

Dostoevsky and Epilepsy

Although their influence did not reach western Europe until some years after his death, the works of the Russian novelist Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821-1881) have intrigued writers, philosophers and theologians ever since. For example, Dostoevsky is "a significant presence in the margins of much that has been written" in the Archbishop of Canterbury's 2005 Clark Lectures delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge.¹ Likewise, neurologists have taken Dostoevsky as a subject for study, because of his epilepsy, and that ascribed to a number of his characters.

Perhaps the first neurologist to write on Dostoevsky's epilepsy was Sigmund Freud (1856-1939); he had trained under Charcot before turning to psychiatry. In an article entitled *Dostoevsky and parricide*, first published in 1928, Freud stated that:

Dostoevsky called himself an epileptic. ... it is highly probable that this so-called epilepsy was only a symptom of his neurosis and must accordingly be classified as hystero-epilepsy – that is, as severe hysteria.

Freud's reasoning for thinking Dostoevsky's seizures psychogenic was based on the timing of their inception:

The most probable assumption is that the attacks went back far into his childhood, that their place was taken to begin with by milder symptoms and that they did not assume an epileptic form until after the shattering experience of his eighteenth year – the murder of his father. It would be very much to the point if it could be established that they ceased completely during his exile in Siberia ...²

In the biography by Dostoevsky's daughter, it was "according to family traditions" that the onset of epilepsy occurred on learning of the death of his father, Mikhail Andreyevich (sometime head physician at the Malinsky Hospital for the Poor in Moscow), but Dostoevsky's own letters contradict this.

Ingenious though the psychoanalytical formulation was, it was vigorously challenged shortly after its translation into English (in the *Realist* of July 1929) by the historian EH Carr (1892-1982), then preparing a biography of Dostoevsky³ (and some years away from commencing his monumental fourteen-volume *History of Soviet Russia* for which he is chiefly remembered). His analysis of the extant sources suggested that, quite contrary to Freud's belief, Dostoevsky's seizures did not start until during his imprisonment in exile in Omsk, ie not earlier than 1849, some years after his father's death in 1839, and indeed was not unequivocally diagnosed as epilepsy until 1857, shortly after his first marriage.⁴

If not pseudoseizures, then from what type of epilepsy did Dostoevsky suffer? A number of neurologists have examined the issue. Alajouanine, one of the successors to Charcot's chair, believed Dostoevsky had partial and secondarily generalised seizures with ecstatic auras,⁵ but Gastaut initially plumped for idiopathic generalised seizures.⁶ Voskuil felt that the seizures began in 1846 (Carr had examined, and discounted, the evidence for this⁴) and suggested complex partial seizures with secondarily generalised nocturnal seizures and ecstatic auras.⁷ Gastaut, returning to the subject, acknowledged the possibility of a silent temporal lesion but such as permitted "almost immediately secondary generalization to each seizure".⁸ DeToledo suggested, on the basis of Smerdyakov's admission of feigning a seizure to provide himself with an alibi for the murder of

his father Old Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* (an episode perhaps recapitulating Dostoevsky's experience of his own father's death), that Dostoevsky was well acquainted with the possible secondary gain of seizures, but he stopped short of bringing the historical wheel full circle back to Freud by suggesting that Dostoevsky had pseudo-seizures.⁹ Most recently, Rosetti & Bogousslavsky entered the lists: they suggested seizure onset in 1846 and that Dostoevsky's father was not in fact murdered, en route to their conclusion that Dostoevsky suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy, most likely left mesiotemporal (this lateralisation based on Dostoevsky's postictal aphasia, since ecstatic auras are thought to be non-lateralising), with complex partial and secondarily generalised seizures, with a relatively benign course.¹⁰

