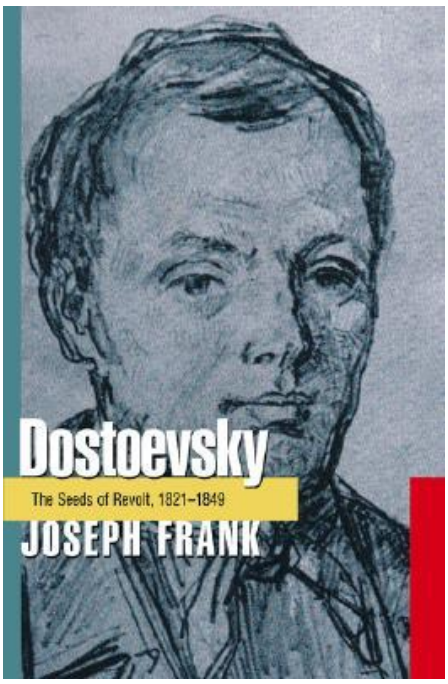

Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821-1849

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The term "biography" seems insufficiently capacious to describe the singular achievement of Joseph Frank's five-volume study of the life of the great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. One critic, writing upon the publication of the final volume, casually tagged the series as the ultimate work on Dostoevsky "in any language, and quite possibly forever."

Frank himself had not originally intended to undertake such a massive work. The endeavor began in the early 1960s as an exploration of Dostoevsky's fiction, but it later became apparent to Frank that a deeper appreciation of the fiction would require a more ambitious engagement with the writer's life, directly caught up as Dostoevsky was with the cultural and political movements of mid- and late-nineteenth-century Russia. Already in his forties, Frank undertook to learn Russian and embarked on what would become a five-volume work comprising more than 2,500 pages. The result is an intellectual history of nineteenth-century Russia, with Dostoevsky's mind as a refracting prism.

The volumes have won numerous prizes, among them the National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography, the Christian Gauss Award of Phi Beta Kappa, the *Los Angeles Times Book Prize*, and the James Russell Lowell Prize of the Modern Language Association.

Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821-1849 Details

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From Reader Review Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821-1849 for online ebook

Mateus Pereira says

It is funny to read about Dostoyevsky as a kid.
Problems with his father, and the school's times, his personality started to develop in this time. It is important to know how the writer started to see the world while he was growing up, his favorite authors and, of course, what made him so furious about the world.

Bryn Hammond says

The adventures of D. up to the age of 28 – that is, up to his arrest.

The family weren't well off. For a start in life his father sent him to a military academy, hideous for our young artist. There, at least, he got to exercise his independent mind, his courage and his empathy for the unfortunate. The last, such a facet of his work, is very evident, very young, as simply a trait of his. And he has the guts – while an outsider himself – to get in the way, however he can, of violence at the school, physical maltreatment of junior students - of janitors - and of German teachers. Independence: not only does he take stands, but he's unafraid to go against fashions, from the earliest age and even where his heart is, in the written arts. He's persistently loyal to a father who has the fevered temperament poor D. must have gotten from him. Both were hard to live with. D. knows this about himself and apologises often to his brother for his behaviour: 'I have a terrible defect… Otherwise I am disgusting… '

Frank accounts for why the issue of serfdom set him frothing at the mouth; he couldn't discuss serfdom without getting over-excited. It began simply with incidents – he was a casual witness of cruelty – a sight daily seen on the streets touched him where he lived. Then his father was murdered by his serfs… or maybe he wasn't, but they believed so. D. managed to blame himself, for his cash demands on his dad in spite of the financial ruin of the estate. He knew the serfs weren't murderers, unless pushed by the intolerable. He knew his dad was a bit of a loop and as a widower had gone to drink. D. ended up with a free-the-serfs agenda that took over his life – quite truly, when he stepped from liberal circles into revolutionary conspiracy.

He signed up to overthrow the government. It wasn't a mere case of leaflets. Later he told us the investigation missed an inner cell, of which he was a member (if not, I assume, he wouldn't have escaped that firing squad). It's exactly like his novel *Demons* – and as exciting to read.

