

# The Decembrist Revolt and its Aftermath: Values in Conflict

**by Robert F. Baumann**

*Editor's Note: Look for Shushanna Baumann's companion piece to this article in the upcoming Special Report featuring papers presented at the 2019 Fort Leavenworth Ethics Symposium.*

In December 1825, a group of Russian conspirators attempted to seize power by carrying out an uprising against the tsarist regime. Known as the Decembrist Revolt, Soviet historians embraced the episode as a precursor to the Bolshevik Revolution, which followed a century later. Less well known is the fact that the Decembrist Revolt drew inspiration from the American Revolution and U.S. Constitution. Made up primarily of nobles, officers and professionals, the Decembrists—as they came to be known later—offer a fascinating example of the complexity of ethical decision making. Moved by moral and political convictions to undertake an astonishingly brash and dangerous takeover, they gave meticulous thought to the justification, methods and end state of this extraordinary endeavor. Not only did they leave behind extensive documents and correspondence, but many survivors were extensively interviewed in the aftermath. This record faithfully reflects a process of principled ethical reasoning as well as the phenomenal complexity in taking the drastic step from discussion and debate to action.<sup>1</sup>

This essay explores the implications of Decembrist actions and their aftermath, as well as the resonance of the entire episode in Russian politics today. Since the period of the Decembrists, there has been a more or less continuous struggle by a significant fraction of Russia's intellectual class to introduce liberal, Western ideas of legality and governance. Foremost among these concepts have been freedom of expression, the rule of law, a representative political process, and a genuine form of accountable governance. Whether challenging tsars, commissars or presidential strongmen, liberal Russian intellectuals have confronted similar criticisms—that their ideas were foreign or not true to the Russian nature, that they were a “Trojan Horse” for alien interests, or that their ideas could never work in Russia. Thus, it is informative to take a look at this tradition through the experience of the Decembrists. Similarly, it is illuminating to examine the post-Decembrist reaction in light of contemporary regime efforts to stifle political opponents. The official ideology of Nicholas I has

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an audible echo in Moscow today.

Concerning the specific focus of [the 2019 Fort Leavenworth Ethics Symposium], the role of ethical considerations in officer behavior, it is essential to observe that liberal Western ethical values informed the political judgement of the Decembrists. The Russian nobility as a class did share some notable Western attributes beyond the fact that most of the elite were fluent in French and often spoke other European languages as well. This reflects their sense of class kinship with their counterparts in the West. Individual honor, as expressed in oaths of allegiance, was an important element of the common culture. The officers among the Decembrists had sworn an oath of allegiance to the tsar, an oath that they took seriously. Therefore, acting against the regime, as their consciences demanded, posed an ethical dilemma.

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Before beginning an analysis of the work of the Decembrists, a brief survey of the historical context is in order. In particular, it is crucial to consider the events and political currents that influenced the decisions of the Decembrists. In the early nineteenth century, Imperial Russia was in some respects at the zenith of its prestige in Europe. In 1812, Russian forces repelled a French invasion in which Napoleon's army marched all the way to Moscow before withdrawing in disastrous defeat. From the Russian viewpoint, this great common ordeal contributed much to the formation of a modern national identity, a collective awakening in response to foreign invasion. A pivotal moment occurred as Russian armies reached the western frontier of

the empire. Against the advice of some of his leading generals, Tsar Alexander I resolved to pursue the French across Europe, with the result that a Russian army staged a victory parade in Paris. It marked the zenith of Russian prestige and influence in nineteenth-century Europe. The experience was fraught with implications. Many Russian officers participated in one of the more fateful military occupations in history. Immersed in French society and culture, it was hard to escape the conclusion that Russian society was by comparison harsh and unenlightened.

The European Enlightenment penetrated Russia slowly during the second half of the eighteenth century. Catherine the great had corresponded with leading French intellectuals and for a time fancied herself as the model "enlightened monarch." Inevitably, the disparity between social theory and reality forced a difficult reckoning. The French Revolution and the execution of Louis XVI stirred revulsion in Russia and led Catherine to abandon her liberal posturing.

