

## Chapter One

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# GERMAN AND RUSSIAN NIHILISM

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The urge for destruction is also a creative urge!  
—Mikhail Bakunin, “Reaction in Germany”

The term *nihilism* has undergone an evolution throughout the history of its usage, and it is perhaps partly because of this growth and change that the word is, as Nietzsche writes, “ambiguous.”<sup>1</sup> Michael Allen Gillespie points out that “the concept of nihilism has taken on a number of various and often contradictory meanings . . . ,”<sup>2</sup> and because of this, Johan Goudsblom admits that “it is difficult to find one’s way in this maze of contradictory interpretations.”<sup>3</sup> Given this difficult ambiguity, it is well worth our while to attempt to separate out some of the themes and motifs characterizing things “nihilistic” before grappling with the substance of this abstruse subject. In the process of briefly examining the applications of the term in various contexts and times, we will find that its meanings do tend to converge and gesture toward a number of associated issues that, when considered together, comprise a familiar pattern.

## GERMAN NIHILISM

One of the first things that should be noticed about the word *nihilism* is that it is often used to do more than simply describe states of affairs. It is also frequently used to pass judgment on those conditions. “Nihilism,” then, is not simply a descriptive term. It often also has an evaluative dimension.

There seems to be some dispute and disagreement in the literature as to when this term first came into use. Stephen Wagner Cho traces its first serious philosophical application to attacks on German idealism by such writers as Obereit, Jenisch, and Jacobi in the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the term takes on a largely abusive or derogatory meaning, being intended primarily as a label of condemnation directed toward the consequences of Kant's distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds. Kant, recall, claimed that what humans can "know" is only the phenomena that arise out of interaction between the noumenal self and the noumenal world. All human knowledge is, thus, perspectival rather than a direct intuiting of "things in themselves." Though there is a "Ding an Sich," we can't know its essence. We are forever trapped in our human perspective, processing sensations through a series of categories that yield only subjective (rather than objective) certitude. Kant grants us certainty and knowledge, but only about the world of phenomena. We cannot possibly know anything about the world beyond phenomena.<sup>5</sup>

"The thrust of Obereit's primary critique of Kantian idealism . . . is directed towards the latter's relegation of human knowledge to the realm of phenomenal appearances . . . , which thereby leads to the eternal banishment of humanity from reality itself."<sup>6</sup> Obereit's reaction to Kant is to accuse him of nihilism, or of cutting humanity off from the ultimate, objective reality of the Ding an Sich. If Kant is correct, then humans must despair of anything but a subjective kind of knowledge. But this subjective knowledge, Obereit claims, is really empty and worthless, since it is isolated from the absolute reality of the extra-human world. His condemnation of Kant as a nihilist, in this early appearance of the expression, is motivated by what he sees as Kant's rejection of the possibility of true, nonsubjective, certain knowledge of ultimate reality. This epistemological alienation was felt as a moment for despair not only by Obereit but by many others as well,<sup>7</sup> and in the later critiques of German idealism by Jenisch and Jacobi, the use of the term *nihilism* is "almost invariably taken up as an incisive attack, as a derogatory term of censure and abuse, as an invective or polemical epithet to condemn and disparage."<sup>8</sup> This derisive use of the term reached an influential peak in Jacobi's *Letter to Fichte* in 1799. Following Obereit and Jenisch, Jacobi attacked the subjectivist position of the Kantians in general and the extreme brand of Fichte's absolute subjectivism in particular. According to Jacobi, idealism, by doing away with everything beyond human consciousness, transforms reality into nothing, and so he repudiates it as "nihilism."<sup>9</sup>

The negative or "polemical" employment of the term *nihilism* thus seems to be among its earliest usages. The charge that Kant and his followers (especially Fichte) are advocating a system of thought that leads to a kind of alienation from ultimate reality is seen by these critics as a self-evidently bad thing. Kantian philosophy is "nihilistic," they claim, because its conclusions leave us disconnected from the "ultimate," and this is a distasteful state of affairs.

