History

Alexandr Pushkin: Ties to the Decemberist Movement through Poetry and Letters

April Trimback

“The world, it must be confessed, is apt to be not a little inconsistent and unjust:

after demanding originality and novelty,

it is frequently dissatisfied with new,

merely because it is not the old;

because it runs counter to its prejudices,

and does not square very well with preconceived theories.”

It is hard to escape the overshadowing, sometimes almost all encompassing, shadow Alexandr Pushkin still casts upon Russian literature. With the constant evolution of language, both within literature and the common speech of the streets, it would be logical to assume that 174 years after his death, many of the literary devices used by Pushkin would have generally fallen out of common practice, rendering his poetry relatively inaccessible for future readers.

However, nearly all of the phrases and common expressions of humor and, at times, sarcasm that he employs are still actively used in both literature and common speech today. Yet, it was not the art of solely crafting poems and literature that eventually won the heart of young Pushkin, letter writing also held great importance in both establishing the Russian language and propelling Pushkin himself, as the refiner of this language, into lasting fame. Although Pushkin’s letters serve as a limited insight into the inner workings


of the brilliant mind of one of Russia’s undisputed and greatest literary figure thus far, an insight that Pushkin intended to be incomprehensive in its scope, research has relatively ignored the political condemnations that lie both within his letters and his works of poetry.⁴ Within the Bronze Horseman, perhaps the most beloved of Pushkin’s poems; as well as within the letters Pushkin addressed to many of the former members of the Arzamas Brotherhood, especially N.I. Turgenev, and the letters written during Pushkin’s stent in Siberian exile, there are many indications of existing Decembrist sympathies within Pushkin’s works.⁵

However, the extent unto which Pushkin was or was not a Decembrist remains one of the most confusing elements concerning his life. To truly understand a man or his work one must first understand the historical and political context that surrounds both the man and the work; for it is not merely from the author or the poet’s mind that great works are produced, the greatest influence upon an author lies within the world surrounding the life of the author. Alexandr Pushkin witnessed many historical acts in his lifetime. As Sam Davis, a historian from Brown University, states it would “probably [be]… more productive to consider Pushkin not so much as a near-Decembrist [for the time being], but as a member of the aristocratic party.”⁶ Unlike what will be seen through the Decembrists, the goals of the aristocracy were clear aims, as was exhibited throughout early Russian history until the time of Ivan I and Peter the Great.⁷ Having the great fortune of being born into aristocracy, Pushkin was well aware of the legacy of powerful Boyars.⁸ He received a solid grounding in political thought, including recent French political thoughts; interacted with officers of the guard who had returned from the Napoleonic wars with not only goods, but current political ideas; and he was taught “in his earliest years… the attitudes of nobility… the underlying political assumptions of the class-


es that were tacit and pervasive.” It was through such interaction with veterans of the Napoleonic wars that Pushkin began to grow up in the shadow of the French Revolution, although “its ideas and accomplishments blurred and merged with the traditions of the Enlightenment.” The combination of ingrained, ancient political ideas; such as the inherent right of Boyars to a degree of power that they were not currently experiencing; and the foundation of the Decembrist movement during Pushkin’s early social years, the progression from a man on the fringes of the Decembrist movement to a man who actively exhibited Decembrist sympathies and leanings throughout his works and letters can be more easily understood when examined in the context of the situation of the politics and social life of Russia.

Yet, although heavily influenced by his aristocratic background, the rise and the decent of the Decembrist, not the aristocracy, appear to serve as marking points in both his discourses and his literary works. For example, one of the clearest markers within Pushkin’s poetry is “around 1823, there occurs a shift in Pushkin’s attitude towards the West… essentially, what is suggested is a shift away from the more activist sort of Decembrist thought.” Yet, to suggest that his thoughts shift away from Decembrist thought, as Davis suggests that such thoughts do, would be to also imply that such thoughts were once so inclined to the more “active sort of Decembrist thought.” When once a man agrees wholeheartedly, a doctrine of any belief, whether or not it is political, is very hard to turn away from. For example, until his death Pushkin’s belief in the chivalry, code of ethics, of the aristocracy persisted throughout his life even though not many flattering actions of the aristocracy persisted. However, such a turn from the beliefs of the Decembrist can be more plausible once analyzing the nature of the movement itself. Perhaps it was the fragmented nature of the movement itself, not a specific or catastrophic event, that allowed Pushkin, or even encouraged, such drifting away of its members.

