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Fathers and Sons

by Jessica Lee

(History 2225)

The novel *Fathers and Sons* by Ivan Turgenev showed the differing ideals between the old generation and the young generation and the paths they each felt Russia should be taking. Turgenev showed through his characters that one does not nor should, as was also the case with Russia as a country, negate the past, thinking that would build a better future. He then showed another option; a happy marriage of the two ideals, where melding of the old Russia and the ideas of a new Russia produced a better and beneficial result. In fact, those characters in the book who represented opposite and far ends of the spectrum did not end with happy lives.

In 1861 Alexander II moved forward with the first of many reforms by emancipating the serfs. This huge reform affected eighty-five percent of the population or about fifty-two million people.¹ There were groups within Russia that were not happy about these changes, “they insisted on long-established values and fought bitterly to preserve privilege and autocratic rule.”² The nobles and the Russian Orthodox Church made up the largest group that did not support the emancipation of the serfs. Not all nobles were against this reform. Many understood the necessity for the change, not just from the side of economy, but also for the moral philosophy against owning another human being. While some noble families did not object, there had been many who were not keen on losing such a large portion of their income, land, and labor. Emancipation was not the only change that society had been going through; many had a hard time parting from long standing and deep rooted traditions about social classes. In the novel *Fathers and Sons*, we were introduced to the character Pavel Petrovich Kirsanov. He was the epitome of Russian nobility. Pavel was the elder brother to Nikolai Petrovich Kirsanov and the uncle to Arkady Kirsanov. He was a very proud and elegant aristocrat who took impeccable care of his appearance, being described as “so elegant and well bred” that he had been able to “preserve a youthfulness of figure and an upward striving”, and had “beautiful hands with long pink fingernails.”³ He held to strict principles and had a hard time giving favor outside of them. We saw this in his disapproval of his brother’s relationship with a lady, Fenechka, who had also been a hired laborer in the house. Pavel’s life was one that was rooted in strong and deep tradition and ideology, and while he was more moderate to the changes, such as emancipation, he still had a hard time moving past those long lived and deep traditions. To Turgenev, Pavel Petrovich was the embodiment of the old Russia. Pavel was everything that is pre-reform, pre-Alexander II. This was why Pavel takes an immediate disliking to Arkady’s friend Bazarov, who stayed for a visit while on the way to his home. When Pavel was introduced to Bazarov he barely acknowledged him except to give him a faint smile, making it clear he was not impressed with their guest. Instead of shaking hands and welcoming Bazarov, he had puts his hands into his pockets making his distaste more apparent. Upon learning that Bazarov would stay with them a few days, Pavel, exclaims “That long-haired person?”⁴ Bazarov’s personality and ideology went against everything that Pavel

¹ John M. Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union: A Historical Introduction from the Kievan State to the Present*, 7th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013) 162.

² Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union*, 161.

³ Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 16.

⁴ Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 17.

believed in. His neatly ordered and calm life had been disrupted by the chaos that Bazarov brought. In the context to Russia these reforms to the Russian aristocracy were the same. The aristocracy's standing in Russian society, the neatly ordered life they lived, was changing in ways which they could not foresee the results. While nobles still held their title of nobility their customs and rules were being modified. Throughout the novel it was very hard for Pavel to try and reevaluate his principles. He was so entrenched in his aristocratic life that he realized he could not live at Marino where perhaps life had changed too much for him to be comfortable. We got a glimpse of Pavel Petrovich at the end of the book - he had retired to Dresden and was living a life in a circle of society where he was most comfortable and was able to hold his Slavophile views. He "has a particular air about him which is acquired by a man only through long acquaintance with the higher strata of society"⁵ yet we saw that he was unhappy, "he finds life hard...harder than he'd suspected. One only has to glance at him in the Russian church when, leaning sideways against the wall, he falls into deep thought and does not stir for a long while, his lips pursed tightly together in bitterness"⁶, his life was not what he wanted. Turgenev showed that if Russia did not progress and reform, willing to work with the changes necessary for a better, modern Russia, the country would be "Indeed...Dead as a Dodo"⁷

