

The Possessed: Dostoevsky's Conscientious Monarchy

Yuanlin Liu¹

¹ St. Stephen's Episcopal School, Austin, Texas, USA

Correspondence: Yuanlin Liu, St. Stephen's Episcopal School, Austin, TX, USA. E-mail: Yuanlin.Liu@sstx.org

Received: December 5, 2020 Accepted: January 14, 2021 Online Published: January 19, 2021

doi:10.5539/ells.v11n1p31 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v11n1p31>

Abstract

In the mock apocalypse of *The Possessed*, Fyodor Dostoevsky references biblical imagery to advocate for a conscientious monarchy as the ideal government to lead the Russian masses from deception. While Varvara Petrovna Stavrogin's oppression of Stepan Trofimovich Verhovensky is similar to the Babylonian kings' exploitation of the Jews in *Daniel*, the love between them and Dostoevsky's eventual glorification of Stepan Trofimovich as the Russian prophet suggest the longevity of a conscientious monarchy, one in which the monarch takes responsibility for the welfare of its subjects and enforces Christian morality. Additionally, Dostoevsky's description of the young anarchist revolutionaries, Nikolay Vsyevolodovitch Stavrogin and Pyotr Stepanovich Verhovensky, echos imagery of the beast and harlot in *Revelation*. Through the parent-child relationship between the monarchists and revolutionaries, Dostoevsky argues that the revolutionaries take root in the traditional social hierarchy yet betray it. This paper analyzes how Dostoevsky uses the biblical parallelisms in *The Possessed* to foreshadow the end to nihilism and defend traditional morality and the tsar as Russia's God-ordained ruler.

Keywords: apocalyptic, conscientious monarchy, nihilism, tsarist

1. Introduction

Great apocalyptic literature is born as an outlet for not only hope but also social critique when a people faces eschatological catastrophe. The toil of Jewish exiles under Babylonian oppression gave birth to the protest against the kings' authoritarian rule in addition to the promise of salvation in the book of *Daniel*, the most well-known ancient apocalyptic; the Romans' moral contamination of Christianity stimulated the denunciation of unfaithful churches as well as the vision of a new Jerusalem in the book of *Revelation*, which built on symbolisms in *Daniel*. Millenniums later, astounded by the Russian communist leader Nechayev's brutal murder of his follower, the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky borrowed imageries from *Revelation* to fabricate a mock apocalypse in *The Possessed*, warning his beloved people of the danger of nihilist anarchism. Through the perspective of a liberal-minded, insightful narrator, Dostoevsky unfolds the power dynamics between the traditional Russian ruling gentry and its God-fearing subjects—represented by the aged matriarch Varvara Petrovna Stavrogin and her protégé Stepan Trofimovich Verhovensky—and the revolutionary youth—embodied by their respective sons. Orchestrating destruction of the tsarist social order, the Nechayev-inspired leader Pyotr Stepanovich Verhovensky aims to manufacture a *Revelation*-like eschatology and to attract followers with the new bestial messiah, Nikolay Vsyevolodovitch Stavrogin. Drawing parallelisms between the young revolutionaries and evil forces in *Revelation* and contrasting the parental generation with the ruler-subject relationship in *Daniel*, Dostoevsky takes on the apocalyptic tradition to criticize nihilist movements and recommend a conscientious monarchy as the ideal form of government for the Russian masses. Ultimately, Dostoevsky's prediction of the imminent failure of revolutionism was confirmed by the fall of the Soviet Union and inspired generations of authors to carry on the Russian apocalyptic heritage.

2. Ruler-Subject Relationship in *The Possessed* and the Book of *Daniel*

Despite her temporary loss of power when the younger generation dominates the province, Varvara Petrovna Stavrogin, representation of the tsars, is much like the tyrannical Babylonian kings in the book of *Daniel* in her control over provincial affairs. Dostoevsky applies the critique of ruthless monarchs in the ancient apocalyptic to his contemporary context, condemning her and the tsars' irresponsible authoritarian control and inaction towards societal instability.