At the time in Russia, political parties, or fragmentations of political movements, were relatively loosely tied individuals who, more often than not, held a general conception of what the future should hold for Russia but did not fully agree


by which means this end should be achieved. The Decembrist movement was no exception; on the contrary, it seems to serve as the epitome of the chaotic political scene of early Russian politics. As Driver is correct in asserting within the Decembrist movement, “there was no really coherent movement, no theory without its contradiction, and no proekt [sic.] that was in principle similar to the others. Not only was there a gulf between Northern and Southern groups of Decembrists, but there were all shades of conflicting opinion among the members of each group, from revolutionary to legitimist.”

As one can clearly see, the contradictory nature of the ideals of the Decembrist makes it difficult to place almost anyone into the classification of the Decembrist. Yet, such a degree of infighting would be more easily accepted if such fighting was confined to geographical borders, such as the separation between the North and the South Decembrists that was drawn more over from geological means than from beliefs. However, this was often not the case. Members from the North Decembrists often argued with other Northern members so that, eventually, “even the two issues on which the Decembrists should have been able to agree, the autocracy and serfdom… [were rendered] extremely complex and unclear.”

As the Southern members were just as inclined as their Northern brothers to infighting, argumentation serving as the agent of progression for the further fragmentation of the movement, there seems to be no area in political and social discourse between Decembrists that did not contain contradictions or further infighting between the members.

Logic would lead a researcher to assume that arguments over basic Decembrist doctrine, such as why the movement was originally founded, are discussions that were buried long ago with the downfall of the Decembrist movement. However, it appears that not only Decembrist, but scholarship regarding the nature of the rise of this party has also descended into a dazzling display of disarraying Decembrist discourses. For example, Geoffrey Hosking, a professor of Russian History and deputy Director of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at the University of London, argues that the purpose of the Decembrist, at their beginning, was to “gradually and undemonstratively [introduce] some of the institution[s] of civil society.”

To generalize this statement, most of the Decembrists did, at least majority of the time, agreed on giving the lower classes more rights and were for the freedom of the serfs. To this belief, Pushkin was no exception. In fact his hope for the Russian people was “a policy of gradualism in emancipation… education first, then freedom…” although he shifts the emphasis from “the nobility’s dependence on emancipation to the peasants’ dependence on the nobility though a time

15 Hosking, Geoffrey. Russian People and Empire 1552-1917. [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1997.] 181
of gradual-nonviolent changes and a period of general enlightenment.”¹⁶ However once again, one can view the fragmented quality of the Decembrists through Pushkin’s own beliefs about the serfs. For example, Philip Cavendish, head of the University College of London’s school of Slavonic and East European Studies and senior lecturer in Russian, in his studies on Pushkin’s short poem “Echo,” believes “the possible poem’s conclusion: perhaps the poet receives no response because his audience consists of a ‘dull public’…”¹⁷ Although the general education system of the serf population of Russia resembled the Western European serf’s system of education, i.e. generally nonexistence, Pushkin’s seemingly negative view of the majority of the Russian population as being far too dull, simply too ignorant, to truly understand his poetry does not seem to support many of the other Decembrist views on serfdom, and even many of Pushkin’s own later views of the serfs.¹⁸ In general, it was thought that serfs could be educated and become like the Boyars in their understanding of the world around them through education.¹⁹ The view that Cavendish presents as being Pushkin’s appears a direct contradiction to this belief, however, although Pushkin’s belief “that the peasants’ lot would be vastly improved with a wealthy, independent, hereditary nobility… [and that] Pushkin rejected as unworkable the many plans and projects which foresaw emancipation as a result of the impoverishment of the nobility” another dazzling conundrum lies within the Decembrist perception on the autocratic.²⁰ Providing contradiction to both Hosking’s attempt to explain the true purpose of the Decembrists as well as Driver’s presentation of the beliefs which Pushkin held concerning how Russia should be run, Martin Malia a notable Russian historian, argues that it was not solely the Decembrists but it was “the aspiration of both emperor and rebels… to apply Enlightenment principles to society with the

