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Dorota Walczak
University of Warsaw

The Icon and the Hatchet. The Motif of Aggression against Icons in Russian Literature before the Revolution

Reading 19th-century Russian novels, it is impossible to overlook the recurring motif of aggression directed against icons. This hostility manifests itself in varying forms – icons are hacked with an axe, smashed to pieces, spat on, mutilated or ridiculed; yet the theme of targeting icons was a fixture which appeared in the works of various Russian authors from the earliest literary texts in that language to the October Revolution. Writers who tackled the issue of aggression against icons include Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Lev Tolstoi, Nikolai Leskov and Dmitry Merezhkovsky.

As Dorota Jewdokimow observes, "An icon has the value of a religious symbol with the power to expose spiritual reality […] in every case, the attitude a given character displays towards an icon is also a manifestation of their attitude towards the reality of the divine".[1] I believe this view to hold true in reference to the works of various Russian authors; it is worth considering, however, whether revealing a character's view of religion – in this case a decidedly negative one – was indeed the main reason behind the author's choice to include the motif of aggression against icons in his text. To what extent do such scenes serve as the means for presenting the author's own outlook on religion? To what extent are they a way of identifying the icon destroyer as an "enemy", an "other", a foreigner, an unbeliever or a revolutionary "nihilist"?

No monograph written so far presents a thorough analysis of the issue of aggression against icons in Russian literature, even though literary texts are a valuable source for studying the phenomenon, since they contain an apt portrayal of 19th-century beliefs on iconoclasm and the possible motives behind destroying holy

1 D. Jewdokimow, *Człowiek przemieniony. Fiodor M. Dostojewski wobec tradycji Kościoła Wschodniego* [A changed man. Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky vs. the tradition of the Orthodox Church], Poznań 2009, p. 87.

images. Remarks on specific acts of aggression as described in the works of a given author are scattered throughout many academic texts pertaining to broader issues.[2]

The present article aims at conducting a detailed analysis of descriptions of acts of aggression against icons found in the works of Russian literature written before 1917. The designated scope of interest includes the authors' choices of the situations in which icons are destroyed or defiled, and the actions directed against holy images. I will specify who the literary characters appearing in the role of "iconoclasts" are and investigate whether they are more likely to be "others" (foreigners and followers of a different religion) or Russians ("nihilists"). I will also examine their apparent motives: a fear of the personages depicted therein, the wish to offend the religious sensibilities of the Orthodox people, a revolutionary desire to combat religion, or a simple expression of hatred and violence.

The people of Rus', who adopted Christianity in its Eastern variant in the year 988, embraced not only the elaborate cult of icons, but also various other aspects of Byzantine culture. For instance, translations of Greek legends and fables about the destruction of images circulated in Russian territories. In these tales, the role of iconoclasts was played primarily by Jews.[3] The native sects of Strigolniki and the Judaisers (Russian: **жидовствующие**), which appeared in Novgorod and Muscovy in the 14th and 15th centuries, were both accused of hostility towards images.[4] According to Barbara Dąb-Kalinowska, this could entail either acts of simple vandalism or a conscious iconoclasm.[5] The first political use of iconoclasm in Rus' is recorded to have occurred in the 16th century; the tsar of Muscovy Ivan the Terrible attempted to justify his invasion of Livonia by claiming that the Lutheran inhabitants of the region were destroying Orthodox icons by placing them in "foul places".[6]

The 17th century brought a complete re-evaluation of the definition of a Russian "iconoclast". Before, the rulers and Orthodox hierarchs had unanimously supported the cult of holy images and persecuted their annihilators; the current ones began to be perceived, at least by a portion of the society, as being principal iconoclasts

2 Cf. В. Лепахин, *Икона в русской художественной литературе*, Москва 2012; Н. А. Тарасова, "Интермедиальные связи в романе Ф. М. Достоевского «Подросток» (икона, картина, храм)", in: *Знание. Понимание. Умение*, 2010, no. 4, pp. 139–145; Jewdokimow, op. cit., pp. 85–87; P. Evdokimov, *Gogol i Dostojewski, czyli Zstąpienie do Otchłani* [Gogol and Dostoyevsky, or a descent into the abyss], translated into Polish by A. Kunka, Bydgoszcz 2002; K. A. Grimstad, *Styling Russia. Structuring Mechanisms in the Prose Fiction of Nicolai Leskov*, The Hague 2000, p. 133.

3 A. Sulikowska-Gąska, *Spory o ikony na Rusi w XV i XVI w.* [Debates on icons in Rus' in the 15th and 16th century], Warsaw 2007, p. 29.

4 Н. А. Казакова, *Антифеодальные еретические движения на Руси XIV – начала XVI века*, Москва– Ленинград 1955, p. 34.

5 B. Dąb-Kalinowska, "Heretycy i ikony" [Heretics and icons], in: *De Gustibus. Studia ofiarowane przez przyjaciół Tadeuszowi Stefanowi Jaroszewskiemu z okazji 65 rocznicy urodzin* [De Gustibus. Studies presented to Tadeusz Stefan Jaroszewski by his friends on the 65th anniversary of his birthday], ed. Robert Pasieczny, Warsaw 1996, p. 260.