But before his deep political involvement he made a literary splash: and this is a cautionary tale. The splash was of the noisiest, and shortly after he sinks like a stone, savagely mauled by the literary lions he thought he had eating out of his hand. Frank takes him to task for his vainglory while the instant fame lasted; but this is too stern a test at 24 – or at any age for any writer.

Frank explains the originality of *Poor Folk*. D. uses the novel of letters, territory of high sentiment and exclusively, beforehand, aristocratic characters; but his affairs of the heart concern a shabby clerk – target of satire in Russian fiction – who isn't even young and handsome, and a girl in the slums. No-one had done this. No-one had taken lowly inhabitants of St Petersburg and given them the fine and subtle sentiments of a Clarissa (without a cultural knowledge beyond them: the clerk has awful judgement in fiction – but his own

life and heart are far above that fiction). D. drives the point home with stray mentions from the epistolary novel - a Lovelace here and a Teresa there. No-one in Russia had even written of such people from the inside – Gogol couldn't shake the sarcasm and the view from an upper level - although George Sand was going great guns in France with poor and noble heroes. She wasn't as clever, though.

The writers most important for him were Balzac and Victor Hugo; Schiller of course, who looms so in his last novel; and he was always devoted to Pushkin. George Sand was between your toes in Russia, at the forefront of the novelistic arm of French Utopian Socialism. Here we get to the great tug of war between two socialisms. The major critic of these years, Belinsky, couldn't make up his mind and hopped from one to the other. But D. by his whole temperament was in the French Utopian camp, and I don't believe he ever left. The Left left him – the tug of war was being won, even in these years, by the other style of socialism, rational, material and divorced from religion.

D. was religious as a child and they teased him for a monk in school. But we need to understand his religion against Utopian Socialism, which thought of itself as the True Christianity, at last, and of Christ as the original revolutionary. Florid sentiments, compassion as the Christ-like trait - quite the loveliest lefties on earth. Not that this contented D. He began to add that element of the human psyche, here, there and everywhere: the knowledge of human irrationality, which Frank attributes to his own unsettling mental experiences; human refusal to be reduced to one's circumstances; self-exacerbation of those circumstances – so that society isn't alone to be blamed. He quickly went beyond protest literature.

In a famous scene in *Poor Folk*, a handshake matters more to the clerk than a hand-out – the sense of equality, treatment with human dignity, are worth no end of dinners to him. A socialism about material circumstances – feed them and they're happy – he'd find terribly insulting, however hungry he may be. Belinsky, converted to the other socialism, says, "It has been proved that a man feels and thinks and acts invariably according to the law of egoistical urges, and indeed, he cannot have any others." Scientific, material determinism, a strictly physiological concept of the mind, rational solutions to our ills – and to boot, a utilitarian function for art. This was terrible to Dostoyevsky and is the start of his great falling-out with the Left.

Much of his biography book one explores these two socialisms – the old he was in sympathy with, the new with which he'll be at loggerheads. I cannot but be struck by the fact that we too are in the grip of a scientific determinism, where free will is a fiction of the user of our software brains, to let us go about our lives without despair. Dostoyevsky spent his life in just such a fight. If you feel embattled, you can visit him.

Shadday says

A damn good way to welcome summer if there ever was one [Think Kentucky Derby, clouds parting, resounding amplified gun shot echo, &c].

Jim says

This is the first of five volumes tracing in exhaustive detail the influences working on Fyodor Dostoevsky during his literary career. It was by reading David Foster Wallace's review of the series reprinted in his

collection **Consider the Lobster** that I decided I would read the series and, along with it, the novels and stories of the great Russian writer as they came up in Joseph Frank's series.

Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821-1849 is excellent except for a sag several chapters long dealing with Dostoevsky's attendance at various political/socialist/Fourierist circles after the disappointment's following the publication of **Poor Folk**. Fortunately, Frank returns after his author's arrest by the Tsarist officials to the minor (but interesting) works he was working on during the period of his socialist venture.

