

The Decembrist Myth in Russian Culture

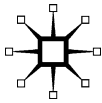
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The Decembrist Myth in Russian Culture

Ludmilla A. Trigos

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THE DECEMBRIST MYTH IN RUSSIAN CULTURE

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P R E F A C E

The passage of nearly two centuries has not dimmed the Decembrist uprising as a vibrant event in Russian historical consciousness. Recurring anniversary celebrations and frequent depictions of the uprising attest to the Decembrists' hold on Russian cultural imagination. This book examines the fascination with and subsequent mythologization of the Decembrists, which began after their incarceration and continued through the twentieth century. Despite its failure to achieve its immediate goals, the Decembrist revolt had enormous political and cultural impact. Various individuals and groups manipulated the Decembrists' image to further their own agendas and consolidate their power: Nicholas I, nineteenth-century intelligentsia (both liberals and radicals), early twentieth-century activists across political spectrums (Kadets, Social-Democrats and Bolsheviks), the Soviet regime and political parties of the post-Soviet era. For many of these groups, literature served as their only forum since political discussion was not openly encouraged by imperial or Soviet authorities. To elucidate how literature shapes cultural consciousness and historical memory, I discuss the literary renderings of the Decembrist uprising and exile. These representations crossed the boundary from print to other media during the twentieth century when filmmakers and composers used them as inspiration for cinematic and musical explorations of the topic. I concentrate on the most widely available texts and influential representations to illustrate the myth's pervasiveness and adaptability.

The various manifestations of the Decembrists' mythic image shade from the literary to the political, depending on the mythmakers' needs. The words "myth," "cult," and "legend" tend to be problematic, as literary critics, historians and anthropologists have different definitions of these terms. Yet all are appropriate in a discussion of the Decembrists.

By myth and mythologization, I mean the way that a story takes on a life of its own after the event occurs. Two points are crucial to an adequate definition of myth. First, myths are narratives that are believed to be true; whether they are true or not is irrelevant. Second, a myth is told to promote some practical purpose. Any event can become a mythic text, as Henry Tudor suggests; the mythmaker must choose one that serves his ultimate purpose.¹

The Decembrist myth permeates Russian literature and culture and evolved over time to fulfill different functions. It is a rich and productive one because of its multivocality.² It participates in and enriches other Russian cultural myths: of Pushkin, as founding father of Russian literature and great national poet; of Petersburg, which variously appears as city of illusion and hotbed of revolution; and of Siberia, which alternates as an icy realm of eternal exile or an unspoiled paradise. By analyzing the Decembrist uprising and subsequent myth from an anthropological viewpoint, we gain insight into the myth's deeper workings and emotional hold. This new perspective enhances our understanding of the Decembrists' central position in Russian cultural mythology and illuminates how they speak to Russian national identity.

Though many have seen the revolt as a unique event in the history of Russian opposition, it was very much a product of the general European revolutionary experience of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Historians of revolutionary movements such as Franco Venturi, Andrzej Walicki, Philip Pomper, Marc Raeff, and Adam Zamoyski have all demonstrated how the Decembrists' secret societies emerged out of that fertile common ground and saw predecessors in the French Revolution, the Spanish Revolution of 1820, the Tugenbund and the Carbonari, not to mention the influence of Romanticism in general.³ To avoid repetition, I emphasize that over time, Russian historians and other cultural commentators chose to downplay the similarities with foreign revolutionary movements in order to foreground the singularity of the Decembrists' feat. This strategy speaks to the need of the Russians (and later Soviets) to see themselves as both a part of and apart from Europe, and demonstrates that Russian national identity continued to hold within itself that tension between being unique while also wanting to be considered on the same cultural and developmental level as Europe.

To provide a broader context, I employ Victor Turner's methodology in my examination of the Decembrist revolt as a "social drama," which

“manifests the conflict between the modes of *communitas* and structure,” and provides greater understanding of a culture:

In the social drama, however, though choices of means and ends and social affiliation are made, stress is dominantly laid upon loyalty and obligation, as much as interest, and the course of events may then have a tragic quality. . . . Conflict seems to bring fundamental aspects of society, normally overlaid by the customs and habits of daily intercourse, into frightening prominence. People have to take sides in terms of deeply entrenched moral imperatives and constraints, often against their own personal preferences. Choice is overborne by duty.⁴

The Decembrist revolt illustrates these aspects of social drama. It tested the moral imperatives of participants on the rebels’ and imperial sides. At its deepest level, it was an uprising undertaken by a group desiring equality and freedom of all men in opposition to the autocracy’s sociopolitical hierarchy and structure.

