

Three in the Game, the Fourth Forgotten

Abstract

The focus of the article “Three in the Game, the Fourth Forgotten” is the incomplete research of the notable Bulgarian literary critic, translator and essayist Tzvetan Stoyanov’s *The Genius and His Mentor* (1978). Tzvetan Stoyanov’s book examines the relationship between the great Russian writer Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky and the Chief Prosecutor of the Russian Holy Synod Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev, the tutor of Emperor Alexander III, considered one of the most retrograde and reactionary thinkers and public figures in general in all of Russian history. The questions that the article asks are: 1) why did Konstantin Pobedonostsev turn specifically to Fyodor Dostoevsky with the desire to turn him into a spokesman for the conservative wing of Russian humanitarian thought in the 19th century, even though there were other significant figures of that time who could have fulfilled the same role?; 2) why does Tzvetan Stoyanov emphasize Dostoevsky’s ties with Pobedonostsev without taking into account the above-mentioned fact?; 3) did Dostoevsky really protect himself from Pobedonostsev’s influence and not allow him to fulfill his intentions towards him? The conclusion drawn by the article is that Dostoevsky and Pobedonostsev were not such antagonists as Tzvetan Stoyanov presents them, but rather like-minded people, and only death prevented Dostoevsky from finally transferring to Pobedonostsev’s camp.

Keywords

game, Tzvetan Stoyanov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, Vladimir Solovyov, Konstantin Leontiev, Nikolai Leskov, retrograde, reactionary, writer

Play. Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky loved to play, and he even wrote a novel about it – *The Gambler* (“Igrok”, 1866): “Fyodor Mikhailovich – his wife Anna Dostoyevskaya recalls – was entirely on the side of the ‘player’ and said that he himself had experienced many of his feelings and impressions” (Dostoyevskaya 1976, 43). *The Gambler* is a fatal novel: its writing depended on whether Dostoevsky would

not become a “serf writer” five years after Tsar-Liberator Alexander II abolished serfdom (1861). The story is dramatic (like everything else about Fyodor Mikhailovich, by the way): the writer takes care of the family of his deceased brother Mikhail, with whom they planned a new “thick magazine” („толстый журнал“), “Epocha”: the former “Vreme” was closed by the authorities after the emperor was outraged by a publication by N. N. Strakhov (under the pseudonym Russki, *Русский*) with the title “A Fateful Question”. The article concerned the events surrounding the Polish uprising in 1863 (an uprising also discussed extensively in Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*). His Imperial Majesty was angered that the author of “Vreme” described the turbulent events as fateful (see Stoyanov 2016, 67-68). Let’s not forget: in Russia, only what the “boss” defined as such is fateful, the rest is irrelevant. “Vreme” was closed, but with the greatest mercy “Epocha” was opened (the Dostoevsky brothers seemed to have a penchant for “chronic” titles). However, the worries of the closure and the stress of going through the courts to successfully launch the new magazine exhausted Mikhail and he had a sudden recollection. His brother Fyodor Dostoevsky – whether as a result of remorse for not helping him enough in these efforts, or because of his immense love and affection “for his brother” (Hristo Botev), took on his debts, as well as the protection of his family, although he himself was not in a flourishing state. The debts turned out to be unbearable and Dostoevsky was threatened with a debtors’ prison (in which he had already been). And then, as he probably thought, a favorable outcome came: the publisher and his namesake Fyodor Timofeevich Stellovsky offered him 3,000 rubles for a three-volume set with all his previously published works (*Notes from Underground*, and others), but also with the obligation on November 1, 1866 to deliver him a completely new novel, previously unpublished. Otherwise, if Dostoevsky failed to fulfill the contract concluded on July 2, 1865, Stellovsky would acquire the right to publish any of his works, including unwritten works, for a period of nine years, without paying him. Not a kopeck, nothing!... Stellovsky was a shark, completely unscrupulous: it turned out that these 3,000 rubles that he gave to F.M., almost all went into his pocket, since he had previously bought off the brothers’ debts for next to nothing. The writer had no idea about the publisher’s machinations, and he was also pressed against the wall, so he accepted the dangerous bet. And let’s not forget that Dostoevsky was a gambler, including a gambler at the roulette

of life! He was already halfway through *Crime and Punishment* and must have believed that in a year and four months he would be able to finish the novel and hand it over to Stellovsky. Yes, but no! – the monster of writerly “serfdom” was increasingly threatening to him. And then... And then came the miracle in the person of the young stenographer Anna Grigorievna Snitkina, recommended to his friend and literary critic Alexander Petrovich Milyukov by the professor of stenography Pavel Matveyich Olkhin. Snitkina was the professor’s best student. The writer and the girl worked on both novels in parallel, giving, of course, priority to *The Gambler*. They finished it on October 29, 1866, the day before the writer’s birthday (October 30 old style) – in just 26 days. Or, as a Malazan proverb says: “Never bargain with a man who has nothing to lose” (Ericson 2024, 237), he will always find a way out. Dostoevsky triumphantly handed the novel *The Gambler* to Stellovsky on November 1, 1866. Before that, he organized a gala dinner, to which he invited Anna. A few days later, he proposed to her: “November 8, 1866, is a significant day in my life: on that day Fyodor Mikhailovich told me that he loved me and asked me to become his wife. Half a century has passed since then, but all the details of that day are as clear in my memory as if they had happened a month ago” (Dostoevskaya 1976, 51).

The dangerous bet with Stellovski is won, and ends with a wedding – a complete happy ending.

