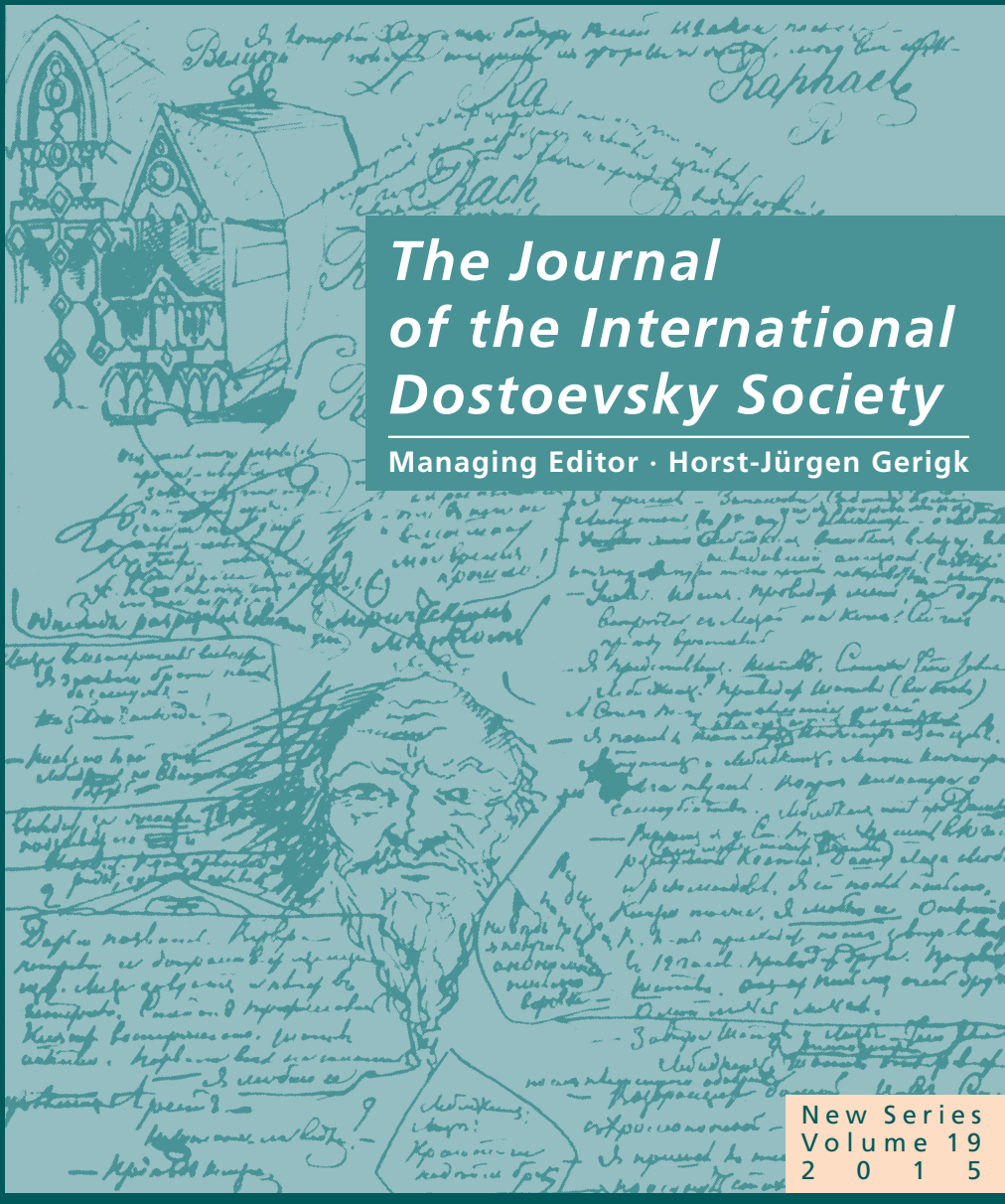
Dostoevsky Studies 19



The Journal of the International Dostoevsky Society

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New Series
Volume 19
2015

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Dostoevsky Studies/New Series is published annually by Narr Francke Attempto Verlag
Subscription price per year: € 58,– (plus postage). Orders can be placed through your bookseller, or directly at Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, P.O. Box 2567, D-72015 Tübingen, Germany
Fax + 49 / 7071 / 97 97 11, info@narr.de