My approach uses an anthropological framework extrapolated from the works of Turner, René Girard, and Kathleen Verdery to expose the deeper cultural processes in the Decembrists’ mythologization. Following Turner’s lead, I go beyond the scrutiny of historical documents to investigate the relationship between fact, myth, and societal context. Additionally, I employ a semiotic analysis of the Decembrists’ self-dramatization. The scholars Iurii Lotman and Lydia Ginzburg have argued persuasively that the Decembrists consciously fashioned their personalities out of literary and historical models.⁵ The Decembrists’ behavior figures significantly here, as well as the way that they and others represent it and the way that these representations interact. Therefore, I examine the Decembrists’ own representations to contextualize the myth’s later versions. Only through a synthetic analysis of the Decembrists’ own *mifotvorchestvo* (mythmaking), and the mythologizing of subsequent generations from the mid-nineteenth century on, will we comprehend the myth’s foundational role in Russian cultural mythology.

In my first three chapters I discuss the myth’s evolution during the imperial era, focusing on how Nicholas I, the Decembrists themselves, and members of the intelligentsia manipulated it for different purposes. The Decembrist myth originated in opposition to Nicholas’s imperial mythology and provided a narrative of political opposition

and sacrifice. The Decembrists' sense of honor and obligation to the people appealed to later generations of Russian intelligentsia, who modeled themselves in part on the Decembrists. For some revolutionaries it was the Decembrists' sacrifice that was primary; for others it was, variously, their messianism, utopianism, or extremism.⁶ The Decembrists' evaluation changed radically after 1917. When the Bolsheviks won the revolutionary struggle, they needed to assert their government's legitimacy as a ruling entity, and resolve their own relationship to the past, reinterpreting it to justify recent events and predict future successes. As many historians and anthropologists suggest, this process is conscious. Eric Hobsbawm links revolutionary movements to "invented tradition," which he defines as "a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."⁷ Hobsbawm emphasizes the selective nature of invented tradition in that it hearkens back to "a suitable historic past": "Revolutions and 'progressive movements' which break with the past, by definition, have their own relevant past, though it may be cut off at a certain date, such as 1789. However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious."⁸ Hobsbawm's invented tradition can be associated with mythmaking in the Soviet authorities' conscious and active attempt to create an official genealogy throughout the 1920s until one particular version became enshrined during the Stalin era.

The ceremonies of the Decembrist anniversaries, especially of the 1925 centennial, demonstrate obvious attempts to shape the Decembrists' image out of numerous and competing elements. The 1925 jubilee serves as my investigation's nexus (chapters 4 and 5) because it marked an important moment in the history of the newly formed Soviet Union, when the Bolshevik regime, established only eight years earlier, could evaluate its successful position. The definitive decision to include the Decembrists uprising into the Russian revolutionary pantheon served as the first step toward an official Soviet historical assessment. In the version resulting from the jubilee, we discern how commemorative rituals elaborated the Decembrist myth for legitimating purposes. This new legitimating myth differed from the intelligentsia's version established in the nineteenth century. The sixth chapter demonstrates how the ideological demands of the Stalin era further refined the myth into a single, authorized version,

which brooked no open challenges. At a time when official culture lost its hegemony, new voices emerged to challenge both the official view of the Decembrists espoused by authorized historians and writers and the unofficial views championed by the intelligentsia on the sidelines, as illustrated in chapters 7 and 8. That the Decembrists still figure largely in the discussion of Russia's historical alternatives testifies to the lasting hold of their myth upon the Russian cultural imagination.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Who respects us inspired bards, in a land where worth is measured according to the number of one's decorations and serfs? . . . It is painful to be an ardent dreamer in the land of eternal frost.

—Alexander Griboedov¹

Historical Fact

On November 19, 1825 after a brief illness Tsar Alexander I died suddenly in Taganrog, Crimea without leaving an heir to the throne. The news of Alexander's death arrived in Petersburg on November 27 in the early morning while the imperial family and the court attended mass to pray for his health. The ensuing interregnum, lasting until December 14, 1825, proved decisive for Russia's future course. The imperial family's indecision because of the lack of an heir magnified the confusion and the country "found itself in the strange predicament of having two self-denying Emperors, and no active ruler."² The assumed heir Constantine, Alexander's younger brother, had contracted a morganatic marriage to a Polish noblewoman, thus barring him from inheriting the throne. In any case, years earlier, he had renounced his right to the throne in a secret document known only to a few members of the imperial family. As Constantine's action had not been made public, his younger brother Nicholas insisted that all take the oath to Constantine as the new tsar.³ Though by many accounts Nicholas knew that he was next in line to the throne and the rightful heir, his behavior made it seem otherwise. His awkward decision prolonged the confusion regarding the succession, spurring an exchange of urgent missives from the imperial family in Petersburg to Constantine in Warsaw. Despite

the family's urgings, Constantine could not be persuaded to quit his home to come to the capital to renounce his right to the throne publicly and formally.