On the opposite end of the spectrum in Russia we had those who believed in a radical ideology of reform. They believed that while these reforms were needed, they were too little, too late. One of these views at the time was the philosophy of Nihilism, which was the rejection of any values or ideas held by society, "they approach everything with a critical point of view...who doesn't acknowledge any authorities"⁸ Bazarov portrayed this idea of Nihilism and radical philosophies. Yevgeny Vassilyitch Bazarov was the son of a military medical doctor, who had been away at University. He was arrogant in thinking and held his ideals above everyone. Since he held in contempt all things that could not be proven through scientific fact he did not respect anything around him. He felt it was his duty as a Nihilist to tear down or condemn any institution, especially within the aristocratic society, whom he felt were the worst kind. When appealed to by his friend Arkady to not judge or treat those in his family so harshly, he responded, "As if I'm going to play along with provincial aristocrats! After all, it's just a matter of their self-esteem, their acting like society lions, their being such dandies!"⁹ The problem with these radical views was that they became tiresome, frustrating, and even dangerous when they did not include anything constructive or good. Even going so far as missing the mark on what was really needed for reform. John M. Thompson, in his book *Russia and the Soviet Union* said while discussing radical views and practices, they "only repelled much of educated society, puzzled the peasants, and strengthened conservatives position and determination"¹⁰ In fact toward the end of *Fathers and Sons*, Bazarov went into town to talk with the villagers, as was his practice, to reinforce his prejudice against the peasants. Bazarov asked a villager how their peasant world was run and the peasant responded with more or less what he thought Bazarov wanted to hear. Upon Bazarov's departure, another villager arrives to ask what Bazarov wanted and is told that Bazarov only wanted to "wag 'is tongue a bit. Like all them masters, you know, he doesn't understand nuthin'." In the eyes of the peasants,

⁵ Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 199.

⁶ Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 200.

⁷ Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 164.

⁸ Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 23.

⁹ Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 27.

¹⁰ Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union*, 167.

Bazarov looked “a little like a village idiot.”¹¹ By the end of the book Bazarov has contracted Typhus. He realized he was not going to be the great person to make an impact on Russia as he once thought. He died with only a few people around him, his parents, and Anna Sergeevna Odintsova. Bazarov came in with his arrogance and anti-establishment ideal, but in the end did not leave much of a lasting impression. Turgenev did not feel that radical views were the best path for Russia to take. Turgenev leans toward a more moderate view of progression for Russia.

Turgenev's stance through *Fathers and Sons* on reforms seems to be a middle ground. He understood there was not a future in the old traditional ways but also understood that there was not one for the radical thinkers of the time either. There was a better way that included taking the best parts of Russia's past and the best parts from the new ideas or views and marrying them together. Turgenev literally does this in *Fathers and Sons* with his father and son characters Nikolai and Arkady. Arkady Kirsanov was the son of Nikolai Petrovich and university friends with Bazarov. When Arkady brought Bazarov home he realized over time that the Nihilistic views he held at school were not really what he wanted. He knew there needed to be reforms and changes and he was ready to move forward with them, “No thought Arkday, this isn't a rich region, it doesn't strike one as either prosperous or industrious. It can't, just can't stay like this. Reforms are essential. But how to go about them, how to start?”¹² Yet he also realized the folly in turning his back on the good parts of the past that were uplifting and productive. He discovered, as Bazarov took apart and mocked all that he held dear and loved, that he was not ready to turn his back on those things that are good. When Bazarov was making fun of his father Nikolai for playing the cello in the country, Arkady's response was, “Bazarov went on laughing, but Arkady, despite the respect in which he held his teacher, on this occasion did not even smile.”¹³ Arkady was moved by the beauty around him. When Bazarov ridiculed him for these thoughts and called his uncle stupid for the same thinking, he immediately jumped to his uncle's defense.¹⁴ Arkady had no problem with the change in class system that was taking place. He encouraged his father to marry Fenechka who was a hired laborer with whom the father had a relationship. He loved the arts and loved music, institutions a nihilistic mind thought would tear down or disregard because they were built on the past. The idea of love and marriage, the oldest institution, was not something a nihilistic point of view could tolerate, and Arkady through music and nature had fallen in love with Katya Sergeevna. He was able to combine his desires and views for a better Russia with his desire to own the land and the business that came with it.

Nikolai Petrovich was also a character who was able, or at least trying, to move forward. He was still able to hold onto some of his old ways while at the same time he helped to achieve a progressive Russia. He was a Russian noble who went beyond the requirements of emancipation reform. He redrew his land to distribute it among the serfs and even moved his own household. While talking to his brother Pavel he lamented that he thought he had been doing as much as he could to keep up with the changing times. In fact, he had done more than most, “I thought I was doing everything I could to keep up with the times, fixing things up for the peasants and setting up a farm, so much so that I'm being branded a 'red' throughout the province.”¹⁵ He saw that there was something the younger boys had that the older generations did not and concluded they were less class conscious. Yet Nikolai was still able to retain parts of himself that he felt made him Russian, such as

¹¹ Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 185.

¹² Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 12.

¹³ Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 44.

¹⁴ Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 129.

¹⁵ Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 47.

his love for music and Russian literature. By the end of the novel he was able to look beyond the social class system and marry Fenechka.

Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* was not just a theme of old Russia versus new, but that the country had to find a way to include the good from past as well as find the good in the future. It was not beneficial for the country to forget the past. Russia needed to move forward to a progressive future with respect to the past. The book closed with everything tied up neatly as if all things had come to their proper ending. It was not a coincidence that the characters who were able to achieve this blending of old and new were the ones who ended happily. This was the same for Russia. It had been through many experiences and produced wonderful accomplishments that its people should be proud of, not turn from, just because they were still growing as a country and needed to make reforms.