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Fyodor Dostoevsky vs. Nikolai Kostomarov: genesis of Smerdyakov's character in *The Brothers Karamazov*

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Abstract. The author examines one of the episodes of N.I. Kostomarov's *Autobiography* – the circumstances of his father's murder as the main source of Smerdyakov's image in F.M. Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* and its correlation with Dostoevsky's criticism of the idea “If there is no God, then everything is allowed!”. It is proved that Dostoevsky could have learned this episode in an oral transmission either personally from Kostomarov, or through mutual acquaintances with him. The connection is traced through the common Turkic origin of the surnames Kostomarov and Karamazov. It is proved that in *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky stands against Kostomarov's opinion about the differences between the South Russian and Great Russian families, expressed in the article *Two Russian Nationalities*.

Keywords: novel, history, plot, image genesis

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Ф.М. Достоевский и Н.И. Костомаров: генезис образа Смердякова в романе «Братья Карамазовы»

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Аннотация. Рассматривается один из эпизодов «Автобиографии» Н.И. Костомарова – обстоятельства убийства его отца в качестве основного источника образа Смердякова в романе Ф.М. Достоевского «Братья Карамазовы» и его соотнесение с критикой До-

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стоевским идеи «Если Бога нет, то все дозволено!». Доказывается, что Достоевский мог узнать этот эпизод в устной передаче либо лично от Костомарова, либо через общих с ним знакомых. Прослеживается связь через общее тюркское происхождение фамилий Костомаров и Карамазов. Обосновывается, что в «Братьях Карамазовых» Достоевский полемизирует с мнением Костомарова о различиях южнорусской и великорусской семьи, высказанном в статье «Две русские народности».

Ключевые слова: роман, история, сюжет, генезис образа

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Introduction

The Brothers Karamazov (1878–1880) have always attracted scientific attention as Fyodor Dostoevsky's last novel. Dostoevsky failed to realize his initial plan to write another volume, where he intended to finish the stories of his characters. However, the plot seems complete and needs no second installment to grant its reader a holistic perception. In fact, Dostoevsky planned a diology of two separate parts, where the second book was bound to be more important than the first. In his preface to *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky admitted that he planned to split one biography into two novels, the second book being the main one because it was to tell the story of the main character “in our current moment. In the first novel, the action took place thirteen years ago, and it could hardly be called a real novel but a single moment from the adolescence of the protagonist” (Dostoevsky, 1972–1990, vol. 14, p. 6). Unfortunately, the writer had only two years to live after the publication of *The Brothers Karamazov*, which is rightly considered to be the final work of his life and the end of his spiritual quest. Fyodor Karamazov and Pavel Smerdyakov needed no book two anyway since their lives ended on the pages of book one: apparently, no further development for these interconnected characters was ever intended. In our opinion, the genesis of Smerdyakov's character still remains unclear and understudied, and we will try to clarify it by referring to a rather unconventional source.

Discussion

The Karamazovs vs. the Kostomarovs

The *Autobiography* of the famous Ukrainian and Russian historian Nikolai Kostomarov was published five years after his death, in 1890 (Kostomarov, 1890). His father, Ivan Kostomarov, was a landowner. He was killed on July 14, 1828, in his estate in a village called Yurasovka in the Ostrogozhsky district, Voronezh Province. This is what his son's autobiography tells about this tragic event. “Several migrants from the Oryol Province lived on my father's land: the coachman and the valet lived on the estate premises, but the third one, an ex-lackey,

