

## **Background on the Author**

Fyodor Dostoevsky was born in 1821; his father was a doctor who, through services to the Tsarist government, went on to achieve noble status and with it the right to own serfs. Dostoevsky dreamed of being a writer, but his father required that he be educated as a military engineer. In 1839, when Dostoevsky was away at the Academy of Military Engineers, his father died suddenly; he may have been murdered by his own serfs in an uprising. Dostoevsky became a lifelong opponent of serfdom and injustice. Later, in 1849, after he had left the academy and embarked on his career as a writer, he was arrested because of his membership in a secret political circle and sentenced to death. Dostoevsky and his fellow prisoners were brought to the place of execution. Three of them were put before the firing squad with bags over their heads, awaiting their deaths. At the last minute, however, the sentence was changed to hard labor.

When Dostoevsky returned to St. Petersburg in 1859 after his years in hard labor and exile, many things had changed. For one thing, the rule of the harshly authoritarian Tsar Nicholas I (1825–1855) had come to an end with Nicholas I's death. Nicholas I was succeeded by his son, Alexander II (1855–1881), who ushered in a series of reforms, including a reform of the justice system and the end of serfdom. Under Alexander II, it was now possible to publish works that would never have been permitted by the censor during Nicholas I's reign. Dostoevsky was thrilled by the end of serfdom, but quickly came to recognize that the emancipation of the serfs did not solve the larger problems of cruelty and social injustice.