Peer-Review: Unsolicited contributions are welcome. Please send three copies for evaluation to one of the Managing Editors or to the publisher: info@narr.de.
Computer typeset: Georg Reimer, Heidelberg
Cover design: Heike Haloschan, Tübingen

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Printed in Germany on acid-free paper.
ISSN 1013 2309
ISBN 978-3-89308-977-2

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New Series Volume XIX, 2015

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ULRICH SCHMID
St. Gallen

Dostoevsky and Regicide: The Hidden Topographical Meaning of *Crime and Punishment*

In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky takes great care to inform his reader about the exact displacements of his hero Raskolnikov. To this day, tourists in St. Petersburg are shown the murderer's closet-like apartment and the victim's house a few blocks down the street.

Why does Dostoevsky locate his murder mystery so exactly on the map of St. Petersburg? Why does he minutely track the itinerary of his hero Raskolnikov, and why does he explicitly identify his residence, the place of his acquaintances, as well as the address of the police station? As I will show, the answer reveals the hidden meaning of *Crime and Punishment,* which addressed a very timely and touchy subject: regicide. Dostoevsky used the city map to create a symbolic plot that elevates the murder story to political relevance.

Dostoevsky employs St. Petersburg not only as backdrop, but constructs the city anew as a highly ideologized space with haunted and holy places. Single districts of the city represent geo-poetical places with positive or negative connotations.

Upon an initial, perhaps superficial reading of the novel, Raskolnikov's strolls about the city appear as senseless wanderings of a lost soul. However, a closer look at his journey reveals a secret design to Raskolnikov's mysterious ways through the city.

Crime and Punishment is not a detective novel in the traditional sense of the word. The reader knows from the very beginning that Raskolnikov is, in fact, the murderer. Dostoevsky even inverts the usual structure of the detective novel: The reader is not keen to find out – along with the detective – 'whodunit', but instead hopes feverishly – along with the protagonist – that the police will not find the culprit.

Dostoevsky puts all his literary efforts into directing the reader's sympathies towards the assassin.[1] Raskolnikov thus appears as a likeable murderer with a highly ambivalent character: He is good, but acts badly. The hero resembles the place of action. Both Raskolnikov and St. Petersburg represent a precarious mixture of «good» Russian and «evil» Western elements. The novel translates this axiology into Raskolnikov's movements within the urban space.

Raskolnikov first makes a wrong decision – he is blinded by the Western model of Napoleonic power and commits a murder. But after having experienced the troubling results of pure Western rationality, he understands his real destination and ends up in the very center of holy Russia, in Siberia.

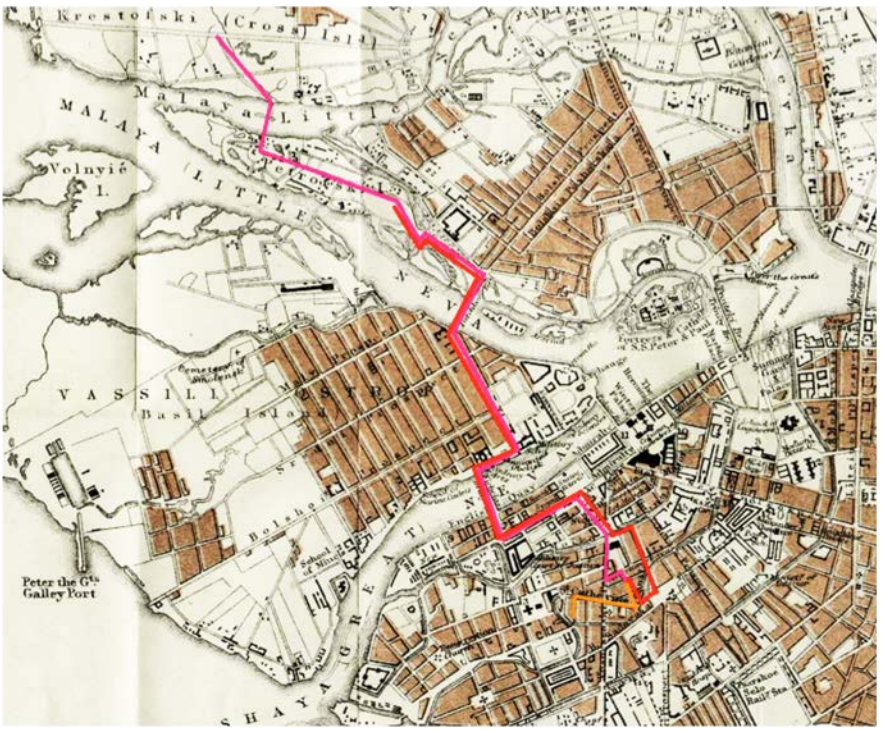
In Dostoevsky's view, St. Petersburg is a city that still has to earn the spiritual status of the Russian capital. He is convinced that Christ is bound to appear in Russia. However, the presence of Western cultural elements (architecture, economy, life style) in St. Petersburg compromises the high destiny of Russia.