was driven away for drinking and resided in the village. These three plotted to kill my father in order to steal the money he kept in a small chest, as they had found out. They were also joined by a man who had been my servant during my stay in a Moscow boarding school. The killers had been nurturing their villainous intent for several months and finally decided to do it on July 14. My father used to go for a walk in the woods at a distance of two or three versts from the estate; sometimes, I accompanied him; sometimes, he was on his own. On the evening of that fateful day, he ordered a pair of horses to be put into the cart and asked me to go with him to the grove called Dolgoe. I got on the droshky but then, for some reason, changed my mind and preferred to stay at home and do some archery, which was then my favorite pastime. I jumped out of the droshky, and my father left the estate alone with the coachman. A few hours passed, and the day gave way to a moonlit night. It was time for my father to return; my mother was waiting for him to have supper, but he would not come. Suddenly, the coachman ran in and said: ‘The horses ran away with Master still in the cart!’ After a short turmoil, they sent a search party, and while everyone was away, the two conspiring lackeys, presumably in the company of one more accomplice, a cook, sneaked out the chest, brought it to the attic, and took all the money my father received for the mortgaged estate, which was several tens of thousands. Finally, one of the villagers returned with the news that ‘Master lies dead on the ground, and his head is all red, and there’s blood everywhere.’ At dawn on July 15, mother and me went there to see a terrible sight: my father was lying in a den with his head disfigured to such a point that it was impossible to tell if it belonged to a human. Forty-seven years have passed since then, but even now my heart bleeds when I see this picture in my mind’s eye and hear my mother’s despair. The local police arrived, carried out an investigation, and reported that my father had undoubtedly been killed by the horses. They even found traces of horseshoe nails on his face. For some reason, the theft was never investigated” (Kostomarov, 1872, p. 431).

Judging by the forty-seven years mentioned by Kostomarov, he wrote this episode in 1875. According to Kostomarov, his father “would often gather some of his serfs on his estate to read philippics to them against bigotry and superstition. The peasants on his estate were Little Russians (Ukrainians) and did not easily succumb to the Voltairian thought, but he also had several serfs that came from the Oryol Province, where his mother's estate was: they served on the premises and thus were used to having long conversations with their master. Those turned out to be much quicker learners” (Kostomarov, 1872, pp. 427–428).

In 1833, this story acquired an unexpected ending. “<...> the real cause of my father’s death was revealed. The coachman, who took him for the ride, came to the priest and demanded that the people be gathered by church bell ringing because he was going to tell the whole truth about his master’s death right at his grave. When people gathered, the coachman fell on the grave, which was near the church, and cried out: ‘Master Ivan Petrovich, forgive me! Hear me, you good Christians, that it was not the horses that killed my master, but we, villains that we are, did it to rob him of his money, which we used to bribe the court with.’ An investigation began, followed by a trial. The coachman denounced the lackeys, who stubbornly denied the accusation but could not hide the fact that they had

taken the money and bribed the police. The cook was more successful in his denial and, for the lack of evidence, was left alone. However, the chief murderer had long been dead. When the killers were interrogated in court, the coachman said: ‘Its Master’s fault, too, for he tempted us; he often told us that there was neither God nor life after death, and that only fools were afraid of the Judgement Day, so we took it into our heads that if there was no life after death, everything was permitted.’ The murderers were eventually exiled to Siberia. The local policemen were also brought to justice and received a worthy punishment, but their chief poisoned himself in order to avoid their fate” (Kostomarov, 1872, 437–438; see also: Rosen, 1977, p. 714).

One does not have to be a scholar to see a parallel with Smerdyakov's line in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which by ten years preceded the first publication of Kostomarov's *Autobiography*. For this reason, the autobiography could not have been a direct source where Dostoevsky took the murder story from. However, Dostoevsky could have learned about the circumstances of Ivan Kostomarov's murder from some oral sources.

One cannot but trace a certain connection between the noble family of the Kostomarovs and the fictional noble family of the Karamazovs. The first known representative of the Kostomarov bloodline was Fyodor Kostomarov: in 1592, Boris Godunov, the ruler of the Moscow State, sent him to London to study, but he did not come back.¹ In Dostoevsky's novel, the head of the Karamazov clan is also a Fyodor.

In fact, Dostoevsky had come to know the surname of Kostomarov long before he met the famous historian. Lieutenant General Koronat (Koronad) Kostomarov (1803–1873) was a Russian military engineer and a military captain. In the mid-1830s, he opened a boarding school in the Reshetnikov House on the Ligovsky Canal in St. Petersburg, where he prepared candidates for admission to the Main Engineering School. Fyodor Dostoevsky and his brother Mikhail studied there in the summer of 1837. In a letter to their father dated August 20, 1837, the Dostoevsky brothers spoke warmly about Koronat Kostomarov: “Koronad Filippovich <...> is very kind and spends all his time with us. We wish you could see us preparing for the exam. All day long, we do nothing but answer his questions at the blackboard, and Koronat Filippovich tests us in almost everything” (Dostoevsky, 1972–1990, vol. 28, book 1, p. 399).