A case in point is the role of Alexander Radishchev, a liberal Russian intellectual who for a time enjoyed the Tsarina's favor. However, Radishchev was not content with superficial agreement about a vision for a more enlightened Russia. In his most famous work, *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, he described the poverty and subjugation among Russia's serfs as well as the cruel ignorance prevalent among the provincial nobility. This expose on the barbarous side of life in Russia did not play well at court. Radishchev eventually punched his ticket to exile to Siberia.

Radishchev preceded the Decembrists by several decades but his analysis of Russian society anticipated theirs. Like most—not all—of the Decembrists, he did not reject Russia's autocracy.<sup>2</sup> Yet, apparently inspired by the American Revolution, Radishchev produced his first poetic political commentary in *Ode to Freedom*, which unsparingly denounced

unchecked autocratic prerogatives and serfdom, while invoking the names of George Washington and Oliver Cromwell as heroic challengers of the status quo.<sup>3</sup> One stanza reads: “What you have, indeed, is what we thirst for; Your example has revealed the dream.”<sup>4</sup> Though a critic of the violent seizure of native lands in America, Radishchev saw the founding of the United States as a new dawn for liberty and expressed boundless admiration for free expression and thought.<sup>5</sup> Following immediately upon the French Revolution, his scathing social critique, including his repudiation of serfdom, received a far more skeptical reception at the Court of Catherine the Great. The final straw was the regicide in Paris and the waves of beheadings of leading royals. Sensing that tolerance could well be confused with weakness, Catherine banned Radishchev’s main works which joined the realm of underground literature.

A quarter century later, the same principal issues stood out in the writings of the Decembrists. The first was the immorality of serfdom, a form of bondage already eliminated across Western Europe and ever more a source of national shame. Serfs were not slaves, although the distinctions were subtle enough that observers could not be faulted for failing to notice. Serfs were tied to the land, could be bought and sold, and were very much at the mercy of the whims of their masters. The most striking distinction concerning the practice of slavery in the Americas was that the serfs themselves were of the same ethnicity as their masters. Interestingly, Russian owners viewed their serfs in much the same way that white slaveholders in the Americas saw their slaves. Popular opinion among owners held that the serfs were naturally less capable of managing their own affairs, and that their servitude was perfectly appropriate.

The second burning issue in the minds of most Decembrists was Russia’s autocracy. In this regard especially, currents of Western thought had

a powerful impact. Almost without exception, the Decembrists believed that governance in Europe and the United States was more enlightened and just (despite the continuation of slavery in the latter). Rule under a constitution and a law code enshrining individual rights for all were the foundation stones of a civilized regime. The French Revolution might have ended badly but even the Emperor Napoleon had created a code of laws. The development of the United States was more inspirational. George Washington was a symbol of liberty. The words of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution became the object of endless study and reflection. The persistence of slavery in America was objectionable but since Russia, too, had not been able to end the scourge of human bondage the emphasis was on what had been achieved to date and what a great country could aspire to in the future.

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In the meantime, another source of distress for Russian liberal intellectuals was that the reign of Alexander I had begun in 1801 with such a sense of promise. Having been tutored by enlightened Westerners, personally chosen by his grandmother Catherine, Alexander was conversant with the latest theories on social justice and seemed genuinely interested in reforming Russia. His youthful inner circle of close friends and advisers fully believed that great progress would take place in the near future. Nevertheless, conservative resistance at court and among the great landowners remained formidable and Alexander could hardly be faulted for remembering that his own father, Paul I, had been deposed and murdered in part because of his unorthodox views. Still,

Alexander generally earned a reputation for vacillation and for delegating too much authority to the anti-reformist Alexei Arakcheev, who served as Minister of War from 1808.<sup>6</sup>

Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 roughly coincided with a change in Alexander's outlook. Victory accompanied Alexander's withdrawal into deep religious mysticism and reinforced a mounting concern for the preservation of autocracy in Russia. Thus, even as they returned home from France, flush with visions for improving Russia, the future Decembrists found that their sovereign was losing interest. In the words of the leading Western historian of the Decembrist movement, Anatole Mazour, "Gradually, they [future Decembrists] began to discover that they had come back to an alien country."<sup>7</sup> Disillusioned Russian liberals began to form secret networks. Some took advantage of the democratic discussion forums provided by Russia's fledgling Masonic societies, but those most committed to change formed a new secret organization. This clandestine society laid down the founding principles of the movement and created a framework for organizing and planning.