The life-gambling ordeal for the passionate gambler Dostoevsky has a happy ending, the novel-gambling one for his hero and also a passionate gambler Alexei Ivanovich – not so much. With Tzvetan Stoyanov, things seem to happen the other way around: for the hero of *The Genius and His Mentor* Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, the favorite writer of the Bulgarian encyclopedist (see Zhechev in Tzvetanov 2016, 7), Tzvetan Stoyanov inlaid a happy and worthy ending, but the happy ending passed him by – on July 3, 1971, without having completed his *magnum opus*, Tzvetan Stoyanov leaves this world: “It’s scary now, when you think about it: only hours separated Tzvetan from that exhausting effort of his as a laborer over the typewriter in the house with old-fashioned furnishings on Gogol Street, where he labored over a description of Dostoevsky’s last days until taking his own path to the end, the path to Pirogov, where mistake after mistake piled up, each more fateful than the other and as fantastically real as everything is in the novels of his beloved writer.” I do not want to believe in such a fatal

and fantastic mixing of literature and life, in the painful relationship between the subject and the object of research, in this change of roles and life circumstances, in such a love union, which otherwise only in romantic legends ends and is resolved with death” (see Zhechev in Tzvetanov 2016, 7). The games of fate do not forgive Tzvetan Stoyanov and he loses the bet with the disease. Toncho Zhechev sincerely admits that he does not want to believe in this predestination, but this is exactly what happens: Tzvetan Stoyanov leaves the world ridiculously, and the last words written by him are “The open grave” and “his fresh grave”: “Coincidences are mysteriously many to be accidental,” the close friend doubts the justice of the world (see Zhechev in Tzvetanov 2016, 7). But these are not the only coincidences that puzzle the authoritative critic, and these are not the only discrepancies that puzzle us, the readers – who read both *The Gambler* and *The Genius and His Mentor*. The biggest discrepancy, at least in my opinion, we find in the choice that Tzvetan Stoyanov explicitly insists in his book was made by Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev, the chief prosecutor of the Russian Holy Synod, namely: that he, the experienced intriguer and skilled courtier, should turn to this very writer, with his influence on whom he could secure in public opinion the necessary and cherished sympathy for his conservative, retrograde and backward views. And that this writer, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, should turn out not to have actually served him, but to have misled him. It was him who misled him – Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev.

It sounds somewhat unexpected: the hyena chose a victim, and she eluded it...

Of course, Tzvetan Stoyanov justified his hypothesis for precisely this choice with superb rhetoric; ignites it before us with an almost impressionistic fervor: “Both Balzac, Goethe, and Tolstoy impose ideas and tastes, but they do so through the image itself, through at least its apparent objectivity. Dostoevsky is above all a suggestion, he does not depict, he suggests, does not keep a distance, but presses himself into you, his image is a voice, it flows, electrifies, captures the whole being – there is something almost magical, almost hypnotic in the effect. He takes over consciousness despite resistance, despite reservations and doubts, manages somehow from behind, somehow treacherously and gently to grab his audience, to crush them, to upset them and then to rearrange them according to his will even when they do not want to be rearranged. Here, this last quality made the strongest impression

on Konstantin Petrovich – that even when the audience does not want to, when its reason defends itself and maintains its preliminary status, it is still not the same after reading” (Stoyanov 2016, 76). With these “electrifying” words of his, Tzvetan Stoyanov places three figures around the gambling table of the literary-historical ideological roulette, two of which are undoubtedly hot-tempered. The first, the most important, is also the most unbalanced: hasty, restless and explosive, even dynamite – that is, you guessed it, bravo! – Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, of course: “The unsuccessful trip to Homburg affected Fyodor Mikhailovich’s mood. He began to often return to conversations about roulette, regretted the wasted money and blamed himself exclusively for the loss. He claimed that very often the chances were in his hands, but he did not know how to hold on to them, he was in a hurry, changed the bet, tried various methods of playing – and as a result he lost. And this happened because he was in a hurry, because he went to Homburg alone and was constantly worried about me” (Dostoevskaya 1976, 123). Here are more “hot” characteristics of the writer’s personality – this time philosophical, not conjugal: “Indeed, in Dostoevsky there is something of the spirit of Heraclitus. Everything in him is fiery and dynamic, everything is in motion, in contradictions and struggle. Dostoevsky’s ideas are not frozen, static categories, these are fiery currents” (Berdyayev 1923, 8). The other figure with a hot temperament, the creator of the story about the genius and the mentor, is more stable than that of his hero, he is playful, at times even ironic, but he is also influenced by the Heraclitus spirit – Tzvetan Stoyanov. In terms of his attitude towards his writing and towards culture in general, we observe a proper logic in this Heraclitus figure, being at the same time emotionally alive and fascinating with logic. At least that is what the witnesses claim. Wife Antoaneta Voynikova: “With him, everything was explained in detail in advance and organized by a large conceptual staging. He could not tolerate disorder and irresponsibility in literature. Each of his works was preceded by intense analytical and conceptual-constructive activity. His brain was clear and creative. Tzvetan felt reverence for human logic” (Voynikova in Stoyanov 2016, 233). Friend Toncho Zhechev: “He narrated and spoke literally as he wrote – passionately, lightly, with incomparable traversals, which in a kind of improvisational brilliance took down the highest of the sinful and dusty earth or raised to the pure and rarefied heights of the heavens the most banal and dirty in life”

(Zhechev in Stoyanov 2016, 8–9). By the way, with this skill of his, in some unknown way, he, Tzvetan Stoyanov, resembles his idol, Fyodor Dostoevsky, to a great extent: Toncho Zhechev said of his indomitable friend that he “leaned more towards the Renaissance ideal” (Zhechev in Stoyanov 2016, 9), Berdyaev, for his part, says of Dostoevsky that he “resides in the Dionysian, orgiastic element” (Berdyaev 1923, 30¹). One, if not identity, then at least cultural-historical symmetry. Thus, in the literary-ideological game, taken up by Tzvetan Stoyanov with the book *The Genius and His Mentor*, he includes two “hot people” – himself and Dostoevsky, who – if they were left alone, I suppose, would with their fiery passions set fire to the gambling table dressed in green cloth. That is why the Bulgarian scholar needed to place another, third person next to her: more stable and serious, more restrained and purposeful. A person, an important person, a very important person!. This third person is Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev, the tough imperialist. In Tzvetan Stoyanov’s description, the Chief Prosecutor is depicted as exactly such an iron man – cool, disciplined, absolutist: “The Church, subordinate to the emperor, itself subordinates him to its nature, or rather they merge into the ‘unity’ of faith, they are one, not two principles. Thus, the absolutism that Konstantin Petrovich fights for is a theocratic absolutism restored in the modern world, similar to his beloved ancient Egyptian structure, but in a new Russian Orthodox modification – at the top the pharaoh, ruler and high priest, the whole society as a mixture of barracks and monastery, with monastery silence, with monastery spirituality, a thought about the absolute even in everyday life, ‘developed funeral customs’, memories of ancestors – all this pyramidally repeating from the top to the ‘lowlands’, strict regulation and corporate division of labor – everyone should mind their own business! – impeccable internal discipline and thanks to it external imperial expansion” (Stoyanov 2016, 48-49). Pobedonostsev is the Arctic shower for the pathetic fires burning the souls of Stoyanov and Dostoevsky; he is their cool firefighter.

