Fathers of Russian Liberalism: Bicentennial Reflections on the 1825 Decembrist Revolt

by Martin George Holmes[17]

Two hundred years ago, on 14 December 1825,[18] a handful of liberal military officers wrote a new chapter in the history of human freedom. Braving a bitter Russian winter, these liberals – known to posterity as the Decembrists – rallied approximately 3,000 troops from three guard regiments in St. Petersburg, then the capital of the Russian Empire. They marched to Senate Square, formed up around the statue of Peter the Great, and decried the accession of Nicholas I to the throne. Their motivation was to destabilize the autocracy, the authoritarian regime throttling Russian political life, and secure constitutional liberties.

[17] *Martin George Holmes is a historian with a PhD from the University of Otago, New Zealand. Send him mail.*
[18] Before the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, Russia used the Julian Calendar, which is slightly behind the Western Gregorian Calendar. All Russian dates before October 1917 are given according to the Julian Calendar.

Throughout the day, Nicholas summoned more than 9,000 loyal troops to surround the Decembrists and bring them to heel. Loyalist officers tried to intimidate them into surrendering. The Decembrists remained defiant; one went so far as to shoot Mikhail Miloradovich, a high-ranking general. Nicholas ordered a cavalry charge, which failed miserably.

Fearing that the civilian population would soon join the Decembrists, Nicholas ordered an artillery bombardment. Cannon balls ripped through the Decembrists' ranks and forced them to flee onto the ice-clad Neva River. The cannons continued to blast; many Decembrists fell through the ice and drowned. On 29 December, a second group of Decembrists revolted in Ukraine, then a territory of the Russian Empire. Approximately 1,000 soldiers rallied to the standard. Within a week, however, the Decembrists encountered a loyalist force, mistook them for allies, and were defeated in battle. Now securely in power, Nicholas I arrested the leaders of the revolt and put them on trial. A handful were executed. Many more were banished to the depths of Siberia.

December 2025 marks the bicentennial of the revolt. One could be forgiven for not knowing it, given the lack of attention from scholars and the general public. Even discussion among classical liberals has been minimal. This neglect is tragic. The Decembrist Revolt played a significant role in the history of liberty in Russia and Eastern Europe. It deserves to be commemorated.

The Horror of Autocracy

To appreciate the Decembrists' courage, one must remember that Imperial Russia was an autocracy. This word refers to the totalizing power that the tsar – the emperor – wielded in Russian society from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries. Until 1905, there was no constitution. There were no legal checks and balances upon the tsar's authority. The tsar had ministers and a senate to help them rule, but these people were imperial appointees designed to rubber-stamp imperial policies. The autocracy even governed the Russian Orthodox Church, the official church of Russia.[19]

[19] This is a key theme of my first publication. See Martin George Holmes, *Heretic or Scapegoat? On the Excommunication of Count Leo Tolstoy* (Fairfax: Eastern Christian Publications, 2020).

Tsarist Russia was a potent concoction of militarism, superstition, religious discrimination, and class hierarchies.[20] A wide swath of the population were serfs, peasants bound to specific plots of land, who were treated more like property than human beings. Religious and ethnic groups at the bottom of society, especially Jews, faced official discrimination. Lording over the masses were a handful of aristocratic families. In between the rich and the poor there was no robust middle class. Draconian measures were second-nature in this society. The Russian state conscripted peasants into the armed forces for lengthy periods and subjected them to flogging and other appalling punishments. Many Russian landowners brutalized their serfs – their "property" – in ways that can only be described as psychopathic.

There was a lot of resentment in imperial Russia, but because constitutional processes were non-existent, peaceful reform was impossible. If the nobility disliked a certain tsar, they staged a palace coup, murdered him, and shoved a more palatable person into his place. Whenever peasants buckled

[20] For a concise overview, see Edward Crankshaw, *The Shadow of the Winter Palace: Russia's Drift to Revolution, 1825–1917* (New York: De Capo Press, 2000), 13–77.

under the oppression of their landlords, they rebelled in violent – and ultimately futile – bursts of rage.

