

Joseph Frank, author of this five-volume biography of Fedor Dostoevsky (Princeton University Press, (1976-2002):

Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt, 1821-1849

Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal, 1850-1859

Dostoevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860-1865

Dostoevsky: The Miraculous Years, 1865-1871

Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881

Why did you choose to study Russian history?

In some sense I did not really choose to study Russian history as such at all --it chose me. This is not to say that I was not interested in Russia. This was really impossible for any intelligent person born as I was in 1918, growing up between the first and second World Wars, and living in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. But my own interests were literary and not historical, and so I did not study history at all.

As I explain in the preface to my first volume, it was because I became interested in Dostoevsky as a writer, and wished to explore his social and cultural background, that I began to read Russian history and especially about the history of Russian culture. After a certain time I realized that it would also be necessary for me to learn Russian both to check on the Dostoevsky texts I was writing about, and also to consult the best authorities on his work in his own language.

As a result, I became aware that, at least in my view, the relation of his work to its social-cultural roots had not been sufficiently clarified, and this became the focus of my own interpretation. Most of the Western literature on Dostoevsky was more personal and psychological than social and historical. The Russian view was greatly and sometimes distortingly influenced both by the internal conflicts taking place within Russian culture itself, and then by the pressures of the Soviet Communist regime. My own aim was to provide a more balanced view, which as far as possible would be that of Dostoevsky himself.

What do you enjoy about teaching/studying Russian history?

What I enjoy about the teaching of Russian history and literature is that, on the one hand, it brings me into contact with so rich and fascinating a subject. For many years during the cold war the internal history of Russia had world-shaking political importance, and this gave the study of its culture a special interest.

Also, I think that the study of Russian history, and particularly its cultural evolution, has a particular importance for grasping some of the issues involved in modernization and the development of what are now called third world countries. The transformation of Russia under Peter the Great, who wished his country to catch up with the scientific and technological developments of Europe, is a paradigm for what has since been occurring all over the world, and raises very similar social-cultural problems.

Why did you choose to write your book on Dostoevsky?

I became interested in Dostoevsky because he was a great writer, and his novels dramatized with such force and brilliance the major issues of modern culture. These issues stemmed from the clash between a religious world-view and the rise of scientific rationalism. No other writer has presented this clash with such depth of understanding and such comprehension of its complexities, though of course he did so in relation to Russian culture. But the world-wide popularity of his works proved that he touched something absolutely fundamental in the modern world.

Did you have any idea that your work on Dostoevsky would turn into a five-volume biography?

I had no idea, when I began to write, that my project would turn out to be as large as it became. I began to write a one-volume work, saw that this was impossible and it soon became four (corresponding to eras in Dostoevsky's own life). But this too eventually became five when I saw that the period between 1860-1865 was so rich that it had to be treated separately.

Joseph Frank
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