Dostoevsky's very succinct spatial ideology is like a second topographical layer that underlies the real map of St. Petersburg. There are not only micro locations to consider, but also the general directions – especially the opposition between the dangerous West and the promising East.

In order to sort out the ideological meanings of places and directions, it is important to track down the hero's orientation in the city. Before Raskolnikov attacks the pawnbroker, he checks out his way to the crime scene. He takes a specified, westward route to get to his victim.

After the test run, he wanders to the Northwestern district of the city, although he himself is not able to explain the reason for his choice of direction.

[1] Horst-Jürgen Gerigk: Dostojewskijs Entwicklung als Schriftsteller. Vom *Toten Haus* zu den Brüdern Karamasow. Frankfurt am Main 2013, p. 61-101.



Ill. 1: Test run for the murder (orange route), excursion to the Northwest (red route), detour over Haymarket on the way back (pink route)

Dostoevsky highlights the symbolic significance of Raskolnikov's unexpected journey by pointing to the lack of a conscious motivation:

> «But where am I going?» he thought suddenly. «It's strange. I must have come for some reason. I came as soon as I had read that letter ... I was going to Vasilyevsky Island, to Razumikhin's, ... I remember now. But why? How did the idea of going to see Razumikhin come to enter my head just at this moment? It's very odd!»[2]

At this point of the plot, Raskolnikov's «very odd» excursion to the Northwestern part of the city makes indeed little sense. However, the significance of this action becomes apparent within the secret topographical meaning of the novel.

[2] Feodor Dostoevsky: Crime and Punishment. New York, London 1989, p. 43.

On the narrative level, his way back is also a notably irrational choice. Raskolnikov takes a slight detour, unaware as to why he decided to do so:

> He could never understand or explain to himself, why tired and harassed though he was, he went out his way to cross the Haymarket instead of returning home by the quickest and most direct route. The detour was not a great deal farther, but it was obviously quite unnecessary.[3]

For the plot of the novel the detour is quite significant: On the Haymarket, Raskolnikov accidentally overhears that the old pawnbroker will be alone in his home the coming day. It is this very information that triggers his plan to kill the old woman.

On the next day, Raskolnikov sets out to commit his murder. He heads to the old pawnbroker, but takes a different way compared to the first time when he scrutinized the situation. However, his direction is still westward.