Enlightenment Ideas and the Aristocracy

From the seventeenth century, capitalism and the Enlightenment spread throughout Western Europe. Both were crucial for the safeguarding of liberty. Capitalism encouraged wealth production and social mobility. The old feudal binary between rich aristocrats and poor peasants gave way to a vibrant society in which education and civic engagement became widespread among all classes. The Enlightenment fueled greater interest in freedom of thought, personal experience, and political radicalism.

Many Enlightenment thinkers argued for individual liberty. The pinnacle of Enlightenment political thought was the American Revolution, when American colonists justified their war of independence on the basis of natural rights. The King of England and his parliament ruled tyrannically and without consent. Therefore, the colonists had the right to defend their liberty by force of arms. The French Revolution, which took place shortly afterward, began with the same

righteous motive. Some early leaders, such as the Marquis de Lafayette, were veterans of the American War of Independence. The impact of anti-individualist ideologies, given impetus by more shady Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, corrupted both the American and French Revolutions over time. But the ideal of liberty nevertheless became a defining feature of Western Europe.

The spread of the Enlightenment in Russia was slower and patchier. Only the aristocracy had the linguistic knowledge, philosophical bent, and leisure time to ponder natural-rights theory. Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812, moreover, provoked a wave of anti-Western sentiment among aristocrats. Napoleon draped his imperial ambitions in the cloak of the French Revolution, claiming that he was liberating other nations from tyranny and superstition. Many Russians responded by reaffirming autocracy and Russian Orthodoxy. No less a figure than Tsar Alexander I, once a dashing young monarch who flirted with political reform, degenerated into a traditionalist fanatic.

Some nobles, however, remained sympathetic to Western liberalism. Young military officers were

particularly susceptible. The war against Napoleon had been portrayed as a freedom struggle: first to liberate Russia from invasion, then to free the rest of Europe from French imperialism.

As the Russian army moved into Central Europe, young officers saw societies in which serfdom had been abolished and constitutions had been established. When they returned to their homeland, the barbarity and backwardness of the tsarist autocracy dismayed them. The Decembrist Alexander Bestuzhev Marlinsky summarized their opinions as follows: "We have shed our blood, and we are obliged to sweat at forced labor again. We have freed the Motherland from the tyrant, and the rulers tyrannize us again."[21] Russian nobles raised overseas tended to react similarly.

The parents of Sergey Muravyov-Apostol wanted to keep the horror of serfdom from him while living in Western Europe, lest he become ashamed of his homeland. Only when he was taken home, and his mother saw his joy at crossing the border, did she

[21] Eugenie Salkind, "Die Dekabristen in ihrer Beziehung zu Westeuropa: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Entstehung des Dekabristenaufstandes vom 14./26. Dezember 1825," *Jahrbücher für Kultur und Geschichte der Slaven* 4, no. 3 (1928): 399.

reveal the dirty truth: "Be prepared, children, to hear some horrifying information: in Russia you will find what you have not known [in Western Europe] – peasants, who are in bondage."[22] Muravyov-Apostol soon joined the army and became one of the most radical Decembrists.

These disaffected officers joined the military and stayed in it, despite their hostility to the autocracy, because it was one of the few professions open to them. It was considered unbefitting of an aristocrat to become, for example, an industrialist or a banker. Aristocrats were gentlemen of leisure, who were based either on their estate or in townhouses. Some wrote in their spare time; some took farming seriously; others whittled away their time in frivolous pursuits.

Those who wanted a serious profession were expected to do government work: the navy, the army, or the civil service. Liberal-minded officers tended to stay within the military because they had a strong sense of civic duty, and because they wanted to be close to the seat of political power. After all, many were part of the elite guard units stationed in the Russian capital.

[22] Salkind, "Die Dekabristen," 390.

The Decembrist Movement Forms

The Decembrist movement began shortly after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, though the term "Decembrist" was applied only after the revolt in December 1825. Much happened within these ten years. The war, as previously mentioned, had generated support for political reform. Russian liberals deplored Alexander I's retreat into a conservative cul-de-sac. The Universities of Kazan, St. Petersburg, Vilna, and Dorpat came under scrutiny because some faculty took liberal ideas seriously.[23] The government sacked professors and purged curricula. In Kazan's case, the university was virtually closed down for a time. Censorship suppressed or mutilated even the most timid critiques of the autocracy, including in fiction.