2.1 *The Monarch's Manipulation of Subjects*

Varvara Petrovna dictatorial reign over the province is best manifested in her chosen protégés, Stepan Trofimovich Verhovensky and Darya Pavlovna Shatov. On her acquaintance with the former, then a lecturer fired for his progressive views, she suggests that he “should undertake the education and the whole intellectual development of her only son,” providing him with “a magnificent salary” (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 11). She appears to be offering the dejected intellectual the choice of a decent living; however, through her formal, authoritative tone and the irresistible monetary lure, Dostoevsky implies that the matriarch by no means allows rejection. In fact, the narrator later comments that she has not only determined his physical appearance but also shaped his identity when “she had herself designed the costume for him which he wore for the rest of his life” (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 19). As how the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar picks out young Israelites “without any physical defect, handsome [...] well informed, quick to understand” to forge them into the Babylonian norm, Varvara Petrovna chooses Stepan Trofimovich for his decent appearance, intellect, and character and molds him into her ideal subordinate (Daniel 1.4, 2.48).

In the same authoritarian manner, she manipulates Darya Pavlovna, her former serf: aiming to educate her in the way of a gentlewoman, Varvara Petrovna hires a governess, French tutor, and Stepan Trofimovich but fires all three without explanation (Dostoevsky & Garnett, p. 72, 73). Her whimsical fashion in manipulating her protégés hints that she takes their obedience for granted and does not regard it necessary to state reasons for her actions. Her unapologetic, arbitrary demands directly parallel the ridiculous brutality of Nebuchadnezzar, who throws the prophet Daniel’s companions into a blazing furnace when they refuse to worship the image of gold (Daniel 3.19). Nebuchadnezzar’s extreme inhumanity foretells the danger of Varvara Petrovna’s unjustified abuse of her subjects and ignorance of her responsibility.

Another instance in which she exploits her subjects out of personal interests is when Darya Pavlovna and Stepan Trofimovich express doubts about their marriage hastily arranged by Varvara Petrovna. Her attitude shifts from “Remember that you’re free to decide” to “You’re [...] An ungrateful fool!” and to “the wedding a fortnight later...there’s no need for you to meddle” (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 71, 80). She first assumes their unconditional submission and then demands it as a repayment of her taking them under her tyrannical wings. The verb “meddle” further ridicules her egotistic dictatorship; while she is the one meddling with their personal affairs, she deems them the intruders as soon as they try to make choices because they interfere with her plan to halt the degrading rumors of a relationship between her son Nikolay Vsyedolovitch and Darya Pavlovna (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 68). Analogously, when Nebuchadnezzar threatens to have all wise men in Babylon “cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble” if they fail to recount and interpret his dream, he deprives his subjects of their life and property only because they fail to fulfill his demand (Daniel 2.5). Like the anonymous author of *Daniel*, Dostoevsky derides Varvara Petrovna’s authoritarian and self-interested actions to highlight the tsars’ negligence of their God-ordained responsibility for their citizens’ welfare.

2.2 *The Monarch's Exile and Responsibility*

Just as how Nebuchadnezzar is decreed by God to live among wild animals in order to reflect on his arrogance, Varvara Petrovna and her counterpart, the new governor’s wife Yulia Mihailovna von Lembke, are exiled from their thrones when they compromised the revolutionary youth with the illusion of keeping power. Seeing the chaos that results from their blind obsession with power, they learn their responsibility to maintain order and ensure the wellbeing of their subjects, becoming the conscientious monarchs that Dostoevsky praises.

In response to the surge of revolutionary sentiments, Yulia Mihailovna convinces Varvara Petrovna to appease the youth in order to maintain their ruler status: “We must appreciate them and mustn’t be hard on them [...] we who make up good society can by our kindness and good influence keep them from the abyss” (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 299). While she seems to be genuinely concerned about the youth being misled into the “abyss” of revolutionism, she secretly uses the chance to prove that she is the embodiment of “good society,” to gain followers and thereby strengthen her authority. Her desire for power being stronger than her concern for societal welfare, she indulges the young people’s disgraceful pranks that generate social chaos. Many times, after hearing about their sacrilegious deeds in the town, “She, too, was extremely angry, and formed the intention of turning the scapegraces out of her house. But next day she forgave them all after persuasions from Pyotr Stepanovich,” the son and tormentor of Stepan Trofimovich (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 320). Dostoevsky ridicules her power-hungriness and ignorance by emphasizing her blind trust in Pyotr Stepanovich, the imposing socialist leader who ill-uses her favor to create chaos with impunity.