Constantine's perverse behavior provided secret society members—later known as the Decembrists—a pretense to overthrow the autocracy. They appealed to imperial troops' well-known preference for Constantine to gain support, posing the problem as one of legitimacy: Constantine was the rightful heir, and he was being prevented from ascending the throne. They hoped to galvanize the troops to act while eschewing the masses' involvement. Had they proclaimed their true goals—the abolition of serfdom, the foundation of a government assuring the freedom, rights and equality of all men—they feared they would lose control of the rebellion. Above all they wanted to prevent widespread bloodshed and popular revolt.

The uprising on December 14 was perpetrated primarily by members of a secret society originating in 1816 as the "Union of Salvation." Comprised of military officers and noblemen, the group's founders included Alexander and Nikita Muraviev, Prince Sergei Trubetskoi, Ivan Iakushkin, and Matvei and Sergei Muraviev-Apostol. Inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and freemasonry and their experiences in Western Europe during the campaigns against Napoleon, the members desired political and social reform. Specific aims included the eradication of the autocratic system, reform of the courts and the emancipation of the serfs, though as a group they did not agree on the methods that would achieve these goals. The original group disbanded in 1817 and renamed itself the "Union of Welfare," splitting into two sections in 1818. The Northern Society, located in Petersburg, was led by Nikita Muraviev (later aided by Evgenii Obolenskii and Trubetskoi), and the Southern Society, located in present-day Ukraine, was led by Colonel Pavel Pestel. The split occurred because of conflicting programs, inasmuch as the societies could be said to have them, since both sections did not have fully articulated ideas of how to achieve political change nor did they have complete agreement on what form of government to put into place.⁴ For the most part, the Northern Society advocated gradual change and constitutional monarchy; the southern group urged a military overthrow that would then allow for the establishment of a republic.⁵

The conspirators had long been planning a coup. An earlier strategy was to assassinate Alexander I while he reviewed his troops. The secret society's members could not agree on the appropriate timing, nor could they organize their actions. On hearing the news of Alexander's death,

they decided to take advantage of the circumstances. It was time to act. The members met nightly at the apartment of the poet Kondratii Ryleev, de facto leader of the Northern Society, to plan their coup. They appointed December 14 as the day for the revolt, the day that a second oath of allegiance was to be taken, this time to Nicholas. They planned to gather troops from their barracks and march them onto Senate Square, where they would publicly refuse the oath and instead demand their “rightful” tsar, Constantine. They would also demand a constitution from the State council members and imperial family, which would establish a constitutional monarchy or a republic; they had not yet decided which they preferred. If all else failed, they would fight.

In addition to the succession crisis, betrayals of both branches precipitated their revolutionary action independently of each other. Captain A. I. Maiboroda’s testimony led to the arrest of Pestel in Ukraine on the night of December 13, 1825, the eve of the oath-swearing and subsequent uprising in Petersburg. The former Northern Society member, Second Lieutenant Iakov Rostovstev, told his colleagues of his betrayal of the Petersburg conspiracy; it was his confession that led them to enact their plot.

The conspirators mustered their forces and began arraying them on Senate Square in the early morning of December 14. A force of approximately 2,000 strong stood on the square, refusing to swear allegiance to Nicholas. The conspirators and their troops waited for the appearance of their designated “dictator,” Trubetskoi, to lead them into action. While loyal troops surrounded the rebels, crowds gathered to watch the spectacle, offering their support to the insurgents. Occasional shouts of “Hurrah for Constantine” were heard. Trubetskoi did not appear; the Northern Society’s inspiration, Ryleev, went to find him and did not return. The nonappearance of the revolt’s appointed dictator and the disappearance of its charismatic prophet left the conspirators and troops uncertain of their course. Captain Alexander Iakubovich sallied back and forth from the side of the conspirators to the imperial forces, first urging his rebel colleagues to hold fast and then telling the loyal generals that they were ready to give up. The eccentric poet and conspirator Vilhelm Kiukhelbeker recklessly brandished his pistol.