To help reduce military expenditure and ensure retired soldiers did not get up to mischief, the autocracy established military colonies for veterans. The man in charge of this plan, General Aleksey Arakcheev, was the definition of a brute. Once he got so angry that he assaulted a soldier and bit off their ear. Under Arakcheev's guidance, military

[23] Anatole G. Mazour, *The First Russian Revolution, 1825: The Decembrist Movement: Its Origins, Development, and Significance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1937), 35.

colonies became cesspits of despotism and poverty. Perhaps most galling of all was the dissolution of the elite Semenovsky Regiment in 1820. Relations between officers and enlisted men had been closer than usual because of shared experiences in war. However, in 1820, a new commander was appointed who was a strict disciplinarian. He flogged many soldiers and, when these battle-hardened veterans lodged an official protest, the regiment was disbanded and the soldiers blacklisted.

Tsar Alexander I's rejection of political reform forced Russian liberals to form secret societies. Only behind closed doors could they ponder solutions to the plight of their homeland. These societies were an open secret: the state police kept tabs on dissidents, and the aristocratic world was so small that word of political meetings soon got around. Alexander's advisors wanted him to crack down on the liberals, but Alexander permitted them to operate. After all, he himself had indulged in liberalism as a youth, and he suspected that they would grow out of it in time.

Alexander was wrong. Russian liberals were determined to have political reform, and they spent many a night discussing how Russia could be made

better. Several ideas were almost universally accepted: the restraint of autocratic powers, the ratification of a constitution, the abolition of serfdom, the spread of capitalist industry, and the education of the masses. However, there were disagreements about how far political reform should go. One faction was moderate. These people took inspiration from, among other things, the American Revolution and the early phases of the French Revolution. They advocated a constitutional monarchy, whether because they considered it the best political system, or because they thought Russia was unripe for republican government in the distant future. Nikita Muravyov, arguably the most important moderate thinker, was one such republican who, for pragmatic reasons, endorsed constitutional monarchy.

The other faction was more extreme. Its guiding light was Pavel Pestel. Without doubt the most able and active of the Decembrist leaders, Pestel was also the most problematic. He regarded himself as a liberal. But he believed that Russia was so backward, and that the autocracy was so repressive, that social revolution must accompany political revolution. Russia was to become a republic; the tsar was to be assassinated. To protect itself, the

infant republic would require a secret police to suppress attempts to reestablish the old order. He drew inspiration from the French Jacobins, the radical revolutionaries who instituted the Reign of Terror to protect – in their minds – the French Revolution from enemies foreign and domestic.

As one might expect, the two factions, known as the Northern and Southern Societies, found it challenging to work together. Each agreed to keep the other updated, and there were constant efforts to unite the two. But the philosophical differences ensured that they operated independently. The Northern Society had its stronghold in the guard regiments of St. Petersburg. The Southern Society had its stronghold in southern Ukraine, where Pestel and some companions held military posts.

The Achilles Heel of the Decembrist Movement

The biggest shortcoming of the Decembrists was their conspiratorial approach to politics. As noted above, it was a position into which the autocracy forced them. But they still reaped the whirlwind. Liberalism can only flourish in an open society, or at the very least, in a society moving toward a condition of openness. Russian liberals were a minority among the aristocracy, which was itself a

minority within the Russian Empire. There was a colossal gulf between this educated elite and the lower classes. Russian peasants lacked a cosmopolitan spirit. Almost all were illiterate and preoccupied with the problems of their family, village, and estate. The influence of the autocracy and of Russian Orthodoxy predisposed the masses to accept government decrees passively, rather than regard themselves as political actors capable of changing them. The average soldier and sailor were virtually the same. They knew how to read and write – this was one of the few compensations for being conscripted - but they were still conditioned to obey social superiors and accept the existing political order without question.

