about Dostoevsky* (1957), called for a rethinking of previous attitudes toward the classic: "It is time to understand Dostoevsky: to break the chain that binds the living Dostoevsky to the rejected dead" [42, p. 258].

Thanks to the Thaw, Dolinin was finally able to complete a long-suffering edition of Dostoevsky's letters. The first three volumes of letters, prepared by Dolinin, had been published between 1928 and 1934 by GIZ (State Publishing House) and Academia publishers, but the release of the fourth and final volume, initially planned for 1936, had been indefinitely postponed. When the fourth volume was finally published in 1959, literary scholar Yulian Oksman sent Dolinin's student, Yelena Dryzhakova, a postcard with a telling congratulation: "At last, we have lived to see it, and how could we not live to see it after we lived to see Stalin's death..." [18, p. 465]. Dolinin himself, however, saw this event not only as a scholarly achievement but also as a sociocultural mission, in the service of which Dostoevsky's texts were subjected to further censorship. For example, in letters to Dryzhakova from that period, Dolinin explained the motivation behind his free handling of Dostoevsky's letters:

Yes, I removed coarse words like 'kike' and 'Jewy' from Dostoevsky's letters. I don't want the young and passionate Jewish intelligentsia to turn away from Dostoevsky without understanding him properly [18, p. 466].

Meanwhile, the process of restoring the semi-banned Dostoevsky to the status of a widely recognized writer was by no means smooth. For example, in a note from the CPSU Central Committee's Department of Culture dated March 22, 1957, regarding Bertha Braynina's review of Mikhail Nikitin's novella *Here Lived Dostoevsky* (1956) in *Literaturnaya gazeta* (March 21, 1957), it was noted that her review contained

a gross distortion in the evaluation of Dostoevsky's worldview and works, with an attempt to justify the renegade writer who betrayed the ideas of socialism that had captivated him in his youth [3, p. 643].

Braynina’s work was seen as sharply deviating in tone from the more restrained and circumspect language about Dostoevsky typically used in party publications at the time:

The publication of B. Braynina’s article, which contains an apologetic assessment of Dostoevsky’s reactionary worldview, justifies the writer’s political renegade behavior, and obscures the contradictions in his work, is a grave mistake by *Literaturnaya gazeta* [3, p. 644].

However, the proposed response to this “free-thinking” was far milder than in 1948: The editor-in-chief of the publication was to be informed of the error, and the *Pravda* editorial board was instructed to publish an article criticizing Braynina’s review.

Gradually, more and more representatives of the Soviet intelligentsia began to defend Dostoevsky’s reputation. Speaking at a meeting of the CPSU Central Committee’s Ideological Commission with young writers, artists, and creative talents from Moscow’s film and theater industries on December 24, 1962, 32-year-old artist Ilya Glazunov publicly declared Dostoevsky to be a measure of artistic taste:

Dostoevsky said: ‘I am a realist in the highest sense of the word. I seek man in man.’ That seems like true realism to me – not shallow bourgeois anecdotes or the desire to follow yesterday’s fashionable Western artists [23, p. 327].

Glazunov’s statement was not widely supported, but the fact that a young artist could make such a declaration at an official gathering without consequence was significant.

In 1963, a new edition of Mikhail Bakhtin’s now world-famous book *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* was published (the first edition of this work had been printed in 1929). Philologist Sergey Bocharov, who was involved in the book’s publication, wrote:

1963 was a breakthrough year, and everything changed as if by magic. There was a second birth of an updated but old book – and it was embraced by the new era in a way that its original era had not. It was a happy encounter between an old author and a new time. This was a historic event – a turning point in our Soviet history. The turn made it possible, and it was also a testimony to the turn. It was no coincidence that this coincided with the appearance of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* – I[rina] Rodnyanskaya recently recalled this [8, p. 278].