6 A. Giza, "List Iwana IV Groźnego do cesarza Ferdynanda I z 1560 r. w zasobie Archiwum Państwowego w Szczecinie" [A letter of Ivan IV the Terrible to Emperor Ferdinand I from 1560 in the State Archive in Szczecin], *Szczeciński informator archiwalny*, 1995, no. 9, pp. 40–46.

themselves. This happened when, in 1654, Patriarch Nikon of Moscow publicly destroyed a number of icons he declared to be "poorly painted" and "too Western" in style.[7] This public act of iconoclasm caused such uproar among the faithful that many pronounced Nikon to be the Antichrist. The resulting split in the Russian Orthodox Church led to the emergence of the group of Old Believers, derogatorily dubbed "raskolniki" ("schismatics"). Since the times of Peter I the Orthodox Church had been rather sceptical towards "miraculous" icons, which began to be examined by separate church committees.[8] At the same time the Russian society, especially its educated part, was beginning to display an increasingly negative view of icon painting, commonly regarded as ugly, primitive folk art. Members of the 19th-century leftist intelligentsia often spoke against the cult of icons.

The term "iconoclasm" (**иконоборчество**) as such was not popular in Russian literature. The only example of its usage which I have been able to locate comes from Dmitry Merezhkovsky's novel *Peter and Alexis. The Romance of Peter the Great*. The word "**иконоборец**" (iconoclast) is used in relation to a barber by the name of Fomka, who chops an icon to pieces using a cleaver.[9] However, it may constitute an element of deliberate archaic stylisation of the language evident elsewhere in the novel.

Other works do not give any specific term to describe acts of image-breaking; only the manner in which an icon was destroyed or defiled is mentioned. In Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Demons* (1872), the description of the act of putting a mouse behind the glass which protects the icon includes the word "**кощунство**" (blasphemy).[10] The lack of terminology to describe aggression against icons is notable; in Dostoyevsky's novella *A Gentle Creature*, a pawnbroker refuses to accept an icon, telling his customer that taking icons as pawns is not, as such, illegal, but, as he puts it, "it feels, you know, wrong".[11]

According to the American scholar W. J. T. Mitchell, iconoclastic behaviour may be divided into three categories: annihilating, disfiguring and concealing the image.[12] The simplest and most radical method of destroying an icon is to cut it to pieces. Dostoyevsky's novel *Demons* mentions an officer who, prompted by revolutionary propaganda, first bit his commander and then destroyed some icons by hacking them with an axe.[13] The axe as a weapon of choice seems significant in this context. The symbolical meaning of an axe in Russian culture was discussed by James H.

7 B. Dąb-Kalinowska, *Między Bizancjum a Zachodem. Ikony rosyjskie XVII–XIX wieku* [Between Byzantium and the West. Russian icons of the 17th to 19th centuries], Warsaw 1990, p 12.

8 О. Тарасов, *Икона и благочестие. Очерки иконного дела в императорской России*, Москва 1995, p. 69.

9 Д. С. Мережковский, *Антихрист. Петр и Алексей*, in: idem, *Собрание сочинении в четырех томах*, vol. 2, Москва 1990, p. 452.

10 F. Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, translated by R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky, London 1994.

11 Idem, *Кроткая. Фантастический рассказ* in: idem, *Полное собрание сочинений*, vol. 24, Ленинград 1982, p. 8.

12 W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago–London 2005, p. 132.

13 Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, p. 346.

Billington: "[It] lived on as a symbol of rebellion. The radical intellectuals were accused by moderate liberals as early as in the 1850s of 'seeking out lovers of the axe' and inviting Russians to 'sharpen their axes'".[14] The motif of an icon being attacked with an axe is found in Merezhkovsky's works as well; the already-mentioned Fomka was accused of destroying an icon with an iron axe.[15] In Merezhkovsky's novel *Alexander I*, Kapiton Alliluyev, a painter, attacks an icon with a knife.[16] The fact that the icon is assaulted with a sharp tool testifies to its being treated as a living being who can be killed. This is a distant reflection of both the theology of icons and magical thinking; the assailant believes that the person depicted is truly present in their image.

Smashing icons to break them into pieces is also a recurring motif in Russian literature. Such an act is committed by Andrey Versilov, a character in *A Raw Youth* (*The Adolescent*), written in 1874.[17] Andrzej Walicki claims this action has ideological significance: "The symbolism of this scene [Versilov's smashing the icon – D.W.] is clear: shattering traditional (Orthodox) heritage, internal conflict (the icon split into two halves), a foreshadowing of the return of the prodigal son – a return facilitated by Sofya, a common woman".[18]

Nikolai Leskov's novella *The Sealed Angel* highlights the motif of mutilating and deliberately damaging an icon as if it were a living thing. The authorities confiscate icons from stonemasons who are Old Believers. In their desperation, the group attempts to conceal the titular icon of the angel; the furious official enacts his revenge by branding their precious icon with his seal.[19]

The motif of mutilating an icon appears again in Leskov's novel *At Daggers Drawn*, where several peasants are talking about their faith in spectres and phantoms: "A peasant with a booming voice spoke at that, explaining that their village had an image of the prophet Sissinios and the twelve demons of fever, all of them depicted as naked women, whose faces had been burnt with fire, because whoever comes to burn a candle for the prophet strikes the women's faces with that same fire, so that their faces would not be seen".[20] In this case, however, the aggressive behaviour did not stem from a lack of piety, but served as proof for the strength of the common people's faith. In this sense, the peasants' behaviour resembled the famous act by Vassily of Moscow, who smashed an icon, which had an image of the devil depicted

14 J. H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture*, New York 1970, p. 28.

15 Мережковский, *Антихрист…*, p. 452.