Count M. A. Miloradovich, Metropolitan Filaret and Grand Prince Michael Pavlovich attempted to negotiate with the rebels. In each case they were turned back with taunts, oaths, and random shots. Miloradovich was wounded by a shot from the gun of the insurgent Petr Kakhovskii and died later that day. The conspirator Ivan Pushchin goaded

Kiukhelbeker to take a shot at the Grand Prince. Kiukhelbeker's gun misfired. The crowd became more restless; workmen from St. Isaac's cathedral at the edge of the square began hurling wood at the loyal troops. With twilight approaching, Nicholas decided to attack. As the cavalry charged, their horses skidded across the square on the ice, accomplishing nothing. The Chevalier Guards attacked next and experienced the same. Nicholas finally ordered the artillery to fire. Chaos ensued. The rebels broke ranks and many fled to avoid the grapeshot. Within twenty-four hours most conspirators were in custody.

A second uprising occurred two weeks later when the news of the events in Petersburg reached the south. Already aware of a traitor in their midst after the incarceration of their leader Pestel, the Southern Society began to strategize. When the authorities arrested Sergei Muraviev-Apostol and Mikhail Bestuzhev-Riumin, the remaining members of the Southern Society and United Slavs, an allied secret society, freed them and gathered reinforcements among the southern regiments to come to the aid of their northern colleagues.

The revolt of the Chernigov troops, led by Muraviev-Apostol, began on December 29, with their march on the town of Vasilkov. Playing on the religious appeal of the Orthodox liturgy, Muraviev-Apostol composed a catechism especially for the revolution, hoping to mobilize support and inspire his troops' devotion. On December 31, Muraviev-Apostol persuaded a local priest to read his text to the assembled troops to justify their action against the tsar. While the rebels in the North played on the troops' preference for Constantine over Nicholas, the Southern insurrectionists manipulated religious symbols to gain support. If the Northern revolt was distinguished by its static quality, then the Southern revolt can be categorized by its aimless wandering in search of manpower. Over the course of five days, the troops roamed the countryside, from Vasilkov to Motovilovka then to Belaia Tserkov and Zhitomir. Imperial troops surrounded them on January 3, 1826, at the village of Trilesy. After a brief and bloody battle, the conspirators were routed and taken prisoner. The members of the Northern and Southern Societies and the United Slavs were reunited in Petersburg in Peter-Paul Fortress where they were imprisoned during the investigation into the conspiracy.

Nicholas I personally questioned the conspirators and oversaw the judiciary process. He established an investigative commission, which he directed throughout. The process dragged on until May 30, 1826, when the perpetrators were sentenced without trial or appeal. The five so-called leaders, Pestel, Ryleev, Kakhovskii, Muraviev-Apostol, and

Bestuzhev-Riumin were sentenced to death by quartering. The other 121 men received sentences varying from demotion to the ranks to lifetime exile and penal servitude. Nicholas graciously commuted many sentences; the five leaders would be executed by hanging rather than quartering to avoid bloodshed.

On July 13, 1826, the sentences were carried out. In the middle of the night, the convicted Decembrists were gathered and stripped of their military uniforms, honors, and scabbards. Imperial officers burned the Decembrists' personal effects and broke their swords over their heads. The prisoners were issued convicts' clothes and taken inside to await news of their colleagues' death. At dawn the five Decembrist leaders were hanged on the ramparts of Peter-Paul Fortress. Though scheduled for 3:00 a.m., the ceremony did not begin until 5:30 a.m. because of the scaffold's faulty construction.⁶ The five fettered men were led out to the scaffold: Kakhovskii walked alone first, behind him Muraviev-Apostol with Bestuzhev, then Ryleev, and Pestel. After the police captain read their sentence aloud, Ryleev called for his comrades to make their final obeisance to the Lord, and then they walked onto the scaffold. The two executioners first placed nooses and then white hoods on them. When the command was given, the board on which they stood was removed and at that moment three bodies fell, their ropes having broken. Ryleev, Muraviev, and Kakhovskii, in varying stages of consciousness, were helped back up onto the scaffold and hanged again. When a doctor pronounced them dead at 6 a.m., they were removed, thrown onto a cart, and disposed of in an unknown location on Golodai Island, an outlying Petersburg island. The official news of the execution and exile of the state criminals appeared in *The Northern Bee* (*Severnaia pchela*) and other newspapers days later (July 17) and cleansing services (*ochistitel'noe molebstvie*) were held in Petersburg on Senate Square (July 14) and in Moscow in the Kremlin (July 19).