Here, from "An Honest Thief," is a fascinating quote that was later eliminated by Dostoevsky because of one critic's stupidly negative response:

> My Emelyan, if he had stayed alive, wouldn't have been a man but some sort of trash to spit on. But here he died from grief and a bad conscience and it's like he showed the world that, whatever he might be, he was a human being all the same; that a man can die from vice as from a deadly poison, and that vice, it must be, is a human thing, something you pick up, it's not born with you -- here today, it could be gone for good tomorrow, otherwise, if we were destined to stay depraved all through the ages because of original sin, Christ would never have come to us.

This is a magnificent book, and I can hardly wait to read the other four volumes in the series. But first, I have promised myself to read (or re-read) **The Double**, **White Nights**, **The Landlady**, and **Netochka Nezvanova**.

Kendall H says

Excellent. Reading Dostoevsky's works in chronological order alongside this volume. Gave insight to the influences on D's works, as well as closely examining the works themselves.

PR says

I wanted to read something impossibly long, and so I chose the multivolume biography of Dostoevsky. I was unaware of the inextricable linkage between FD and Russian history, the way his experience acts as a kind of synecdoche for Serfdom's end, social order, etc. A great primer in 19th century Russian history and intimate biography of FD and St. Petersburg literati as well.

Alex Lee says

This is an extremely detailed first volume of Dostoevsky's development as a writer and as a human being. Frank traces his influences and the people and circumstances that informed Dostoevsky to become who he is along with a very fine examination of the stories that Dostoevsky wrote.

It seems Dostoevsky had enough advantages to secure an education and meet the children of wealthy individuals but did not have enough to secure himself. The fact that he wanted to fit in, had success, and then ruined it through arrogance may have been part of what led him to take a very deep stance about who people were, and how they fit into society. Frank chooses to end this volume on an incomplete story before

Dostoevsky's arrest, citing how the story shows the prototype of the kind of examination: an individual in society trying to fit in is about morality.

All in all, a fairly good read. I look forward to the next volume.

Bar Shirtcliff says

I gratefully collected this at the post office today, and have done almost nothing but read this book, today. Best staycation ever!

This is a wonderful book by an erudite historian who happens to be the foremost expert on Dostoevsky's life and work. It isn't done in the typical fashion of the popular biography, i.e., filled with useless minutiae and gossip. Rather, this work is illuminated by and illuminates Dostoevsky's creative life. Frank seems to take it for granted that the reader has read every single book or story that Dostoevsky wrote. With that assumption, Frank is able to step from biographical details that help to explain aspects of his writing, to specific characters that stand out as examples, without even bothering to say in which work those characters figure (unless they're in the less well-known works, of course). Really, there is nothing extra in this book. It's delightful. There's a footnote containing a long a quotation from Karamzin's History and Letters, where Karamzin describes his conversation with Kant. What a treat! And so on.

This is a delicious intellectual tour - a genealogy of a mind and its works.

I haven't finished yet, but, this is just volume one, anyway. I just wanted to have a screed about it.

All right, now I've finally started on the next one. I expect it to be even better. I have little to add to this. I suppose it's worth saying that I learned about little-known writings of which I'd been totally unaware, like D-'s articles in various journals, an abandoned novel, and an interesting short story that seems to contain the seeds of several themes that appeared, all mature and leafy, in later works such as Crime and Punishment and the Demons. I was able to find this one in Russian, and perhaps I shall read it. These less-known works make the leap from before to after prison much less shocking, in terms of how his ideas seemed to change. Really, he was pulling away from the French-influenced socialists and back towards some of his central, liberal beliefs long before he ended up in Siberia.

His version of the story, well, it just made a better story - or so proposes Frank, convincingly. We all tailor our bios to make them more intelligible and convincing. Otherwise, we'd all die from the tedium every time anybody asks a personal question, or come off as rude by refusing all the time. The longer I live, the shorter my story becomes. Dostoevsky, a professional storyteller, well, of course he would use his own life to make a story that supports his beliefs. I wonder what his writing would have been like if he'd been bereft of beliefs and hope. He'd probably have gone genre-fiction and/or postal. That's my bet. The prose would have still been great, but the plots.. could have been anything. Maybe sci-fi or horror.

