



Claudia Verhoeven. *The Odd Man Karakozov: Imperial Russia, Modernity, and the Birth of Terrorism.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. 248 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4652-8.

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The Culture of Terrorism in Imperial Russia

This is a fascinating and significant interpretation of Dmitrii Karakozov's failed attempt to shoot Russian Emperor Alexander II on April 4, 1866, not just the act itself but its wider historical meaning. Claudia Verhoeven brings much-needed emphasis to the word "culture" in the phrase "Russian political culture." She presents this brief moment—a peasant bystander's arm deflecting the pistol, Karakozov squeezing the trigger—as an event of transformational significance, the beginning of violent political opposition in an "Era of Great Reforms," the origin of terrorism, and the opening of modernity.

The political party *Narodnaia volia* (People's Will) might well be thought to have invented modern political terrorism. Verhoeven, however, argues that Karakozov introduced it ten years earlier. She borrows Dostoevsky's statement about Alesha, the hero of *Brothers Karamozov* (1880), and she says the feckless, disoriented, and seemingly negligible Karakozov "bears within himself the heart of the whole" (p. 3). His political-cultural meaning reaches out in all directions except chronologically backwards. Karakozov was a novelty. His act introduced and illuminated the problem of "the modern" in Russian political culture.

Verhoeven identifies the essential "actual" persons and events of the mid-1860s. Three appendixes anchor the exuberant narrative in durable detail. Creative and meticulous use of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) brings to light much that has not been considered before. The trial records are put to excellent use. She makes it clear that state police and judicial officials were as active in the sorrowful drama as those who opposed them.

Nothing about the "actuality" of this topic could be more important than the question of whether Karakozov's attempt represented an organized "conspiracy." Verhoeven is careful, but she could have taken a more resolute stand against the government's assertion that the

two purported solid bodies of conspirators—"Hell" and "The Organization"—actually existed. It seems that police and judicial authorities fabricated these bodies to demonize all social movements. This is more significant for Verhoeven's larger purpose than she fully realizes, because the emerging Russian police state seems every bit as "modern" as Karakozov and his associates. The state's ethically and legally unrestrained manipulation of judicial procedures and cynical publicity "spin" paralleled so-called nihilist ethical and legal unrestraint. This was political war, and Karakozov was not the only modern and fearsome aggressor, nor were he and his associates the only casualties.

Verhoeven's useful name lists and chronologies provide foundation for thinking more precisely about these issues than ever before. But Verhoeven moves beyond the "actual" toward the "real." She and I are both playing here with Dostoevsky's intriguing neo-Platonic idea of "higher realism" (p. 96). Readers will be challenged by her exploration of the less tangible but perhaps more profoundly significant cultural-historical meanings of "actual" persons and events. Verhoeven sets her interpretive perspective when she insists that terrorism—at least in its classical, revolutionary incarnation—is not simply a strategy, not a means toward this or that particular political end, but rather a paradigmatic way of becoming a modern political subject, and that its genesis can be understood only when analyzed in the material contexts of modernity (p. 4).

Notice how the abstraction "modernity" has "material contexts." Yet a most disquieting possibility is that we must emancipate or de-link the notion of "modernity" or "modernism" from the preceding parochial context of historical impulse and drag. On the contrary, history does not so much impel or restrain "the modern" as history is itself impelled or restrained by "the modern." Karakozov acted at that time and as he did because "the

modern” was ready for him to do so. To play with old Soviet historiographic concepts for a moment, we could say that Verhoeven believes there was no *zakonomernost'* (causal regularity) in Karakozov, and that is what makes him so important. “April 4, 1866, exists entirely in relation to historical novelties” (p. 6).

Some readers will appreciate this introductory discourse. Others will feel that the theoretical narrative, which raps up with the statement that “terrorism is politics in becoming,” almost loses its way in neo-Hegelian fog where all the marvelous detailed political actuality is of secondary importance (p. 7). And the first chapter causes some apprehension with its subtitle, “The Virtual Birth of Terrorism.” But the fog lifts quickly as the study proceeds with its complex and intriguing presentation. The right questions are provoked and details provide the material for answers. Some will feel that the cultural has absorbed too much of the political in Verhoeven’s energetic interpretive account. The search for historical precedence is put to the side in favor of accent on the culturally perceived novelty of Karakozov’s act. In the mind of the consuming “culture,” everything was different after April 4.