The remaining Decembrists, sentenced to Siberian exile, imprisonment and/or penal servitude, set off in the remaining days of the summer. Several wives petitioned Nicholas for permission to follow their husbands to Siberia. After much deliberation, he allowed a small number to go, as long as they left their children and renounced their former rank and rights. Eleven wives journeyed to Siberia in the years 1826–1831; from 1838–1847 four sisters, two mothers, and one more wife arrived.⁷ The women, renowned in Russian literature and history as *dekabristki* (literally, Decembrist women), became famous for their self-sacrifice and *podvig* (moral feat). The wives were the Decembrists' remaining link to Russian society and supported their husbands both

spiritually and materially. Though the Decembrists were physically isolated from society from the moment of their incarceration, they resurfaced in 1856 when Tsar Alexander II granted them amnesty and allowed the few survivors to return to western Russia.

Mythic Narrative

In Victor Turner's terms, the Decembrists' outright refusal to take oath to the new tsar enacted "a public, overt breach"⁸ against the autocracy. This act played on the loyalties of the perpetrators (would they pledge allegiance to their tsar?) and the authorities (would they take arms against fellow Russians?). In the intervening hours, while the rebels stood on Senate Square in St. Petersburg, a "phase of mounting crisis" occurred, during which the authorities had to determine how to counteract the social/political breach, and the rebels had to decide how to force their hand. Neither side knew what to do, resulting in the derogatory appellation of the revolt as a "standing revolution" (*stoiachaia revoliutsiia*). Since there was no escalation in the conspirators' military force because of their lack of organization and leadership this phase was brief. The authorities' negotiations failed to achieve resolution; a chaotic atmosphere ensued, with the lower classes watching the stand-off while hurling firewood at imperial troops. December 14 coincided with the winter solstice, when mummers entertained the crowds "in a carnivalesque mixture of Christian and pagan symbolism," an atmosphere that certainly influenced the tone of the revolt.⁹

Though carnivalesque elements may have been inherent in the holiday, they also arose naturally from the new tsar's accession. René Girard's discussion of succession rites illuminates the deeper workings of the Decembrist uprising from an anthropological perspective. Girard examines installation rites in societies where violence often accompanies transfers of power. In these settings, the king must commit transgressions violating sacred laws to take on the role of the original victim, who is polluted. (Recall the figure of Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex*.) Because of the violation, the king is subject to ritualistic insults during the succession rites, which may involve a mock attack on his bodyguard or himself. Girard demonstrates the king's function as "the catalyst who converts sterile, infectious violence into positive cultural values."¹⁰ Given the king's marginal status within society—he is not a member of society, but above it—he can take on the sacrificial or surrogate victim's role to expel violence detrimental to the community.

The Decembrist revolt can be seen in this context as an archetype of ritual confrontation in enthronement rites. However, in their case, the ritual crossed from mock attack to genuine opposition with dire consequences. The confrontation's static quality underlines its ritual nature; the conspirators and their troops stood on the square for hours before being compelled to fight after tsarist artillery fired on them. The ritual aspects are also apparent in the authorities' reactions; they hesitated to quash the revolt, instead negotiating with the rebels. The tsar's military and religious representatives tried to convince the conspirators to withdraw with appeals to higher forces of divine and human law. During their attempts to negotiate with the rebels, the tsar's representatives, Grand Prince Michael and Metropolitan Filaret, were insulted and humiliated, and one of the greatest heroes of the era, Miloradovich, was wounded. Only then did Nicholas take action to efface the social breach's effect, ordering loyal troops to fire artillery at the lightly armed insurrectionists.

Unlike ritual confrontations, the Decembrists directly challenged Nicholas's legitimacy and raised the possibility of regicide in two senses. The explicit question of whether the "rightful" ruler (Tsarevich Constantine) had been killed was the Decembrists' pretense for revolt. However, the implicit question of whether to kill the new tsar to overthrow the monarchy served as the primary impetus for the Decembrists' action and strategy. In this case, Nicholas's behavior during the uprising confirmed his legitimacy, paralleling the legitimating process undergone by the ruler during installation rites performed by primitive communities. The revolt's perpetrators, sentenced to death, imprisonment or exile, became marginalized, liminal figures in society's perception.

Nicholas's Mythology of Rule and Historical Representation

Immediately after the Decembrists' sentencing, Nicholas forbade their mention in all public media. Contemporaries expected that Nicholas would annul the death penalty for the condemned Decembrists at the last minute as a result of the Empress's intercession on their behalf. When this expectation was not fulfilled, "even more conservative members of the elite were shocked."¹¹ Out of fear of society's reaction to the punishment and future eruptions of opposition to the state, Nicholas strove to erase the conspirators' names and actions from history and their memory

from the public consciousness. However, Nicholas's decisions—to ban public mention of the Decembrists, to execute the five leaders in secret, and to exile the remaining rebels to Siberia—backfired because they allowed legends to arise concerning the executed men and survivors. Among certain elite circles, the intelligentsia and the inhabitants of Siberia, the Decembrists gained mythic status.