Jaek Wraf says

The first volume of an exhaustive series on this amazing author's life. I've loved his novels since high school, but learned almost nothing about his personal life. The book gets dry at times, but Frank keeps the reader engaged by cycling between winding, complex narratives of Dostoevsky's socialist ties, analyses of his early literary works and their connection to literature of the day, and intriguing character sketches of people around the writer. This gave me a richer basis for understanding and enjoying Dostoevsky's works.

John says

While this is only volume one of five, I am thoroughly intrigued for the rest of the series. What appears from outside to be merely a (detailed) biography of Dostoevsky's life is actually something more--an in depth critical look at his works, which itself demands biography. Thus, while there are biographical elements galore in this volume, Frank's primary purpose is to provide background for his criticism and exploration of Dostoevsky's writing.

The volume covers the early period of the writer's life and career, up to his arrest in 1849, which led to the abrupt ending of the incomplete major novel, Netochka Nezvanova. Frank makes sure to highlight Dostoevsky's literary and political influences (Gogol, Hoffman, Scott, Hugo, Pushkin, and Sand among others), but dives into the ethos of these writers to draw lines of connection and/or contrast between their work and Dostoevsky's. The result of this careful treatment of the surrounding literary and philosophical history allows Frank to situate early Dostoevsky comfortably in the Romantic era with its appreciation of the higher ideals in life.

However, with the changing of the times came an aggressive and all-consuming materialism, from Europe and into Russia. The result finds Dostoevsky at odds with many of his now increasingly materialist colleagues, people concerned only for the nuts and bolts of society and solving the problems around them. While Dostoevsky was sympathetic to this heightened social concern, he also wasn't prepared to give up on the notion of romantic ideals. And so, by the end of this period, he finds himself seeking to blend these two concerns. There are tantalizing hints that he would have done just that in his incomplete novel.

Frank does an excellent job working through the stories (and one short novel) of this period, highlighting Dostoevsky's interest in the theme of personal freedom vs. social limitation, the development of his perception of masochistic tendencies in certain of his characters (people who gain something from their own failings or guilt), and his ability in a variety of genres. I reread a number of the stories covered in this volume, and found Frank's analysis to enlighten and deepen my understanding of the works. For that I am grateful.

R says

If you are reading this book or planning to read this book, you probably already know about Dostoevsky. In my opinion this books presents a classic chicken and egg problem - should I read Dostoevsky's books first or this book about Dostoevsky? If you face this dilemma, I would suggest you read at least a couple of

Dostoevsky's books before reading this biography. This book is an amalgam of biographical introduction to Dostoevsky's life and literary review of his early work. Some chapters are devoted to Dostoevsky's life while the others are devoted to characters in his books. Although you can make sense of his book's characters without reading them, having a glimpse of Dostoevsky's style would help you appreciate the style and references. This book may leave you with a desire to read Dostoevsky's work. It refers to at least 12 books from Dostoevsky - The double, Poor folk, Netochka Nezvanova, Notes from underground, The idiot, Crime and Punishment, The Brother's Karamazov, The Devils, The landlady, An honest thief, White Nights, and Mr. Prokharchin. In addition to these works, there are references to influence on Dostoevsky from the following authors Gogol (e.g. the Overcoat, dead souls and the nose), Pushkin, Herzen and Goncharov. Rest assured, this book will make a significant contribution to your reading list!

Chris says

This book is more than a simple biography of Dostoevsky. It is an analysis of his works and an in depth study of the cultural and intellectual influences on his early writings. I learned a great deal about the writers and philosophies of this period in Russia. This not only illuminates Dostoevsky's work, but it clarifies themes of other Russian writers of this period, Gogol, Turgenev, etc... This is the great strength of the biography, the skill of the biographer in bringing out the literary ideas of the period. One thing that I learned that surprised me was the significant influence of George Sand on Dostoevsky at this time. For me this was very unexpected and interesting. I did not understand how wide her influence was during her own lifetime. She is a much neglected writer today. I recommend before reading this book to have a familiarity with 'Poor Folk' and 'The Double' to fully appreciate the biographer's discussions of these two works written during period in Dostoevsky's life.