16 Idem, *Александр I*, in: idem, Собрание сочинении в четырех томах, vol. 3, Москва 1990, p. 276.

17 Ф. М. Достоевский, *Подросток* in: idem, *Полное собрание сочинений*, vol. 10, Ленинград 1975, p. 409.

18 A. Walicki, *Zarys myśli rosyjskiej: od oświecenia do renesansu religijno-filozoficznego* [The outline of Russian thought: from the Enlightenment to the renaissance of religion and philosophy], Cracow 2005, p. 491.

19 Лесков, *Запечатленный ангел*, 1889, p. 580.

20 Idem, *На ножах*, in: idem, *Собрание сочинении в двенадцати томах*, vol. 9, Москва 1989, p. 323 (passage translated for the purpose of the present publication).

beneath the painted surface.[21] Such practices are magical in character and are based on the assumption that one can destroy a demon by damaging its image.

More often than physical aggression, literature includes the motif of a symbolic battle, in which images are ridiculed and caricatured in order to be discredited in the eyes of the faithful or as means of defaming the Orthodox community itself. In Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–1881), the old Fyodor Karamazov tells his son Alexei the story of how he wanted to spite his late wife, the boy's mother: "'Look', I said, 'look, here is your icon, here it is, look, I'm taking it down from the wall. Now then: you believe it has the power to work miracles, but I'm going to spit on it before your very eyes and nothing will happen to me afterwards!'".[22] Karamazov wanted to vilify the icon not only to express his anger at his wife, but also to convince her that the icon, in whose intercession she believed so much, was a powerless piece of wood that could not even defend itself from aggression.

Defaming icons also occurs as a motif in another novel by Dostoyevsky, namely *Demons*. The instance of robbing a holy image described there is not, in itself, perceived as either terrifying or shocking. It is not the theft of the icon's revetment that is considered blasphemy, but the fact that a mouse is let behind the glass protecting the holy image: "But the main thing is that besides the theft a senseless jeering blasphemy was committed: behind the broken glass of the icon a live mouse is said to have been found in the morning".[23] Stripping an icon of its cover was naturally an evil deed, yet, according to Dostoyevsky, deliberate defamation was far worse.

In the already-mentioned novel *Peter and Alexis* by Merezhkovsky, the titular Tsarevitch Alexis reproaches his father Peter for pursuing an anti-Orthodox policy: "They call the holy icons idols, the church singing bulls' roaring. […] They take miracle-working icons away on stinking dung carts under dirty mats, thus insolently defiling them before the people. In this way they attack the Orthodox faith, under the pretext that it is not Christianity but only useless and harmful superstitions. […] If you ask for a reason, the only answer you get is: they were superstitious, bigots, sanctimonious humbugs! He who keeps fast is a bigot; he who prays, sanctimonious, he who adores the icons, invariably (they say) a hypocrite".[24] Alexis is convinced that combating hypocrisy and false piety through jeering may easily turn from fighting 'superstitions' to attacking faith itself.

Merezhkovsky also describes Peter I's actions against icons. The tsar wishes to "expose the deception" of a false miracle-working icon whose fame is clearly directed against him. The icon is said to be weeping due to the ruler's reforms and to portend disaster. The act of "exposing" the icon evolves into public ridicule, which Tsarevitch Alexis cannot bear.

21 C. Wodziński, *Św. Idiota. Projekt antropologii apofatycznej* [Saint Idiot. A project in apophatic anthropology], Gdańsk 2000, p. 101.

22 F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by D. McDuff, London 2003, p. 183.

23 Idem, *Demons*, p. 324.

24 D. Merezhkovsky, *Peter and Alexis: the Romance of Peter the Great*, London 1905, pp. 104–105.

> Peter left the table and coming out in front of the statue, where there was more room, he, leaning with his back against the marble pedestal and holding the image in his hand, began to give a careful and elaborate description of the deceptive mechanism. […] Peter removed the silver trimmings set with priceless gems; it came off easily, having been already loosened during the first examination. He then unscrewed the brass screws which fastened a small piece of new lime-wood to the back of the icon; in its centre there was fixed a smaller piece; it moved easily on a spring, a pressure of the hand was sufficient to work it. […] Peter proved it by an experiment: he moistened the sponges, put them into their cavities, pressed the board and the tears began to flow.[25]

In the end, the icon is destroyed; somebody steps on it in the panic caused by the storm. But the actual act of iconoclasm is committed by Peter through his act of "exposing" the icon. Significantly, the examination is performed during festivities organised to commemorate the arrival of a statue of Venus into Petersburg. The juxtaposition of these two depictions of women – the icon of the Virgin Mary and the nude, sensual Venus, sounds a strong note in Merezhkovsky's description. The scene seems all the more significant given the fact that in defaming the icon Peter is assisted by members of the clergy, most actively by Theodosius Janovsky. Peter declares the weeping icon a curio and plans to put it in a Kunstkammer to demonstrate that he does not feel any respect towards it. The mocking of the icon is interrupted by a storm, which may be interpreted as a manifestation of God's wrath at the tsar.

Literary portrayals of the perpetrators of aggression against icons and their motivation are an equally interesting issue. An unusual example of blasphemy comes from Nikolai Gogol's story *The Viy*. There, the icons are destroyed directly by an evil power. The praying Khoma evidently lacks faith and is therefore afraid of the "monstrous creatures" who, for example, throw the images off the walls of the church and toss them around the protagonist.[26] Yuri Mann, an authority on Gogol's works, writes that interference by a higher power is typical for Gogol's imagery: "In Gogol's stories, higher powers explicitly interfere with the plot. They are images personifying the unreal element of evil: the devil or people in alliance with him".[27] This isolated example aside, the categorisation of literary "iconoclasts" runs along the axis of "domestic" versus "alien". A large portion of the image-breakers depicted in prose are people from outside Russia, "foreigners" and "non-believers", often appearing as invaders and assailants. The "domestic iconoclasts" are usually revolutionaries, anarchists, freethinkers or reformers.

