

WEEK 11 INTRODUCTION TO READINGS

**Ivan Turgenev, excerpt from Fathers and Sons, Chs. 1-10
(original Russian edition 1861; this translation 1867)**

Ivan Turgenev was born in 1818 to a landowning family in Russia. He later recalled the family estate as exemplary of an unjust social system, recalling for example that his grandmother had once lost her temper and killed a young boy serf by smothering him with a pillow. Turgenev studied at the University of Berlin and became a critic of Tsarist Russia. From 1850 onward he published fiction that was widely read. (Incidentally, the young Lenin loved to read Turgenev, including Fathers and Sons).

In this novel, Turgenev explored the dilemma of Russian intellectuals regarding how to modernize Russian society. Contemporary debates arising from the "problem of backwardness" concerned every realm of social life, from sexuality to technological and economic development. There were many factions in the debates; two were the "Slavophiles" and the "Westernizers." Both confronted the issue of how to react to the greater technological and productive power of states to the west of Russia. While the Slavophiles advocated, for example, a political formation of "democratic autocracy" that drew, they claimed, upon a distinctively Russian past, Westernizers proposed to borrow Western ideas and create a synthesis of Russian and Western ways. "Nihilism" was the term given to some adherents of the latter faction—a term which itself suggests the complexity of efforts to transform Russian thought and life.

Because his writing was often critical of serfdom, Turgenev was arrested in 1852 and imprisoned for one and one-half years. After Fathers and Sons was published, the harassment of Turgenev was so great that he left Russia to live in Germany for most of the rest of his life. He died in Paris in 1883.

Vera Figner, excerpt from memoirs

Vera Figner was one of thousands of Russians who became involved in revolutionary populism from the 1870s onward. About 15% of those arrested for such activities were women. The emancipation of serfs in 1861 had not solved the crisis of agrarian life in Russia, because the former serfs still often lacked title to any, or sufficient land, and they were still under the control of their former landlords. As a result, peasant revolts continued the older pattern of serf revolts. Populists believed that the peasants were not only unjustly oppressed, but also that they, the peasants, held the key to the revolutionary transformation of Russia. There were many groups in Russian radical politics of those years; Figner was part of one called "People's Will," a group which carried out the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. In the 1920s, her memoirs were published in English as Memoirs of a Revolutionist; this excerpt comes from another autobiographical manuscript.

WEEK 11 QUESTIONS

**Ivan Turgenev, excerpt from Fathers and Sons, Chs. 1-10
(original Russian edition 1862; this translation 1867)**

1. What was truly "Russian" according to Bazarov? According to his opponents?
2. What role do science and progress play in the novel?
3. How do the main characters think about or behave toward peasants?

Vera Figner, excerpt from memoirs

4. Why did Figner become a revolutionary?

5. How do you think Figner's life would have been different if she were a man?