## RUSSIAN NIHILISM

Most commentators seem to agree that the development of the concept of nihilism in German philosophical circles in the eighteenth century was quite separate from its development in Russian circles during the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> This would help to explain the dissimilar natures of German and Russian nihilism, as well as giving us an insight into some of the ambiguities associated with the word. Many authors attribute coinage of the term *nihilism* to the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev,<sup>11</sup> who uses it in his novel *Fathers and Sons*, first published in 1862, though as we have already seen the term, in fact, appears much earlier in Germany. Whereas German nihilism tends toward the theoretical and philosophical, the Russian form of nihilism is more closely associated with radical, revolutionary political movements, and, at least for Turgenev, is not necessarily a term of derision. In Turgenev's depiction of nihilism, we find it transformed into a clear-eyed, unromantic, and action-oriented form of protest against the old and decaying forms of Russian political and social convention. Though often Turgenev's nihilists exhibit the callousness and one-sided dogmatism of fanatics, they are, in general, treated with a kind of fondness by the author. This is especially clear with the main character Bazarov, whose energy, intelligence, and dedication to the cause of social justice mark him as a rare and noble figure.

The novel *Fathers and Sons* is, in essence, a story about the gap between older and younger generations. It focuses on the characters of Arcady and Bazarov, two college students who, upon returning home from school, come into conflict with the traditional folkways of their families, communities, and cultures. Arcady has met the nihilist Bazarov at college, and has fallen under his spell. Bazarov is in training to become a doctor, but he is a most unusual type of medical student. He is a nihilist who claims that he believes in nothing. The kind of nihilism that Bazarov advocates, however, seems to be based upon principles of materialism, hedonism, and utility, sounding very much like a more modern variant of ancient Greek cynicism. Bazarov flouts all convention, is engrossed in the dissection of animals for the sake of curiosity, womanizes and drinks hard. He is against all forms of liberalism and romanticism, instead seeing himself as a tool for the preparation of a new stage in the development of history:

"In these days, negation is the most useful thing of all—and so we deny."

"Everything?"

"Everything."

"What? Not only art, poetry . . . but also . . . I am afraid to say it . . ."

"Everything," Bazarov repeated with inexpressible calm.<sup>12</sup>

Bazarov's nihilism, though it is met with horror and fear by the older generation, is met with excitement and exhilaration by his peers. Both young men

and women find his powerful arrogance attractive. They admire his self-confident calmness and easy dismissal of authority. Although Bazarov claims to hold no stock in logic or reason, he seems very much the model of a down to earth logician, unaffected by emotion or whimsy (at least until he crosses the path of Mme. Odintsov). These characteristics are the very ones that lead to our own ambivalent feelings about Bazarov as we read the novel. On the one hand we admire his spirit and irreverence; his rebellious willingness to speak his mind regardless of the consequences. On the other hand, we are annoyed at his disrespect for the feelings of others. He holds all emotions in contempt, and even seems to despise himself when he experiences them. Despite these personal shortcomings, Turgenev portrays the nihilist Bazarov as a character concerned with education, learning, truth, and social justice. His death, as a result of contracting typhus during an autopsy, is a fitting end for a character dedicated to the medical sciences, the progress of knowledge, and the end of unnecessary human suffering.

Alan Hodge writes, "In Turgenev's eyes, Bazarov was the most profoundly sympathetic of his creations. . . ." <sup>13</sup> The Russian usage of the word *nihilism*, then, may not have necessarily had the same reproachful overtones as the German variant. In fact, the Russian socialist Dmitry Pisarev is said to have adopted the label *nihilist* after having been charmed by Bazarov's character, although other radicals, such as Nikolai Chernyshevsky, were offended by the characterization. Chernyshevsky wrote the novel *What Is To Be Done?* <sup>14</sup> in response to Turgenev's book, and it was in his depiction of the "new men" that Russian nihilists found an alternate model for emulation. Chernyshevsky's brand of nihilism advocated a mix of materialism, egoism, socialism, feminism, and an unbounded faith in the powers of science. But the advocacy of these doctrines seems, as Stephen Lovell writes, to have been primarily motivated by the "rejection of existing authority." <sup>15</sup> Russian nihilism, on the whole, was a movement of revolutionary repudiation whose positive doctrines were generally vague and disjointed. Its main thrust was a desire for political action, change, and revolution. Soon it became integrated into the struggles of anarchism, Jacobism, and Bolshevism. It is understandable, then, that Russian nihilism was immensely exciting and popular among young intellectuals, yet feared and despised by the older conservative elements in the country. For instance, Dostoyevsky's novels, especially *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Possessed* reflect a negative evaluation of those who "had been infected by the rationalistic nihilism of the young revolutionary-minded generation." <sup>16</sup> Despite such dissent, the appearance of the term *nihilism* in Russia seems to stem from a source that did not presuppose a negative judgment of the subject matter to which the term was applied. Calling a person a nihilist did not necessarily indicate distaste for that person. It may just as well have indicated respect.