¹⁶  Miliukov, Paul.  *Outlines of Russian Culture* 9


aim of emancipating the peasants and replacing autocracy with responsibly.”

Malia’s interpretation of the *Bronze Horseman* also serves to support his relatively positive outlook of a Russia where, as his quote suggests, the nobles and even the Tsar are accustomed to and live up to responsibility, a view supported by his explication that “*The Bronze Horseman*, celebrated the grandeur of the Petrine empire.” This positive outlook can also be seen in Russian documentation of the time, manifesting itself through the Doctrine of Official Nationality. Within the Doctrine, it can be explained that “true autocracy had a twofold nature: absolute domination over men for whom it represented divine authority, yet complete and voluntary submission to God.... Indeed it was the task of the ruler to love all his subjects, and love them equally well. He alone could perform this function... he [because] alone could suffer for and with all of his people; he alone could bring them cure.”

Despite the dismal picture history has painted of the world’s politicians, such an idyllic stance on lofty ideals of a perfect patriarchy that some of the Decembrists believed in, holds some merit and can be supported by instances in Pushkin’s poetry. One of the clearest examples of such leanings lies within the *Bronze Horseman*. Nicholas V. Riasanovsky of the University of California, in regards to the praise Peter the Great and the Russian autocracy were receiving within poetry and literature of the time of Tsar Nicholas I, comments on Pushkin’s views of Peter the Great as presented within *The Bronze Horseman*.

Even Pushkin joined the huge chorus praising Peter the Great and the Russian Autocracy.... Pushkin’s Peter was above all the glorious hero of Poltav, the almost superhuman leader of his country who gave Russia a new life and a new history, symbolized by St. Petersburg, Pushkin’s’ beloved city. The emperor stood for reform, light, progress, for the present strength of the nation, and for its future destiny. Still, Pushkin had some reservations

---

21 Malia, Martin. *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*. [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1999.] 141.

22 Malia, Martin. *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*. 51.

to make... he became increasingly impressed by the ruthlessness and the cruelty of the overwhelming monarch and his measures, by the desperate plight of the common man writhing in the clutches of the leviathan emperor and state. Pushkin's own life seemed to repeat the same tale: he found himself controlled, restricted, directed, and generally hounded at every turn by Peter the Great's statue and by Peter's successor, another powerful and autocratic ruler, Nicholas I. (Riaisonovsky 1957)

Although Riaisonovsky does acknowledge Pushkin's praise towards Tsar Peter the Great, he later attest that the actual statue presented in the poem of the Bronze Horseman represented "both the power and the harshness of Peter the Great and of Russian autocracy." With that being said, as Davis is keen on reminding, "Pushkin was unable to forgive Peter for what he had done to the nobility, however much he admired the colossal historical figure and builder of [the] empire." This can best be seen through the lenses of Pushkin's aristocratic childhood and schooling, where it is beyond doubt stress upon the ages in Russian history when the Boyars held considerable power would have been stressed for the son of an aristocratic. Perhaps the scene best illustrating the nature of such interior conflict between the want to praise Peter the Great for his overshadowing legacy and the want of the Boyars to regain their lost power can be seen clearly in one particular scene of The Bronze Horseman.