Despite the Russian liberals' dream of a free and modern Russia, therefore, their plan of action differed little from the palace coups of earlier generations. Neither the moderates nor the radicals generated a mass movement in favor of political change. Some radicals took steps to do so, but they achieved little. The Decembrists remained fixated on the idea that a dedicated group of military officers could, at an opportune moment, launch a palace coup and force the autocracy to implement

reform. The best time to launch such a coup, it was believed, was after the death of Alexander I.

No one expected Alexander to die so soon, in the fall of 1825. He was only in his late forties. But he caught typhus while traveling throughout the empire, and died on 19 November. News of his death reached the capital on 27 November.[24] An awkward interregnum began. Alexander had no heir, so it was assumed that his eldest surviving brother, Constantine, was the new tsar. But Constantine did not want the throne – he feared assassination – and so Alexander had drawn up a will that declared a younger brother, Nicholas, the successor. This will was unknown to most Russians, so as a matter of course, military men and state bureaucrats swore allegiance to Constantine. Even Nicholas swore allegiance, figuring that it would be risky to claim the throne until the will's contents were popularized. For three weeks, Russia was gridlocked as Constantine repeated his renunciation, and Nicholas continued to bide his time. But in mid-December, Nicholas resolved to accede to the throne. December 14 was to be the day that the senate and guard regiments swore allegiance.

[24] Mazour, *Russian Revolution*, 156.

The Decembrists were unprepared for Alexander's sudden death, but they felt that they could not let this opportunity pass. If Nicholas, a stern reactionary, were allowed to accede without protest, Russia might have another generation of autocratic rule. The moderates in St. Petersburg and the radicals in south Ukraine resolved to stage a coup. The Northern Society acted first. The liberal officers would gather the soldiers and sailors under their command, march to the senate, and demand political reform. Because they lacked mass support, they resorted to deception to achieve their aims. They told the men under their command that Constantine was the rightful tsar, and that it was their duty, as defenders of the Russian state, to ensure his claim to the throne. It was a tragedy that these liberals, in pursuit of their vision of an open society, lied to gain political support. The lie itself was also absurd considering that Constantine was no less a traditionalist than Nicholas.

The Northern Society collapsed under the weight of its self-imposed responsibilities. Too much had to be done too quickly. Despite their best efforts, the Decembrists rallied only 3,000 men from three guard regiments. The rest either sided with Nicholas or attempted neutrality. By the time the Decembrists

reached the senate, the members had already dispersed, which meant they could not lodge their protest in favor of a constitution. Several Decembrists backed out before or during the revolt. One key leader, the charismatic Sergey Trubetskoy, seemed to suffer a nervous breakdown. Another, Kondraty Ryleyev, was so ill that he retired to his quarters. The 3,000 soldiers and sailors, shivering in the snow, were abandoned to the command of a mere lieutenant.[25] When Nicholas ordered an artillery barrage on their position, there was little to do but flee onto the frozen Neva River. Those who did not perish from cannon balls or falling through the ice were captured and put on trial.

The Southern Society was beset by the same problem. Pavel Pestel was arrested shortly before the revolt. Command passed to Muravyov-Apostol, the man who had been raised in Western Europe, and whose parents had kept him ignorant of the existence of serfdom as a boy. To his credit, Muravyov-Apostol openly proclaimed to the troops under his command that they were fighting for a

[25] There was a higher-ranking lieutenant commander present. But as a naval officer, he felt out of his element fighting on land, and so he declined to take charge. Mazour, *Russian Revolution*, 176.

free Russia. He persuaded a local priest to join his cause, and he also tried to rally local peasants. But many of the peasants did not understand what the revolt was all about; there was an ideological gulf between the thousand-or-so soldiers and the peasant communities through which they marched. Not all these soldiers, moreover, fully grasped what they were doing. In any case, the rebels were soon cornered and overrun by troops loyal to Nicholas.

The new tsar put the Decembrists on trial. During their imprisonment, the Decembrists were subjected to torture. Nicholas hanged the key leaders, including Pestel, Ryleyev, and Muravyov-Apostol. Others were banished to Siberia.