In 1963, a passionate article by the future renowned Dostoevsky scholar Yuri Kariakin (1930-2011), titled “Anti-Communism, Dostoevsky, and Dostoevism [dostoevshchina],” was published in the journal *Problemy mira i sotsializma* (No. 5). In his article, Kariakin argued that Dostoevsky should not be seen merely as an anti-communist but rather as a critic of bourgeois ideology and capitalism. He emphasized that a proper study of Dostoevsky’s complex and contradictory work could benefit Soviet society, which should not allow anyone from outside to “monopolize” such a great Russian artist as Dostoevsky.

Bibliographers know how difficult it is to calculate the international circulation of Dostoevsky's books and the number of works about him. But perhaps this fact is of greater importance to ideologues and politicians, as it means that Dostoevsky, in one way or another, contributes to shaping the worldview of many of our contemporaries [25, p. 81].

While it is both impossible and unnecessary to list all the works on Dostoevsky published during the Thaw in this article, we will highlight some of the most significant books: *F. M. Dostoevsky: The Creative Path (1821-1859)* (1960) by V. Kirpotin; *F. M. Dostoevsky* (1962) by L. Grossman; *Ideas and Images of F. M. Dostoevsky* (1962) by Mikhail Gus; *Dostoevsky and Kant* (1963) by Yakov Golosovker; *The Last Novels of Dostoevsky: How The Adolescent and The Brothers Karamazov Were Created* (1963) by A. Dolinin; *Dostoevsky's Novels* (1963) by Yakov Zundelovich; *Dostoevsky's Style* (1963) by Nikolai Chirkov; *Dostoevsky's Realism* (1964) by Georgy Friedlander; *F. M. Dostoevsky in the Recollections of His Contemporaries* (in two volumes, 1964); and *F. M. Dostoevsky in Work on The Adolescent* (from the "Literary Heritage" series, 1965, Vol. 77). Poet Joseph Brodsky's reaction to one of these books by the most prominent Soviet Dostoevsky scholar, Friedlander, is noteworthy:

Art criticism or literary studies are only possible when the researcher can stand on a par with the subject. I read Friedlander on Dostoevsky and all I see is the author himself, his view of Dostoevsky. Not to mention he catches Fyodor Mikhailovich's 'errors' from a Marxist perspective, but Marxism was alien to Dostoevsky, and Dostoevsky naturally does not fit into its framework. This so-called objective approach becomes subjective [30, p. 316].

At the end of the Thaw, in 1966, the Pushkin House of the USSR Academy of Sciences formed a group tasked with publishing the first academic *Complete Works* of Dostoevsky in 30 volumes, a project that took nearly 20 years to complete and significantly contributed to the development of Dostoevsky studies [4], which had long stagnated. For example, between 1941 and 1971, not a single dissertation – doctoral or candidate – on Dostoevsky was defended at the Pushkin House, and no special conferences or academic meetings dedicated to the writer were held [48, p. 12]. In general, as Aleksandr Dmitriyev observed:

The aggressive and almost accusatory zeal of the late 1950s was clearly replaced in the 1960s by a claim to a more holistic understanding of Dostoevsky, in contrast to the allegedly ideologically one-sided interpretations in the West [12].

The "rehabilitation" of Dostoevsky during the Thaw was largely driven by efforts to create a more favorable image of the USSR abroad, as Dostoevsky was very popular and in growing demand in many countries, among leading intellectuals and ordinary readers alike. Influential Soviet journalist Aleksey Adzhubey (1924-1993), son-in-law of CPSU First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, mentioned in his account of a 1955 trip to the US that Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were "the only [Russian] names widely known to Americans" [2, p. 124]. Philosopher Sergey Fudel, in his 1963 book *The Legacy of Dostoevsky*, referred to the unprecedented popularity of Dostoevsky among Parisian students [20, p. 7].