But is one cool firefighter enough for two raging human flames? Will he be able to extinguish the fires that are burning them all by himself? According to Tzvetan Stoyanov, no, he won’t be able to. And he is somewhat right – with him, the cool Pobedonostsev himself (despite his name) really doesn’t succeed; Tzvetan Stoyanov doesn’t

¹ In the original edition of the book *Dostoevsky’s Worldview* (1923), the page numbering is wrong, page 20 is indicated instead of 30.

give in to his hypnotizing gaze and icy presence at all. But, at the same time, his intellectual-critical belief that the fire, burning and scorching the soul of Fyodor Dostoevsky (Tzvetan-Stoyanov's too, of course), is capable of withstanding the cold, even frosty waterfall of calculation of his other hero from *The Genius and His Mentor*, Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev, seems a little naive to me. And precisely for this reason, I think that without a doubt, hastily and somewhat calculatedly inaccurately, Tzvetan Stoyanov directs Konstantin Pobedonostsev explicitly and only to Fyodor Dostoevsky with the idea of turning him, the writer of the “humiliated and offended”, into that “reformer” and “corrector” (Hristo Botev) of Russian public opinion so necessary to Pobedonostsev and dreamed of by him in the right conservative and loyal direction. To re-educate Dostoevsky into an instrument of the “Okhrana”². Because, I think, the Chief Prosecutor had other options before him, equally promising, with which it would probably have been easier, more accessible, and with a more solid guarantee of success. But due to certain circumstances – they overtook him, surprised him, seduced him, he gave them up. He doesn't even see them. He does not see them and is wrong, because – if we believe Tzvetan Stoyanov's thesis, in relation to Dostoevsky Pobedonostsev suffered a crushing defeat and instead of the Chief Prosecutor transforming him into his own, the writer, on the contrary, at the end of his days began to move away, more and more from him, the security guard, to move away... “He achieves nothing” (Stoyanov 2016: 301), is the final verdict of the Bulgarian critic. And he could have achieved if his choice had fallen on someone else. Contemporaries unanimously testify: with Alexander III Konstantin Petrovich achieved a lot, an extraordinary amount. Not for any other reason, but because he correctly chose on whom to exercise his conservative influence. With Dostoevsky, however, the high dignitary gambles on a losing card: he turns to the passionate player Dostoevsky and squanders his chance, because on the Russian intellectual terrain there were other “players”, more inexperienced and susceptible, whom, however, he, Pobedonostsev, did not even

² “Okhrana” is the abbreviated (slang) name for “Guard Department” (“Department for the Protection of Public Security and Order”), included in the structures of the Tsarist Secret Police, created in August 1826 by order of Tsar Nicholas I after the Decembrist uprising on 14.XII.1825 (26. XII.1825 new style). The “Okhrana” itself was established in 1866 under the subordination of the St. Petersburg mayor after the attempted assassination of Tsar Alexander II by Dmitry Karakozov (4/16.IV.1866). The department was closed by decree of the Provisional Government of 14.III.1917 immediately after the February Revolution.

think of manipulating in favor of his reactionary ideas. Moreover, Tzvetan Stoyanov did not think of these players either: all of them, from the scholar-literary critic to the official-seducer, are unremembered, unremembered, unforeseen. Forgotten, completely forgotten.

But did Konstantin Pobedonostsev really have other options?

Yes, definitely yes. True, over time they fall away one by one, but that they existed is undeniable. One of these possibilities was Vladimir Sergeyeovich Solovyov, the famous philosopher, author of the idea of “congregation”, son of the no less famous historian Sergei Mikhailovich Solovyov. About him, Alexei Losev writes: “He was an expansive, enthusiastic, impulsive person and, as we have already indicated, most of the time he lived in the estates of his friends or abroad. Having very original views, he never got close to either the right or the left” (Losev 1990, 103). Solovyov hinted at his youth about future “great hopes”, about him the conservative Russian thinker Konstantin Leontiev sincerely admitted that he loved him very much („Я его крепко люблю“). However, this was at the beginning, at the first steps of the young philosopher in the intellectual life of tsarist Russia. Subsequently, the defender of Orthodoxy not only declared him a “villain” and a “satan”, but even insisted on his expulsion from Russia: “It is necessary, very necessary, to expel Solovyov from the borders of the Empire...” (Losev 1990, 79-80). It is curious, by the way, that both Leontiev and Pobedonostsev – two Russian thinkers very similar in their conservative sentiments, were seduced in their political fantasies by Eastern despotisms, in which they found their ideal for the state structure of the Northern Empire: if Pobedonostsev pharaonism and looks with longing eyes at ancient Egypt, Leontiev Byzantiumizes and constantly highlights the Roman Empire, the Second Rome, as an example for imitation by the Moscow Kingdom, the Third Rome. However, both of them conveniently forget (another forgetting, let us note) the empire of Genghis Khan and the Golden Horde: the real, in my opinion, predecessors of the exercise of power in the Russian and Muscovite way. The short Russian intellectual-historical memory does not last long, however: in 1921, Prince Nikolai Trubetskoy, together with Pyotr Savitsky, Georgy Florovsky and Pyotr Suvchinsky, founded the Eurasian movement in Sofia (see Trubetskoy 2012, 37 et seq.). To which, by the way, the ideas of Vladimir Solovyov and probably Dostoevsky indirectly contributed. The two were close friends, the

writer likened the philosopher to one of his favorite paintings – “Head of the Young Christ” by Annibale Carracci (Dostoevskaya 1976, 206).

