

Chapter 23 Primary Source Activity

Czar Nicholas I (textbook page 599) feared the new ideas that swept Europe after the revolutions of 1848. He dealt harshly with groups that favored liberal ideas. The young writer Feodor Dostoyevsky, a member of one such group, was arrested in St. Petersburg in 1849 and sentenced to death in a public square. Here is his story, told partly through letters he later wrote to a friend. ♦ *As you read, think about the kind of government that could treat its citizens this way. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

The Execution in Semyonovsky Square

“Remember how the officer, after he had finished reading our death sentences, folded up the paper and stuffed it in his pocket, and then stepped down from the platform, and at that very moment the sun came out of the clouds and flashed across my face. I turned to my neighbor and said: ‘It’s impossible! They don’t really intend to shoot us!’ Instead of replying, he pointed to a row of coffins covered by a cloth. When I saw this, I lost all hope, and I was deeply convinced that they intended to shoot us. . . .”

For more than half an hour they had been forced to stand in those two rows on the platform, while the crowd watched silently. . . . [T]hey were ordered to remove their outer garments and put on the hooded white gowns with long sleeves which would serve as their shrouds. Petrashevsky [the group’s leader], one of the few who could still make a joke, said: “What a stupid attire!” Then Petrashevsky, Mombelli, and Grigoriev were led down the steps and bound to the posts, and the hoods were drawn over their faces. Swords flashed, a trumpet sounded, there was a roll of drums, and the sixteen soldiers standing 16 feet away from the three bound men raised their rifles at an order and prepared to take aim.

[Dostoyevsky was part of the next group waiting to be led down the steps.]

I had, as I supposed, at most five more minutes of life, and I decided to devote them to thinking about myself. I tried to picture to myself how it would all happen. . . . And suddenly there was a strange stir among the men on the platform. My shortsightedness prevented me from distinguishing anything, but I knew something was happening. Suddenly I became aware that an officer was riding full tilt across the Square in our direction, waving a white handkerchief. This was the imperial messenger bringing the news of our amnesty. Later we learned that the whole affair had been planned; and in truth how could it have been possible to punish with death these twenty youths, some hardly out of their childhood, for offenses so small. The Tsar

“I had, as I supposed, at most five more minutes of life, and I decided to devote them to thinking about myself.”

[czar] had made the decision to punish us in order to terrify us, so that we would remember his laws.”

Source: *The Fortress*, by Robert Payne (Simon and Schuster, 1957).

Questions to Think About

1. What convinced Dostoyevsky that he and his friends were really going to be shot?
2. What prevented the executions?
3. **Recognizing Assumptions** According to Dostoyevsky, what did the czar intend this staged execution to achieve? What does this show about the czar’s ideas?
4. **Activity** Imagine that you are a foreign visitor from a democratic country, visiting Russia in 1849. Draw an editorial cartoon commenting on this incident and what it shows about Nicholas’s rule.