However, their relations soon deteriorated: in a letter to his father dated May 5–10, 1839, Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote that “Kostomarov fooled you to take your money because we could have entered the school even without tutoring” (Dostoevsky, 1972–1990, vol. 28, book 1, p. 59). Perhaps, this episode prompted Fyodor Mikhailovich to award such an unsympathetic hero as Fyodor Karamazov with a surname that resembled that of Kostomarov.

The surname of Karamazov, just like Kostomarov, is of Turkic origin. Dostoevsky derived it partially from the surname of the famous historian N.M. Karamzin (1788–1826). A certain Semyon Karmazinov appeared in his *Demons* (1871–1872) as an obvious parody on the writer Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883), who also had

¹ Rummel, V.V. Kostomarovy. *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary* (vol. XVI, p. 404). St. Petersburg. (In Russ.)

a surname of Turkic origin. The surname of Karamzin comes from the name of a certain Tatar Kara-Murza, who entered the Russian service. *Kara* in the Turkic languages means *black*, while *murza* means *a chief or a commander* (from the Persian *amir-zade*, which means *a prince*). The surname of Karamazov also comes from the same *Kara-Murza*, but Dostoevsky used the pattern of another Turkic surname he knew, i.e., Kostomarov. This surname originated from the Turkic words *kos*, which means *pair, double* and *tomar*, which means *a tussock, a tubercle, a stump, a small reservoir overgrown with tussocks*. There are three villages called Kostomar in Northern Kazakhstan, and they are relatively close to the places where Fyodor Dostoevsky served in the Siberian linear battalion of Semipalatinsk, now Semey. One is in the Arshalynsky district of the Akmola Region, the other is in the Kostanaysky district of the Kostanay Region, and the third one was located in the Irtyshsky district of the Pavlodar Region until it disappeared as a settlement in 2015. Thus, Kostomar can be translated as *a pair of bumps* or *a pair of tubercles*. In all likelihood, the first of his name was either nicknamed as *Kostomar* or came from a settlement with this name.

The temptation of Smerdyakov

In the novel, Pavel Smerdyakov is a servant, a cook, and an illegitimate son of the landowner Fyodor Karamazov. He kills his father under the influence of the ideas induced by his elder half-brother Ivan Karamazov, hoping that in gratitude Ivan will recognize him as a brother and reward him. After the murder, Smerdyakov steals his father's money. He relies on the presumption that Ivan Karamazov wants his father dead. When it turns out that Ivan never wished his father dead, Smerdyakov returns the money and commits suicide by hanging (Kantor, 2001, p. 189–225).

Moisei Altman was the first scholar to draw a parallel between Smerdyakov and Kostomarov's *Autobiography*. In his research, he cited the fragments from the *Autobiography* that described the Voltairian conversations Kostomarov's father had with his serfs and the confession of the killer that his master *tempted* him and his accomplices into the murder. M. Altman thus came to the following conclusion: "Dostoevsky could well have known the rumors about Ivan Kostomarov's death, but even if he didn't, it did not matter, for such stories were common among the nobles in the times of serfdom because the masters were afraid of their too bright servants: whoever denies the Lord can, of course, deny the lords. Voltairians that they were, free-thinking masters did not forget another Voltaire's saying that 'If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him:' to maintain their dominance, it was necessary not to teach godlessness to servants. This is what we have in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Smerdyakov the servant, taught by Ivan Karamazov that everything was permitted, kills Fyodor Karamazov..." (Altman, 1975, pp. 121-122). Unfortunately, Altman's brilliant discovery did not enter the comments to the iconic collected edition of Dostoevsky's works (Dostoevsky, 1972–1990, vol. 15, pp. 393–619). Most likely, this happened because Altman's book was signed for publication only on December 30, 1975, and the corresponding volume of Dostoevsky's works was put into typesetting on October 9, 1975, and signed for printing on April 28, 1976.