The Fathers of Russian Liberalism

The Decembrist Revolt was a complete failure. It could never have succeeded because it lacked mass support, and because the publicized goal – the accession of Constantine – was a red herring. But the nature of the autocracy was such that this failure became a rallying point for future generations of political dissidents.

Nicholas I ruled the country with an iron fist until his death in 1855. The last years of his reign,

however, were marred by Russian defeats during the Crimean War. It was evident to everyone, even Nicholas, that Russia was a backward, corrupt, and inefficient state compared to Western Europe. His successor, Alexander II, recognized that mild reforms were essential to prevent the country falling apart. Most notably, he abolished serfdom. The autocracy remained in full force until 1905, when a revolution forced Nicholas II to draw up a constitution and establish a parliament.

The tsar still wielded absolute power, but he now had to contend with legislation and legislators who wanted to push Russia in a liberal direction. It was not until the February Revolution of 1917, when Nicholas abdicated and Russia became a republic, that free elections were finally held. The rise of the Bolsheviks and the tumult of the First World War quickly strangled the infant provisional government that, for all its shortcomings, was the most liberal Russia had received to date. Under the Soviet Union, another kind of autocracy became paramount. The Soviets honored the Decembrists, the opponents of the old regime, by renaming Senate Square "Decembrists' Square."

During the long struggle against autocracy, reformers and revolutionaries took inspiration from the Decembrists. They fought and suffered for their principles, being harassed by secret police and thrown into squalid prisons, just like the Decembrists. They too were forced, by circumstances, to meet in secret and to plan clandestine rebellion against a regime that denied open political debate. In his autobiography, the dissident nobleman Peter Kropotkin paid homage to "the Decembrists, who were the first to unfurl the banner of republican rule and the abolition of serfdom."[26] Unfortunately, revolutionaries after the Decembrists tended to be socialists and anarchists who embraced the blood-stained logic of Pavel Pestel. But the Decembrists cannot be blamed for this trend.

The legacy of the Decembrists remains as important today as it ever was. Modern Russia, though liberated from communism, is an authoritarian country in which collectivism is emphasized and political opposition is discouraged. The Russian government recognizes the danger of liberal ideas, and that the Decembrists could serve as a lightning

[26] Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, vol. 2 (London: Smith, Elder, and Company, 1899), 141.

rod for those ideas. Hence the renaming of Decembrists' Square back to "Senate Square" in 2008. But the renaming of the square cannot expunge the Decembrist Revolt from history. The Decembrists illustrate that Russia, despite its long history of authoritarianism, has a native liberal tradition that holds within it the seeds of a freer society.

The Decembrists also teach a broader lesson. The revolt failed, above all, because Russia lacked a culture of open political discussion and of a clear notion of individual liberty based on natural-rights theory. Even among the aristocracy, these ideas were far from universally accepted. The Decembrists' failure shows that countries that have developed under the influence of classical liberalism are truly blessed. The United Kingdom and the United States, to take two famous examples, have fallen away from classical liberalism. Their governments have become bloated and overbearing, and their populations, by and large, have become docile and socialist. Nevertheless, classical liberalism is built into the political institutions and into the political culture, which means that liberals are never without resources when protesting for freedom.

Other countries, such as Russia, lack this inheritance. Classical liberals based in old liberal strongholds, therefore, should fight all the harder for their inheritance. And classical liberals in other countries should seek to plant and nurture the seeds of liberal ideas within their own lands, in the hope that they may develop into traditions in time.

In retrospect, this is what the Decembrists should have done in Russia. Rather than launch armed rebellion without mass support, they should have worked to create a civic culture. Beginning among themselves at first, and then slowly radiating outward, they could have tried to create a culture of political openness, as well as a culture in which individual liberties were taken seriously. This strategy alone could have brought enduring, authentic cultural change. It would have been a challenging path to trudge. The tsarist regime would have hurled many agitators into prison. The Decembrists might have buckled under the pressure, just as they buckled on the battlefield. It is difficult to say for certain. But one thing is clear: two hundred years ago, the Decembrists wrote a new chapter in the history of liberalism in Russia. Their efforts should not be forgotten.