

THE MORAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE OF THE NARODNAYA VOLYA MOVEMENT IN THE NOVELS OF YURI TRIFONOV AND YURI DAVYDOV**Natalya Mikhaylovna Petrukhina**Doctor of Philology, Professor, UzSLWU
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Abstract: This article explores how the novels of Yuri Trifonov and Yuri Davydov artistically apprehend the moral problems of the Narodnaya Volya (“People’s Will”) movement. The historical fiction of the 1960s–1970s develops Dostoevsky’s tradition while broadening the moral polyphony of the historical novel.

Keywords: historical novel; moral values; terror; populism (narodnichestvo).

Yuri Trifonov’s prose is marked by a sustained search for moral values within historical character types, from *The Glow of the Campfire* to *Impatience*, *The Riddle of Dostoevsky’s Conduct*, and his final novel *Time and Place*. These works poetically illuminate the social and moral grounds of the protagonists’ actions and the psychological motivation of their deeds in objectively unfolding historical circumstances.

Before proceeding, it is worth asking why the Narodnaya Volya movement attracted such keen interest in the fiction of the 1960s–1970s. There are several reasons. One is the restoration of historical fairness: years of ideological rigidity had not permitted morally approving assessments of populism and, in particular, of Narodnaya Volya, on the grounds that it neither led nor could lead to a definitive revolutionary outcome. In the 1960s, when the revaluation of values begun in the mid-1950s spilled into a projected restructuring of all spheres of life (that ultimately failed to materialize), writers shifted emphasis from the negative role of particular historical “Personalities” to their merits and innovations that marked a new historical turn. They remembered and sought to do justice to those who had struggled, as best they could, against autocracy for a democratic reorganization of life. The deeds of the “People’s Will” became the object of artistic cognition of a “heroic morality,” within a system of value-ethical coordinates underlying a modern historiosophical conception. This, evidently, explains the writers’ emphasis on moral and psychological aspects in depicting the events and figures tied to this movement.

Thus the emergence of the moral-psychological historical novel in the 1960s–1970s is not merely a respectful tribute to the Tynyanov–Forsh line, which indirectly continues Dostoevsky’s tradition within the intertextual system of historical fiction. Although in treatments of the revolutionary populist movement moral motives dominate ideological and political ones, this development was historically warranted: an organically flaring tendency to expand the moral polyphony of the historical novel.

A case in point is Yuri Davydov’s novel *The Quiet Season of Leaf-Fall* (*Glukhaya pora listopada*), where the reflections of the historical figure German Lopatin predominate: on the immortal exploit of the conspirators of 1 March 1881 as “personalities outstanding in the moral sense,” and on the “moral duty” of those who fought autocracy for the people’s liberation from oppression. To be fair, the theme of populism, and of the movement’s moral content in fiction, arose long before the period under review. Recall, at least, Leonid Andreev’s *A Story about Seven Who Were Hanged* (1908), *The Governor* (1906), and the play *To the Stars* (1906), which expose tsarist reprisals against revolutionaries while elevating the moral impulse of those who gave their lives for an unrealized dream of popular freedom. The theme of “moral impulse” also sounds in works by Gleb Uspensky, V. Grigorovich, and A. Ertel; nor did F. M. Dostoevsky

ignore it. Yet with these writers the “moral impulse” tends to function as a lateral, incidental motif.

Trifonov elevates this lateral motif to a central theme in his historical novel *Impatience*, published in 1973 in *Novy Mir*. Viewing populism as one stage in the development of the Russian revolutionary movement, Trifonov builds the plot of *Impatience* around a concrete historical event. On 1 March 1881 in St Petersburg a “trial of justice” is carried out: the execution of Tsar Alexander II in accordance with the sentence of the Executive Committee of Narodnaya Volya. One of the inspirers and organizers of this “trial of justice” is Andrei Zhelyabov. While admiring the courage and conscious self-sacrifice of the March First conspirators, Trifonov emphatically condemns terrorism as a dead end. The moral failure of the Narodovoltsy lay in their “exchange of the idea of a people’s revolution for the idea of terror,” without understanding that the latter cannot achieve genuine social ends.

In an interview the German critic R. Schröder asked Trifonov: “The Narodovoltsy tried, subjectively and voluntaristically, to hasten what had not yet objectively matured. What is your view of this problem?”¹ Understanding the “man and circumstances” conception as a moral problem of the right to choose and the right to err (following Dostoevsky), Trifonov stressed that a person, while having the moral right to choose, does not always assess his capacities correctly. Sometimes he underestimates them; sometimes he overestimates them. At times he undertakes actions with subjective intentions and notions that, objectively, take on a different character. So it is with Raskolnikov: subjectively evaluating his rebellion as “murder in the name of justice,” he commits a crime that, under objective assessment, leads him to cathartic repentance. “It seems to me,” Trifonov concludes, “that something similar often occurs in revolutionary actions. This, of course, applies to the Narodovoltsy as well.”²

The very formulation of the topic presupposes an emotional dimension. Beyond the obvious fact that an artistic work is meant to affect the reader emotionally, a moral evaluation, unlike a historical, political, or scholarly one, necessarily contains an emotional component. Moreover, morality is historical; it changes, contrary to Chingiz Aitmatov’s claim that morality “is not subject to innovations... Each individual perceives it as an unshakable and sacred heritage of the forefathers.”³ Life experience, regrettably, refutes this essentially humane proposition. Moral notions often shift with political conjuncture, the momentary demands of cultural fashion, and the conditions of individual existence. Morality is conditioned by the norms of a given society and period. Indeed, within one society different social groups may adhere to different moral norms; in such cases one group’s moral evaluations may diverge from, or even conflict with, another’s. In other words, a writer who undertakes a theme involving moral assessments of social phenomena inevitably enters the sphere of worldview and world-perception, and thus of emotional reception.

The activity of Russian revolutionary terrorists is inseparable from moral conceptions of physically eliminating autocracy as an effective method of political struggle. This, in fact, was one reason many contemporaries turned away from the Narodovoltsy. They were not only writers and other “peaceable” people but revolutionaries themselves. The split of “Land and Liberty” began at the personal-ethical level in grasping terror as a form of struggle, its expediency and effectiveness, and culminated at the moral level when many in Narodnaya Volya recognized terrorism as immoral. This predetermined the moral-psychological illumination of the Narodnaya Volya movement in historical fiction.

References

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