The works of 19th-century Russian authors often featured portrayals of iconoclasts who were foreigners and non-believers. The role is usually assumed by the invaders, or less often by the members of ethnic minorities and followers of religions regarded as "iconoclastic", i.e. Jews or Tatars. In historical novels set at the time of Napoleon's Russian campaign in 1812 the part of image-breakers is played by the

25 Ibid., pp. 28–29.

26 Н. В. Гоголь, *Вий,* in: idem, *Полное собрание сочинении и писем в семнадцати томах,* vol. 2*: Миргород*, Москва–Киев 2009, p. 448.

27 Ю. Манн, *Поэтика Гоголя*, Москва 1988, p. 68.

French, whom the authors portray as having been affected by anti-religious state propaganda.

The iconoclast in Aleksey Konstantinovich Tolstoy's novel *The Silver Prince* is a Tatar that wandered deep into the Muscovite state, almost reaching Moscow. In his descriptions of the image-breaker, the author emphasises his foreign origins.[28] Tatars are perceived as destroyers, invaders, enemies of Christianity and everything Russian. Tolstoy juxtaposes Tatars (Muslims) with Russian (of the Orthodox faith). This contrast is aimed at uniting Russians against Tatars, despite all internal divisions and conflicts. Prince Serebryany says: "Will we let the holy icons be insulted? […] Will we allow the unbaptised to burn our Russian villages and kill our brothers?".[29] Tolstoy does not mention the ideological motivation of the Tatars; the description suggests that the destruction of icons is brought about only by their desire for material profit.[30]

In Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Grigory Danilevsky's *Moscow in Flames*, acts of iconoclasm are committed by French soldiers. Tolstoy's protagonist, the Russian aristocrat Pierre Bezukhov, witnesses the departure of the French army from Moscow. Napoleon's soldiers are carrying spoils of war; the crowd surrounding Bezukhov offers the following comments: "'Look at those furs', they said. 'See what the vultures have looted… Behind there, on the cart, it's from an icon, by God!…'".[31] In his biography of Lev Tolstoy, Viktor Shklovsky emphasises that this monumental work focuses neither on the position of the French or Russian army nor on battle scenes; in his view, Tolstoy examined there the issues of the meaning of war, the underlying reasons for historical events, and the significance of national self-awareness in a war as experienced by ordinary people.[32] Tolstoy presents the anger sparked by the destruction and theft of Moscow's icons as a force unifying the Russian nation.

Moscow in Flames by Grigory Danilevsky describes the looting of Moscow's churches by the French:

> The holy images taken from the walls had been placed upon boxes containing groats or flour, and served the soldiers as seats; in the sanctuary a couch had been made with the doors of the Holy of Holies placed against the altar and was covered with a lilac silk priestly garment. It was occupied by the regimental cook, a chubby, ruddy lady, who was busy paring carrots. The table and the altar were heaped with numerous kitchen utensils; geese and pieces of game hung from the big chandelier; nails had been driven into the iconostasis and supported quarters of bleeding beef, which were carefully

28 After А.К. Толстой, *Князь Серебряный*, Москва 1977, p. 213. In the English-language translation: Alexey Tolstoy, *The Silver Prince*, by Nikita S. Galitzine, Trafford Publishing 2007, pp. 201–202, the prince's speech is rendered as follows: "Do you see how the cursed Tatars mock the Christian faith? […] Are we going to let pagans burn our Russian villages and slaughter our brothers?" (translator's note).

29 Ibid., p. 215.

30 Ibid., p. 214.

31 L. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, translated by R. Pevear and L. Vorokhonsky, New York 2007, p. 1018

32 В. Шкловский, *Лев Толстой*, Москва 1963, p. 404. Cf. the English translation, Viktor Shklovsky, *Lev Tolstoy*, translated by Olga Shartze , Moscow 1978.

> enveloped in a rich altarcloth; soldiers were smoking and playing cards; the atmosphere was suffocating.[33]

Jews as iconoclasts appear in *The Egyptian Darkness*, the first volume of an anti-Semitic trilogy by Vsevolod Krestovsky. A group of Jews raids a monastery demanding that Tamara Bendavid – who is the granddaughter of a local rabbi and has converted to Orthodox Christianity – and others be handed over. Although the attack does not result in any serious damage, a rumour begins to spread through the populace:

> And so, little by little, vague rumours and talks started to be heard in the market and the square, saying that someone had gone to the nunnery in the night and smeared the holy doors with tar and stained the holy images depicted thereon with mud, or something worse. And it is known what it means for the southern Russian folk to have someone's door smeared with tar. Who would do such an abominable thing and why? – Questions subconsciously arose among the people.[34]

Slowly the rumour about the extent of the "crime" spreads and the tales of the alleged blasphemy become increasingly serious in nature. The growing anger of the crowd leads to a spontaneous pogrom of the Jews. The local community regards Jews as enemies; instigators of the massacre recognise Jewish households and shops only by the fact that their windows are not adorned with icons.[35] Krestovsky, himself displaying a decidedly antagonistic attitude towards the Jewish community, presents the ever-expanding rumours of the desecration of images as groundless and harmful, yet does empathise with some of the voices from the crowd: "[…] they had given too much leeway to the Jews! They had been sitting on top of the christened folk entirely!".[36] The author appears to share the belief that unfounded allegations are a consequence of the actions of the Jews – a community which isolates itself from Russians and exhibits a hostile attitude towards its Christian neighbours.