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One of the documents that most informed Decembrist thinking about the structure of a future government was the American Declaration of Independence, the text of which would not actually appear in print in Russia until the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The declaration struck a chord with liberal Russian intellectuals, who were for the most part aware of it through brief published summaries passed along from France.

Equally influential was the American

constitution. Indeed it is clear that for most of the Decembrists the establishment of a constitutional regime was fundamental. Nikita Murav'ev, author of one of the draft constitutions put forward by a Decembrist, drew extensively from the American model, as well as from the examples of one or more of the individual states. Not at all coincidentally, the proposed oath to be taken by a future Russian emperor bore a strong likeness to the one taken by American presidents.<sup>9</sup>

The relatively youthful Murav'ev had joined the Army during the 1813 campaign to liberate Europe from Napoleon at the age of 17. By virtue of his noble status, he became a captain in the Guards Corps in short order and fully exploited his time in Paris to associate with French intellectuals. Not long after his return to Russia, he became a founding member of the Union of Salvation from which the eventual revolt was forged. Due to his energy and commitment, he soon emerged as a leader in the movement and willingly took on a constitutional project. What he produced was radical enough in a Russian context, but might not have fully reflected Murav'ev's staunch republicanism.<sup>10</sup> The proposal settled for a constitutional monarchy, but did address liberation of the serfs and slaves, as well as the establishment of some form of legislative assembly. Moreover, it declared unequivocally that "autocratic government is equally fatal to rulers and to society," and that "it is not permissible to let the basis of government be the despotism of one person."<sup>11</sup> A hereditary "emperor" would in reality be a very strong executive, commanding the army, conducting foreign policy, and enjoying a legislative veto. The Russian Empire would become a federation of nationalities, an evident attempt to balance central authority with a reasonable latitude for local governance.<sup>12</sup>

Murav'ev's constitutional project did not enjoy universal support among the Decembrists. A more extreme constitutional gained support

among those who were more radical in their approach. A split in the movement occurred in 1820, resulting in the formation of the Southern Society, which operated in a much more secretive fashion and championed more extreme solutions.

Another officer, Pavel Pestel, spearheaded the work of the Southern Society. Not an ethnic Russian, Pestel hailed from a Lutheran, rather than Orthodox, religious background and had spent several years studying in Germany before the Napoleonic invasion. By 1821, he was commanding an infantry regiment based in Tulchin, even as he drafted a scheme to overthrow the tsar's government. Pestel's reform plan, titled Russian Law, demanded immediate emancipation with land for the serfs, abolition of class privileges, and openly espoused republican government. He was even open to the possibility of regicide. A monarch limited by a constitution, he believed, could not be trusted and would seek the first opportunity to redesign the system of government in his own favor.<sup>13</sup>

Like Murave'ev, Pestel believed that the United States offered a viable model of republican government. Conventional wisdom in Russia not only in conservative, but also in many more liberal political circles, was that republicanism would inevitably result in chaos and governmental collapse. Pestel achieved political success in the Southern Society in pressing for a genuinely republican vision. Like some other partially Westernized Decembrists, Pestel's worldview was influenced by Enlightenment philosophy. At the same time, as evidenced by his correspondence with his parents, his Orthodox Christian faith was wavering.<sup>14</sup> Generally, Orthodoxy was a bulwark of the social status quo in Imperial Russia. In contrast to America, in Russia there were few religious voices that opposed serfdom. Otherwise, there were remarkable similarities between the debates over serfdom or slavery in Russia and the United States.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, events both domestic and

foreign conspired to shape the plans of the future Decembrists. A liberal revolution against Ferdinand I in Spain enjoyed brief success in 1820. Backed by part of the army and commanded by a colonel (Rafael del Riego), it forced the king to accept a liberal constitution before conservative Europe marshalled an army of its own to restore the status quo.<sup>16</sup> (The failed takeover in Spain nevertheless confirmed the views of leading Decembrists that a well-led, limited revolution might succeed. In this sense they also seem to have taken note of the example of George Washington, who rejected the idea of a revolution of the masses or a guerilla war out of fear that a general social conflagration would make the restoration of a civil society nearly impossible. The key point is that Washington succeeded by waging a primarily conventional war that observed international norms. The Decembrists could look to another, domestic historical example, the Pugachev rebellion of 1773-1775, for a contrary example of how fomenting a mass uprising of the peasants could be a bloody and destructive failure.<sup>17</sup> Even in this instance, there were practical lessons. One was that a crisis of succession or monarchical legitimacy could prove to be a political opportunity.