Kate Sherrod says

Though the event is not actually depicted or described in Seeds of Revolt, the specter of Russian uber-novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky's arrest, mock execution and sentence to Siberia looms large over this first of Joseph Frank's five-volume biography of the man. This should not be a spoiler for anyone; this fact and its timing (1849) are quite possibly the best-known and most-talked-about biographical detail in all Dostoevskiana, mentioned in every introduction, foreword, sketch and essay I've ever seen about the man. I might say it's as impossible not to know Dostoevsky was sent to Siberia as it is not to know that he wrote The Brothers Karamozov and Crime and Punishment, but then I run the risk of wandering into bless-me-what-do-they-teach-at-these-schools-ism.

What is not generally known to the casual Dostoevsky fan (which is what I would call myself; I certainly could not hold forth with Michael at Pink's for any length of time*) is the details of why and how this pivotal event came to happen. Enter the redoubtable Joseph Frank, whose staggering work I learned of, as is probably the case with everyone in my cliques and circles, through an essay by the late and much-lamented David Foster Wallace.** And before you ask, yes, I plan to read the other four volumes, for having completed this one I find myself a much less casual Dostoevsky fan and a Frank fan as well.

Frank could definitely go toe-to-toe with Michael at Pink's, and wouldn't even have to serve up a hot dog to keep the ordinary punter's attention while he did so.

As I said, the arrest looms large over this account, ominous and always feeling just around the corner even as Doestoevsky grows up with his strict father, suffers through military school, attracts the praise and attention of the great critic Vissarion Belinsky with his first novel Poor Folk (which I have yet to read but now very much want to) and then falls out with him, takes up other, nicer friends and watches them move away, writes, writes and writes and always wrings his hands over the plight of the enslaved peasantry of Russia (among whom he had had mostly happy formative experiences as a boy on his family's little estate) -- and then meets Petrashevsky, he of the circle accused of subversion and revolution and all sorts of other things that autocratic regimes do not like.

Frank's painstaking examination of the Petrashevsky circle -- a very informal salon in which members of the intelligentsia gathered of a Friday night to talk Socialist ideas, religion, politics and, occasionally, literature -- frankly gave me the chills, not so much because of what happened to them per se, or how they conducted themselves or what they talked about as what they resembled: they resembled Twitter, if not the entire internet. Everybody got a chance to spout off or argue, there was rarely a set agenda, anyone who wanted to could participate (within limits, of course, the physical and temporal ones of St. Petersburg of the 1840s. Of course.), anyone could get sucked in and, potentially (and later actually), everyone could become tarred with the same brush. So when some members started up a secret society with the aim of actually staging a revolution in Russia, everybody got busted.

Back then, of course, the government had to work hard at it, to infiltrate the circle with an actual person hanging out at actual gatherings at specific times; nowadays, we've turned everything inside-out, having our conversations in full public view, asynchronously, trusting the First Amendment and the odd pseudonymous identity and that those in power won't confuse rhetoric with intent. This may be very foolish of us. Especially as things like NDAA have been allowed to happen. I do not fear being mock-shot or sent to Siberia, but I do fear an internet fettered and stunted by corporate/government interests, or being cut off from it and thus my world. I fear falling into the prison of my own flesh.***

Such are the dark thoughts a good Dostoevsky biography can inspire. And this one is very, very good. And, as I said, I'm itching to get my hands on the other four volumes.

And I'll be sleeping with one eye open, and tweeting with a little more concern (though I'm sure I already damned myself long ago out of my own typing fingers. I've always been free with my opinions, and have paid the price for this before when they were misconstrued, misunderstood, or just unpopular). Dostoevsky was not a revolutionary or even much of a socialist, Frank says, but if you got him going defending literature that wasn't written purely as a dialectical tool for social reform, or, worse, on the plight of the peasantry, then he could potentially wind up out in the streets screaming and waving a red flag. As a friend of mine once observed, some people have buttons to push, others have a whole keyboard. Unca Fyodor had perhaps a modestly sized keyboard; mine is vast and varied).