However, Russian nihilism, not having a cohesive program of political action or ideology, was a convenient umbrella under which to shelter a whole

collection of radical types, and the label *nihilism* became increasingly associated with terrorism and acts of violence during the latter part of the nineteenth century. A prime example of this trend is to be found in Sergei Nechayev. Nechayev was an associate of the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin with whom he is rumored to have co-authored a notorious pamphlet titled *Catechism of the Revolutionary*.<sup>17</sup> Nechayev was completely committed to the cause of chaos and destruction, seeing himself, like Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons*, as a tool for the revolution. Eventually he was imprisoned for murder in the Peter and Paul Fortress where he died after many years in solitary confinement.<sup>18</sup>

*Catechism of the Revolutionary* contains the principles and guidelines for would-be nihilist revolutionaries willing to abandon all belief in order to embark on a career of violence and destruction. Such combatants were expected to be dedicated and merciless, having no beliefs of their own, but willing to prepare the way for the revolution:

(1) The revolutionary is a dedicated man. He has no interests of his own, no affairs, no feelings, no attachments, no belongings, not even a name. Everything in him is absorbed by a single exclusive interest, a single thought, a single passion—the revolution.<sup>19</sup>

The nihilist's commitment to destruction had to be complete, though it was a destruction intended to serve the greater purpose of establishing a better world for the future:

(3) The revolutionary despises all doctrinairism and has rejected the mundane sciences, leaving them for future generations. He knows of only one science, the science of destruction. . . . His sole and constant object is the immediate destruction of this vile order.<sup>20</sup>

With activists such as Nechayev, the popular understanding of the term *nihilist* gained renewed negative and frightening connotations. Much of the ambiguity that is now present in the word may stem from this historical baggage with a resulting confusion between its descriptive and evaluative content. Today, the term still rings with echoes of terrorism, violence, and negativity thanks largely to its associations with Russian radicalism, and especially with revolutionary anarchism. Nihilist thought, moreover, had tremendous influence on political developments in nineteenth-century Russia, inspiring the formation of organizations such as "Hell" and "The People's Will." Lenin and the Bolshevik movement were also heavily influenced by the nihilism of Turgenyev, Chernyshevsky, Nechayev, and Bakunin. The destructive side of Russian nihilism was often mitigated in these movements by a positive social program in service of which negation and rebellion took place, and, indeed, Russian intellectuals such as Berdayev, Herzen, and Stepniak have characterized these nihilists in terms bordering on reverence. We even find Camus

claiming, "The entire history of Russian terrorism can be summed up in the struggle of a handful of intellectuals to abolish tyranny. . . . [B]y their sacrifice and even by their most extreme negations they gave substance to a new standard of values, a new virtue, which even today has not ceased to oppose tyranny and to give aid to the cause of true liberation."<sup>21</sup> Russian nihilism, thus, cannot be accurately depicted as a wholly negative and despised phenomenon. By many thinkers, both at that time and at present, it has been viewed as a noble and worthy political movement. Even after becoming associated with terrorism and violence, "nihilism" in Russia, in contrast to the earlier use of the term in Germany, was not necessarily a label of condemnation.<sup>22</sup>

In his entry for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Donald Crosby attributes the wide popularization of the term *nihilism*, after around 1870, primarily to the writings of Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, and Friedrich Nietzsche. For Turgenev and Dostoyevsky, nihilism had a predominately political flavor. But for Nietzsche, nihilism was more complex and personal, issuing forth as both a spiritual and cultural problem.<sup>23</sup> Goudsblom claims that "after Nietzsche the concept of nihilism became respectable."<sup>24</sup> Gillespie writes that the concept of nihilism "was given its determinative definition by Nietzsche,"<sup>25</sup> and Karen L. Carr tells us that "Nietzsche, of course, wrote more explicitly about nihilism than any other nineteenth-century figure; his understanding of nihilism has been the decisive influence on twentieth-century usage."<sup>26</sup> With Nietzsche, the German and the Russian strands of nihilism are woven together into a sophisticated whole, yielding an account that, though at times puzzling, is nonetheless profound and perceptive. Coming to grips with Nietzsche's framing of the problem of nihilism is crucial for a full understanding of what nihilism has come to mean for us and our time. As Camus observed, "With him nihilism becomes conscious for the first time."<sup>27</sup>