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A very recent domestic event served to fuel discontent and highlight the arbitrary severity of the Russian regime. The revolt of the illustrious Semenovskiy Guards Regiment in 1820 jolted the consciousness of many Decembrists. Founded by Peter the Great while still in his youth, the regiment was home to many sons of Russia's elite and had outsized influence in palace politics, playing a key role for example in securing the

throne for Catherine II. In turn, Alexander took a keen interest in the unit and guaranteed that they lacked no comfort befitting their regimental lineage.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the Tsar personally led the Semenevsky Guards during the triumphal parade in Paris in 1814, a signal mark of distinction.

Over time, however, the sense of entitlement within the regiment led to trouble. More than a few partook of radical political views at a time when Alexander's own political orientation was shifting in favor of reaction. In 1819 a new commander, Colonel F. E. Schwartz, took the reins of the regiment. An ardent disciplinarian, Schwartz was determined to reconstruct the regimental culture. His conduct seems to have

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been purposefully demeaning and he quickly lost all respect among the officers. A final straw leading to mutiny was corporal punishment meted out to a few who had won the Cross of Saint George fighting the French, and were consequently supposed to be exempt from such forms of punishment. As indignation spread through the barracks, on October 17, 1820 the First Company announced that they could no longer serve under such a commander. In the ensuing standoff, they received the support of the rest of the regiment. Discipline did not completely dissolve and the entire regiment marched to the Peter and Paul Fortress to face new sanctions. Subsequent discovery of a note suggesting that tyrants could be legitimately removed triggered a full investigation. In the end, a tribunal condemned 220 men of the regiment to run a battalion gauntlet. Alexander reassigned the regiment out of the capital to the southern military district.<sup>19</sup> That step unintentionally put them in contact with Pestel and the Southern

Society.

Thus, the historical conditions were set for radical action. Unfortunately for the Decembrists, continued philosophical differences between the northern and southern branches of the movement imperiled the possibility of coordinated action. Attempts at reconciliation proved unsuccessful despite a broadly shared understanding that neither group could act alone. A precipitating event was necessary. That event would be the death of Tsar Alexander to whom every officer had sworn loyalty. Notably, in a culture that placed a premium on honor and oaths, withdrawing such a pledge required a counter-pledge. Consequently, those joining the Union of Salvation had to accept the possibility of moving against the reigning sovereign.

Acting against Alexander I proved highly problematic, and not just for the reason that many were still somewhat sympathetic towards him even in their disappointment. Another active consideration was that the whiff of conspiracy had long since reached the palace, particularly after the Semenevsky incident. As a result, the regime had become far more vigilant in enforcing ideological orthodoxy and threatened violators with arrest and more. One consequence was that active communication among the Decembrists of the north and south became even more difficult.

The Decembrists awaited a propitious moment to act and serendipitous luck provided just that moment. Briefly, the sudden death of Alexander in November 1825 provided a short pause between regimes alexander until a successor could be crowned and a government sworn to allegiance. To nearly all, the death of Alexander came as a shock. As described by one Decembrist, the still youthful tsar, only 48 years of age, had always been a vigorous and universally admired physical presence. No one could imagine someone like him dying of natural causes.<sup>20</sup> The confusion and vague sense of mystery attending the death added to the troubling atmosphere that surrounded the

impending succession.

The pause between reigns became painfully prolonged because of a highly secret and unorthodox development in the succession plan. Since Alexander died childless, the rightful successor according to Russian tradition was his brother, Constantine, the next in line by virtue of age. Constantine, unfortunately, had privately declined his right to the throne because he had divorced and remarried, this time to a Polish Catholic woman who lacked royal lineage. Therefore, the right to the throne would pass to the next brother in line, Nicholas. No one in government, not to mention the general public, was privy to this knowledge. Indeed, Nicholas himself was quite uncertain as to how to proceed, and in fact had already pledged himself to Constantine, who was still in Poland with no intention of returning to St. Petersburg. Thus Russia faced the peculiar situation in which each brother was setting aside his own claim to the throne in favor of the other. Prince S. P. Trubetskoi, the designated temporary dictator, noted later in captivity that the troops were unlikely to trust the announcement of a secret manifesto designating Nicholas as the heir.<sup>21</sup> While all of Russia waited for clarification, the Army took an oath to Constantine.