In a letter to Veniamin Kaverin dated November 3, 1967, Korney Chukovsky remarked: “It’s of course a national disgrace when there are Russian writers who don’t know Dostoevsky as well as the Japanese do” [10, p. 624].

This situation constantly pushed communist officials to rethink Dostoevsky’s work for the purpose of culturally appropriating the writer’s legacy for the Soviet state. Maintaining the country’s international prestige no longer permitted the suppression or denial of Dostoevsky’s enormous importance to world culture, nor could he be “ceded” to the ideological enemy. However, attempts to present Dostoevsky in a “Soviet” light were often marked by a certain tragicomic quality. For example, Roman Grynberg, publisher of the New York almanac *Vozdushnye puti* (who corresponded with Chukovsky under the pseudonym “Sonya Gordon”), sarcastically commented in a letter to Chukovsky dated March 27, 1965, on the manipulative attempts of Soviet cultural figures to “prove that Chekhov and Gogol, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were precursors of the Soviet regime” [10, p. 676].

Thus, after many years of being sidelined, Dostoevsky was “rehabilitated” in his homeland only in 1956, a move formally tied to the Soviet leadership’s plans to widely commemorate the 75th anniversary of the writer’s death. However, the implementation of these plans was made possible only within the context of the new cultural policies of the Thaw. Naturally, the “rehabilitation” of the great writer during this period was neither complete nor unconditional. Even in the final years of his leadership, CPSU First Secretary and Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers Nikita Khrushchev remained personally skeptical of the still-suspect Dostoevsky. During his visit to Egypt in May 1964, the Soviet leader publicly expressed irritation when Egyptian journalist Mohammed Hasanein Heikal (1923-2016) described him in an essay as a “peasant from a story by Dostoevsky.” Khrushchev was offended not by the comparison to a simple peasant but by the reference to Dostoevsky instead of, say, Leo Tolstoy, [regarded as a] “mirror of the Russian revolution” [46, p. 611].

Toward the end of the Thaw, in his “Letter to the IV All-Union Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers” dated May 16, 1967, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn described various manifestations of Soviet censorship, including the fact that

even Dostoevsky, the pride of world literature, was at one time not printed (and still not fully printed now), excluded from school curricula, made unavailable for reading, and slandered [43, p. 28].

By the mid-1960s, the authorities had noticeably moderated Soviet cultural figures’ overly enthusiastic and bold invocations of Dostoevsky. In 1966, Aleksandr Alov and Vladimir Naumov’s film “A Nasty Story” was shelved (it was not shown until December 1987).

Some theater projects, like certain films based on Dostoevsky’s works, were also blocked by censors. For example, the plans of Yuri Lyubimov (1917-2014), artistic director of the Taganka Theater, and his colleague, literary scholar Yuri Kariakin, to stage a play titled *Arithmetic*, based on several of Dostoevsky’s novels, were thwarted. Kariakin explained the concept of the play during a theater council meeting on November 13, 1967:

This refers to arithmetic calculations. I'll kill the old woman – she's not really a person but a louse – and I'll use the money for the benefit of humanity. Then it turns out that not only did he kill the old woman, but also her pregnant sister. Moreover, he cut himself off from people, and it turns out that he not only destroyed himself but also his mother. In the play, we want to show that if such an idea seizes one person's soul and mind and leads to such consequences, what would happen if such ideas seize the souls and minds of many people? A general free-for-all ensues. People, out of fear, start slaughtering and killing each other. But you probably can't do this with just one crime and punishment. Dostoevsky devoted his entire life to these ideas. To put it plainly, there is a crisis of a young person's mind and soul. He throws away the old and grabs onto the new, which deceives him. He looks for a foundation and realizes that one cannot be found without Marx, without Brecht, or without Dostoevsky. These three foundations – this is the idea of overcoming the arithmetical worldview [1].