The two matriarchs are soon punished for their ignorant indulgence of chaos. Varvara Petrovna changed from the “unapproachable ‘noble lady’” to the most “commonplace, whimsical society woman” after she is voluntarily

intoxicated by the revolutionary youth in her futile effort to maintain control (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 334). Her degradation from the tsar-like ruler in the province to a plain, old woman parallels Nebuchadnezzar's fall from a powerful king to an animal when he is "driven away from people and ate grass like the ox [...] his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird (Daniel 4.33). As a punishment for their abuse of power, they are temporarily deprived of special appearance and intellect, the elements that distinguish humans as God's most special creations.

Dostoevsky uses Varvara Petrovna's penalty to establish her as a cautionary tale for arrogant rulers. Once she and Nebuchadnezzar learn their responsibility for their subjects, however, their former glory returns to them. On Stepan Trofimovich's deathbed, Varvara Petrovna asks Sofya Matveyevna, his new caretaker, with tears of remorse in her eyes, "Good Lord! Do you look upon me as [...] a wicked woman, a tyrant? Who had ruined his life?" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 660). The stark contrast between her interrogative tone and previously authoritative statements illustrates her insecurity about her public image and repentance of previous oppression of her subjects. Like how Nebuchadnezzar learns his insignificance in relation to God and "praised the Most High," Varvara Petrovna re-establishes her authority in a responsible manner after she discovers the danger of her former tyranny (Daniel 4.34). When she proposes to sell the gospel with Sofya Matveyevna, she willingly embraces the mightiness of the divine and submits herself as God's servant (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 664). During their trials and tribulations, both rulers learn to respect God's supreme authority and repent their unjust ways. With their positive transformation, Dostoevsky recommends them as embodiments of a conscientious monarchy—one in which the ruler reveres God and loves their subjects.

2.3 *The True Prophet*

As Varvara Petrovna represents the Russian monarch, Stepan Trofimovich exemplifies the common citizen—the foundation of Russian identity. They are the true Daniel-like prophets exalted by Dostoevsky in their foretelling of Russia's future amid oppression from monarchs and anarchists.

Like how Daniel is selected by Nebuchadnezzar as one who "qualified to serve in the king's palace," Stepan Trofimovich is endorsed by Varvara Petrovna for his literary expertise (Daniel 1.3). After witnessing the revolutionary youth deprave the town, he decisively embarks on his long-anticipated "pilgrimage" to escape from the despicable nihilism: "even with the clearest recognition of all the horrors awaiting him he would have gone out to the high road and walked along it!" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 629). Dostoevsky celebrates the way he enshrines Russia and its traditional moral values, as how the author of *Daniel* applauds Daniel's reverence of God when he refuses to take gifts from King Belshazzar, knowing that it is God who grants him knowledge to interpret the writing on the wall (Daniel 5.17).

Then, after witnessing the youth's mindless destruction under the name of his once-admired revolutionism, Stepan Trofimovich becomes the town's true prophet. At Yulia Mihailovna's fête, he reveals the essence of Russian revolutionaries: "Ladies and gentlemen, I've solved the whole mystery. The whole secret of [the manifestoes'] effect lies in their stupidity... the last word in this business—is forgiveness" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 484, 485). The grand opening of his speech is reminiscent of prophecies in ancient apocalyptic: the speakers always passionately address the entire population. It also creates a sense of urgency and adds credibility to himself, just as how ancient prophets pressed people to action with an immediate threat from God. Stepan Trofimovich's tone softens as he preaches Jesus-like forgiveness at the end of the speech; he has found the key to the improvement of humanity, which is to banish all selfishness and embrace each other with compassion.