The selection of December 14 as the date for general swearing of allegiance to Nicholas left just enough time in an age of slow communications for the Decembrists to put together an action plan. Members of the Northern Society, acting in St. Petersburg, were to pre-empt the oath of allegiance by preventing the ceremony in the senate square and boldly attempting to rally elite units in the capital, some of which might be sympathetic, to the join the cause of revolution. The Moscow Life Guards Regiment was part of the plan and reached the intended rally point ahead of the scheduled ceremony. General Confusion was their ally. Thousands of liberally-minded civilians began to gather as well.

According to the plan, a sympathetic priest was to lead guards units and civilians in the square in taking an oath to a new regime. A leader of the conspirators was to address the crowd, following which a sympathetic Orthodox priest would administer an oath created for the occasion. Called the “Orthodox Catechism,” and authored by Sergei Murav’ev-Apostol, a former member of the Semenovskiy Regiment, this pledge contended that good Christian Russian soldiers would be violating their duty to Christ by aligning with tyranny. Their sacred duty was to support armed insurrection to restore Christian law and liberty.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, a scheme was in place to set up a temporary dictatorship until a proper governmental transition was possible. Notably, the Decembrists wanted to include some leading liberal members of the existing government who were not actual participants in the conspiracy. This was partly in recognition of the need to broaden the base of the prospective regime and to build public confidence.<sup>23</sup>

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Just as the stage seemed to be set, it turned out that Nicholas had already received the oath of allegiance from key figures in the government in an unannounced pre-dawn ceremony. Then it so happened that the designated “dictator,” Prince Trubetskoi, had lost his nerve and failed to arrive. Cavalry units, who were not part of the conspiracy, arrived to challenge the leaderless Decembrists. The critical moment slipped away and by evening Nicholas had control of the square.

Clearly defeated, the Decembrists in the capital scattered. Some, including a significant number of soldiers, headed south to link up with

the Southern Society to join an attack on Kiev. Compared to the revolt in the capital, events in Ukraine moved in slow motion due to the lag in transmission of information and the relatively remote location of most of the conspirators. Pestel, the intended leader, was arrested before he could act. Therefore, command of the uprising of the Chernigov Regiment fell to Murav'ev-Apostol. Unable to rally any significant support from other army units, the regiment surrendered within two weeks.

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The immediate aftermath of the uprising was a lengthy investigation, including extensive debriefing of anyone associated with the conspiracy. The new Tsar, Nicholas I, personally interviewed a number of the leaders to learn more about their motives and methods. As a result of this exhaustive compilation of records, modern historians have been able to assemble a detailed history of the event and the roles of key participants. In the end, 121 individuals were exiled to Siberia and 5, including the top leadership, were hanged. A number of wives accompanied their husbands into exile even though their children were not allowed to come along.

Defeating the ideas behind the Decembrist movement proved more difficult for Nicholas than crushing their uprising. The memory of the Decembrists, ably assisted by those such as Russia's most gifted writer, Alexander S. Pushkin, who sent a letter of moral support to the exiles, carried on to inspire subsequent generations of revolutionaries. The Bolsheviks and their leader, V. I. Lenin, would invoke the example of the Decembrists even though the future communist regime would have little use for political liberty. Indeed, Soviet-era writers

were prolific in their commentaries and histories of the movement which even today remains a staple in the historical education of young Russians.

What perhaps receives less attention in Russian schools is the history of the political reaction that set in under Nicholas. Here too, interestingly, inspiration came from France on the wave of post-Napoleonic reaction.<sup>24</sup> Much expanded police monitoring of suspected dissent, increased censorship, and a concerted ideological effort to mold the outlook of the population characterized his reign. Under Nicholas the government propagated the doctrine of Official Nationality resting on three philosophical pillars: Russian Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality. The Russian Orthodox Church had served as a virtual organ of state power since the reign of Peter the Great and functioned to remind the populace constantly that the Tsar was their sovereign and protector. In turn, the autocratic principle affirmed the theoretically unlimited power of the ruler. Finally, nationality, not *nationalism*, proclaimed the historic importance of Russia and the legitimate role of the state ruling over many nationalities.