The actions of the "domestic iconoclasts" are entirely different in nature than those of foreign image-breakers. Tight connections between religion and politics, as well as the sacralisation of the monarchy, prompted rebels to turn against the Orthodox church, which legitimised the tsarist rule and defended it. This also meant turning against its main symbols, that is, the icons. Those opposing the tsarist rule, the so-called "new men", had a negative view of the authorities, and thus also of the Orthodox faith and religious art. The majority of revolutionists agreed with Nicolai Chernyshevsky, who said that art ought to be ideologically useful.[37] As Andrzej

33 G. P. Danilevski, *Moscow in Flames*, translated by A. S. Rappoport, London 1917, pp. 148–149.

34 В. В. Крестовский, *Тьма Египетская*, vol. 1, Москва 1993, p. 233.

35 Ibid., p. 326.

36 Ibid.

37 A. Walicki, "Lwa Tołstoja poglądy na sztukę w związku z estetyką rewolucyjnych demokratów" [Lev Tolstoy's views on art in connection with the aesthetics of the revolutionary democrats], *Materiały do Studiów i Dyskusji z Zakresu Teorii i Historii Sztuki, Krytyki Artystycznej oraz Badań nad Sztuką* (henceforward: MSD), 1954, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 229–230.

Walicki observes: "The principal concern in revolutionary-democratic aesthetics is the issue of the ideological directionality of works of art".[38] The harshest opinion on the artistic quality of icons was expressed by the unofficial leader of revolutionary democrats, the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky.[39] The biography of the philosopher and theologian Vladimir Solovyov contains the information that in his youth he befriended revolutionaries and "threw all icons out of his house".[40]

The negative attitude towards icons displayed by "nihilists" was used by authors active in the genre of the so-called anti-nihilistic novel (Rusian: антинигилистический роман). This genre, characteristic to Russia, criticised the existing social reality, in particular the revolutionary and anarchistic movements.[41] Dostoyevsky's *Demons* are unquestionably a lampoon against the Narodnik version of socialism and a criticism of the worldview proposed by Nechayev ('nechayevschina'), even though the book contains more general and deeper thoughts on the essence of revolution and on human nature.[42]

Several scenes in *Demons* feature icons being destroyed or defamed by revolutionists. The already cited passage concerning the icon-destroying officer contains the information that "in his room he had placed the works of Vogt, Moleschott and Büchner on stands like three lecterns, and before each lectern kept wax church candles burning".[43] The place of icons is taken by works of three authors representative of the so-called vulgar materialism; this demonstrates that the human nature abhors a vacuum – having renounced God, a man must put something in His place. Billington mentions a similar tendency in 19th-century Russia; in his view, revolutionaries often wore the image of Rousseau around their necks instead of Orthodox medallions.[44] As noted by Dorota Jewdokimow, "in destroying the icon, the revolutionary in *Demons* denies that which is symbolised by it, i.e. the reality of the divine, replacing icons with books carrying a materialistic message".[45]

Another case of iconoclasm in *Demons* is the already-mentioned incident with the theft of an icon's revetment and putting a mouse behind the glass protecting the image. Dostoyevsky states that the assailant had a connection to Verkhovensky's "five" and that the act of defiling the icon was directed against the Orthodox Church, and thus indirectly against the State itself. Dostoyevsky saw the

38 Idem, "Zagadnienie piękna w estetyce rosyjskich rewolucyjnych demokratów. W 125-lecie urodzin M. Czernyszewskiego" [The issue of beauty in the aesthetics of the Russian revolutionary democrats. On Nicolai Chernyshevsky's 125th birthday anniversary], *MSD*, 1953, vol. 4, no. 3–4, p. 169.

39 Billington, op. cit., p. 33.

40 В. Л. Величко, *Владимир Соловьев. Жизнь и творения*, Санкт-Петербург 1904, pp. 17–18.

41 В. Л. Терехин, *«Против течений»: утаенные русские писатели. Типология антинигилистического романа*, Москва 2002, p. 104.

42 L. Bazylow, *Historia nowożytnej kultury rosyjskiej* [The history of modern Russian culture], Warsaw 1986, p. 509.

43 Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, p. 346.

44 Billington, op. cit., p. 396.

45 Jewdokimow, op. cit., p. 85.

direct relation between the icon, the Church and the State, apparent in Captain Lebyadkin's note written to governor von Lembke: "If you want a denunciation to save the fatherland, and also the churches and icons, I alone can".[46] The author clearly links iconoclasm with anti-government activism, disrupting the society and robbing it of the support of religion. Henryk Paprocki claims that iconoclasm is, essentially, the negation of God in oneself, and that this was the reason why Verkhovensky and Karamazov destroyed icons.[47] It is not by coincidence that Dostoyevsky portrays the antagonists of his novels as iconoclasts.

Dostoyevsky was not the only author to equate iconoclasm with "nihilism". The negative attitude towards icons as displayed by the "new men" was also emphasised by Krestovsky in his anti-nihilistic novel *Krovavyi puf.* Lidhinka Zayc, a nihilist, teaches children to be "godless", saying that "an icon is not God, but an ordinary wooden board. God, my dear, does not exist and never has, and if they tell you that he does, they are deceiving you".[48] Lidhinka, a member of "nihilist" youth, persuades her pupils to accept the inexistence of God by negating the purpose of the icons' existence.

