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Review: The Nihilist Princess

Felix Frost

2006

Last year, the anarchist III Publishing published a new translation of the long out of print 19-century novel *The Nihilist Princess*. The book is written by the French feminist writer Louise M. Gagneur, and according to its preface, it is the only of Gagneur's books currently in print. The novel tells the story of the twenty-year-old princess Wanda Kryloff, who secretly belongs to the nihilist movement. At daytime she is a flirtatious society-lady who is set to inherit great wealth and power. But at night she sneaks off to revolutionary meetings and devotes her time to the betterment of the oppressed masses.

While the story about Princess Wanda Kryloff is fiction, the revolutionary movement that it describes did exist. There really was a secret revolutionary organization in Petersburg in the 1870's, which held secret meetings and published revolutionary manifests and letters to the Czar. Its political program was relatively moderate by today's standards, but its methods were radical and included assassinations and terrorism. Some of the minor characters in the book are also real life persons, like Vera Zassoulitch who is picked out to assassinate Moscow police commissioner Trepoff. The book should not, however, be taken

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as an accurate portrait of the Russian revolutionary movement of the late nineteenth century. From the book one gets the impression of a large and very organized movement, which has its agents everywhere, even in the top hierarchy of the church, the government, and the secret police. Every nihilist in Russia, we are told, even the anarchists who respect no authority whatsoever, are taking their orders from the revolutionary committee. The book further claims that Wanda's mother joined the nihilist movement already in the 1850's, while the term nihilist wasn't used in the meaning of socialist revolutionary until the 1870's.

The characters in the book are not nihilists in the original meaning of the word, but they are "socialists, humanitarians, revolutionaries." Far from believing in "nothing," they believe in their cause with an almost religious fervor. As a matter of fact, religious metaphors are used consequently throughout the book in describing the nihilist movement. Its recruits are described as "converts" and "acolytes," its propagandists are "apostles," and its politics are "the new faith." Despite their burning convictions, the main characters seem to have less than pure motives for joining the "new faith." Wanda herself admits to having become a revolutionary to divert her attention from her secret love, Count Litzanoff, who is married to her best friend. Litzanoff is also in love with Wanda, and becomes a nihilist because of her, while Litzanoff's wife joins the revolutionary movement to overcome her grief over Litzanoff, who doesn't love her and has affairs with other women. At least two other co-conspirators are madly in love with Wanda, as are the secret police agent Count Stackelberg.

Wanda however, has no time for such private matters as love and marriage, as she has dedicated her life to the revolutionary cause. When she finally decides to get married, it is only a ploy to get away from her father's influence, and to get access to her inheritance, which she wishes to give to the cause. Her greatest wish is to throw away all her fabulous clothes, cut her hair short, and get a job in a factory in order to spread the new faith amongst

the common people. Unfortunately she is stuck in her posh society life, because the revolutionary committee thinks she can be most useful this way.

The book might not get all the details right, but it still gives a good representation of the general attitude and spirit of the Russian nihilists. It might not be Dostovjevsky, but it's an excellent alternative to Barbara Cartland...

Louise M. Gagneur: The Nihilist Princess
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