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The Portrayal of Germans in Russian
Literature

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"The German is like a willow. No matter which way you bend him, he will always take root again." - Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Since Peter the Great westernized Russia, Germans have played a significant part in Russian history, occupying various ranks in the army and services. These, perhaps more favorable Germans, became displaced by large settler groups after Catherine the Great, a German herself, came to power in the mid seventeenth century and called for the settlement of the Volga region and later other uninhabited areas in the Ukraine and Bessarabia (<http://www.grhs.com/alberta/history1.html>). In addition, as Russia acquired the Baltic lands after the Great Northern War, it received this area's large German aristocracy (<http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Baltic%20German>). Due to these various groups of Germans, the portrayal of German characters may differ in Russian literature, but many of the stereotypes are the same. When reading any Russian author one should analyze not only the statements made by characters about Germans, but one should also look at the way these Germans are described by the narrator and the characteristics they exhibit. Over time, the stereotypes become more ingrained in the literature and often tend towards the negative. This is not to say that Germans are increasingly viewed as negative, but rather that the stereotypes of Germans in later Russian works appear more intense and disruptive to traditional Russian life. However, Russian authors always seem to make exceptions for notable Germans such as the poets Goethe and Schiller, who by their great works were able to overcome typical stereotypes. By studying quotes from Russian literature one finds that Germans are often portrayed as embodying a cold materialistic nature, and as the literature progresses over time, an element of atheism appears in addition.

Starting with Pushkin, we already see several references to Germans, especially in

The Queen of Spades, where the main character, Hermann, is of a Russian German background. Hermann's father left him a small inheritance, but Hermann preferred to remain entirely frugal to the point where he would not gamble unless he was guaranteed to win (Pushkin 80). "He's German. He counts the pennies. That's all it is" (Pushkin 71). Even on the first page he is stereotyped for being too stingy and too calculated in matters of chance. In a way, Hermann's calculated and persistent nature almost makes him seem ill, especially how he *copies* love notes out of a German novel to express his love as opposed to writing his own (Pushkin 82). In The Captain's Daughter, Pushkin also portrays General Andrey Karlovich in this stingy and calculated manner, "Strict German economy ruled at his table, and I suspect that his fear at occasionally having to share his bachelor meal with another guest was one reason for dispatching me to the garrison in such a hurry" (Pushkin 119). Once again we get a sense of stingy greed from a German, and although this statement is not very protracted--as we will see in later Russian works--it still applies a stereotype to even the better of Germans residing in Russia. The one exception to this rule would be Catherine the Great, who appears very amiable and strong, however, one can imagine that at that time, it would have been unfavorable to write poorly of a Czar (Pushkin 206).

Lermontov's Werner in A Hero of Our Time is somewhat unlike these previous stereotypes of Germans. Perhaps first we should note that Lermontov says that although his name is German, "He is a Russian" (Lermontov 77). However, looking closer we see that Werner does have these typically German, materialistic and skeptical attributes ascribed to him, but his poetic qualities seem to balance it out (Lermontov 77). Even further in his description, his decrepit appearance is compared with that of the great poet Byron:

Werner is short, thin and as weak as a child. He has one leg shorter than the other, like Byron, and his head looks disproportionately large for his body. His hair is closed cropped, and shows up the bumps of his skull...His coat, cravat, and waistcoat were invariably black. The young men always called him Mephistopheles, and he pretended to be annoyed, though in fact it flattered his vanity (Lermontov 78).

Being called Mephistopheles is likely an allusion to the German poet and playwright Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. So while Germans like Werner and Hermann do exhibit a materialist oriented outlook on life, Werner is exonerated, because his romanticism and poetic characteristics add a more human dimension to him. We can therefore conclude that this poetic connection to Goethe and other famous German authors is a redeeming aspect for Germans, although this does not answer *why* this romantic nature of German poets is considered to be a comforting characteristic. Then, eclipsing the matter at a time when Germans excelled in the sciences, Pavel in Fathers and Sons says:

As far as I'm concerned, sinner that I am, I don't regard Germans with much favor. I'm not even talking about Russian Germans: it's well known what sort of creatures they are. Even German Germans aren't to my liking. Previously, there were some acceptable ones; they had their--well, there was Schiller, also Goethe...My brother here's especially fond of them...But now all they have is chemists and materialists... (20)

Like in later Russian works, we see a clear disgust for Germans, and here Russian Germans are distinctly disliked. But most importantly, this passage reveals that Germans like Goethe and Schiller were pleasant and acceptable. This would correlate well to the description of Werner in A Hero of Our Time. Pavel sees the move in Germany toward the sciences and materialism as negative. We can perhaps ascribe this point of view to an understanding of Germans and their Western attitudes as corrupting Russian youth and society.

The materialist nature of Germans has been a stereotype that we can trace back to Pushkin's The Queen of Spades, but later Russian works by Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Turgenev go into greater detail to expand on this aspect of the German. In Gogol's The

Overcoat, the tailor, Petrovich tells Akaky, "You'd do better, when the cold winter days come, to cut it up into footcloths, because socks don't keep your feet warm. They were invented by the Germans, to squeeze more money out of people" (Gogol 124). Again we see this stereotyping of Germans as being very materialistic and money oriented. In comparison with previous Russian works, this description is much more negative. Where Hermann was stingy and Werner was a bit foul mouthed, here Gogol describes Germans in a more intensely negative way than heretofore seen in Russian literature. In addition, the stereotypes of Germans being skeptical and calculated turn into a form of atheism, "In this respect he was true to his ancestral habits, and in quarrels with his wife would call her a godless woman and a German." (Gogol 121). Godless, ancestral habits, and German are all used in the same sentence. It seems that Germans are godless, and in remaining true to ancestral habit, Petrovich is obliged to use the name calling of his wife as a German as an insult--telling us that this dislike of Germans is perceived to go back for ages.

Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment is rife with examples of the exceeding materialistic nature of Germans and their untrustworthy character, and although this examination of quotations may seem somewhat redundant, it is important in that it shows us the culmination of the discussion up until now. During the funeral dinner for Katerina Ivanovna's husband, Amalia Ludwigovna's behavior caused Dostoevsky to comment, "Wasn't this stupid German woman giving herself airs because she was the landlady, and had consented to help her poor lodgers out of charity? It looked like it. Charity indeed" (Dostoevsky 321)! Soon following, Amalia attempted to tell a story, but because of her poor sense of Russian grammar, she elicited a disgusted response from Katerina: "The silly creature!--and she thinks it is all very pathetic, and doesn't suspect how stupid she is. I

think that drunken clerk is much cleverer than she is” (Dostoevsky 327). This entire argument between the two women is written out in several pages, and it is very much filled with accusations and retorts on Katerina’s part that Amalia is a greedy and lowly woman. This coming from a poor mother whose husband was a drunkard is quite an accusation, and yet, it would seem that Katerina is justified in her accusations, because when Dostoevsky himself makes comments as the narrator, he backs up her claims. Yet even when mentioning an unimportant German character, Dostoevsky makes sure to portray him/her as meager rabble: “The public was entertained by a chorus of very poor singers and some drunken German from Munich as a red-nosed, but extremely melancholy, clown” (Dostoevsky 421). To say that a German fails at the simplest task of being a clown is to say that they are a useless people. “It is true that it was all obscure, as the accusation came from another German, a woman of notorious character whose word could not be credited” (Dostoevsky 252). This shows us the untrustworthy nature exhibited by Germans, and finally: “Look at that fat man--he must be a German--who elbowed me” (Dostoevsky 444). Guessing at a fat man being German would reflect the notion that German’s are wealthy and rude materialists. Dostoevsky seems to integrate every bias against Germans into his work quite well, and because Crime and Punishment is often looked upon as a social critique, it is no wonder that these Germans appear so frequently materialistic. Dostoevsky, like Turgenev, uses Germans to show the intrusion of Western culture on Russian society and its negative results.

However, by limiting our scope to just Germans, we have only examined one aspect of Russian xenophobia, therefore let us briefly examine other foreigners mentioned in Russian works in order to rank the German among them and see how the German is distinct

from other foreigners:

'They're a pathetic lot' I said, pointing to our filthy hosts, who were watching us in a sort of dumb stupor. 'As stupid as they come!' he replied. 'Believe it or not, but they're absolutely useless. And you can never teach them anything either. Say what you like about our friends the Kabardians or the Chechens - robbers and vagabonds they may be, but they're plucky devils for all that. Why, this lot don't even bother about weapons. You'll never see one of them wearing a decent dagger. There's your Ossete for you!' (Lermontov 9).

Out of this quotation from Lermontov's A Hero of Our Time, we can draw the conclusion that the inhabitants of the Caucasus are viewed not as real threats to Russian society, but seen as inferior and illogical. This examination only further supports the notion that Russians were more disdainful toward Westernization--hence the bias toward Germans. But then we also need to observe the way another Western nation is characterized in Russian literature to further this supposition. In Pushkin's The Captain's Daughter, Pyotr's French tutor Monsieur Beaupré is described as a lazy drunk libertine. Instead of him teaching Pyotr a thing at all, Beaupré took the advantage to learn from Pyotr how to speak Russian better (Pushkin 104). Eventually Beaupré is kicked out for having seduced the ugly maids who worked in the household. This leads Pyotr's father to often cite this instance later in the story as the failure of his son's upbringing. Then when Pyotr comes to Belogorsk, he meets Shvabrin, a deceitful man who was assigned to duty there for four years for illegally dueling. The importance of mentioning him is that when Pyotr first meets him, Shvabrin introduces himself in French (Pushkin 123). For its literary usages, this brings us to see Shvabrin in much the same light as we saw Beaupré simply by association with the French language. Now from this we can clearly see a type of bias that arises out of the characterization of the French as lazy and deceitful, but yet French was also a characteristic of high society, and that cannot be wholly ignored. There is a sort of

decadence that comes along with the French despite their shortcomings, and this is something that Germans by contrast cannot conjure up themselves unless they are either Goethe or Schiller. But we can still see a critique of Western culture in the way both the French and Germans are described, however, for all intents and purposes, the Germans are by far portrayed more repulsive than the French.

In brief, the German serves as a literary connection between Westernization and materialism in Russian literature. Russian authors make exceptions for German poets and romantics, because they exhibit qualities which are looked highly upon by these Russian authors. Even the ideological battleground in Fathers and Sons seemed to exist as a fight between materialism/nihilism and romanticism. These two concepts are polarized and represented by East and West, and by the older more Russian generation and the younger more Westernized generation. From the induction of Germans into Russian society during Peter the Great's reign, the move toward Westernization brings with it the negative aspects of materialism which in Russian literature are most personified by Germans themselves. Although other Western foreigners are mentioned in Russian literature, none appear so often and so heavily stereotyped as the Germans.

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