

nihilism

nihilism, (from Latin *nihil*, “nothing”), originally a [philosophy](#) of [moral](#) and epistemological [skepticism](#) that arose in 19th-century Russia during the early years of the reign of [Tsar Alexander II](#). The term was famously used by [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) to describe the disintegration of traditional [morality](#) in Western society. In the 20th century, [nihilism encompassed](#) a variety of philosophical and [aesthetic](#) stances that, in one sense or another, denied the [existence](#) of genuine moral truths or values, rejected the possibility of knowledge or communication, and asserted the ultimate meaninglessness or purposelessness of life or of the universe.

The term is an old one, applied to certain heretics in the [Middle Ages](#). In [Russian literature](#), *nihilism* was probably first used by N.I. Nadezhdin, in an 1829 article in the *Messenger of Europe*, in which he applied it to [Aleksandr Pushkin](#). Nadezhdin, as did V.V. Bervi in 1858, equated nihilism with [skepticism](#). [Mikhail Nikiforovich Katkov](#), a well-known [conservative](#) journalist who interpreted nihilism as synonymous with [revolution](#), presented it as a social menace because of its negation of all moral principles.

It was [Ivan Turgenev](#), in his celebrated novel [Fathers and Sons](#) (1862), who popularized the term through the figure of Bazarov the nihilist. Eventually, the nihilists of the 1860s and '70s came to be regarded as disheveled, untidy, unruly, ragged men who rebelled against tradition and social order. The philosophy of nihilism then began to be associated erroneously with the regicide of [Alexander II](#) (1881) and the political terror that was employed by those active at the time in [clandestine](#) organizations opposed to [absolutism](#).

If to the conservative elements the nihilists were the curse of the time, to the liberals such as [N.G. Chernyshevsky](#) they represented a mere transitory factor in the development of national thought—a stage in the struggle for individual freedom—and a true spirit of the rebellious young generation. In his novel [What Is to Be Done?](#) (1863), Chernyshevsky endeavoured to detect positive aspects in the nihilist philosophy. Similarly, in his *Memoirs*, Prince [Peter Kropotkin](#), the leading Russian anarchist, defined nihilism as the symbol of struggle against all forms of [tyranny](#), hypocrisy, and artificiality and for individual freedom.

Fundamentally, 19th-century nihilism represented a philosophy of negation of all forms of aestheticism; it advocated [utilitarianism](#) and scientific [rationalism](#). Classical philosophical systems were rejected entirely. Nihilism represented a crude form of [positivism](#) and [materialism](#), a revolt against the established social order; it negated all authority exercised by the state, by the church, or by the [family](#). It based its [belief](#) on nothing but scientific truth; science would be the solution of all social problems. All evils, nihilists believed, derived from a single source—ignorance—which science alone would overcome.

The [thinking](#) of 19th-century nihilists was profoundly influenced by philosophers, scientists, and historians such as [Ludwig Feuerbach](#), [Charles Darwin](#), Henry Buckle, and [Herbert Spencer](#). Since nihilists denied the [duality](#) of human beings as a combination of body and [soul](#), of spiritual and material [substance](#), they came into violent conflict with [ecclesiastical](#) authorities. Since nihilists questioned the doctrine of the [divine right of kings](#), they came into similar conflict with [secular](#) authorities. Since they scorned all social bonds

and family authority, the conflict between parents and children became equally immanent, and it is this theme that is best reflected in Turgenev's novel.