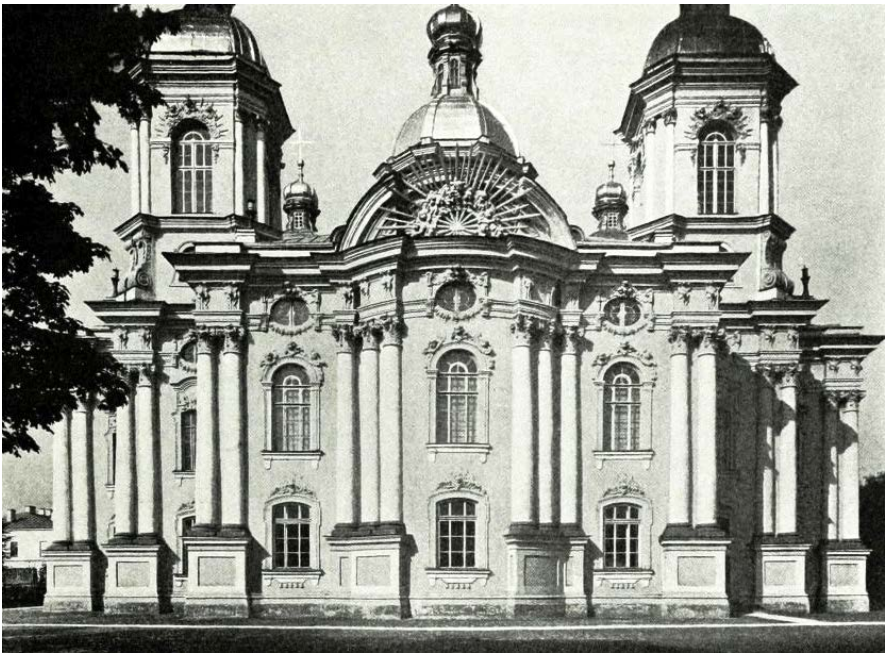


Ill. 2: Test run of the murder (orange route), final itinerary for the murder (red route) with extrapolations to the South (Nikolskii Cathedral) and West (Mariinskii Theater)

If we extrapolate the path from the test run, we arrive at the Nikolskii Cathedral – a Russian orthodox church. This is a very important place in Dostoevsky's ideological system: The cathedral represents a holy space in

[3] Ibidem, p. 51f.

anticipation of redemption of the world. Dostoevsky is convinced that Christ will appear in Russia, and that Holy Russia will be the center of a redeemed world. Dostoevsky's main narrative problem in all his novels is the following question: When this assumption is true, why then is Russia in such a misery? Dostoevsky's answer points to the fact, that for the time being, Russia is not able to recognize the new arrival of Christ. Russia is blind. The problem of redemption is thus first and foremost a problem of perception. Dostoevsky's main fear is not the lack of redemption yet to come. Instead, he is afraid that nobody will realize it when it really happens.



Ill. 3: Nikolskii Cathedral in St. Petersburg

If we extrapolate the path Raskolnikov takes when he finally commits the murder, we arrive at the Marinskii theatre.

In the 1860's, when Dostoevsky wrote his novel, the place of this theatre was ripe with symbolic significance. A fire destroyed the old theatre in 1859, and a new building was erected in its place in 1860. The architect was the russified Italian Albert Cavos who was one of the main designers

of the Western townscape of St. Petersburg. He designed important buildings, such as the Imperial theatre, the Page corpus, and the Ministry of Postal Services. His style was an eclectic classicism that imitated Italian architecture. With the reconstruction of the Marinskii theatre the repertoire changed as well. The theatre used to be a place where one could see folkloristic Russian comedies, though this program soon gave way to the Western genre of the opera.

In short: the Mariinski theatre symbolizes exaggerated Western influence in both its architecture, and in its music. Dostoevsky might have gone so far as to say that it symbolizes Western degeneracy.



Ill. 4: The newly erected Marinskii Theatre in the 1860's

The topography depicts Raskolnikov's main problem. His inclination towards the holy Russian orthodoxy is innate. As soon as he heads out to implement his fatal rational plan, he enters the false world of Western theatrical culture. Everything that follows after the murder (and of course also the murder itself) is part of an ill-conceived melodrama inspired by Western culture. Raskolnikov is a fan of Western innovations, and explains his social theory as follows:

> If Kepler's or Newton's invention for some reason would have required the sacrifice of one or ten or hundred human lives, Newton would have had the right and obligation to do away with those ten or hundred men. All leaders of mankind, all those Lykurgs, Solons, Mohammeds, Napoleons and whatever their names are, were without exception criminals, because they stepped over holy principles.[4]