Kirillov, the "religious revolutionist" from Dostoyevsky's *Demons*, is an interesting case. He is presented as an apologist of suicide, claiming that the human race had conceived God because of its fear of death, and that only suicide, being a manifestation of courage, may free a man from superstition and allow him to become a god in human shape. Yet Kirillov keeps an icon of Christ in his room and burns a candle before it, despite trying to belittle this fact in public.[49] Neither does the old revolutionist Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, a democrat and liberal, denounce God; he even converts to Christianity at the end of his life. Although posing as a free-thinker and atheist, he keeps icons in his house and turns to them when he is afraid of being arrested.[50]

Also in Andrei Bely's novel *Petersburg* (1912) there is a character who despite being a revolutionary always carries an icon "just in case". The abode of Aleksandr Ivanovich Likhutin, a member of a revolutionary group, is described in the following manner: "In addition to the bed, yes, here I must say, hung a small icon of Seraphim of Sarov's thousand nights of prayer amidst the pine trees, on a stone (here I must say – Aleksandr Ivanovich wore a small silver cross under his shirt)".[51]

Andrey Petrovich Versilov, the protagonist of *A Raw Youth*, may also be considered a free-thinker. His life is hardly an example to follow: he has two illegitimate children and his mistress, Sofya, is married to another man. He is nonetheless still seeking God and experiencing moral turmoil. Dostoyevsky portrays him as a man posing as a liberal, but desperate in his search for faith and the meaning of life;

46 Dostoyevsky, *Demons*, p. 360.

47 H. Paprocki, *Lew i mysz, czyli tajemnica człowieka. Esej o bohaterach Dostojewskiego* [The lion and the mouse, or the human mystery. On Dostoyevsky's heroes], Bielsko-Biała 1997, p. 52.

48 В. В. Крестовский, *Кровавый пуф*, Москва 2007, p. 326.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., p. 334.

51 A. Bely, *Petersburg. A Novel in Eight Chapters*, translated by D. McDuff, London 2011, p. 330.

his attempts at converting to Catholicism and periods of asceticism are also mentioned.[52] In the already cited passage, Versilov destroys an icon and proceeds to explain the motivation behind his deed to Sofya: "Don't take it for a symbol, Sonia; it is not as Makar's legacy I have broken it, but only to break something… […] You may take it as a symbol, though; of course, it must have been so!…".[53] In the specialist literature, Versilov's symbolic iconoclasm is interpreted in a number of ways. Jewdokimow and Walicki agree that the breaking of the icon is a pivotal point in Versilov's fate, constituting the lowest point in his downfall and the beginning of his journey towards redemption: "In Versilov's character, through the icon and the repudiation of the image and the rejection of God, the author shows a descent towards the bottom, so as to show the ascent of the image, i.e. the healing of the split in the protagonist's nature".[54] A different motivation is presented in the case of another of Dostoyevsky's protagonists, namely Fyodor Karamazov. He is portrayed as a man known for his decadent lifestyle and following a hedonistic philosophy. Fyodor Pavlovich expresses a negative view of Orthodoxy and regards the restrictions of religion as a hindrance.

The portrayal of icon-breaking and acts of iconoclasm committed by members of the authorities, or even by the tsar himself, appears to be a uniquely Russian phenomenon. Such actions are motivated by the desire to either combat the excessive (in the iconoclast's opinion) cult of icons, or to oppose "heretics". The motif appears in a particularly elaborate form in Merezhkovsky's novel *Peter and Alexis*.

Merezhkovsky's Peter I is a dualistic figure full of internal contradiction. He is presented as both a reformer attempting to inculcate Russians with the appreciation for European culture and education, and as a ruthless eradicator of old Russian traditions, which he views as a sign of ignorance and superstition. Peter even turns against his own son Alexis. According to Bernice Rosenthal, in Merezhkovsky's novel Alexis represents Christ, a martyr giving his life for the old faith in tradition.[55] The author apparently sides with Alexis. As Ludwik Bazylow observes, Merezhkovsky "prefers to support traditions on the verge of extinction. He saw the sophistication of new ideas, yet regarded their implementation as requiring too great a sacrifice".[56]

In his novel, Merezhkovsky portrays Peter as a ruler certain of his civilising mission and internally obliged to educate his subjects. Paradoxically, however, the monarch chooses to introduce "education" and "civilisation" by very uncivilised means. The author is trying to show that many actions of the reformist tsar were directed against the Orthodox Church; their aim was to limit its privileges and make it subordinate to the tsar's authority. Merezhkovsky's Peter is not an enemy of the Orthodox faith and does not view himself as fighting with religion as such, but only with

52 F. Dostoyevsky, *A Raw Youth*, translated by C. Garnet, Overland Park 2009, p. 24.
53 Ibid., p. 328.
54 Jewdokimow, op. cit., p. 85.
55 B. G. Rosenthal, *D. S. Merezhkovsky and the Silver Age: The Development of a Revolutionary Mentality*, The Hague 1975, p. 104.
56 L. Bazylow, *Historia*, pp. 540–541.