Another moment in which Dostoevsky praises Stepan Trofimovich as the true prophet is in his epiphany at the end of his life:

You see, that's exactly like our Russia, those devils that come out of the sick man and enter into the swine [...] But a great idea and a great Will will encompass it from on high [...] and all those devils [...] shall all be drowned [...] But the sick man will be healed and "will sit at the feet of Jesus," and all will look upon him with astonishment (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 654).

Alluding to Russia as the "sick man" from the Gospel of Luke, Stepan Trofimovich acknowledges the flaws of the Russian monarchy—the tsars disregard their subjects' welfare. With people losing faith in religion and government, anarchist ideology plagues Russia like "devils." Just like Daniel's eventual realization of God's mightiness and his people's sin, Stepan Trofimovich concludes that even chaos is a part of God's grand plan to strengthen people's loyalty in Him (Daniel 9.7). With Stepan Trofimovich's life culminating in his ecstatic recognition of God's omnipotence, Dostoevsky portrays him as a representation of the common people, who suffer from governmental oppression and anarchist destruction yet are the true gold-fearing prophets and future

of Russia.

2.4 *The Interdependence of the Monarch and the People*

While from the surface Varvara Petrovna's occasional exploitation of Stepan Trofimovich parallels the relationship between the Babylonian kings and Daniel, Dostoevsky focuses on their love for each other to reveal the interdependence of the Russian rulers and the people. The presence of the former is necessary for the spiritual survival of the latter, and the latter is the basis of the former's authority and fulfillment.

As summed up by the narrator in *The Possessed*, "There are strange friendships. [Varvara Petrovna and Stepan Trofimovich] are always ready to fly at one another, and go on like that all their lives, and yet they cannot separate" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 14). Above all, Dostoevsky captures their mutual emotional attachment with the word "friendships." Although they have violent desires against each other at times, each holds an essential place in the other's heart. For example, when Stepan Trofimovich writes his numerous, verbose letters of confession to Varvara Petrovna, "she always read these letters with the greatest attention... put them away in a special drawer, sorted and annotated... [and] pondered them in her heart. But she kept her friend all day without an answer" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 15). Unlike the Babylonian kings' ruthless oppression of their subjects, she pretends to be indifferent to act superior but carefully interprets his outpourings of emotions to get to the essence of his heart, cherishing these proofs of their intimacy.

In the same manner, even though Stepan Trofimovich protests Varvara Petrovna's arrangement of his marriage with "But I'm a serious man, and I can refuse to submit to the idle whims of a giddy woman," he justifies his eventual consent with "if I had not agreed she would have been dreadfully angry" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 80, 83). Differing from Daniel's utter rejection of King Nebuchadnezzar's dictation of diet and gifts, Stepan Trofimovich recognizes Varvara Petrovna's ill-usage of him, talks of rebelling against her authoritarian rule, yet eventually submits to her wish each time (Daniel 1.8). He does so not out of material concerns, for he does not betray morality for money; instead, he values her happiness more than his own and willingly sacrifices his preferences for hers.

Dostoevsky eventually reveals their passionate love for each other on Stepan Trofimovich's death bed. When he confesses, "I loved you all my life... twenty years," she replies angrily, "And when you were getting yourself up for [Darya Pavlovna] you sprinkled yourself with scent" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 657). Hearing his sincere exclamation, she cannot suppress her outburst of jealousy at a minor incident of him respecting another woman, revealing her long-standing, violent love for him. Ending Varvara Petrova and Stepan Trofimovich's lives as an inseparable whole, Dostoevsky argues that a conscientious monarchy is the most authentic form of Russian government because the monarch and the citizens rely on each other to form the most congruous Russian identity.

3. Young Revolutionaries in *The Possessed* as Evil forces in Revelation

While Dostoevsky's depiction of the older generation resembles the ruler-subject relationship in *Daniel*, he ascribes the revolutionary youth traits echoing that of the evil forces in the *Revelation* to criticize them as despicable and aimless.