However, there is reason to believe that it was the story of Nikolai Kostomarov's account of his father's death that served as the main source of Smerdyakov's character. The parallel with this tragic story is too obvious. Just like one of conspirators against Ivan Kostomarov, Smerdyakov was a cook. Just like the real murderers, he stole from the dead man. Just like the chief of the local police, who declared the murder an accident, Smerdyakov committed suicide, not by poisoning though but by hanging. However, the coachman's repentant words are the most important argument in favor of this theory: "...he often told us that there was neither God nor life after death, that only fools were afraid of the Judgement Day, so we took it into our heads that if there was no life after death, everything is permitted". These words coincide with the essence of Ivan Karamazov's philosophy: if there is no God, then everything is permitted. Probably, the case of Ivan Kostomarov was the only known murder when serfs killed their master, inspired by the atheistic doctrine he had preached, or at least used this doctrine to justify the murder. The similarity between the names of Kostomarov and Karamazov is likely to come from the similarity of these stories.

Of course, Dostoevsky could not have read the first publication of the *Autobiography* nine years after his own death. However, Nikolai Kostomarov came up with the oral version of the story about his father's death as early as in 1875 or even earlier, and he certainly told this vivid and moralizing episode to his friends and acquaintances.

F.M. Dostoevsky vs. N.I. Kostomarov

In 1864, Fyodor Dostoevsky was going to publish an article with objections to Kostomarov's statements about the cowardice of Prince Dmitry Donskoy during the Battle of Kulikovo: Dostoevsky agreed with the position of his friend historian M.P. Pogodin on this matter. The article was never published, only some preparatory materials have been preserved (Dostoevsky, 1972–1990, vol. 28, book 2, p. 395, note 8). In general, Dostoevsky was rather critical of Kostomarov's views on Russian history. In his letter to A.N. Maikov dated February 12/24, 1870, Dostoevsky wrote, not without irony, that "The Bulletin of Europe had accumulated every single brilliant name, including Turgenev, Goncharov, and Kostomarov" (Dostoevsky, 1972–1990, vol. 29, book 1, p. 107). In another letter to M.P. Pogodin dated February 26, 1873, he admitted that he could not "read Kostomarov without indignation" (Dostoevsky, 1972–1990, vol. 29, book 1, p. 264). However, he wrote to his wife Anna on February 7, 1875, that "the historian Kostomarov had fallen down to typhus" (Dostoevsky, 1972–1990, vol. 29, book 2, p. 11). From the tone of the letter, it is very likely that Dostoevsky knew Kostomarov in person. Therefore, there was still a chance that Dostoevsky could have heard the story directly from Nikolai Kostomarov. He could also have learned about it from a mutual acquaintance, though. Presumably, Fyodor Dostoevsky met Nikolai Kostomarov between January and April 1861 at a dinner party hold by the publisher Nikolai Tible, who was his good friend (Budanova, Fridlender, vol. 1, p. 318). Alternatively, Dostoevsky and Kostomarov could meet on December 3, 1866, at a literary soiree that the Society for Assistance to Writers and Scientists in Need organized to commemorate Nikolai Karamzin. Kostomarov was invited

to recite some of his works, and Dostoevsky allegedly visited that event, too (Budanova, Fridlender, vol. 2, p. 84).

Even though they had very different views on Russian history, Dostoevsky showed great interest in Kostomarov's work. On February 11, 1863, Dostoevsky bought two volumes of Kostomarov's *Northern Russian People's Court in the Times of the Veche* from A.F. Bazunov's bookstore (St. Petersburg, 1863). In 1861–1863, Mikhail and Fyodor Dostoevsky issued a literary journal called *Vremya* (Time). In Issue 4, which appeared in April 1863, the Dostoevsky brothers published P.V. Znamensky's critical review of this book (Budanova, Fridlender, 1999, vol. 1, pp. 392–393, 401). However, Dostoevsky spoke highly of Kostomarov's article in the October 1877 issue of the *Dnevnik Pisatelya* (Writer's Diary). Kostomarov published it in No. 478 of the *Novoye Vremya* (The New Time): he wrote about the address of some Polish emigrants to the Russian public with a proposal to reconcile and cooperate in science and economy. Dostoevsky argued with some aspects but called the article *brilliant* and described Kostomarov's arguments against the Poles' proposal as *clear and precise* (Dostoevsky, 1972–1990, vol. 26, pp. 57–59). Finally, Nikolai Kostomarov was among the few officially invited to Dostoevsky's funeral on January 31, 1881 (Budanova, Fridlender, vol. 3, p. 558).