And yet, he, Fyodor Mikhailovich, would certainly have anathematized Vladimir Sergeyevich, just like Konstantin Nikolaevich, if he had heard him on 28.3.1881 in a public lecture call *ex cathedra* Alexander III, who had just taken the throne after the successful assassination attempt on his father Alexander II, not to punish regicides with death. Because of this thoughtless (unthoughtful) act of his, the doors of Russian universities were closed to the then still young Solovyov (he was born on 28 January 1853) forever (according to his biographer, however, he would have been bored to be an ordinary professor (Losev 1990, 63). More importantly, the hearts of the few who saw in him, in the face of Vladimir Sergeyevich Solovyov, that “lord of thoughts” („властитель дум“), capable of uniting the Russian intelligentsia with their native, primordially Russian soil, were also closed. Solovyov repeatedly complained to his friends: “I wish no harm to anyone, I only want Pobedonostsev not to prevent my books from being printed” (Eltsova 1991, 150). However, Pobedonostsev had crossed him out completely, just as Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy had crossed him out; without a drop of mercy, he places both of them in the imperial “isolator”: “We cannot hide from the fact that in recent years the mental agitation has intensified extremely under the influence of the works of Count Tolstoy, which threaten to spread strange, perverted concepts about faith, the Church, the government and society; a completely negative orientation, alienated not only from the Church, but also from nationality. Like an epidemic madness, it conquers minds. And Tolstoy was joined by the completely deranged Solovyov, presenting himself as some kind of prophet and – despite the complete absurdity and bankruptcy of everything he preaches, he is listened to, read and applauded, as recently happened in Moscow” (Pobedonostsev in Losev 1990, 471-476). And for Emperor Alexander III, Pobedonostsev’s true pupil, Solovyov was simply: “The Purest Psychopath” („Чистейший психопат“).

Yes, a year after Dostoevsky’s death, Pobedonostsev realized with regret and anger that Solovyov could not replace the writer... There is no way such an exemplary “psychopath” could be entrusted with the responsible task of dragging and attracting the Russian intelligentsia into knee-jerk reverence for the autocracy and Orthodoxy. Vladimir Solovyov’s candidacy was rejected without appeal. But it is strange that

Konstantin Petrovich did not try to attract as a partner his namesake Konstantin Nikolaevich Leontiev – initially a friend, and then a sworn enemy of Solovyov. However, it seems that there are both objective and subjective reasons for this abstention. The objective ones are that until 1874 Leontiev was outside the borders of the Russian Empire: he served it faithfully as a dragoman in Chania on the island of Crete, consul in Adrianople (Edirne), vice-consul in Tulcea, Northern Dobrudja, Romania, and again consul in Ioannina and Thessaloniki. And despite the fact that Leontiev published relatively actively, the major social movements in the country passed in his absence; that is, he was not amid the whirlwind of events. The subjective ones are that Pobedonostsev did not particularly like Leontiev’s fiery verbal outbursts (in this respect, he tolerated only Dostoevsky). Not to mention that he did not agree at all with Konstantin Nikolaevich, who considered Greek Orthodoxy more righteous and more important than Russian; therefore more valuable than the empire. And this is unacceptable, a real scandal! According to Lev Tikhomirov³, a former revolutionary, later one of the remarkable conservative Russian thinkers, a minister in Stolypin’s government, between Pobedonostsev and Leontiev there was a sharp disagreement on the issue of the Bulgarian church struggles precisely on this basis: “At that time” – writes Tikhomirov – “the struggle of the Bulgarians against the Patriarchate of Constantinople was going on, which had escalated to the point of anti-canonicity. Our Church or, more precisely, the government (in the person of the chief prosecutors Count Dmitry Andreevich Tolstoy and Pobedonostsev) sympathized with the Bulgarians and silently watched the violation of the rights and interests of Constantinople. Leontiev, having a not very high opinion of the Slavs and in every respect preferring the Greeks to them, fought hand in hand with Filipov for the Patriarchate of Constantinople“ (Tikhomirov, 1992, 15). And although the thinker-“guardian” Leontiev gives Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev as an example with his behavior during the days of the Pushkin celebrations (June 1880), contrasting him with Dostoevsky’s famous speech

³ Lev Aleksandrovich Tikhomirov (1852–1923) in his youth was a member of the revolutionary organization “Zemlya i volya” (“Land and Freedom”) and “Narodnaya volya” (“People’s Freedom”). It was he who drafted the proclamation of the “Narodovoltsy” after the assassination of Alexander II on March 1, 1881. To avoid arrest, in 1882 he emigrated to Switzerland, where in Geneva, together with Pyotr Lavrov, they published the newspaper “Narodnaya volya”. In 1888, he renounced revolutionary ideas, wrote the pamphlet “Why I Stopped Being a Revolutionary” (1888), thanks to which he was pardoned and in 1889 returned to Russia. In the government of Stolypin (1906–1911) he was responsible for issues of the press and workers’ organizations. In 1917, he gave up political activity.

(Tzvetan Stoyanov also draws attention to this fact), he does not have a particularly high opinion of him, he considers him a “soulless tomb”: “He is a very useful person: but how? He is like the cold, he prevents decay, but nothing can grow with him. Not only is he not a creator, he is not even a reactionary, he is not a restorer, he is only a conservative in the narrowest sense of the word: cold, I say, a guard, a soulless tomb, an old ‘innocent’ virgin and nothing more”... (Leontiev 1911). In other words, although both of them, Pobedonostsev and Leontiev, have one goal and idea – to elevate the empire and solemnly bring faith into the service of the throne, they have very distant (even opposite) understandings of how to do this: Pobedonostsev, this “successful Julien Sorel” (Stoyanov 2016, 27), believes that nothing should change and should remain as it is (cold, frost and constancy for eternity), while Leontiev insists on a return to the Byzantine heritage (as he imagined it, of course). It is in this sense that Leontiev is a true “reactionary” (which, in his words, Pobedonostsev is not), that even a retrograde and to an even greater extent a retroutopian. But there is no way that a conservative in the narrow sense of the word (Pobedonostsev) can find a common language with a conservative in the broad sense of the word (Leontiev) – no agreement arises from such a divergence, it is impossible to reach consensus.

