

Title: Asylums for Undesirables, Degenerates and Madmen: A Russian Institution of Social Control

Author: Frederick H. White, Memorial University

Responsibility for the mentally ill in Russia originally fell to monasteries and only in the eighteenth century became the domain of the State. It was then left to the police to deal with the mentally ill along with criminals and other undesirables. In the nineteenth century, Russian psychiatry became a respectable medical profession and yet, their patients were perceived still as menaces to society. German romantic notions of madness gave way to degenerative theory just as psychiatry was emerging as an independent medical science in Russia, solidifying this notion of mental illness as deviancy. In this way, the institutional behavior of confusing the criminal and the mentally ill in prisons and asylums finds legitimacy in the psychological theories of degeneration, which were associated with criminal, psychopathic, sexually deviant and abnormal behavior. By briefly looking at how mental asylums are depicted in the literary works of Anton Chekhov, Vsevolod Garshin and Leonid Andreev, I will argue that at the beginning of the twentieth century literary figures were cognizant of the role that these medical institutions were playing as instruments of social and political control and how the diagnosis of madness was synonymous with a prison sentence.