The imperial prohibition on the Decembrists' representations (in print and portraiture) lasted throughout Nicholas's reign. The exceptions to the ban were the official narratives of the Decembrist uprising: the newspaper account first published in *The Saint Petersburg News* (*Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*) and reprinted elsewhere, references in imperial manifestoes issued regarding the revolt, sentencing, execution, and cleansing services, and Baron Modest Korf's history *The Accession of Nicholas I* (*Vosshestvie na prestol Nikolaia I*, 1857). Though Korf's work was written in 1848, it was publicly issued only after Nicholas's death in Russian, English, and German. Prior to 1857 copies were available exclusively for the imperial family's private use. These official representations need to be evaluated to examine properly the Decembrists' mythic image. The Decembrist myth arose in response to the official narratives of the uprising, the only publicly available information about the movement and its members. The Decembrists and their sympathizers sought to counter the incomplete and skewed accounts by producing their own versions of the events and representations of their participants (see chapter 2).

The newspaper account after the uprising minimized the rebellion's importance as a stand against the autocracy. Written by Dmitrii Bludov at Nicholas's order,¹² it sought to allay Russian and European fears about widespread insurrection. Instead it impugned the perpetrators' and their supporters' characters, claiming the rebel battalions of the Moscow troops were joined by "several people of vile appearance in frock coats,"¹³ who were "madmen" (*bezumtsy*), and insinuated that they were drunk.¹⁴ The article insisted the troops were the "blind instrument" (*slepoe oruzhie*) of a few officers who took advantage of them. For this reason, after hearing that rebel troops returned to their barracks, confessed their wrongdoing and took the oath, Nicholas pardoned them and returned their standard.¹⁵ Only with the leaders discredited and the true goals suppressed could Nicholas defuse the revolt's significance. The article never mentioned the rebels' demand for a constitution or their desire to abolish the autocracy and serfdom.

Months later, after the execution of the Decembrist leaders, a religious ceremony was held on Senate Square to cleanse it of the blood,

crime, treason, and dishonor against the *tsar-batiushka* (dear father tsar), which the popular imagination perceived as attempted patricide. The fact that Nicholas felt it necessary to purify the uprising's setting highlights his extreme reaction to the crime and the depth of his fear. The service contained two New Testament readings, from Paul and Luke. The latter illustrates Christ's role in cleansing and saving the faithful as long as they believed. This reading provided an allegory for Russia; believing in the tsar, all would be cleansed of their sins, kept safe and protected from "raging revolt...and the destruction of the entire Russian tsardom."¹⁶ The manifesto Nicholas issued that day repeated the rhetoric and affirmed "the fatherland is cleansed of the marks of infection, which it hid within itself for so many years."¹⁷

Nicholas celebrated his victory over the Decembrists, whom he called "mes amis de quatorze," with a liturgy on December 14 every year of his reign. As Richard Wortman asserts, Nicholas constructed his own myth of the uprising, which glorified his and his supporters' valiant efforts to persuade the rebels to withdraw and then, only when forced to resort to violence, showed their courage in suppressing the rebellion:

Nicholas I used the Decembrist Rebellion to refurbish the ruler's image as conqueror and to put it at the service of the autocracy's defense, rather than its transformation.... The insurrection made it possible to present conservatism as a radical break, for Nicholas defined the Decembrist Movement as the embodiment of the Western, rationalistic views that his brother, Alexander, had also held.... In crushing the rebellion, he heroically began a new era, loyal to a tradition presumably demonstrated by the failure of the rebellion.¹⁸

Nicholas created the myth to legitimate his own right to rule, resting his claim on two facts. First, he demonstrated his capacity to rule the empire during the revolt. Second, he already produced a male heir, whom he offered to the troops as a sign of future dynastic stability.¹⁹ Thus, the validation of his power and creation of his own mythic version of events began in the ceremonies occurring on the day of the insurrection and continued until the end of his reign.²⁰ Given this atmosphere, an alternative vision could not compete openly with the imperial myth. The manifesto and ritual cleansing of the square on the day of the Decembrists' execution sought to affirm Nicholas's version, his "heroic triumph" over evil: "December 14 thus became another

event, with the Napoleonic wars, that united the armed forces in the holy cause of defending Russia.”²¹