Vladimir Solovyov – unbalanced, Konstantin Leontiev – exalted: neither one nor the other suited the goals of Konstantin Pobedonostsev. He knew it (or at least felt it), since he had a keen sense of the human soul and passions – he knew where to press and where to relax in order to get what he wanted. A player, a great player. Tzvetan Stoyanov, who was also a great player, admits it to him – Hristo Drumev, the excellent bridge master who served as the prototype of one of the characters in the novel *The Portrait of My Double* by Georgi Markov, says that he had a teacher, a more excellent player than him – namely Tzvetan Stoyanov (“Tsvara”). About Pobedonostsev, Tzvetan Stoyanov writes: “We must say right away that Konstantin Petrovich was a great player – undoubtedly greater than his master. He was an exceptionally gifted courtier, the likes of which even the Russian royal court rarely saw. He knew exactly when to object, when it was better to remain silent, when one should even express agreement” (Stoyanov 2016, 30). The Bulgarian scholar believes that it was precisely on the basis of this intuition that the Russian Chief Prosecutor looked at Dostoevsky; however, I argue that he had another target in mind, easier and

closer, but for inexplicable reasons (or perhaps explainable ones, we will find out) he did not think of him. By the way, Tzvetan Stoyanov does not think of him either, although – from all accounts, this author would have been the most successful choice for Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev.

It's about Nikolai Semyonovich Leskov.

He was born on 16.2.1831. Dostoevsky was older than him by almost ten years. Pobedonostsev was between the two, 2.6.1827. Four years is a difference in any time, one is always inclined to give priority to the authority of age, especially in the 19th century. Therefore, it is even more surprising that Konstantin Petrovich did not turn to Leskov instead of Dostoevsky – it would have been more profitable for him, including from this position, to the more mature one. Not to mention that Nikolai Semyonovich was close, very close to his views, closer even than Dostoevsky, therefore, difficulties and stumbling blocks in the “processing” could not be expected. And accordingly, to arrive at the sad result (or rather lack of result): “He achieves nothing”, as Tzvetan Stoyanov noted regarding Pobedonostsev's efforts. True, Leskov was disliked by the “leftists,” who even spread a rumor that he had written his first three novels – *Nowhere* (1864), *The Encircled* (1865), and *In Dispute* (1870) – on direct orders from the Third Department of the Okhrana, the sinister secret police (Oborin, 2024, 224). This (false, by the way) rumor ruined Leskov's reputation in the eyes of the “revolutionaries”: the invective of Dmitry Pisarev, the young critic, about Leskov's novel *Nowhere* is well-known: “All this would be funny if it weren't so stupid” (Pisarev quotes a phrase by Leskov). Good! But if the depiction of acquaintances was done in order to harm one's neighbor, to avenge insults, or to ensure the novel the success they define as *un scandalous success* (scandalous)? What then? Then it is best to rephrase the sentence as follows: “All this would be funny if it weren't so dirty.” – I am very concerned about the following two questions: 1) will there be at least one magazine in Russia today – apart from “Russian Gazette” – that would dare to print on its pages anything by Mr. Stebnitsky (Stebnitsky is a pseudonym for Leskov, under which he published *Nowhere*) and signed with his surname?; 2) will there be at least one honest writer in Russia who would be so careless and indifferent to his reputation as to agree to work in a magazine that adorns itself with Mr. Stebnitsky's stories and novels? (Anninsky 2012, 76).

The sentence was harsh, Leskov seemed doomed. In the same year, 1864, he wrote his famous work *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, published in issue 1 of the Dostoevsky brothers' magazine "Epoch" for 1865 (he did not receive a fee, which somewhat spoiled his relationship with the brothers). The work did not enjoy the popularity with which it became famous later, mainly thanks to Dmitry Shostakovich's opera *Katerina Izmailova*, which infuriated Joseph Stalin. Varvara Babitskaya tells in the "Polka" project: "Reviews of 'Lady Macbeth...' did not appear either in 1865, when the magazine was published, or in 1867, when the essay was reprinted in the collection *Stories, Essays and Stories* by M. Stebnitsky, or in 1873, when this edition was repeated. Not even in the 1890s, shortly before the writer's death, when his *Complete Collected Works* in 12 volumes were published by Alexei Suvorin's publishing house and brought Leskov the belated recognition of readers" (Babitskaya 2024, 50). Saltykov-Shchedrin himself, author of *The History of a City*, scoffed in a "devastating article". But all this, in my opinion, would definitely have attracted Pobedonostsev like a real shark that had smelled blood, so that he could make at least some, however minimalist, warming gesture that would flatter Nikolai Leskov's soul. However, Pobedonostsev passed by all this cruel intellectual showdown with silence, even indifference. Presumably busy instilling mind and reason into the head of the heir to the throne (which was not distinguished by any special talents, so he had to try hard). And perhaps that is precisely why Pobedonostsev passed: it was still too early for the future Chief Prosecutor to actively participate in the game, he had not yet become that all-powerful official, as happened during the reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II. But he could not have failed to notice Leskov's talent, respectively the possible benefit of his being drawn to the conservative clique. Leskov would hardly have resisted, because: 1) he was in great need of support and encouragement after the "left" outrages against him; 2) his own views were too close to those of Pobedonostsev. Leskov writes – and writes well (otherwise he would hardly have been attacked so "savagely"), but after Pisarev's pamphlet it seems that it was tacitly decided that no one would pay attention to him. Or, if he does turn to him, it is with only one intention – to insult him: "Some critics pointed out the excessively bizarre language, others were cynically interested in the mental health of the author, who – telling about all sorts of 'devilry', assures that he is telling the 'truth'" (Trofimova 2024, 241). We mentioned