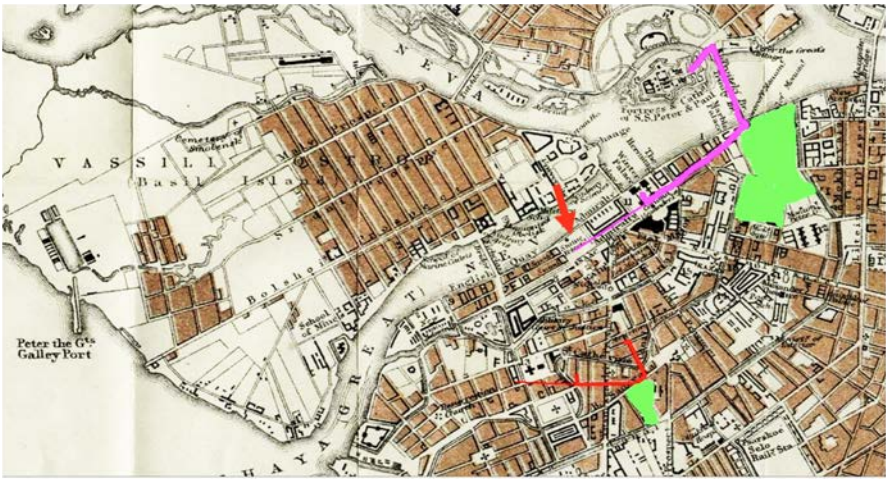
[4] Ibidem, p. 220.

All of Raskolnikov's ideal figures are foreigners. Raskolnikov would not have been misled from the path or a genuine Russian redemption had he followed Russian ideals.

There is a second reason as to why Dostoevsky lets Raskolnikov choose a special itinerary for his murder. On his way to the pawnbroker, Raskolnikov passes a small park, the Yusupov Gardens where Raskolnikov's thoughts seem to float freely:

> Passing the Yusupov Gardens, he began to consider the construction of tall fountains in all the squares, and how they would freshen the air. Following this train of thought he came to the conclusion that if the Summer Garden could be extended right across the Champ de Mars and joined to those of the Mikhaylovsky Palace, it would add greatly to the beauty and amenities of the city.[5]

At this point of the novel, Dostoevsky violates all laws of fictional verisimilitude for the sake of leaving a hint about the deeper meaning of his novel: Raskolnikov is about to kill a woman and muses about the city's recreational spaces at the same time! However, Raskolnikov's ecological considerations are far from being accidental. If we identify his ambitious garden project on the city map, we get the following picture.



Ill. 5: Raskolnikovs route and the Yusupov gardens (red route, small green area below) and the symbolic, enlarged route of the regicide with the joint areas of the Summer Garden and the Champ de Mars (pink route, big green area above). The red arrow indicates Falconet's monument to Peter the Great.

[5] Ibidem, p. 62.

Raskolnikov's city planning acquires a symbolical meaning, if we first amplify both Raskolnikov's itinerary and the adjacent green spaces in the city. Second, we have to move these patterns upwards somewhat, before turning them counterclockwise ever so slightly. Now we recognize the symbolic meaning, as the route starts at the Peter and Paul Fortress, passes the Summer Garden, and ends at the Winter Palace.

Looking at the emerging picture, it becomes clear that Raskolnikov's murder depicts a symbolical regicide. The route originates at the prison for revolutionaries and leads to the residence of the Tsar.
Even the extrapolation of the enlarged itinerary leads to a significant place: To the monument of Tsar Peter I. who westernized Russia at the beginning of the 18th century.



Ill. 6: Étienne Maurice Falconet: The Bronze Horseman. Monument to Peter the Great (1782). View of the 1860's

In Dostoevsky's nationalist ideology, Peter I. is as negative a character as Napoleon. Both imperators stand for the utterly undesirable western context of power, oppression, and individual self-affirmation.

The topographical specificity of Raskolnikov's route hints at the fact that the murder in *Crime and Punishment,* too, is a regicide on a smaller

scale. This literary motive could, of course, not be represented under Tsarist conditions and had to be hidden from plain sight.

The topic of regicide was hot in Russia when Dostoevsky wrote the novel. At the beginning of the 1860's, many revolutionary pamphlets appeared and called for terror and bloodshed. A case in point is the pamphlet «Young Russia» (1862) by the terrorist Peter Zaichnevsky (1842-1896). Dostoevsky knew this manuscript; it is mentioned in one of the articles of his journal *Time*.[6] Zaichnevsky openly calls for the assassination of the Tsar, which was, as of yet, unheard of in a Russian context:

> We are not afraid of the revolution although we know that a river of blood will flow. We are not afraid when we see that we will have to shed three times more blood to destroy the present order than than the Jacobins shed in the 1790's.
> It is unlikely that the affair will be confined to the annihilation of the family of the Imperator, i.e. about some hundreds of victims.[7]

These dreams turned into reality only a few years later: the revolutionary Dmitri Karakozov made an unsuccessful attempt on Alexander's II life in 1866.