3.1 *The Beast Nourished by the Monarch*

First, Varvara Petrovna's son, Nikolay Vsyevolodovitch Stavrogin, resembles the beast with his moral depravity and otherworldly charisma. In Stepan Trofimovich's poem fantasizing an apocalypse, he imagines "a youth of indescribable beauty rides on a black steed, and an immense multitude of all nations following him. The youth represents death, for whom all the people are yearning" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 10). Dostoevsky reverses the "Faithful and True" rider of the white horse in *Revelation* with the black steed metaphor to foreshadow the arrival of young Stavrogin as an imposter of the messiah and the doom of the population (Revelation 19.11). In fact, Stavrogin's utter fearlessness makes him comparable to heroes in Russian legends and a new God according to the narrator and Kirillov, the suicidal atheist; however, his "rapture from the tormenting consciousness" of extremely disgraceful activities resembles the beast's devilish might (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 204, 116, 691).

Another way in which Stavrogin parallels the beast is in how his angelic appearance and mysterious strength evoke passionate emotions from people. When Stavrogin first appears in the province, people marvel at his extraordinary appearance:

His hair was of a peculiarly intense black, his light-coloured eyes were peculiarly light and calm, his complexion was peculiarly soft and white, the red in his cheeks was too bright and clear, his teeth were like pearls, and his lips like coral... yet at the same time there seemed something repellent about him [...] his

face suggested a mask (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 44).

Dostoevsky's repetition of the words "peculiar" and "too" emphasize how his gentle, angelic features contrast with the intense colors in his hair, cheeks, and lips to create a striking mysteriousness that draws in any observer, as does the first beast with its otherworldly yet authoritative "ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns" (Revelation 13.1).

However, Stavrogin's otherworldly appearance does not conceal his rebellious and immoral desires, like how the beast "spoke like a dragon" to the detriment of God's creations (Revelation 13.11). When the old governor locks him up for biting on the governor's ear, Stavrogin first displays his inhuman potential: he "suddenly became noisy, began furiously beating on the door with his fists, with unnatural strength wrenched the iron grating off the door, broke the window, and cut his hands all over" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 52). His intense impulse and inhuman noises reveal how he is governed solely by animalistic instincts and strength. Similar to how the beast's performance of "great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people" causes people to wonder "Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it," Stavrogin's immortal strength and pain-endurance beguile people into regarding him as otherworldly (Revelation 13.13, 13.4).

By his mysterious gestures even his mother, the tsar over the province, treats him with awe. When she questions if the cripple Marya Tromofyevna Lebyadkin is his lawful wife,

At last he smiled, a sort of indulgent smile, and without answering a word went quietly up to his mother, took her hand, raised it respectfully to his lips and kissed it. And so great was his invariable and irresistible ascendancy over his mother that even now she could not bring herself to pull away her hand (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 183).

Dostoevsky reverses their parent-child relationship and reveals Stavrogin's dominance through the word "indulgent"; she is so bewitched by his charm that even a simple performance of gentlemanly respect wins over her obedience. Citing bestial imageries from *Revelation*, Dostoevsky criticizes how the Stavrogin-embodied revolutionary youth are nourished by the tsar-led ruling class yet gain authority over the traditional gentry with their destructive power.

3.2 *The Rise of the Harlot*

Just as how Stavrogin resembles the beast, Stepan Trofimovich's neglected son Pyotr Stepanovich Verhovensky's orchestration of societal destruction for power resembles the false prophet and prostitute's moral contamination of the nations in *Revelation*. Through Pyotr Stepanovich's deception of followers, Dostoevsky ridicules the revolutionary leaders at his time for their hypocrisy and power-lust under the disguise of serving the "cause."

In the first step of demonstrating his authority, Pyotr Stepanovich debases his innocent father in order to elevate himself. On their second meeting at the old man's house, Stepan Trofimovich appears "thin and sallow" while Pyotr Stepanovich sits next to him "with a most familiar air [...] and taking up more room on the lounge than deference to his father should have allowed," purposefully disappointing social expectations of filial piety and guest-host relationship (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 302). Their power dynamics are similar to that between Varvara Petrovna and Stavrogin: although the parents should hold authority over their children as both the elder and the host, they are the ones being attacked by insults from their children. Pyotr Stepanovich's disrespect of existing social hierarchies in tormenting the common people echoes the prostitute's desecration of religious ones: she is "drunk with the blood of God's holy people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus" (Revelation 17.6).