He gazed into the brazen face// Of the half-planet’s ruler, proud.// And was his breast oppressed. He laid // On the cold barrier his forehead. // His eyes were veiled with a mist-cover, // His heart was all caught with a flame, // His blood seethed. Gloomy he became// Before the idol, looming over, // And, having clenched his teeth and fist,// As if possessed by evil powers,// “Well, builder-maker of the marvels,”// He whispered, trembling in a fit,// “You only wait!...”- And to a street,// At once he started to run out --// He fancied: that the great tsar’s face,// With a wrath suddenly embraced,// Was turning slowly around... // And strait along the empty square // He runs and hears as if there were,// Just behind him, the peals of thunder, // Of the hard-ringning hoofs’ reminders, --// A race the empty square across, // Upon

24 Riaisonovsky, Nicholas V. “Some Comments on the Role of the Intelligentsia in the Reign of Nicholas I of Russia, 1825-1855.” 171

25 Riaisonovsky, Nicholas V. “Some Comments on the Role of the Intelligentsia in the Reign of Nicholas I of Russia, 1825-1855.” 172

26 Miliukov, Paul. Outlines of Russian Culture. 10.
the pavement, fiercely tossed;// And by the moon, that palled lighter,// Having stretched his hand over roofs,// The Brazen Horseman rides him after – // On his steed of the ringing hoofs.// And all the night the madman, poor,// Where'er he might direct his steps,// Aft him the Bronze Horseman, for sure,// Keeps on the heavy-treading race.\(^{27}\)

Therefore, from a literary stance, it would be logical to conclude that the terror that chases Eugene to his ultimate death after he challenges the statue of the Bronze Horseman is not fear from a nearly sacrilegious act of challenging the statue of the former Tsar, it is the legacy of Peter the Great that still persist within his successor, the limiting the Boyars of their power to further support the autocratic government. As “the themes forming the matrix of Puskin's political thoughts are also pervasive in the literary works… surrounding The Bronze Horseman: the nature of the Russian nobility as opposed to European aristocracy, general decline of the nobility, the role of Peter, and the autocracy in decline, the specter of a peasant uprising, and so on…” not only formed the basis that served as the framework of Pushkin's political mindset, they served as the driving factors behind both his literature, as previously explicated above in regards to The Bronze Horseman, as well as his personal letters.\(^{28}\) It is these themes that allow Pushkin to lament on the decline on the aristocracy while contain both clear sympathetic leanings towards the Decembrist movement, for both the aristocracy and the Decembrist, ultimately, want a more equal distribution of power rather than the autocrat controlling the bulk of the power.

Yet, although much of Pushkin's seemingly apparent aristocratic laments and more Decembrist leaning connotations were allowed to be published for a considerable amount of time, the eventual censorship of Alexandr Pushkin was to prove problematic. Exiled for three years, 1820 until 1823, for revolutionary and often blasphemous vers and epigrams, it was in Siberia that perhaps one of Pushkin's most scandalous pieces was published.\(^{29}\) It was an article that attacks every level of Russian society… the ranking aristocracy, the nobility (Pushkin's own class); Catherine, who 'humbled the spirit of the nobility.' Only the clergy is spared, probably because of its relative powerlessness-and even sponsored, because of their contribution to the national


\(^{28}\) Miliukov, Paul. *Outlines of Russian Culture.* 12

character and their role as buffer between the autocrat and his people. The apparent admiration for Peter the Great, which opens the article, is dispelled later by a footnote which equates him with a tyrant.\textsuperscript{30}

Although such an article leans towards the Decembrist position upon the aristocracy, it would appear logical to assume that this document helped to lead to the censorship of Pushkin and to extend Pushkin’s stent in exile. In fact, in an 1830 article in the \textit{Philadelphia Inquirer}, Pushkin is attributed with having written “an ode to liberty” that, when Tsar Nicholas I recalled him to court to atone for his actions, Pushkin heatedly responded by reading from the uncensored version of his poem to the emperor, which included “several energetic stanzas which had been either omitted or considerably softened down by the copier.”\textsuperscript{31} Certainly, such a brash response to the ruling Tsar would ensure punishment upon the poor soul of the offender. Glancing back into the annals of Russian history clearly shows the measures that a Tsar will take once insulted, one must only look at the great bloodshed in Ivan IV’s reign. It can safely be assumed that Pushkin knew what he was doing through his response to the Tsar. What is unknown, however, is whether or not this article is in reference to the same “blasphemous vers” as mentioned by Crown that led to the poet’s exile. Despite the ambiguity of the poem referenced in the American paper, one must take into account that there might have been a delay in information exchange between Russia and America during the time, what remains clear is the three year time frame that Pushkin spent in exile.