This is a welcome interpretive innovation. Chapter 2 discards the idea that Nikolai Chernyshevskii’s fictional Rakhmetov, in *What’s To Be Done?* (1863), can be taken seriously as a precursor to Karakozov. She “rereads” this infamous novel in a new and convincing way. Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866) also plays a prominent role here. The story seemed prescient—a murder committed by a lonely and disordered youth. By accident of historical fate—Karakozov’s shot in the park—the composition and serial publication of the later chapters were interrupted. Karakozov T-boned the great novel. It began to appear on one side of the startling shot, and it was completed on the other. It meant one thing before April 4, and it meant another afterward. Like those cognoscenti who can hear that chilling moment when Charlie Parker psychologically snapped in the midst of a recorded saxophone solo, so also can Verhoeven point to the chapter and verse in the novel (pt. 3, chap. 5) where the Karakozov hit transformed Dostoevsky, his art, and his readers (p. 101).

At the scene of the crime, Alexander II asked Karakozov what he hoped to achieve. Verhoeven rejects the several different contemporary accounts of what Karakozov answered and, in an uncharacteristic moment of credulity, accepts Harvard scholar Adam Ulam’s assertion that it was “Nothing, nothing.”[1] Yes, the unlikely Ulam-based reply feathers nicely with the theme of “ni-

hilism,” but Verhoeven rests a too-heavy interpretive crowbar on this flimsy fulcrum. It would have been better for her revisionist purposes if she had jettisoned the official conventional meaning of “nihilism.” It would have been better not to side with Mikhail Katkov, “Hangman” Murav’ev, and other establishmentarians who purposefully misread Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev’s novel *Fathers and Children* (1862). Turgenev’s nihilist Bazarov was twisted into a materialistic adherent to immoral doctrines—“the end justifies the means,” murderous socialism, and anarchistic scientific atheism. Friends and beneficiaries of the Imperial status quo transformed Turgenev’s nihilist in order to create an “-ism” and to fan public hysteria about an imaginary worldwide conspiracy against all that was Russian and holy. All this feels very “modern,” indeed.

Verhoeven does not need cliché nihilism as she moves ahead to explain the meaning of Karakozov. In her final three chapters, she calls our attention to the whole cultural landscape embodied in Karakozov’s “clothes, his body, and his psyche” (p. 105). These chapters are very fresh, creative, surprising, and thought provoking.

OK, clothing, face, psyche, but what about the direct expression of purpose in Karakozov’s personal proclamation “To My Worker Friends” (*Druz’iam-rabochim*)?—Reference to this important self-explanation appears on seven widely separate pages (pp. 22, 60, 97, 130, 189, 202, and 210). Only two of these offer direct citation of the text (pp. 60 and 130). And these are repeat translations of the same excerpted passage (with variations in scope and translation). This redundancy might be justified because it calls to question Ulam’s account of what Karakozov answered just after his shot and duplicates what some contemporary witnesses heard him say. And perhaps the variance reveals without detail the role of officials in tweaking the text, creating different versions to strengthen the case for vast diabolic conspiracy.

Most important, the proclamation suggests that significant events prior to April 4 were gnawing at Karakozov. Even if not a result of solid conspiracy, his shot did not come altogether out of the blue, out of “nothing.” For example, five years earlier during his time at Kazan University, the official “terroristic” massacre of villagers at nearby Bezdna deeply disturbed him, fellow students, and faculty. This tragedy caught the imagination of the whole Russian reading public like no other of the hundreds of similar unrestrained deployments of violent military force against recalcitrant villagers between 1858 and 1862. Verhoeven describes the modernist “amoral, all-or-nothing, end-justifying-means modus operandi” of

revolutionaries, and her full narrative gives ample basis to apply that phrase also to leading “reactionaries” (anti-reform officials) (p. 39). Karakozov’s politics show the scars of those “terrible” events. Add to this the anger over official assault on the new university, followed by student protests and hundreds of life-altering arrests of mobilized youth in the fall of 1861. If Karakozov (or Dostoevsky’s Alesha, for that matter) “bears within himself the heart of the whole,” the agonies of the reform era must be considered a vital valve of that heart (p. 3).

Karakozov’s proclamation calls in question the notion that he had either no political purpose or had a purpose so unprecedented, so “modernist,” that his errant shot must be seen as the beginning of a whole new political epoch. The proclamation expressed three of the most common themes found in the more than one hundred other political proclamations composed over the previous decade: the tsar is the people’s enemy, not the

people’s “little father”; he and his henchmen broke their promise to give the people their land; and they should all be brought to account for their crimes. Verhoeven asks us to read Chernyshevskii’s fiction with close attention. She could ask the same for Karakozov’s actual and direct political testament.

Readers will occasionally want to argue with Verhoeven and often to applaud her. She rewards careful and concentrated attention. From university undergraduates to advanced academic specialists, all who are interested in mid-nineteenth-century Russian history, politics, and culture will find reading, even rereading, this book a pleasurable, challenging, and informative experience. Here there is much of unique and real (as well as “actual”) value.

Note

[1]. Adam B. Ulam, *In the Name of the People* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 3.

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