For Dostoevsky, regicide was utter blasphemy. In a letter from Geneva he wrote to Apollon Maikov on March 2, 1868:

> While here abroad, with regard to Russia I have finally become a complete monarchist. If any one has done anything in Russia, it is obviously the Tsar alone. (But not on this account only, but simply because he is the Tsar, beloved by the Russian people, beloved for himself and because he is the Tsar. With us the people have given and give their love to every Tsar, and only in him do they finally believe. To the people it is a mystery, a priesthood, an anointment.) Our Westerners understand nothing about this; they pride themselves on basing themselves on facts, and they overlook the primary, the greatest fact of our history.[8]

The Tsar, a much loved and holy institution, needed protection against Western attacks. In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky presents a mental experiment that shows the fatal consequences of a Russian mind gone astray.

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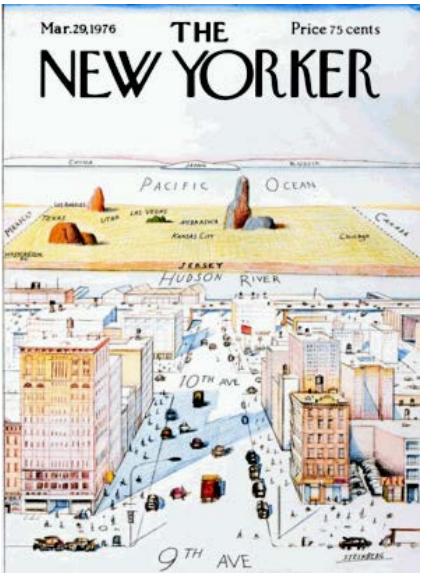
[6] N.G. Rozenblium: Peterburgskie pozhary 1862 g. i Dostoevskii (Zapreshennye stat'i zhurnala «Vremja»). In: Literaturnoe nasledstvo 86 (1973), p. 16-54, p. 49.

[7] F. Kon: Istoriia revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia v Rossii. Tom pervyi. Kharkov 1929, p.18-21.

[8] Dostoevsky: Letters and Reminiscences. Translated from the Russian by S.S. Koteliansky and J. Middleton Murry. London 1923, p. 64.

The use of cartography in the interpretation of *Crime and Punishment* is, however, not confined to the reconstruction of itineraries. We can identify entire regions in the city of St. Petersburg that serve as ideological spaces in Dostoevsky's novel. A cartographic visualization of these structures will produce a cognitive map that does not represent equidistances but values and perceptions instead.

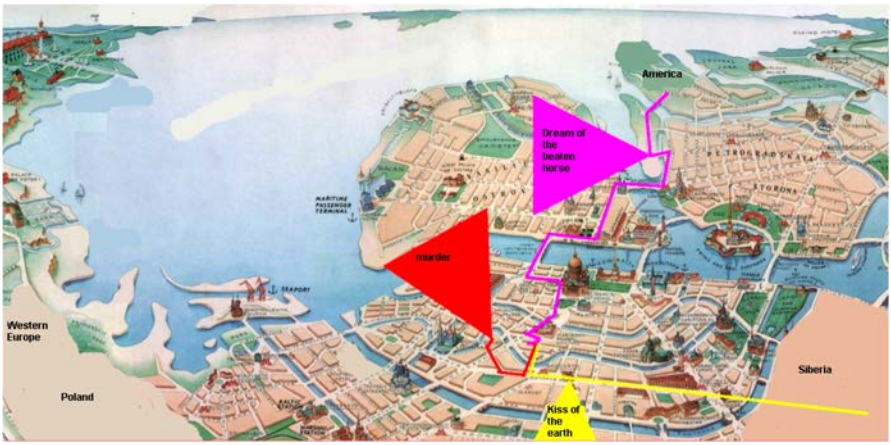
A good example for a cognitive map is Saul Steinberg's famous cover of the *New Yorker* from 1976. Traditional maps render objective structures; Saul Steinberg's map renders ideological structures that determine a person's cognitive abilities.