Lyubimov explained his interest in this theme:

We often hear people say: 'I started reading *Crime and Punishment*, but I put it down – I can't read Dostoevsky, he depresses me.' But I think Dostoevsky purifies, because he raises all the questions that people are afraid to ask themselves, from which they try to run away. I believe that such a play would be extremely timely and useful. We shouldn't limit ourselves with material; we should first pose the questions we want to answer, and then we'll find the material [1].

However, in 1967, Lyubimov and Kariakin were not allowed to raise these questions (Kariakin was even expelled from the party in 1968 for his anti-Stalinist remarks at a gathering in commemoration of Andrey Platonov). Later, however, Lyubimov did stage *Crime and Punishment* (1979), *Demons* (1985), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (*Skotoprigoonyevsk*) (1997).

Despite the authorities' partial reversal on promoting Dostoevsky's work in the USSR toward the end of the Thaw, following the breakthrough year of 1956, when the 20th CPSU Congress condemned the cult of Stalin, they never again attempted to completely ignore or ban the writer. On the contrary, they increasingly sought to appropriate Dostoevsky's global significance and skillfully use it as a tool of soft power.

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Notes

¹ It is surprising that during the height of the anti-Dostoevsky campaign in the USSR, political prisoners were not banned from reading Dostoevsky. For instance, poet Naum Korzhavin (1925-2018) recalls how he freely read Dostoevsky while imprisoned at Lubyanka from 1947 to 1948: “Thank God, Lubyanka had a large library of confiscated books. We never saw the library itself, but they brought us books from there – sometimes randomly, but often ones we requested. They gave us everything except, oddly enough, the works of the classics of Marxism-Leninism, including Stalin himself – avoiding, as Captain Brittsov explained to me, any ‘provocative interpretations.’ That was where I read a lot of Dostoevsky, including all of the *Writer’s Diary*” [28, p. 757].

² Stalin knew what he was saying when he called Dostoevsky a “great writer.” His library contained several of Dostoevsky’s books, including *The Brothers Karamazov*, with over 40 handwritten notes made by the Soviet leader in the margins. Stalin’s interest in Dostoevsky was reported by both his daughter Svetlana Alliluyeva and party functionary Dmitry Shepilov. For more on the topic of “Stalin and Dostoevsky,” see [24, pp. 360-365].

³ Yuri Puschaev, in his article “Soviet Dostoevsky: Dostoevsky in Soviet Culture, Ideology, and Philosophy,” attempts to refute the “myth” that Dostoevsky was a semi-banned writer

