



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Written in Blood: Revolutionary Terrorism and Russian Literary Culture, 1861–1881* by Patyk, Lynn Ellen

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his novel shares with a few of its predecessors and a follower. One could only wish that such a thoughtful guide would exist for one's other favourite works of fiction.

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Patyk, Lynn Ellen. *Written in Blood: Revolutionary Terrorism and Russian Literary Culture, 1861–1881*. The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 2017. xiii + 349 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$69.95.

SCHOLARS have long been aware of the role played by literature in the history of the Russian revolutionary movement. As yet, however, most studies have focused on radical writers and critics, with the relationship between the political struggles of the late imperial period and Russian culture more generally remaining comparatively unexplored. With this absorbing and commendably interdisciplinary 'literary history of terrorism' (p. 4), in which she argues that revolutionary violence and its practitioners acquired literary form within the Russian canon long before they emerged in practice, Lynn Ellen Patyk goes some considerable way towards redressing this balance.

Written in Blood takes as its central theme the interplay of word and deed (*slovo i delo*). For Patyk, Russian revolutionary terrorism was nurtured by a 'subtle and intricate feedback loop between art and life, between cultural representations [...] and political violence' (p. 11). Focusing on the period from the advent of the Great Reforms to the revolutionary shockwaves that convulsed Russia in the years 1878–81, she demonstrates that a wide variety of writers from across the political spectrum rehearsed in words the later regicidal escapades of *Narodnaia volia* and, in so doing, perceived the moral dilemmas of terrorism with remarkable clarity. It is from this emphasis on the mimesis of culture and politics that the book derives much of its incisiveness and originality, since it allows Patyk not only to conceptualize terrorism as both a concrete act of violence and a socio-cultural construct (a dichotomy central to terrorism studies, yet explicitly disavowed in her introduction), but to adopt a broader perspective on her chosen topic. The idealized literary 'models for action' bequeathed by Ryleev, Chernyshevskii et al. to their ideological heirs, and familiar to contemporary scholars from the work of Iurii Lotman and others, are only part of the story here. By admitting to her purview non-revolutionary writers such as Pushkin, Turgenev and Dostoevskii, Patyk shows that Russian literary culture as a whole was complicit in, yet deeply ambivalent about, the genesis of terrorism.

Despite the book's impressive dramatis personae, it is Dostoevskii whom Patyk singles out for his 'remarkable attunement to and synchrony with revolutionary terrorism' (p. 13), and to whom most of *Written in Blood* is devoted. The final chapters of part one, and parts two and three altogether, are given over to a re-reading of *Crime and Punishment*, *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov* against the backdrop of the proto-terrorist outrages with which each coincided (Dmitrii Karakozov's failed 1866 attempt on the life of Alexander II, the Nechaev affair of 1869 and Vera Zasulich's trial in 1878). If such extensive treatment may at first seem daunting to the non-specialist reader, their persistence will be amply rewarded, for these chapters make a compelling case that the genesis of terrorism was, in fact, the very 'new word' of which Dostoevskii often spoke but never defined. In particular, the sections dealing with the Nechaev and Zasulich trials, in which the author shows that the defence advocates' rhetorical strategies in both cases drew upon literary models originating with Dostoevskii, and that the latter, in turn, reciprocated by writing the Zasulich trial into the denouement of *The Brothers Karamazov* — thus creating a public forum for discussion of the unfolding revolutionary crisis — are thoroughly engrossing. Although Patyk is careful to qualify her discussion of Dostoevskii by stressing his loyalty to the autocracy and opposition to the revolutionaries he depicted, he unquestionably emerges from *Written in Blood* as a more politically-ambiguous figure than the reactionary of popular repute.

It is difficult to find fault with this book. Readers with an interest in the Silver Age may regret that the relatively short chronology precludes any discussion of how the literary culture of that period responded to the cataclysmic waves of terrorist violence that marked the years directly before and after the 1905 revolution, although this topic has been touched upon by other scholars. Greater emphasis could have been placed on the religious scripting employed by many of the (ostensibly atheistic) revolutionaries Patyk discusses, not least because it is this curious tendency which appears the main contender for an alternative hypothesis: when one encounters Zasulich imagining Arkhip Bogoliubov, General Trepov's victim, as a Christ-figure whom she saves from the cross (p. 185) or Sergei Stepniak-Kravchinskii likening his fellow terrorists to 'Satan rebelling against God' (p. 227), it is hard not to wonder whether terrorism ultimately owed as much to the *shestidesiatniki*'s youthful crisis of faith and reason as to literature. Nonetheless, these are minor quibbles. In all, *Written in Blood* is a marvellous contribution to the study of modern Russian culture, and should be required reading for anyone interested in Dostoevskii, terrorism, or the Russian intelligentsia.

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