The Decembrist insurrection became a central defining moment for Nicholas’s reign, in validating his claims as emperor and charting his course as a conservative and reformer, and also in shaping his future “mythology of rule”²²: “Nicholas I renewed the image of conqueror, but now as lone and embattled defender of monarchy against the pernicious forces of revolution.”²³ Nicholas’s myth, however, was countered by the development of the Decembrist myth, a myth against the establishment, an anti-myth challenging the autocracy’s version of truth and right to power. Nurtured in the nineteenth century by the poet Alexander Pushkin, the political activist Alexander Herzen and the Decembrists’ families and sympathizers as well as the Decembrists themselves, the myth grew clandestinely, through obscure references, unofficial correspondence and word of mouth. Yet in certain circles, it provided a powerful counterweight to official history. Though they strove to overthrow the autocracy and social hierarchy to equalize citizens, in the end the only status reversal that ensued was their own, from high to low. Because of their crime against the tsar, the Decembrists became marginalized figures in society. As Turner suggests, marginalized figures often take on great sacred power while being considered dangerous and polluting. These “mythic types” come to “symbolize the moral value” of rebellion against oppressive rulers, and are seen as “representatives or expressions of universal human values.”²⁴ Though Nicholas’s state rituals emphasized the Decembrists’ polluting effect in other circles they achieved a sacred status.

The imperial mythology’s most enduring representation was *The Accession of Nicholas I* written by Baron Modest Korf, Nicholas’s state secretary and issued in a limited first edition (for the imperial family) on December 14, 1848, 23 years to the day of the Decembrist uprising. Korf wrote his book at the request of Tsarevich Alexander,²⁵ who recognized that the first days of his father’s reign must not “fade or pass into history distorted by exaggerated rumors.”²⁶ Alexander Nikolaevich provided Nicholas’s notes but instructed Korf to excise all the personal elements. He also suggested that Nicholas correct the text and add any personal reminiscences that were relevant to make it “the most credible whole.”²⁷ The Tsarevich’s suggestions exemplify that history is the victors’ domain and shows how historical texts concretely demonstrate political power.

Korf’s text borders more on the panegyric than on history. Introducing the first public edition in 1857 after Nicholas’ death, Korf proclaims he

will give not only the full truth but also a valuable example to posterity: “Emperor Nicholas does not need laudatory exclamations, but history requires truth and valiant examples. This purpose will reconcile the illustrious departed to the violation of his modesty’s secret!” (v). Korf justifies the publication of the first day of Nicholas’s reign to balance the news of Nicholas’s last day; he exalts the recently departed tsar for his virtues, portraying him as a good ruler and courageous man from his succession’s first moment.

Korf disclaims his medium, calling it a “chronicle” (*letopis’*) rather than a “history” (*istoriia*): “A chronicle ought to relate events and how they occurred: it is history’s province to evaluate them and pronounce upon them definitive judgment” (ix). Pronouncing judgment is, however, specifically what Korf does. His work falls more precisely between the “history” and the “portrait.” Korf thus follows the genre described by Louis Marin: “If history is made by actors and if, among these actors, there is an agent through whom they receive being, life, and movement, the narrative of History can be only the narrative of this agent and of all he does, says, and thinks. His acts, words, and thoughts—and only they—define the absolute and universal space of History and of the narrative of history: the king must therefore be praised everywhere.²⁸ In Korf’s narrative, Nicholas is the main actor who must be praised and justified; all others are marginalized. His being and worth gain validation through the Decembrist revolt’s suppression, the first and most important act of his reign. It cannot be coincidental that the Tsarevich asked Korf to write the book in 1848, given the number of revolutionary uprisings in Europe at the time. Could this narrative originally have been intended as a reminder of Nicholas’s past victory over revolution and consolation, or as a promise of future victory over the specter of revolution? In any case, Nicholas’s success is twofold; the tale of the revolt’s quashing leads to the suppression of the story’s other possible versions. Korf represents the conspirators in highly negative terms: “A handful of young madmen, acquainted neither with the demands of the Empire nor with the people’s spirit and the true needs, insolently dreamed of the government’s reorganization; soon, the thought of reform was also joined by the unholy thought of regicide” (100). The Decembrists’ portrayal as madmen echoes the newspaper accounts and many contemporary letters and memoirs of the elite’s conservative members.²⁹ The figures of the revolt have no say in this text. Their narratives are subsumed by the praise of the king.

Though a panegyric in many ways, the work often seems an apologia. Korf answers publicly for Nicholas’s treatment of the Decembrists and

his actions as tsar in general. He also speaks to criticism from abroad in foreign publications.³⁰ The entire text legitimizes Nicholas's rule, explaining why he ascended the throne rather than Constantine. In a surprising example of openness, Korf reveals the letters exchanged between Constantine and Alexander I regarding the succession to demonstrate Constantine's earlier renunciation and validate Nicholas's legitimacy.