- before the Thaw [36]. However, his evidence primarily relates to the situation prior to 1948, when the Soviet regime's attitude toward Dostoevsky was indeed more lenient.
- ⁴ Dolinin A. S. *In Dostoevsky's Creative Laboratory (The History of the Creation of The Adolescent)*. Leningrad: Sovetskiy pisatel, 1947.
- ⁵ Kirpotin V. Ya. *Young Dostoevsky*. Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1947; Kirpotin V. Ya. *F. M. Dostoevsky: A report read on November 11, 1946, at the ceremonial meeting of the Gorky Institute of World Literature of the USSR Academy of Sciences, dedicated to the 125th anniversary of the birth of F. M. Dostoevsky*. Moscow: Sovetskiy pisatel, 1947.
- ⁶ Zaslavsky was a fierce critic of Dostoevsky as early as the mid-1930s. Upon learning that the publishing house Academia intended to release a separate edition of the novel *Demons*, he published a feuilleton in *Pravda* (January 20, 1935) titled "Literary Rot," warning: "The novel *Demons* is the dirtiest libel directed against the revolution" [11, p. 363]. Furthermore, according to Zaslavsky, "the counterrevolutionary intelligentsia has always been drawn to Dostoevism." According to literary scholar Benedikt Sarnov, Zaslavsky's article was directed not so much against Dostoevsky himself as against the heads of Academia: Maxim Gorky and Lev Kamenev (the latter was already arrested by the time of the article's publication) [28, p. 158].
- ⁷ The denunciation was written by a certain V. Novikov and forwarded to Mikhail Suslov, the Central Committee Secretary in charge of propaganda and agitation.
- ⁸ Critics did not attempt to "rationally" debunk Dostoevsky's religious (Christian) views but focused on his harmful "reactionary" stance overall. Yet, it was precisely the writer's passionate love for Christ and his focus on the spiritual life of the individual that attracted many readers to Dostoevsky's works. For example, Natalia Kastalskaya (1887-?) wrote to Varlam Shalamov in 1955 about the powerful effect of Dostoevsky's works: "Dostoevsky is not just art – he is the very New Testament, with pressure that not everyone accepts. Perhaps more than art. A penetrating light, a beam through every door, almost a soul microscope – also, an analysis, a prophecy beyond any 'form.' A waterfall of unshackled thoughts and feelings" [41, pp. 193-194].
- ⁹ Unfortunately, this film was never completed, and after the release of the first part, there was no continuation.
- ¹⁰ The third part of the film was completed by lead actors Kirill Lavrov and Mikhail Ulyanov after Pyryev's death.
- ¹¹ Dostoevsky scholar Kirpotin called his performance "internally and externally flawless" [27, p. 334]. Actress Tatyana Doronina remarked: "To be able to listen as Myshkin-Smoktunovsky listened – empathizing, sympathizing, comforting, almost without words – is a gift, a miracle! Smoktunovsky-Myshkin was not a 'theatrical' event, but a universal human one" [13, p. 225]. Writer Ruth Zernova (1918-2004) recalled: "It was like an earthquake. He was invited everywhere and showered with hospitality. They drank to his health..." [50, p. 243].
- ¹² Andrey Fyodorovich Dostoevsky (1908-1968). In the mid-1960s, he participated in meetings of the working group at Pushkin House (IRLI, the Institute of Russian Literature of the USSR Academy of Sciences) to prepare the academic *Complete Works* of F. M. Dostoevsky. He also helped set up the Dostoevsky Museum in Leningrad. He published several articles dedicated to his grandmother, Anna Grigoryevna Dostoevskaya (1846-1918). Three months before his death, he fulfilled her dying wish by arranging for her remains to be transferred from the Autskoye Cemetery in Yalta to the Tikhvin Cemetery of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery in Leningrad [9, p. 525].
- ¹³ Exhibitions on F. M. Dostoevsky. *Vechernyaya Moskva*. February 9, 1956. No. 34.
- ¹⁴ Grossman L. A Great Russian Writer. On the 75th Anniversary of the Death of F. M. Dostoevsky. *Vechernyaya Moskva*. February 9, 1956. No. 34.
- ¹⁵ Dorofeyev V. A Great Russian Writer. *Sovetskaya kultura*. February 9, 1956. No. 17 (409).
- ¹⁶ In Memory of a Great Writer. *Pravda*. February 9, 1956. No. 40 (13703).

¹⁷ Poet Boris Pasternak vividly described the Stalinist terror of 1937 as “Shigalyovism,” referring to the character Shigalyov in Dostoevsky’s *Demons*, who says: “He has each member of society watching the others and obliged to inform. Each belongs to all, and all to each. All are slaves, and are equal in their slavery. In extreme cases, there’s slander and murder, but the main thing is equality. The first thing is to lower the level of education, science and accomplishment. A high level of science and accomplishment is accessible only to people of high ability, and there’s no need for high ability! People of high ability have always seized power and been despots. People of high ability can’t help but be despots and have always corrupted more than they have brought benefit; they are sent into exile or executed. Cicero had his tongue cut out, Copernicus had his eyes put out, Shakespeare was stoned – that’s Shigalyovism!” [14, p. 322] (cited from [15]).

¹⁸ Refers to the work: Zaslavsky D. I. *F. M. Dostoevsky: Critical and Biographical Essay*. Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1956.