Ill. 7: Saul Steinberg: View of the World from 9th Avenue.

Such cognitive maps are distorted maps that do not represent objective geographical relations, but subjective interpretations of space.

The city of St. Petersburg in *Crime and Punishment* has a similar ideological structure as Saul Steinberg's New York. The districts of the city are endowed with a hidden meaning in need of reconstruction. The narrative space surrounds three regions: Western Europe, America and Siberia. We can locate these regions on a city map of St. Petersburg from a bird's eye perspective.



Ill. 8: Topographical map of St. Petersburg with symbolic directions.

From this point of view, Raskolnikovs visit to Krestovskii Island, taking place between the test run and the actual assassination, acquires a particular meaning. His wandering must be read as a symbolic emigration to the United States. Raskolnikov is looking for happiness – his murder is the attempt to reach a Napoleonic happiness (which is, of course, radically wrong in Dostoevsky's eyes). Before Raskolnikov commits the crime, he witnesses a different kind of happiness on Krestovskii Island (i.e. in America):

> Here there was no stuffiness, no evil smells, no public houses. But these pleasant new sensations soon gave place to painful and irritating ones. Occasionally he would stop before some picturesque dacha in its green setting, look through the fence and see in the distance gaily-dressed ladies on balconies or terraces, and children running about the gardens. He took a particular interest in the flowers and looked at them longest of all. Splendid carriages, and ladies and gentlemen on horseback, passed him, and he gazed after them with curious eyes and forgot them before they were out of sight.[9]

The ironic tone of this description makes clear: This is not Raskolnikov's happiness. It is too cheap, to material, too much of a philistine's happiness. Raskolnikov is attracted by another happiness, one that may be termed as the Napoleonic happiness. This bliss is much more expensive, it has to be paid for with human blood. But the geo-ideological structure of St. Petersburg shows that the way to this wrongful happiness leads to the West. The

[9] Feodor Dostoevsky: Crime and Punishment. New York, London 1989, p. 45f.

Napoleonic happiness concentrates on individual ratiocination; Raskolnikov is not fit for such logic. To be sure, he is not too weak to assert his position according to Western mores, he is however, too Russian to neglect the problematic implications that come with Napoleonic happiness.

The first two itineraries are dead ends. There is no solution at the end of the road. On his way back from America, Raskolnikov dreams of a beaten horse and thus unmasks the dominating exploitation of American culture. The act of killing the old woman is in itself a turning point and instills a heavy fever.

Only the last itinerary, the one pointing toward the East, represents a solution: Raskolnikov confesses his guilt, kisses the earth and is exiled to perform heavy labour in Siberia. This motive confirms Dostoevsky's stern confidence that the truth for contemporary Russia will come from the East. Dostoevsky keeps with the biblical sentence in *Crime and Punishment*: «He who has eyes let him see.» He hides the true ideological plot in the cartography of his novel. Dostoevsky perhaps thought his readers unable to discover the hidden topographical meaning of his novel. At the same time, he may have set up this riddle as a kind of test for his Russian readers. There may be a chance for the Russian people to recognize Christ, as he is bound to reappear in this world, if only his audience is able to decipher the secret message of his novel. Both tasks are no easy feat. But Dostoevsky firmly believed that it was his task as a writer to open the eyes of his Russian readers, and to prepare them for the arrival of Christ in Russia. One of the worst threats to this expectation was the rising terrorism in Russia. Since the Tsar was, in Dostoevsky's eyes, in perfect «symphonia» with the orthodox religion, any attempt at his life drove Russia further away from its holy destiny. *Crime and Punishment* is therefore a tale of conversion: Raskolnikov is – as indicated by his name – «split» between Western rationality and Eastern spirituality. Only after having overcome his Western blindness, can he serve as a model for every single reader of Dostoevsky's novel. In this sense, Raskolnikov is a saint who found the right path after living in sin. *Crime and Punishment* then should not be read as detective novel, but as a hagiography.