Saltykov-Shchedrin, who is intoxicatingly mocked in “Sovremennik”: “In the story *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* the author tells of a woman – Fiona, and says that she has never refused a single man, then adds: “Such women are valued extremely highly in robber gangs, in prison parties and in Social Democratic communes”. All these additions, rubbing the nose of the revolutionaries, about the female Fiona and about the nihilist bureaucrats, are scattered without any connection everywhere in Mr. Stebnitsky’s book and serve as evidence that the author has some peculiar fits from time to time“ (Babitska 2024, 50). It was this sunken reputation that did not attract – what am I saying?!, but rather repelled Konstantin Petrovich from Leskov: he did not want his name to be associated with an author disliked by critics and the public, as well as by colleagues. Although – to Dostoevsky’s credit, he did not harbor any particular ill feelings towards Nikolai Semyonovich, despite the misunderstanding over the unpaid fee. The Russian poet and critic Lev Oborin noted in his essay on the book *The Congregants* (which Leskov considered his best work: “This is perhaps the only work of mine that will find a place in the history of our literature” – Oborin (2024, 207), that: “Dostoevsky and Leskov carefully read each other, which is why in both *Demons* and *Congregants* one can find quite a few parallels: for example, in *Demons* the revolutionary-provocateur Verkhovensky offers Stavrogin the role of Ivan Tsarevich in the political conspiracy, and in *Congregants* the provocateur Termosesov offers Prince Bornovolokov: “Be like Ivan Tsarevich, I will be your Gray Wolf” (Oborin 2024, 205). Fyodor Mikhailovich (half-heartedly) praises Leskov’s story *The Sealed Angel* in *The Writer’s Diary* (1873), saying: “The conversations of the Englishman and the schismatics about icon painting stand out in the story. The place is really nice, the best in the entire work” (Dostoevsky 2021, 197). But along with the good words, he almost immediately doubts the authenticity of what was written, it seems contrived: “In general, in this sense, Mr. Leskov’s story left me with a painful impression and a certain distrust of the veracity of what was described. Of course, it is wonderfully told and deserves all kinds of praise, but my question is: is all this true? Could all this have happened in our country? The thing is that, as they say, the story is based on real facts” (Dostoevsky 2021, 198). The writer-critic makes us imagine such a case at length, and also cites the account of an eyewitness – a village priest from the Oryol province, to whom an official (peace mediator) stated that the government was not thrilled with the possibility of

education being under the care of the clergy. “Why so?” – the priest became interested, to which he received a direct answer: “Because the clergy are the conduit of superstition” (Dostoevsky 2021, 198-201). Here comes Dostoevsky’s pain, the reason for his distrust and objections to Leskov: the latter described the clergy in an unfavorable light, which – even if based on facts – still should not have been expressed publicly. Because: “We are generally inclined to accuse our clergy of indifference to the holy cause; but what could they do in some cases? And at the same time, the people need the help of the clergy more urgently than ever. We are experiencing the most ambiguous, the most inconvenient, the most transient and the most fateful moment perhaps in the history of the Russian people” (Dostoevsky 2021, 201-202). What emerges from Dostoevsky’s disagreements? It turns out that the truth must be concealed for the sake of the people’s need, because they, the shepherds, may not be high-ranking, but the flock should not know about it, because otherwise they will not follow them. It is as if this flock is blind, deaf, without taste, touch and smell; naive, ignorant, simple. The people are like a child, Fyodor Mikhailovich is convinced, and this child needs fathers, and fathers with authority. According to him, these fathers can be found in only two places: 1) in the church; 2) in the palace. And the greatest father is, of course, the king: “These are royal children, these are real, real royal children, and the king is their father. [...] With the peasant reform, the king became a father in practice. And the people’s attitude towards the king as towards a father is our true, granite foundation, on which any reform in our country could be built” (Stoyanov 2016, 118). *Fathers and Children* (Turgenev), but in a completely different light: fathers are protectors, children are obedient, and educators who cultivate children are loyal subjects. As Tzvetan Stoyanov emphasizes: “And the reforming of Russia is, above all, a ‘parental act’, and it is part of its ‘peculiarity’ (Stoyanov 2016, 119).

Here, in this statement of Dostoevsky, lies his huge divergence from Nikolai Leskov. A huge ideological divergence, which is especially evident in the characters described by both of them: if Dostoevsky deals either with the urban “humiliated and insulted”, or with the intelligentsia at a crossroads, or with dissolute and/or slightly insane representatives of the upper classes (especially in the so-called “Pentateuch”: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Adolescent*, *Demons*, *The Brothers Karamazov*), then Leskov in his most famous works tells about completely different layers of Russian society

– peasants-schissists (*The Sealed Angel*), the merchant class (*Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*), master craftsmen (*The Left-Hander*), the lower clergy (*The Fallen*), wanderers – God-seekers (*The Enchanted Wanderer*). Nikolai Semyonovich never stopped pointing out that, unlike other Russian writers, he speaks in his books in the language of the people he wrote about: “Leskov liked to emphasize that, unlike the nationalist writers of the 1960s, he knew the common people not by hearsay and claimed on this basis a special authenticity to his biographical descriptions: even though his characters were fictional, they were written from life.” (Babitskaya 2024, 61). It was precisely on the basis of this particular form of expression (in association with that of Gogol) that the concept of “tale” was introduced into Russian literary studies: “[I]n Leskov’s case, we are not dealing with an exact reproduction of folk speech – this is the path that the creators of essays on folk life have been trying to follow since the time of the naturalistic school – but rather with a stylization in accordance with it: on the pages of his stories, Leskov practiced a lot in pseudo-folk word creation. Immersed in the search for a new artistic form, oriented towards folk themes, Leskov gradually developed a special form of narration – the tale, as it would later be called in literary studies. It is believed that this form was first described in 1919 in the article *The Illusion of the Tale* by Boris Eichenbaum, which, however, dealt not with Leskov’s work at all, but with Gogol’s *The Overcoat*. [...] That is, the story brings into the literary text the colloquial style with all its colloquialisms, jargonisms and irregularities, so that the listener can immerse himself in the situation as much as possible” (Trofimova 2024, 245-246). In other words, the way Leskov tells is completely different from the way Dostoevsky tells: if the latter’s style is, as Tzvetan Stoyanov notes, “to prove ‘the opposite’” (Stoyanov 2016, 162), that is, he leads a discussion with other intellectuals and ideologists like him, who – if he fails to unite, at least he can refute and thus make them think; Leskov describes ordinary people, pulls out folk images and folk people from the bowels of Russian society, from its depths, presenting them to the audience as they are – simple-minded, unadorned, naively simple. As Toni Nikolov notes in his preface to the translated *Bulgarian collection* of works by Nikolai Leskov, *The Sealed Angel* (2016): “It was only at the beginning of the 20th century that his prose began to be perceived as a ‘phenomenon’, and he was considered ‘the most Russian of Russian writers, who deeply and extensively knew the Russian people as they

