

**Title:** *Boris Godunov* and the Terrorist  
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On April 4, 1866, Tsar Alexander II narrowly avoided an assassin's bullet outside the Summer Garden in St. Petersburg. The inexperienced marksman was one Dmitri Karakozov, a 25-year-old radical who had donned a peasant costume and a pseudonym for the occasion. Cited by several historians as the first act of modern terrorism, this thwarted assassination, and the rather opaque personage behind it, launched a nationwide epidemic of hermeneutomania. Conservative critics were quick to blame Karakozov's revolutionary politics on the dangerous influence of Nikolai Chernishevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, a furiously popular novel published three years earlier. Many found in Karakozov a flesh-and-blood facsimile of Chernishevsky's hero, Rakhmetov, who in pledging his life to the fulfillment of his social ideals eschewed both physical comfort and romantic love. For the Rakhmetovs of the world, an existence outside the public sphere was superfluous.

Russians would soon see many of these issues spectacularized, as 1866 was also the year in which the state censor finally approved Pushkin's 1825 *Boris Godunov* for performance. As contemporary writers such as Dostoevsky noted, the Pretender of Pushkin's play – a young, low-born revolutionary committed to toppling the autocracy – had much in common with the Chernishevskian “new man.” (And, like Karakozov, he went by the name Dmitri.) But Musorgsky's *False Dmitri*, half ascetic revolutionary and half ardent romancer, cuts an odd figure in the context of the times, and furthermore Musorgsky's handling of the character in his two versions of the opera suggests shifting ideas about the role of this figure both in the opera and in history.

Considering texts by Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, and Chernishevsky, this paper contextualizes Dmitri's ambiguous operatic fate within a broad debate surrounding the dominant socioliterary type of the era – the “nihilist,” the “new man,” and ultimately the “terrorist.”