AWESOME stories

DEATH SENTENCE

0. DEATH SENTENCE - Story Preface

1. WHO WAS DOSTOEVSKY?

2. ST. PETERSBURG - BEGINNINGS

3. LIFE in ST. PETERSBURG

4. ARRESTED

5. DEATH SENTENCE

6. DOSTOEVSKY in LOVE

7. DOSTOEVSKY the GAMBLER

8. TRAGEDIES in DOSTOEVSKY'S LIFE

9. SAVED - BY STENOGRAPHY

10. FALLING IN LOVE

11. FROM SECRETARY to WIFE

12. TIMELY WRITING; UNTIMELY DEATH



Арестантскія работы. Передъ входомъ въ рудники.

стлать бѣлье, положить подушки, одѣяло и револьверъ на стулъ около кровати. Такъ всѣ спятъ, — мужчины и женщины.
— Но два-то револьвера зачѣмъ?

Political prisoners who received sentences to serve at hard labor were sent to places in Siberia (such as the Omsk penal colony) and to Sakhalin Island (the subject of a work by Anton Chekhov). This image depicts a scene from the Sakhalin penal colony: “Prisoners work. At the entrance into mines.” The illustration appears at page 212 of part II of Vlas Mikhailovich Doroshevich’s book *Sakhalin (Katorga)*, published, in Moscow, by Sytin in 1905.

Dostoevsky and his friends did not know it, but they were about to be traumatized.

Who would have believed that reading a letter to a group of people - even if it was a banned document - could result in a death sentence? Who would have imagined that intellectuals could be arrested for merely discussing ideas? Who would have thought that it was a major crime to “intend” something even if one did not “do” it?

Months had passed since Dostoevsky was found guilty of possessing subversive material, but still no sentence was imposed. The reason was Nicholas I. The Tsar was intimately involved in the “judicial” process.

Behind the scenes, he insisted the trial had to produce the “right” result - so a military tribunal was convened. (It mattered little that such a procedure violated Russian law.) But that was only the beginning of the Tsar’s efforts to play mind games with the “Petrashevtsy” prisoners. What if the sentence were death by firing squad? What if, at the last second, the Tsar showed his great “mercy” by stopping the execution?

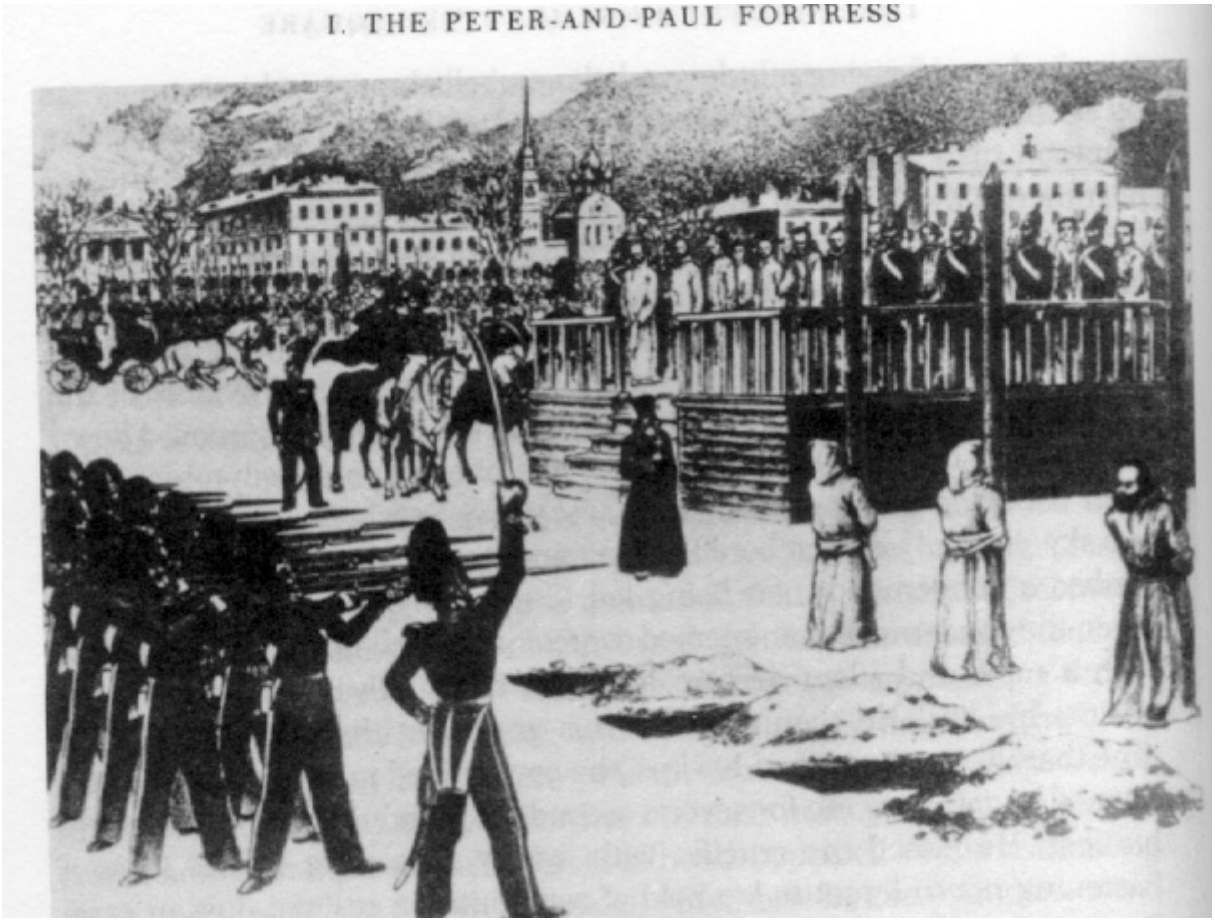
With such an orchestrated plan in place, the unwitting Fyodor Dostoevsky was summoned to hear his sentence on December 22, 1849. It is impossible to grasp what must have gone through his mind when he saw coffin-laden carts behind a scaffold. For whom were those coffins intended? He soon learned:

> *The former Engineer Lieutenant Dostoevsky - age twenty-seven - for participation in criminal plans, for the circulation of a private letter containing rash statements against the Orthodox Church and the highest authorities, and for the attempt to distribute subversive works with the aid of a lithograph - condemned to death before a firing squad.* (Quoted by Geir Kjetsaa in Fyodor Dostoevsky: *A Writer's Life,* page 87.)

The sentence would be swiftly carried out. The young Russians had only minutes to live - or so they thought. They were ordered to remove their outer garments and don hooded white gowns (which would also serve as burial shrouds.) The first group was brought forward. The order was given to present arms. Members of the execution squad followed the next commands:

> *Ready! Aim!*

Then ... silence ... as the prisoners ... waited ... to take ... their ... last ... breath. But the order to “Fire!” never came. Instead, on cue, someone excitedly announced the Tsar’s “pardon.”



The trauma of facing certain, unexpected death never left the novelist. The whole episode later caused one of the condemned "Petrashevtsy" to go insane. (Two others had already died in prison.)

What was the Tsar's purpose behind this charade? To make sure people - especially these young intellectuals - knew what could happen if they broke his laws.

Freed from a firing squad, Dostoevsky was sent to Omsk (in Siberia) to begin serving his real sentence: four years in overcrowded barracks at the Omsk Penal Colony (wearing iron shackles which scarred his legs) plus four additional years of low-ranking military service. It was a place where a convict could have his face branded, scarring him for life.

Before leaving St. Petersburg, the Siberian-bound novelist wrote a farewell letter to his brother, Mikhail. Someone gave him a New Testament, and that Bible became his constant companion.

Later, Dostoevsky observed that all the misery he endured was exactly what he had needed to make him the writer he ultimately became.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
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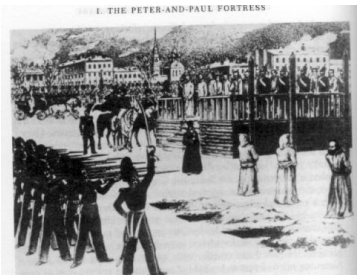
See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/DEATH-SENTENCE-Dostoevsky

Media Stream



Peter and Paul Fortress - Facing the Firing Squad
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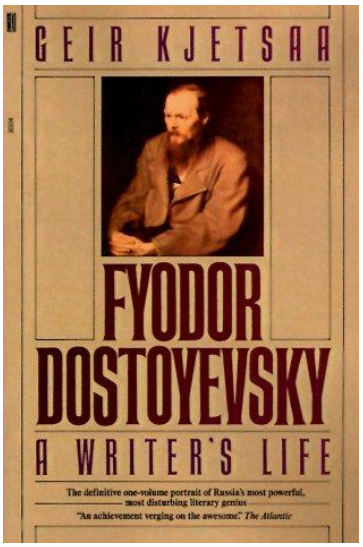

Fyodor Dostoevsky: A Writer's Life - by Geir Kjetsaa

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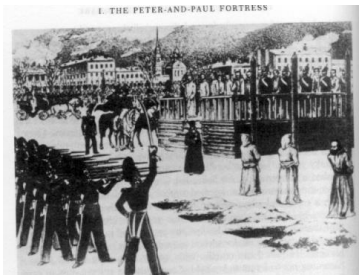

Peter and Paul Fortress - Facing the Firing Squad

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Firing Squad - First Group

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Drawing of Dostoevsky

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Omsk Settlement - Serving at Hard Labor

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Map of Russia Depicting Omsk

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Barracks at the Omsk Camp

Image online, courtesy the Dartmouth College website.

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Omsk Penal Colony

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Mikhail Dostoevsky

Image online, courtesy Dartmouth College website.

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Dostoevsky - Sent to Omsk

Image online, courtesy F.M. Dostoevsky Literary Museum.

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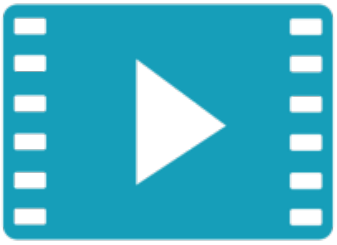

Dostoevsky - Facing the Firing Squad

Video clip online, courtesy VastVideo.

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