One intriguing aspect of this official ideological triad is the extent to which it is mirrored in the priorities of the Russia state today. Especially since the widespread public protests of 2012, the Putin government has systematically implemented a program to manage and shape public perceptions.<sup>25</sup> He has surrounded himself with advisors who share a similar vision of Russia's past and present. For example, his Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, publicly associates Russia's present policies with figures from its imperial past, such as diplomat Alexander Gorchakov, whose service spanned from the last years of Nicholas's reign through the period of his successor, Alexander II during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Gorchakov represented Russia to the world in the aftermath of the national humiliation in the



Crimean War. A vigorous advocate of Russian interests, he was a respected figure on the world stage.

More to the point, however, has been the construction under Putin of a contemporary Russian ideology that bears a likeness to that of Nicholas I. Broadly described as “conservatism” as spelled out in terms of Russian traditional values, this outlook provides Putin’s domestic audience with a coherent message that resonates emotionally and politically.<sup>27</sup>

Today, Putin has effectively rebranded Nicholas’s ideological trinity of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality. Putin, even more than Boris Yeltsin before him, has embraced the Orthodox Church as a fundamental source of legitimacy. In exchange for generous financial support and broad legal protections shielding it from competition by “alien” religions—mainly proselytizing churches from the West—Putin has received robust support for his presidency and policies. Indeed, Putin has claimed the mantle of defender of mainstream Western Christian values by taking a stance against the godless rejection of traditional morality in contemporary Europe. As journalist Melik Kaylan summarized, “What Putin is trying to accomplish is a complete swapping of roles between East and West since the Cold War. The ground zero for defenders of Christian tradition, of conservatism, the nation-state, family values, and the like has reversed its geo-polarity.”<sup>28</sup> Since 2014, when that article was written, Putin has further been able to exploit domestic tensions across Europe concerning immigration by openly lending moral, and occasional financial, support to nativist political parties.

Putin has also borrowed from the Soviet Union with his creative re-definition of political terms such as democracy (now described as “sovereign democracy,” which he holds has a distinctive form in Russia unlike that in the West. In other words, to boil this principle down to its essence, Russia can have an exceptionally

powerful chief executive whose, broad, but not unlimited, powers reflect a national style of democracy that Russians intuitively appreciate.<sup>29</sup> So, while there is no attempt to restore autocracy, some of the trappings of tsarist rule are present. The third complementary element in Putin’s formula is the affirmation of the greatness of the Russian state and the multiethnic population it governs. This is nuanced in a way that does not demand focus on Russian ethnicity so much as Russian acculturation. Terms like *Rossiiane* or *rossiiskie* encompass all those Russian-speaking peoples bounded by Russia’s traditional territory and historically falling within its cultural orbit. It is fascinating also that although Putin is not public an adherent of so-called Eurasianism, a vaguely defined view of Eurasia as a distinct historical space dominated by Russia, his approach to Russian nationalism is in many ways compatible with it.<sup>30</sup>

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Putin’s regime has adopted still another aspect of the Official Nationality of Nicholas I. The American historian of Russia Nicholas Riasanovsky noted about the Russians under Nicholas: “They loved to contrast happy, stable, and harmonious Russia to the dissatisfied, restless, and revolutionary West.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the future belonged to Russia. As Riasanovsky notes, “The Messianic Russian future demanded an adventurous, aggressive, even revolutionary, foreign policy which represented the very opposite of the conservative and legitimist orientation of Nicholas I and his government.”<sup>32</sup> To be sure, there was an inherent tension between the values of romantic nationalism, on the one hand, and conviction that the tsar knew best on the other.