The hidden polemic between Dostoevsky and Kostomarov on the Ukrainian question was much more serious. In his article entitled *Two Russian Nationalities* (1861), Kostomarov wrote about the differences between the Southern Russians (Little Russians aka Ukrainians) and the Great Russians, i.e., Russians per se. "Great Russians have a desire for a dense fusion of parts, the destruction of personal motives under the common goal, the inviolable legality of the common will expressed as a heavy burden. For them, this desire coincides with the inevitable unity of extended families and the idea that one's personal freedom naturally dissolves and drowns in the big world. One's life is inseparable from that of the whole family, communal property, or the shared taxes on estate in the old days, where the innocent had to bear the punishment for the guilty and the hard workers had to work even harder to compensate for the idleness of others. For a South Russian, however, there is nothing harder and more disgusting than such an order of things, and South Russian families split up as soon as their members become aware of the need for a separate life. Parental guardianship over adult children seems an unbearable despotism for a South Russian. The claims of older brothers over younger ones or uncles over nephews arouse violent enmity between them. Among the South Russians, blood ties and kinship do little to dispose people to harmony and mutual love. On the contrary, people seen by others as gentle, peaceful, and friendly are sometimes in irreconcilable enmity with their kinsmen. Quarrels between relatives are common both in the lower and in the upper class. On the contrary, Great Russians see blood ties as a reason to be friendlier and more indulgent towards their kin even though they do not exhibit these good qualities when they deal with strangers. To preserve love and harmony between close relatives, South Russians must separate as soon as possible and have as little in common as possible. They cannot bear a mutual duty if it is based not on free agreement, but on the fatal necessity of family ties. In Great Russians,

such a situation usually inhibits and pacifies any personal impulses. Great Russians are ready to force themselves to love their relatives out of obedience to duty, even if they do not like them: they condescend to them because they are family, which they would never do to people outside their family circle. Great Russians are ready to make a personal sacrifice even if they realize that their relatives are not worth it because blood is thicker than water. South Russians, on the contrary, are prone to stop loving their relatives and are less indulgent to their weaknesses than to those of a stranger; in their case, kinship does not lead to friendship” (Kostomarov, 1890, v. 1, pp. 100–101]

Khristina Alchevskaya described in her diary how Dostoevsky reacted to this passage (1876). “You say that in Little Russia men are independent, that an adult son starts his own farm immediately after marriage, that a woman is not looked upon as cattle, that she is the mistress in her house, and that the family lives an independent life. What good is that? As soon as a son gets married, he separates himself from the family and immediately becomes an enemy. The property gets divided bit by bit, and mutual interests go apart, giving place to beggary. Meanwhile, a Great Russian family is based on a communal principle. It is good if the family respect their elders. The old man of the family is not a despot but a model to follow: he is the head of the family not because he likes power so much but because he fulfills the duty assigned to him by nature, and all the rest obey him quite naturally. It is about family closeness, common interests, and labor division, and what you offer is isolation and enmity” (Dostoevsky, 1990, vol. 2, p. 339).

In this context, *The Brothers Karamazov* continues this dispute. In the Karamazov family, children separate early from their parents and, by the classification proposed by Kostomarov, are closer to the South Russian family pattern, thus moving away from the Great Russian type, and Dostoevsky sees this as the main cause of all their misfortunes.

Conclusion

The story behind the images of Smerdyakov and Fyodor Karamazov with their destructive philosophy slogan *If there is no God, everything is permitted!* is an oral account of the murder of Nikolai Kostomarov’s father, probably narrated by the historian himself. The surname *Kostomarov*, in turn, must have served as one of the sources for the surname of the main characters in the novel. Finally, the very plot of *The Brothers Karamazov* is a polemic with Kostomarov’s idea about the superiority of the South Russian aka Ukrainian family pattern over the Great Russian aka Russian one.

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