the superstitions that had arisen around it. Grażyna Kobrzeniecka-Sikorska states that "although Peter I did not declare an open war on the cult of icons, he did act against the excessive forms of that cult. The fight was mostly directed against miracles allegedly worked by icons […]. Peter saw the belief in miracle-working icons as synonymous with backwardness and was motivated by the wish that superstitious practices were no longer mocked by foreigners".[57] According to Sergiusz Michalski, Peter was against the cult of icons, as his sympathies lay with Protestantism.[58] This opinion seems to be shared by Merezhkovsky, who writes that Peter I "delighted" in talking about false miracles and exposing them.[59] Revealing the deceitful trick was a game; he did not view the act of disclosing the fallacy of a miracle-working icon as blasphemous. "His face was calm, as if he had just been describing a curious trick of nature or some unusual object in the Kunstkammer".[60] In Merezhkovsky's novel, Peter I is a scholar performing experiments, who thinks that by revealing the falsehood of miracles he is not fighting religion, but creating a new, more rational and "enlightened" version of it. According to Leonid Dolgopolov, Merezhkovsky's opinion of the reformist tsar was too harsh: "To Merezhkovsky, the disruptive activity of Peter I is but a reconstruction of external forms of life that does not affect the transformation of an individual's soul. Only Alexis holds the potential for a true change – hidden, internal and spiritual. The entire novel aims to substantiate this view. Peter's actions suffer due to narrow-mindedness, as they reflect only one side of the issue, namely soulless rationalism. To Merezhkovsky, he seems a despot introducing new forms of state activity with a typically Eastern cruelty. He is creating a new State, devoid of religion and morality".[61]

In his novel, Merezhkovsky attempted to demonstrate that an example works "top down": all dignitaries, state officials and even ordinary citizens strove to imitate the ruler. In Alexis' eyes, the barber Fomka was a continuator of the trend started by Peter I; his act of iconoclasm was ideologically motivated, even though the barber went a step further than the tsar, destroying the icon "because he did not revere the holy icons, the life-bringing cross nor holy relics; the holy icons, said he, and the holy cross are merely the work of man; and he did not believe that relics brought pardons for his own transgressions. Neither did he accept the church dogma and traditions, nor did he believe the Eucharist to be the true body of Christ, but simply bread and wine".[62] Peter's anger when Fomka is burnt at the stake indicates that the tsar was on the barber's side and agreed with his actions.[63]

57 G. Kobrzeniecka-Sikorska, *Ikona, kult, polityka. Rosyjskie ikony maryjne od drugiej połowy XVII wieku* [An icon, the cult, politics. Russian Marian icons after the second half of the 17th century], Olsztyn 2000, p. 123.

58 S. Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe,* London–New York 1993, p. 156.

59 Merezhkovsky, *Peter and Alexis*, p. 28.

60 Ibid., p. 29.

61 Л. Долгополов, *Андрей Белый и его роман «Петербург»*, Ленинград 1988, p. 292.

62 Merezhkovsky, *Peter and Alexis*, p. 106.

63 Ibid., p. 106.

Another author to mention the destruction of icons perpetrated by the authorities is Leskov. In his short story *The Sealed Angel* the act of iconoclasm is committed by officials and the defiling and confiscation of icons constitutes a personal revenge by one of the clerks who feels wronged by the Old Believers: the prayers they offered for the success of his planned business endeavour had not been effective. He offers to return the icons in exchange for a substantial bribe: "Give me a hundred roubles for each picture, otherwise I will burn them all".[64] Learning that the stonemasons do not have such a sum, the official feels disappointment and his anger turns to fury when he realises that they are trying to conceal their most precious icon, that of an angel. The act of destroying the icon by branding it with a seal is an expression of his rage.

Leskov's intention in describing the mutilation and confiscation of the Old Believers' icons was to demonstrate the utter lack of restraint with which the officials treated the members of that religious group. In his interpretation, members of the state authorities believe the Old Believers to be lawless, so they confiscate and damage the icons they possess, even though they do not have the authority to do so; after all, they do not need to justify their actions if these concern outlaws. The head official is not dissuaded by the arguments used by the chief of the stonemasons, Luka Kirillov, who begs for the icons to be spared as they are "holy" and constitute "the wonderful artistic heirloom of [their] forefathers".[65] The icon has no religious or artistic value for the chief official; it is used only as an outlet for his anger and the means of exacting revenge on the Old Believers, who care deeply about their "Guardian Angel". This attitude is very apparent in his words: "Oh, you rascals, you wanted to steal it that it might not hang on the rod, but as it is not there see now what I will do to it".[66] Taking the icons away from the Old Believers as an act of repression by the authorities is also described by Krestovsky in the already-mentioned anti-nihilistic novel *Krovavyi puf*.[67]

Iconographic acts motivated by religious faith constitute a separate category. A clear example of such actions comes from the already cited passage from Leskov's novel *At Daggers Drawn*, in which peasants damage the faces of demons depicted on icons. The female figures, appearing all the more diabolical since they are depicted naked and shameless, are attacked by the faithful, who collectively destroy them.[68] Iconoclasm caused by strong beliefs may also be identified in Merezhkovsky's novel *Aleksandr I*. The painter Kapiton Alliluyev is driven by madness rooted in religion: "He was pious and wanted to become a monk since his early years".[69] When Arakcheev demands that Alliluyev paints a blasphemous depiction of the Mother of God, with his mistress Nastasya Minkina portrayed as the Virgin, the "split" causes