are” (D. P. Svyatopolk-Mirsky)” (Nikolov in Leskov 2016, 19-20). It is in connection with the story that Toni Nikolov cites Walter Benjamin’s opinion that in his novel structures, Leskov does not keep pace with the searches of the contemporary (19th and the 20th century) novel: “He is above all a storyteller, and a storyteller of a high class. None other than Walter Benjamin, in his reflections on the genesis of the modern novel, dedicates a separate study to Leskov’s poetics, situating it at that point in the narrative at which the oral is separated from the written, insofar as the classical novel arises individually and in solitude, since it is not a tradition, but an organization of events in the rhythm of historical action. No matter how controversial this definition of Benjamin for the modern novel is, what is interesting is that he chose as its counterpoint precisely the work of Nikolai Leskov. According to Benjamin, Leskov is the “great exception” because he learns from the ancients and remains close to the forgotten traditions of oral creativity (“the tale”)” (Nikolov in Leskov 2016, 25). In other words, if Dostoevsky writes “ideological” and “intelligent” novels, then Leskov creates “love”⁴ and “folk” stories, intended not to excite any intellectual constructions, but to recreate the life of ordinary people as it is. The writer tries to make these ordinary people seen, noticed, taken out of anonymity, in order to be properly appreciated: “Leskov – Tatyana Trofimova points out – consciously collects in his story almost all romantic clichés in order to show them with his rereading in a reduced-realistic key. Where the heroes were previously aristocrats, in their place comes the ordinary man, Ivan Flyagin” (Trofimova 2024, 252). And it is precisely this ordinary person, it seems to me, who is the faithful shield that protected Nikolai Semyonovich Leskov from the possible advances of Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev to turn him into his confidant: Leskov has no relation to those who manipulate public opinion, that is, the intelligentsia, he tells about other people, more genuine and not so deeply obsessed with ideas – priests, Old Believers, merchants, wanderers... That is, all those whom Pobedonostsev’s trusted people had to manipulate. However, Leskov says (and proves) with his works: they do not need manipulation, they know best what is useful for them and where to look for (and find) the

⁴ “Lubok” is the name given to Russian folk graphics from the 17th –20th centuries, characterized by a simple style, bright colors and a combination of picture and text (instructive or humorous). This type of “folk picture” was a cheap and accessible form of art for peasants and lower class citizens. The name was also used for more simple folk literary publications. The origin of the name comes from the specially treated wooden boards on which the drawings were printed, called “lubok”.

truth. In other words, the writings of Dostoevsky, on the one hand, and Leskov, on the other, reveal the enormous chasm (division) between the Russian intelligentsia and the Russian people, which had erupted during the times of the Schism, continued with the Petrovich reforms, and deepened during the reign of Nicholas I – so deep that even the abolition of serfdom failed to fill it. It is well known, for example, how the common people welcomed the enthusiasts of the “walking among the people” movement in 1874: “It turned out to be difficult to enter into an understandable and useful conversation with the peasants. According to V. G. Korolenko, “the revolutionary intelligentsia and the people had neither a common language nor mutual understanding.” Lukashevich and Aitov, when they asked some peasants to spend the night in their cellar, “for the first time they heard the invariably repeated question: ‘Whose are you?’ They ‘didn’t understand it at all,’ Lukashevich admitted, ‘as if they were speaking to us in some foreign language. The word ‘whose’ sounded so strange, it seemed to us like some incredible remnant of the time of slavery, when it was probably natural for serfs to ask whose they were, that is, to which ‘master’ they belonged... Only later did we realize that this wild-sounding word in the mouths of the peasants simply replaced the question of where we were from, that is, from which district or which district we were from... We were literally ‘foreigners’ here, in Central Russia, and we had only the most general idea of the religion and customs of the local population” (Pelevin 2013, 80). All this mutual misunderstanding between peasants and intellectuals sometimes spilled over into beatings of the excited youth, in other places into handing them over to the police, in third places into their expulsion from the peasants. And, I say this with regret, Dostoevsky’s ideas about the people are the same as those of “those walking among the people” – the most general ideas. Which crystallized in his conviction that “God reveals himself in the abyss – Dostoevsky’s eternally favorite theme. And happiness is redeemed with suffering” (Bykov 2020, 330-331). Here is the huge difference between him and Leskov, who knew the people firsthand, from nature, as they said then. And along with their suffering, he also described their joys, their bright moments (*The Enchanted Wanderer*). However, Pobedonostsev did not need connoisseurs of the people, Pobedonostsev needed connoisseurs of the intelligentsia. And that is why he does not recognize Leskov, but recognizes Dostoevsky.