Eventually, Pushkin was welcomed back to the main center of Russia by Tsar Nicholas I, although it has been suspected that such an act was only to ensure Pushkin’s poems for entertainment and the presence of his vivacious young wife.\textsuperscript{32}/\textsuperscript{33} However, when Pushkin returned it was to a literary Hell. Censorship was the poet’s prize for returning to mainland Russia, with Tsar Nicholas I, a man with little interest in literature, serving as the poet’s personal censor.\textsuperscript{34} As an 1829 article in the \textit{New London Gazette} remarks, upon recalling Pushkin Nicholas I immediately be-

\begin{flushleft}


33 Lieven, Dominic, ed. \textit{Cambridge History of Russia: Volume 2 Imperial Russia, 1689-1917}; [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.]

\end{flushleft}
gan to show the poet what his literary career would consist of for “Nicholas refused his imprimatur to the first production which Pushkin presented.” Similar to the American take, England also commented on Pushkin’s predicament. Taking great interest in Russia, especially in the Decembrist movement, the English were among the first to ‘discover’ Pushkin in Western Europe. In one early newspaper, unearthed by Russian poet and literary historian Gleb Struve and regretfully not cited within his article, is reported to have printed the following regarding Pushkin’s censorship:

Pouchkin [sic.] had quite enough of that good-natured censorship, and found it impossible to write verses when his situation was not much unlike that of Damocles; the hair might break, and the sword fall, and one ill-judged expression might have consigned him to the guardianship of the Governor of Siberia. Latterly, therefore, we have not heard much of the productions of the northern Byron. . . . But the day may yet arrive when the genius of Russia will be freed from the shackles of tyranny, and then we shall see that the poets of the North are not so destitute of liberal feelings, not so sluggish in the cause of liberty, not so tame and spiritless as they appear to be at this moment.

However, unlike to the claim presented in this article, Pushkin did not suddenly cease to write while under censorship. On the contrary, it was through the use of Aesopic speech that Pushkin was able to continue to author rather controversial letters and literature without the knowledge of the Tsar. Aesopic speech refers to “a particular human point of view: more often than not, a perspective on the great and powerful from below.” As Nicholas I followed the same path as Peter the Great by limiting the aristocratic class and, as viewing the upper class through the eyes of the lower classes would have been frowned upon, any views contrary to supporting the strengthening of the autocrat or supporting greater freedom to the lower classes would have been heavily censored. With the Tsar as Pushkin’s personal censor, Aesopic speech was one of the only ways that Pushkin was able to slip certain emancipation sympathies past the Tsar for, as Tolz observes, “censorship was developed to an almost incredible extent…. Criticism of the government and of official proceedings was absolutely prohibited. Even those who at a later date were considered pillars of reaction… were suspended as revolutionaries.” Thus, to


38 Tolz, Vera. Inventing the Nation: Russia. [New York: Oxford University
avoid another stint in Siberian exile, “Pushkin often uses another device for misleading the spying postal employees, if not his correspondence: Aesopic language….” for example, in a number of letters to his wife “he referred to Alexander I in apparent allusion to ancient Roman rulers; in a number of letters to his wife, Pushkin alluded to Nicholas I as ‘he.’” Although employing symbolism, allusions, and many other literary devices, it was through the use of Aesopic speech that Pushkin was able to slip past the censorship of Nicholas I and the other government censors to convey many instances of his meaning.