64 Leskov, *The Sealed Angel*, in: *Russian Sketches, Chiefly of Peasant Life*, translated by B. L. Tollemache, London, 1913, p. 44.
65 Ibid., p. 44.
66 Ibid., p. 45.
67 Крестовский, *Кровавый пуф*, p. 165.
68 Idem, *На ножах*, p. 323.
69 Мережковский, *Александр I*, p. 276.

the artist to lose his senses. The painter, "who regarded blasphemous images to be a mortal sin", ultimately attacks the icon of Mary he created.[70] "He was tortured by his conscience; he started to drink and drank himself feverish. He wanted to drown himself; he was pulled out and flogged. He drank more and one day in a bout of madness he threw himself at the icon of the Virgin Mary, the one he himself painted, the one with the face of Nastasya Minkina, wishing to cut it with a knife. When he was caught, he declared that he would stab the real Nastasya as well".[71] The painter wanted to destroy his own work because, in his eyes, depicting Mary with the features of the lewd Nastasya made it not an icon, but an "anti-icon", a demonic image that worked not to strengthen people's faith, but to make them lose it.

* * *

The motif of aggression appears frequently in Russian literature of the 19th and early 20th century. It was used both by the so-called "classic" authors (Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy) and writers representing the second or third rank (Danilevsky, Krestovsky). The chosen means of aggression differed – icons are presented as cut to pieces, chopped, mutilated, defamed or ridiculed. The literary accounts are, however, quite one-sided, since the motif of image-breaking was usually used by "conservative" authors who felt a strong connection with the Orthodoxy, and not by those identifying with the revolutionary intelligentsia.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that the literary iconoclast is invariably an "other", a person from outside the given community or the cultural circle. That can mean a foreigner, an unbeliever (a Tatar, a Jew, a Frenchman), but also an "ideologically estranged" Russian, i.e. an atheist, a revolutionary, a person devoid of traditional values. "He is a true poet and loves Russia, yet denies her absolutely. He is without any sort of religion, but yet almost ready to die for something indefinite, to which he cannot give a name, but in which he fervently believes, like a number of Russian adherents of European civilisation of the Petersburg period of Russian history" – this is how Dostoyevsky described the iconoclast Versilov.[72] The image-breakers portrayed in Russian literature are people who put themselves outside of Russian society and are alien to it, cut off from their roots.

Literary reactions to iconoclasm often assume a collective form which unifies the Russians against a common blasphemous enemy, be it internal or external. The middle of the 19th century was a formative period for modern European nationalism. In Russia the greatest contributions to this process were made by the so-called Slavophiles, who believed in the extraordinary quality of the Russian people. According to Walicki, they saw profound significance in juxtaposing the "atheist" West with the "truly Orthodox" Russia, and the "religious" Russia of the past

70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 Dostoyevsky, *A Raw Youth*, p. 364.

(i.e. before Peter I) with the Europeanised modern face of the country.[73] While the Russian elites had become secularised and made themselves similar to western-European circles, the common people managed to preserve the "ancestral faith" in an unsullied form, including rituals and the cult of icons, which the intelligentsia was no longer able to accept or understand. Observing peasants praying to an icon, Ivan Kireyevsky came to the conclusion that the faith of people who pray to an image with such fervour simply must be genuine.

"The people hardly know faith, you may say, they cannot even say a prayer, but bow down before a piece of wood and mutter some nonsense about the Good Friday and Florus, and Laurus. […] The common people know Christ, their God, perhaps better than we do, even though they were not taught at schools", wrote Fyodor Dostoyevsky to the liberal critic Avseenko, referring to the Slavophile notion that only the common people of Russia had adhered to the pure Orthodoxy and were able to defend it.[74]

The so-called "classical" Slavophiles praised the piety of the simple people, juxtaposing it with the hierarchic Church, which they regarded as tainted with Western rationalism, and distanced themselves from the authority of the tsar.[75] Representatives of the later iteration of the movement expressed very different views in this respect. Within a few decades, Slavophilia had taken a strong turn towards state nationalism. Danilevsky was an apologist of both the official Orthodox faith and tsarist autocracy.[76] The rank of the highest values was granted to Orthodoxy and "Slavness" as expressed in the framework of statehood. From the 1860s onwards, the Slavophile movement was becoming increasingly nationalistic and "pro-state" in nature. The state began to be identified with religion, and the tsarist regime with Orthodoxy. Defending the faith and its symbol, the icon, from an enemy, be it a foreigner or a revolutionary, became tantamount to defending the state and the nation.

Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz

Abstract

The present work focuses on the motif of aggression against icons introduced in the works by many Russian writers before the Revolution. Analysed material includes the works of Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Nikolai Leskov, Lev Tolstoy, Dmitri Merezhkovsky and Vsevolod Krestovsky.

73 A. Walicki, *W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii. Struktura i przemiany rosyjskiego słowianofilstwa* [In the circle of the conservative utopia. The structure and transformation of the Russian Slaviphilia], Warsaw 2002, p. 14.

74 Достоевский, *Дневник писателя за 1876 год*, in: idem, *Полное собрание сочинении*, Ленинград 1981, p. 113.

75 Е. А. Дудзинская, *Славянофилы в общественной борьбе*, Москва 1983, pp. 33–34.

76 Walicki, *W kręgu…*, p. 370.

The main aim of the article is to define how the authors imagined an act of image-breaking and to determine who played the role of an iconoclast and what the presented motivation of such actions were. It attempts to answer the question of why so many authors felt the need to incorporate the motif of aggression against icons in their works, what literary and propagandistic aims this motif served, what feelings it was meant to evoke in the readers and what image of the world it strove to create.