Not to mention that Fyodor Mikhailovich had no objection to being recognized at all. Let us recall that he himself sought out Konstantin Petrovich, that is, the recognition was a two-way, parallel mutual attraction of both parties to each other. Anna Dostoevskaya shares in her memoirs: “Fyodor Mikhailovich loved to visit K. P. Pobedonostsev very much; conversations with him gave him a great mental attitude, like communication with an unusually sharp, deeply understanding, albeit skeptical mind” (Dostoevskaya 1976, 293). Dostoevsky met Pobedonostsev at the regular Wednesday gatherings organized by Prince Vladimir Meshchersky, the publisher of the magazine “Grazhdanin” known for his extremely reactionary views, and a gravitational sympathy instantly arose between the two: “It was here that he met K. P. Pobedonostsev, with whom he later became very close, and this friendship remained until his death” (Dostoevskaya 1976, 175). Tzvetan Stoyanov also acknowledges this mutual liking (almost seduction), although he tries to belittle and underestimate it throughout the entire text of *The Genius and His Mentor*: “And now this same genius **himself** (*sic!*) came to Pobedonostsev, **himself** (!) put his sword in the service of the tsar and the faith. In the fierce ideological battle, the “guard” received an unexpected ally – a new, previously unknown powerful weapon, which could strike the “depths” of human souls with an explosion” (Stoyanov 2016, 81). Let me repeat: historical facts testify that it was not Pobedonostsev who sought out Dostoevsky, but that Dostoevsky sought out Pobedonostsev. It is not for nothing that Dmitry Bykov calls the author of *Demons*: “the first poet of Russian fascism” (Bykov 2020, 322). And Mikhail Shishkin in his essays on Russian literature specifies: “Dostoevsky felt a dislike for all nationalities except for the ‘God-fearing Russian people’” (Shishkin 2025, 127). This attitude towards “Great Russian” imperialism and chauvinism is the deep reason why he, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, alone, truly alone, without any coercion, placed himself at the service of the greatest retrograde within the borders of the Russian Empire; to put it a little more sharply, it was offered to him directly and the experienced intriguer did not miss the opportunity to take advantage of it. Why should he even bother with the compromised among the intelligentsia – especially the left-wing intelligentsia, Nikolai Leskov, when he has Dostoevsky at hand, who did not have a bad name among them at all? Tzvetan Stoyanov affirms in this regard: “Dostoevsky again!” – exclaims the populist Nikolai Mikhailovsky in

irritation a year after his death in his famous article *Cruel Talent* – but no matter how much he argues with him, no matter how much he complains about his “cruelty”, no matter how much he rejects him as a “prophet”, he acknowledges his presence. And from the grave he does not leave us alone, torments us, asks questions, pulls us somewhere. There are also many memories of participants in the then progressive youth circles, where “wild disputes” were constantly waged about him – they rejected him and, rejecting him, affirmed him, because the next day they would take up the same topic again – “Is he an obscurantist? Is he a great artist?...” (Stoyanov 2016, 80). In this opinion, Tzvetan Stoyanov also receives support in absentia from Rene Girard: “This art, entirely built on the terrible and shocking experience of the writer, will seek expression beyond negation. Dostoevsky does not pretend to escape from the dungeon; on the contrary, he descends so deeply into it that he emerges from the other side. “Not like children, I believe and confess Christ. My hosanna has passed through the hell of doubts” (Girard 2013, 137). However, Leskov did not at all believe in suffering as a redemptive hell and a radiant promise of a future hosanna, not to mention that he did not at all succumb to the sorcery of the Chief Prosecutor who seduced Dostoevsky. In a letter to Leo Tolstoy (5.VIII.1988) he mockingly calls Pobedonostsev Lampadonostsev, and when he was teased about the portrait of Count Mikhail Loris-Melikov hanging on his wall, that he would introduce a “lame constitution” in Russia, Nikolai Semyonovich angrily replied: “And wouldn’t Pobedonostsev’s rule be better?” (Leskov 1931, 03.04.1881). Dostoevsky surrendered to Pobedonostsev, Leskov avoided Pobedonostsev, and perhaps that is why Tzvetan Stoyanov conveniently forgets the creator of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*. Because – if he had not forgotten him, the heroic image that he builds of his beloved author in his book *The Genius and His Mentor* would have melted like a lump of ice on a hot tin roof.

Polish writer Mariusz Szczygiel, winner of the *NIKE award* for 2007, tells in his book *Gottland* about the Czech shoe manufacturer Tomasz Bata that the second of his four recommendations to the workers in his factories was: “2) not to indulge in idleness (it is best to read, but

with one caveat: DO NOT READ RUSSIAN NOVELS – this is the slogan invented by Bata on the wall of the felting workshop. Why? Bata's answer is on the wall of the gumming workshop: RUSSIAN NOVELS KILL THE JOY OF LIFE” (Szczygiel 2013, 21). The Czech manufacturer does not specify which Russian novels should not be read, but they certainly include all of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, every single one. And – I am convinced that Tomasz Bata had never heard of a Russian writer named Nikolai Semyonovich Leskov and his stories. Because – if he had, he would hardly have published so many a merciless indictment of Russian literature.

Russian researcher Sergey Zotov, creator of the “Suffering Middle Ages” project, tells in his book *Iconographic Infinity. The Unusual in the Orthodox Icon* about an icon in the Resurrection Cathedral in the city of Semey (formerly Semipalatinsk), Kazakhstan, called “Christ Blessing a Soldier”, which depicts Fyodor Dostoevsky: “The kneeling Dostoevsky stands around the Crucifix and seems to be trying to confess to the Savior, Who has lowered His hand low to bless the writer. For the image of the soldier, the artist (who may have personally known the author) used the famous portrait of Dostoevsky by Vladimir Favorsky, which is easily revealed when comparing the two figures. The writer was exiled to Semipalatinsk and lived there for almost five years, so it is not surprising that he became the subject of an icon from this region. In 2010, according to a message from the church, holy myrrh flowed from the icon” (Zotov 2024, 269-270). The scholar does not specify the reason for the myrrh – whether because of Jesus or because of Dostoevsky, but I am sure that there are devotees who would decide that the miracle happened precisely because of Dostoevsky. And I am also convinced that if they saw Nikolai Leskov depicted on an icon, they would declare it sacrilege...

Tzvetan Stoyanov hypnotically believed in the second Dostoevsky, the peace-bringing...

But isn't it time to break free from hypnosis and believe in the first Dostoevsky, the shoemaker?...

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