Whatever its particular nature, what impact did this seizure disorder have on Dostoevsky's art? Siegel & Dorn¹¹ have traced six characters with epilepsy in Dostoevsky's oeuvre, of which the most notable are Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* (1868) and Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1881). Certainly the former has an experience of mystical ecstasy akin to Dostoevsky's ecstatic auras, whereas Smerdyakov's epilepsy, as related above, is "a piece of machinery necessary to the plot, and appears to have no other artistic or spiritual significance".⁴

Ecstatic auras, a feeling of absolute harmony and happiness, a sense of spiritual exaltation and triumph, a feeling of power to transcend the limits of the material world, comparable with Mahomet's vision of Paradise, were first recorded by Dostoevsky in 1865. Such ecstatic auras have sometimes been labelled as "Dostoyevsky's epilepsy," although this terminology does not appear in the various ILAE classifications of seizures; they have been associated with focal right temporal abnormalities.^{12,13} In one case, ecstatic auras have been reported to be induced by watching television – not as implausible as it may at first appear, since such episodes were independent of the content of the television programme – but these were associated with generalised rather than focal epileptiform activity.¹⁴

References

- Williams R. *Grace and necessity. Reflections on art and love*. London: Morehouse/Continuum, 2005:170.
- Freud S. *Dostoevsky and parricide*. In: Dickson A (ed.). *Penguin Freud Library volume 14: Art and Literature*. London: Penguin, 1985:441-460
- Carr EH. *Dostoevsky (1821-1881). A new biography*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931.
- Carr EH. *Was Dostoevsky an epileptic?* Slavonic and East European Review 1930;December:424-31.
- Alajouanine T. *Dostoyevski's epilepsy*. Brain 1963;86:209-18.
- Gastaut H. *Fyodor Mikhailovitch Dostoevsky's involuntary contribution to the symptomatology and prognosis of epilepsy*. Epilepsia 1978;19:186-201.
- Voskuil PHA. *The epilepsy of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky (1821-1881)*. Epilepsia 1983;24:658-67.
- Gastaut H. *New comments on the epilepsy of Fyodor Dostoevsky*. Epilepsia 1984;25:408-11.
- DeToledo JC. *The epilepsy of Fyodor Dostoyevsky: insights from Smerdyakov Karamazov's use of a malingered seizure as an alibi*. Arch Neurol 2001;58:1305-6.
- Rosetti AO, Bogousslavsky J. *Dostoevsky and epilepsy: an attempt to look through the frame*. In: Bogousslavsky J, Boller F (eds.). *Neurological disorders in famous artists*. Basel: Karger, 2005:65-75.
- Siegel AM, Dorn T. *Dostoyevskijs Leben im Wechselspiel zwischen Epilepsie und Literatur*. Nervenarzt 2001;72:466-74.
- Cirignotta F, Todesco CV, Lugaresi E. *Temporal lobe epilepsy with ecstatic seizures (so-called Dostoevsky epilepsy)*. Epilepsia 1980;21:705-10.
- Morgan H. *Dostoevsky's epilepsy: a case report and comparison*. Surg Neurol 1990;33:413-16.
- Cabrera-Valdivia F, Jimenez-Jimenez FJ, Tejero J, Ayuso-Peralta L, Vaquero A, Garcia-Albea E. *Dostoevsky's epilepsy induced by television*. J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry 1996;61:653.



Andrew Larner is the editor of our Book Review Section. He is a Consultant Neurologist at the Walton Centre for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Liverpool, with a particular interest in dementia and cognitive disorders. He is also an Honorary Apothecaries' Lecturer in the History of Medicine at the University of Liverpool.

Correspondence to:

AJ Larner,
Consultant Neurologist,
Cognitive Function Clinic,
Walton Centre for Neurology
and Neurosurgery,
Lower Lane,
Fazakerley,
Liverpool,
L9 7LJ.
Fax: 0151 529 5513,
Email: a.larner@
thewaltoncentre.nhs.uk



I thank my colleague Dr Ivan Iniesta, a genuine Dostoevsky scholar, for drawing my attention to another recent article on this subject by Baumann et al. (Seizure 2005;14:324-330).