Dostoevsky magnifies his brutality through his ill-usage of the kind-hearted governor von Lembke to carry out his scheme of aimless destruction. After the governor mistakenly trusts him to be "an ardent young man of poetic feelings" and "divulg[es] the secret of his novel to him," the young man ungratefully abuses von Lembke: he "installed him in [von Lembke's] study and was asleep on the sofa there, uninvited" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 311). Pyotr Stepanovich's uncivil manner and spatial dominance once again represent his spiritual oppression of the governor for his personal agenda; he aims to convince Yulia Mihailovna of her husband's stupidity, instigate her to take control of provincial affairs, and utilize her ignorance to carry out societal destruction.

Moreover, Dostoevsky incorporates mocking details regarding Pyotr Stepanovich's revolutionary quintet to foreshadow the imminent end of revolutionary groups. He purposefully selects easily controllable followers like Erkel, the "'little fool' who was only lacking in the higher form of reason... [and] forever yearning to follow the lead of another man's will, of course for the good of 'the common' or 'the great' cause" (Dostoevsky & Garnett,

2005, p. 574, 575). Erkel's blind loyalty to any attractive idea that appears to be in the service of people reflects not only the general restlessness of youth but also the wavering foundation of revolutionary groups; the revolutionary groups are consisted of those whose clear vision of life is absent instead of true believers of a new social structure.

Like the false prophet in *Revelation* who "tormented those who live on the earth" and out of whose mouth come "demonic spirits that perform signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty," Pyotr Stepanovich persuades his ignorant followers into denying God and harming the innocent (Revelation 11.10, 16.14). For example, to frighten the town with mysterious murders, he portrays Shatov, a socialist-turned-Christian, as a traitor to instigate the quintet to kill: "it's Shatov! [...] he will give information against all... To-morrow we shall be arrested as incendiaries and political offenders" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 548). Utilizing their animalistic fear of death, he spurs even the most compassionate of them to murder Shatov, who has lost all awareness of danger out of ecstasy of his wife returning to him. Dostoevsky draws a drastic contrast between the quintet, driven to action by fear for themselves, and Shatov, who thinks of starting a new life with his wife. His detailed depictions of Shatov's innocent hope for a bright future add to the tragedy of his death, criticizing the selfishness of the revolutionaries. Through the cruelty of Shatov's murder, Dostoevsky exposes that revolutionaries commit countless of such crimes out of their selfish interests and to the detriment of humanity in Russia.

3.3 *The Beast's Eventual Betrayal of the Harlot*

Furthermore, Pyotr Stepanovich's futile manipulation of Stavrogin in order to rise to power parallels the power dynamics between the prostitute and the beast in *Revelation*. Through these parallelisms, Dostoevsky foreshadows the imminent end of all revolutionary ideologies.

When Pyotr Stepanovich persuades Stavrogin to start a revolution with him, he confesses, "I am a scoundrel, of course, and not a Socialist. Ha ha!" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 418). Like the prostitute dressed in scarlet, the color of socialism, he is using the prestige of the already-made ideology to attract followers (Revelation 17.3). His flippant attitude towards deceiving followers and causing destruction mirrors the selfish lust for power of many revolutionary leaders at that time. Additionally, he optimistically envisions how he will attract ignorant, worthless followers with Stavrogin's help:

Listen. I've reckoned them all up: a teacher who laughs with children at their God and at their cradle is on our side... The schoolboys who murder a peasant for the sake of sensation are ours. The juries who acquit every criminal are ours...the docility of schoolboys and fools has reached an extreme pitch... On all sides we see vanity puffed up out of all proportion; brutal, monstrous appetites... Do you know how many we shall catch by little, ready-made ideas? (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 418).

Pyotr Stepanovich is highly aware of the nihilist, restless Russian people in need of devoting their energy to a cause and therefore views them as the primary targets of his fabricated ideology.