In summary, there is remarkable continuity in the competition between liberal Western values and traditional Russian conservatism that is reflected still in Russian politics and behavior today. The values of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality are alive and well. Much as imperial Russia under Nicholas I acted to curb the influence of values espoused by the Decembrists, Russian officialdom today seeks to insulate the current regime from Western cultural influences. Likewise, there remain Westernized citizens in Russia today, struggling still for recognition of full political liberty. No attempt at revolution is in the cards today, however. The Decembrists formed as a conspiratorial movement as a result of a distinct set of circumstances, perhaps the most important of which were momentous revolutionary changes in the United States and France. It was also vitally important that a large number of young idealistic officers had spent a lengthy period of time in Paris where the contrasts with home were striking. Today Russia's obsession with security guarantees both that officers will be thoroughly indoctrinated and they will not fraternize excessively with foreigners. Another distinction, of course, is that the continued existence of serfdom in 1825 was a major motivating factor for the Decembrists, one that has no equivalent today. Neither is the economic gap between Russia and the West comparable to 1825, even though a perceptible gap remains.

If we try to isolate the values that drove the Decembrists to action, it is clear that three were operative. The first was a belief in political liberty and opposition to arbitrary rule by one individual unchecked by a constitution or representative legislature. Clearly, the Decembrists took their oath to Alexander I seriously enough that they were unable to reach a consensus to move against him. A second moral conviction was that the abolition of serfdom was essential to pave the way for a society of equal citizens no longer rigidly bound by birth or class. To be precise, the Decembrist vision did not yet include a place for women or non-Christians at the table of power, but if realized it would have created new momentum in that direction. A third, implicit belief was that there was nothing sacred about tradition or the status quo. They viewed Russian society as a work in progress.

What is most fundamental about the ethical beliefs of the Decembrists is that they were not known to have entertained notions of revolution or regicide prior to 1815. Upon return to Russia they experienced a collective crisis of conscience, exacerbated by growing disappointment with Alexander I. As officers, they adhered to a code of conduct and did not take jumping the chain of command lightly. Of course, the Decembrists were also a highly entitled group of men, accustomed to the privileges of their class, convinced that they should be taken seriously. Moreover, recent historical precedent in America and France cast a bright light on possibilities and perils of seizing the political initiative. The outcome, had they succeeded, belongs to the realm of counterfactual history. Undoubtedly, change would have proved tumultuous and bloody, perhaps even on the scale of the October Revolution and Russian Civil War of the twentieth century. Given conditions in Russia, a course of events like those of the French Revolution seems far more probable than one resembling the American case. Revolution imposed by a tiny group from above, no matter how enlightened, was not likely to end well. **IAJ**

## NOTES

- 1 (Without question, the seminal Western study of the Decembrist revolt remains the work of Anatole Mazour, *The First Russian Revolution, 1825: The Decembrist Movement, Its Origins, Development, and Significance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1937). Soviet works in Russian on the Decembrists are too numerous to mention here, although a few are cited in this study. The larger point is that the Soviet regime adopted the Decembrist revolt as a forerunner of Lenin's revolution, although the former was only bourgeois, rather than socialist in character. Nevertheless, as part of the officially recognized revolutionary tradition, the Decembrists occupied a place of honor in Soviet history. One notable Soviet-era work on the struggle between autocracy and revolution is I. V. Orzhekhovskii, *Samoderzhavie protiv revoliutsionnoi rossii*, [Autocracy against Revolutionary Russia], Moscow: Mysl', 1982. A more recent work tracing the history of attempts to reform Russian government up to the October 1917 Revolution is *Vlast' I reform: Ot samoderzhavii k sovetskoi vlasti*, [Power and Reform: From Autocracy to Soviet Power], ed. B. V. Anan'ich (Moscow: Olma, 2006.)
- 2 Allison Blakely, "American Influences on Russian Reformist Thought in the Era of the French Revolution," *The Russian Review*, 52 (October 1993), p. 454.
- 3 Max Laserson, "Alexander Radishchev—An Early Admirer of America," *The Russian Review*, 9, No. 3 (July 1950), p. 179.
- 4 Blakely, p. 451.
- 5 Laserson, pp. 182-183.
- 6 Christopher Duffy, *Borodino and the War of 1812* (New York: Scribner's, 1973), pp. 36-39.
- 7 Mazour, p. 55.
- 8 Bolkovitinov, "The Declaration of Independence: A View from Russia," *The Journal of American History*, 85, No. 4, (March 1999), p. 1390.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 1392-1393.
- 10 Mazour, pp. 86-87.
- 11 Ibid., p. 88.
- 12 Ibid., p. 93; Anan'ich, pp. 227-228.
- 13 Mazour, p. 78.
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