But what of it, Orson Welles might ask. Go on singing.

*Wink wink at Unca Harlan Ellison, the modern writer of whom I was most reminded as I read this biography of Unca Fyodor. Go get your hands on a copy of Angry Candy, far and away my favorite of his short story collections and the one containing the amusing and awesome "Prince Myshkin and Hold the Relish."

**Which appears in his last essay collection Consider the Lobster, if you're wondering. I could not find a link to the complete text online. The book is worth acquiring or at least reading, though, and not just for the Frank/Dostoevsky piece!

***Wink wink at William Gibson. Of course.

Conrad says

It can't have been easy to do. If you wanted to be Robert Frank, you would wake up one day and:

Step 1: Learn Russian, French, and German. Throw in some Old Church Slavonic.
Step 2: Read oeuvre of Belinsky, Gogol, Turgenev, Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Herzen, Bakunin, George Sand, Voltaire, Rousseau, Fourier (ugh) and many, many others, in addition to the many critical works written about Dostoevsky. Reading everything by FD alone would be tough - the guy barely did anything but write for most of his life, since it was his sole means of subsistance.
Step 3: Obtain volumes of Tsarist police reports on Dostoevsky as well as Soviet books of criticism (probably not that easy to do in 1979!)
Step 4: Read all those, too.
Step 5: Put it all together.

I admire him for the huge effort he put into his biographies. But it must be said, this book shows its age. It spends a fair amount of time toward the beginning painstakingly refuting Freud's transparently self-serving interpretation of FD's work and childhood. Frank second guesses himself sometimes, particularly when going over the details of Dostoyevsky's father's murder. What is absent is much consideration of the themes of FD's early novels in terms of the later criticism of them. We get an excellent picture from this book of what FD's brothers thought, as well as Belinsky, Maikov, and Petrashevsky, but it would not have been awful to discuss *Poor Folk* and the feuilletons in terms of later reflections on his early politics by Sartre and any of the thousands of thinkers who have been impacted by FD's works. There have to be documents relating to the Petrashevtsy that are available now and would've been impossible to access when Frank wrote these five books, his magnum opus. I find it hard to believe that this is still the comprehensive FD biography, given all the water under the bridge since it was written.

Anyway, this volume covers Dostoevsky's childhood and young adulthood as a kind of Christian Socialist (a type he gives a sly nod to at one point in *The Brothers Karamazov*.) It traces his Christian roots and his devotion to the Church, so odd to his Westernized peers; his nightmarish schooling at the College of Engineers; his life as a flaneur and radical in the Palm-Durov and Petrashevsky circles, up to his imprisonment. It's not perfect but it is very, very good.

J.M. Hushour says

One part biography, one part that kind of literary criticism that I don't mind and which is rare: the kind that actually has something to say. Frank thus accomplishes the nigh impossible, a revelatory dip into one of the greats, while keeping his academic distance enough and staying abreast of the usual hogwash and jargon. He even emasculates Freud, which is always hilarious and ironic.
This first volume ends with Dosty's arrest, so it covers his childhood, youth, and education. Better than all that crap, it goes into never-insane detail, the level of detail that never dares throttles the subject, to tease out Dosty's place in the literary environment of his time. That environment is fascinating, as fascinating as Dosty's early literary output which shines most forthright in "The Double" but apparently, according to Frank, hit its high point with an unfinished novel about a young woman/aspiring singer.

You get all you'd want about politics, culture, Belinsky, Dosty's sudden rise to literary fame and his just-as-rapid fall from grace amidst the polemics and bullshit of the academic milieu of the time.
Frank nicely steps out of biography into criticism and looks at each of Dosty's works of this period to reassess them and throw new light, new contextual light, on what the young D was up to.