Yet, having instances of potential political leanings does not always indicate that an individual is a member of a potential political party. Pushkin believed with his letters as well as with his poetry that “prose and poetry were for [him] two entirely different forms of artistic language… [and] a rigid differentiation between poetry and prose” exist. It was through his letters that, as Lauren G. Leighton of the University of Wisconsin proclaims, “gave voice to his determination to overcome the lack in [effective communication of ideas in the] laboratory of the epistolary genres.” As it can be seen, the first and foremost thing that Pushkin intended for both is letters and his poetry to do was to elevate the Russian language into a language that would be a legitimate carrier of literary prose and ideals, a language that would be respected throughout the world for her literary contributions.

Although Pushkin had many reasons to consider himself a Decembrist, whether those reasons include sympathies towards the emancipation of the serfs and the want to reinstate much of the aristocracy’s lost power, the degree unto which such potential political leanings resonates throughout his poetry and letters


is something that cannot easily be measured. Literature of any form ultimately finds itself at the mercy of the reader. Whether or not the reader interprets the piece as was intended by the author can never fully be understood, unless the reader ask the author himself what potential symbols or allusions particularly mean. The untimely death of Pushkin, a death that occurred in 1837 as a result of a duel over his wife’s honor, prevented many literary commentaries from the author himself that would have served to dispel potential misreading or over analysis of his works. Perhaps, too, it was not his death that adds to the ambiguity of his work, it was the fact that Pushkin, outside of Russia, was relatively unknown within Europe. However, “to say therefore that Pushkin was, during his lifetime, practically unknown in England would certainly an exaggeration. True, little was known of his life and personality, and not always were the facts, as reported in English magazines, quite accurate,” yet it is the lack of concrete documentation of what Pushkin personally intended for elements of his poems and his letters to convey that adds to the uncertainty of whether or not any of his literature truly contain any elements of Decembrist leanings or, if they do, to what degree such elements are intended to represent.

For the sake of simplicity to the answer of whether or not Alexandr Pushkin was a Decembrist a simple answer can be given. Yes, Pushkin was a Decembrist, but all but in name; for what really constitutes as a Decembrist? They are but a lose band of people joined together for a future of emancipated Russia, nothing else. If the members of such a movement be bound in ranks and in number to be categorized and tallied, perhaps all of Russia would have been considered part of the Decembrist movement due to the varying beliefs of the members. If agreeing on a common factor is reason enough to place two individuals into the same category, is it even justified to call the Decembrist a group or a movement? From individual to individual believes on issues that seemed to form the heart of the argument, such as the emancipation of the serfs, were hotly debated and there were hardly any issues that the Decembrist fully agreed upon. Such is the nature of politics, for it continues today into modern political parties where every member of said party does not always hold the same values as any other member of said party. If the classification of a Decembrist is widened to include everyone who had leanings or sympathy with the cause of emancipation of the serfs, then it would be accurate to call Alexandr Pushkin a Decembrist. However, since the works of Pushkin suggest, and the lack of specific works for the advancement of the Decembrist cause, the lack of any statement of Pushkin’s belief in the cause of the Decembrist, and the

43 Crown, Archie. The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Russia and the Former Soviet Union. 212

44 Struve, Gleb. “Puskin in Early English Criticism (1821-1838).” 314.

lack of historical evidence linking Pushkin to any public action or private meeting of the Decembrist, history should regarded the highly influential poet and man of letters as existing on the fringes of the movement, not as an active participant and certainly not a member of this movement.

Bibliography

Reference


Primary Sources


Harding, Jasper, ed. “Anecdotes of the Emperor” The Pennsylvania Inquirer, January 25, 1830. http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=P63V5SJSMTMyQTQ0MjQ4NS41NTU2NjM6MToxMzo2Ni4xMTAuMjEzLjcx&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissuequeryname=31102&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=31102&p_docnum=6&p_docref=v2:110C9BFA1F116650@EANX-12DF4C2AA078F530@2389478-12DEF8F1F7688648@0-12EECEC944490BC0@Anecdotes+Of+The+Emperor+Nicholas (accessed February 10, 2012).


Monograph


Hosking, Geoffrey. Russian People and Empire 1552-1917. [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1997.]

Malia, Martin. Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleu. [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1999.]
Bibliography


Journal Articles