Korf focuses on Nicholas's noble character and strong sense of duty, stressing that Nicholas took up the post as emperor even though he felt unprepared. He portrays Nicholas as a reluctant leader, much like Moses, who attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to turn away from his divinely ordained historical role. Korf proclaims that first hearing of Alexander's intention to alter the natural order of succession in favor of Nicholas over Constantine: "the young couple [Nicholas and his wife] was struck as with a thunderbolt by this unexpected news, which to them was full of terror. In tears, they were unable to respond" (9). Nicholas's reaction underlines his modest nature and lack of imperial ambition: "In vain did the Grand Prince represent that he had never prepared himself to occupy the lofty rank of Emperor; that he felt within himself neither the necessary strength for such a great post, nor the necessary firmness of character; that he had but one wish and ambition in the world—forever to serve the Emperor" (10). On hearing of the Emperor's death, Nicholas's first act was to swear allegiance to Constantine, insisting that it was his duty to observe the succession's unchanging order. Once confronted with positive proof of his inheritance, Nicholas continued to refuse, asserting that no one knew of Alexander's will with its change of succession. As Korf portrays it, Nicholas felt he was making the greatest sacrifice in accepting the new role assigned to him:

Which of us two, He [Nicholas] inwardly asked himself, makes the greater sacrifice here? Is it he who, once determined to renounce his paternal inheritance under the guise of his own unfitness, remains faithful to his word, in the position which he has himself chosen, in conformity with his taste and his desires; or is it he who, never having prepared himself for a dignity from which he was exempt by his very birth, and without knowing positively of the decision decreeing his own destiny, now suddenly finds himself obligated at a most difficult time, when the future appears anything but smiling, to sacrifice himself and all that he

holds dearest—domestic happiness and peace—to obey the will of another? (85)

Repeated references to Nicholas's consciousness of duty and modesty (which would have kept him out of the limelight) represent Nicholas's final decision to take the throne as the ultimate act of self-sacrifice. Extolling Nicholas's action, Korf further sacralizes the tsar: "In inscribing on our history's pages one of the noblest and sublimest of its events, before his sacred debt to his country, Nicholas Pavlovich forced silent in his heart the voice of self-preservation and self-interest: with a soul full of the most pious trust in Almighty Providence he obeyed its design. Nicholas Pavlovich was emperor" (107). Korf quells any suspicion of Nicholas's ambition to become tsar. Korf then cites Nicholas's letter to his brother Michael on the evening of December 12, 1825, when he received Constantine's definitive refusal of the throne: "Finally all is decided. . . and I must take on the burden of the Emperor" (109). Nicholas appears as the most dutiful imperial servant, for whom the empire is a burden rather than a reward. Korf turns Nicholas into a sacrificial victim relinquishing his own good for society's benefit.

To highlight Nicholas's rightful status, Korf stresses the people's loyalty compared to the rebels' and deceived troops'. To this end, Korf propagates the negative apocrypha of the uprising. He reports the quip about the crowd calling for "Constantine and Constitution" (*Konstantin i Konstitutsiia*) thinking that they meant Constantine and his wife.³¹ By demonstrating the crowd's ignorance, Korf shows their inability to side knowingly against the autocracy in the rebels' favor; rather their child-like understanding leads them into error. The *tsar-batiushka*, paternal authority extraordinaire, steps in to protect his citizen-children from the nefarious conspirators' influences.

Korf effectively provides a new justification of Nicholas's reign after his death. Three primary motivations may have spurred this justification. First, Nicholas died after the devastating loss of the Crimean War. The defeat caused many people to question the regime's earlier policies. Korf allays those doubts by depicting Nicholas' crowning moment. Second, Nicholas's justification provided legitimization of his son and heir, the new tsar, Alexander II. Alexander showed mercy by granting the Decembrists amnesty in honor of his coronation. Thus Alexander's noble act follows ironically in his father's footsteps. Nicholas proved himself as a ruler by crushing the revolt. Alexander II, already a legitimate ruler according to the order of succession, could validate himself by being the antithesis of his father and pardoning the Decembrists.

Though showing clemency toward the remaining Decembrists, Alexander did not withdraw all the restrictions imposed upon them. The few returnees to western Russia could not live in the capital cities, though some played an important role in society upon their return, especially during Alexander's reforms enacted in 1861. Alexander realized the double-edged nature of his pardon when he saw the Decembrists' heroic welcome and specifically told Korf: "It seems to me that the time has come to publish your history of December 14. I am aware of the absurd and false rumors circulating about this event not only in Europe but in Russia itself."³² However, instead of counteracting the returning exiles' acclamation, Korf's publication provided further impetus to their mythologization.