Like the prostitute, who has become "a dwelling for demons / and a haunt for every impure spirit, / a haunt for every unclean bird, / a haunt for every unclean and detestable animal," he seeks to gather people of all lowly ranks and intellect (Revelation 18.2). To achieve so, he lays out his future plan with Stavrogin as a new savior satiating people's spiritual hunger: "Stavrogin, you are beautiful! [...] We'll set fires going [...] Russia will be overwhelmed with darkness, the earth will weep for its old gods [...] Well, then we shall bring forward [...] Ivan the Tsarevitch [...] We'll set a legend going better than the Skoptsis'. He exists, but no one has seen him [...] we'll pass two or three judgements as wise as Solomon's [...] we shall consider how to build up an edifice of stone" (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 417, 420, 421). His hasty and imploring tone demonstrates how the success of his revolution and ensuing power depend solely on his manipulation of Stavrogin, similar to how the prostitute assumes glory through riding on the mighty beast (Revelation 17.7). He desires to manufacture an apocalypse, present the beast as the new mysteriously charismatic savior, and build a third temple instead of the New Jerusalem in *Revelation*. Using the word "edifice" and referencing the Skoptsy sect of Christianity, Dostoevsky emphasizes how Pyotr Stepanovich is completely shameless in fabricating an artificial ideology more brutal than the castration and mastectomy practiced by the Skoptsy followers. Similarly, Dostoevsky hints through the patronymic of Stavrogin's pseudonym—Tsarevitch—that this new naive ideology's naivete will eventually give in to the aged wisdom of tsardom like a father and son's undeniable blood lineage.

Next, Dostoevsky captures Stavrogin's rejection of Pyotr Stepanovich and the latter's ultimate failure through the detail of the two young men walking together. Despite his efforts to appease Stavrogin, Pyotr Stepanovich has to get "splashed through the mud to keep pace with Stavrogin, who had walked [...] taking up the whole pavement" and is kept in ignorance when Stavrogin leaves for St. Petersburg (Dostoevsky & Garnett, 2005, p. 552, 542).

Just like how the beast will “bring [the prostitute] to ruin and leave her naked,” Stavrogin with his attractive otherworldliness inspires Pyotr Stepanovich’s political fantasy, destroys the morality inside him, and leaves him to face persecution alone (Revelation 17.16). Through Pyotr Stepanovich’s eventual loneliness and the governmental persecution of his followers, Dostoevsky foreshadows the eventual tragic end for such nihilist revolutionary movements and establishes the everlasting ingenuity of a conscientious monarchy for the Russian masses.

4. Conclusion

Conclusively, Pyotr Stepanovich’s revolutionary quintet is caught by the police and Stavrogin commits suicide out of magnanimity for the world, just like how “the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf [...] The rest were killed with the sword coming out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh” in *Revelation* (Revelation 19.20, 19.21). The graphic description of the beast and its followers’ violent death and its parallelism to the fate of the quintet strengthens Dostoevsky’s argument that such sparks of nihilist revolutionary movements composed of power-seeking leaders and uneducated followers will inevitably be extinguished by the collective efforts of God-fearing Russians.

On the other hand, the tsar and the common people will live a long, fulfilling life blessed by God. Despite the similar despotism shared between the Babylonian kings in *Daniel* and Varvara Petrovna, the latter’s love with her protégé Stepan Trofimovich and repentance of her dictatorial rule indicates that the Russian monarchy she represents will not share the same fate with the fallen Babylon.

Ultimately, Dostoevsky produced *The Possessed* as a social critique to warn people against being led astray by nihilists and revolutionaries amid unprecedented civil unrest, advocating for a conscientious monarchy as the ideal government instead. His legacy of revising ancient apocalyptic during a time of social stress is carried on by Russian writers generations later, most famously exemplified in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose reception of a Nobel Prize in literature symbolizes worldwide admiration for his truthful social critique under totalitarian rule.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to my mentor, Professor Lindsay Whaley of Dartmouth College.

References

- Daniel. (2011). In *Bible Gateway*. Retrieved 2011, from <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Daniel%201&version=NIV>
- Dostoevsky, F. (2005). *The Possessed* (C. Garnett, Trans.). New York, New York: Barnes & Noble Classics.
- Revelation (also Apocalypse). (2011). In *Bible Gateway*. Retrieved 2011, from <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+1&version=NIV>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author, with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).