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THE DECEMBRISTS

Alexander Rotchev was a contemporary and quite possibly a sympathizer of the Decembrists, the coterie of idealistic military officers whose indecisive attempt at a coup d'état on Senate Square in St. Petersburg was easily and bloodily crushed on 14 December [26 December new style] 1825. On that day the oath of loyalty to the new tsar, Nicholas I, was to be taken. Five ringleaders were hanged, thirty-one were sentenced to penal servitude, and ninety others were exiled, chiefly to Siberia.

Most of the Decembrists were quite young, some were still adolescents; most were very well educated and well traveled and therefore familiar with the new Russian literature of moral and social protest (Alexander Radishchev and Alexander Pushkin, for example) and with the political and social changes in Western Europe and their philosophical underpinnings (romanticism, idealism). Most were active members of one or more of the diverse secret political societies that had arisen in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars under the influence of Freemasonry. Most belonged to the aristocracy, whose privileges enabled their activities; and most were ranking officers (79 percent of the 579 individuals investigated by the emperor's tribunal were military personnel) and therefore capable of leading an uprising.

Their desire for change was stimulated by economic stagnation in Russia (the country was virtually bankrupt by 1825), and they were frustrated by Alexander I's increasing conservatism and mysticism during the last half of his reign. They hoped for better from the childless Alexander's younger brother, Constantine, who was supposedly liberal in outlook; he, however, declined the succession, which then went to the youngest brother, Nicholas. Nicholas I responded intensely to the conspiracy, becoming the "gendarme of Europe" in foreign affairs and the upholder of "orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality" in domestic matters, ruling with an iron hand by means of his "Third Section" (secret police).¹

The Russian-American Company felt this chill, for several of the Decembrists had been closely associated with the company, especially Kondraty Ryleyev, the driving force behind the radical Northern Society and one of the executed ringleaders.² A romantic poet, he would have been known perhaps even personally to Rotchev, who was likewise an aspiring writer. At the time of his arrest Ryleyev lived and worked at the company's St. Petersburg headquarters on the Moika Canal near the Blue Bridge, where he served as its office manager from the beginning of 1824. Admiral Nikolay Mordvinov, the company's patron and a popular liberal figure, had offered him the well-paid position (a salary and ten shares plus a free flat for him and his wife and two

¹ For more details on the Decembrists, see G. R. V. Barratt, *Voices in Exile: The Decembrist Memoirs* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974), Anatole G. Mazour, *The First Russian Revolution, 1825 – The Decembrist Movement: Its Origins, Development, and Significance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1937), and Marc Raeff, *The Decembrist Movement* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

² Of the five men, three, including Ryleyev, fell off the faulty gallows at the first hanging attempt and had to be restrung, but not before another of them had time to say "Oh Lord, they can't even hang properly in Russia" (Raeff, 1966, p. 177).

children). Two other members of the Northern Society lodged at the company's building, and meetings of the plotters were held there. During the inquisition following the abortive uprising, the tsar asked a suspect where he worked, and when the latter replied "At the Russian-American Company," Nicholas I snorted, "And that's a fine company you have assembled there."³ The late Soviet historian, Semyon Okun, wrote that No. 72 on the Moika became "a sort of conspirators' club" and that to frequent it was to be "identified with actual participation in the conspiracy."⁴ Ryleyev and other future Decembrists also attended soirees given by Ivan Prokofyev, one of the company's directors. Nikolay Kusov, another director, and a well-known progressive, also attended. The company's Board of Directors thought so highly of Ryleyev's services that they gave him an expensive raccoon coat with a beaver collar (valued at 700 rubles), and after his arrest they paid his debts (but took back his shares) and let his wife remain in the flat.⁵

Another convicted conspirator, Dmitry Zavalishin, whose initial death sentence was commuted to hard labor in Siberia, visited Russian America and Alta California in 1823-24 as a junior officer on the *Kreiser* and was even considered for the post of manager of Ross Counter. Another Decembrist, Batenkov, was slated to succeed Governor Muravyov at Sitka. Zavalishin advocated aggressive Russian expansion on both sides of the North Pacific and, like Ryleyev, openly criticized Russia's concessions under the American-Russian Convention of 1825. (Ryleyev even petitioned the Minister of Finance on this matter.) No other Decembrist showed as much interest in the company and its colonies or wrote as much about them as Zavalishin,⁶ a prolific writer (and the most long-lived of the Decembrists.)

Other Decembrists with a connection to the Russian-American Company included Mikhail von Kyukhelbeker (the younger brother of a prominent poet) who in 1821 had sailed to Russian America and Alta California as a lieutenant aboard the *Apollon*, and Vladimir Romanov who had voyaged to Alta California and Russian America in 1820-22 as a lieutenant on the *Kutuzov*. The former was sentenced to hard labor in Eastern Siberia and the latter, a friend of Ryleyev, was temporarily disgraced.

Right after the insurrection, Director Prokofyev, fearing his own and the company's implication in the conspiracy, burned all of the incriminating documents. But the trials clearly revealed the close links, and the Russian-American Company fell out of royal favor and lost imperial support for projects such as Governor Wrangell's proposal to win recognition of the legitimacy of Russian California from the Mexican Republic, whose independence Nicholas I refused to countenance.

³ O'Meara, 1984, p. 145.

⁴ S. B. Okun, *The Russian-American Company*, trans. Carl Ginsburg (New York: Octagon Books, 1979), pp. 112, 113.

⁵ On Ryleyev, see Patrick O'Meara, *K. F. Ryleev: A Political Biography of the Decembrist Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁶ Including a short book about the company, *Rossiisko-Amerikanskaya Kompaniya* (Moscow: Universitetskaya Tipografiya, 1865), which was published as a defense of the firm on the eve of a shareholders' meeting to be held to discuss the State Council's proposed renewal of the company's charter.

What explains the relationship between the company and the Decembrists? For one thing, the rebels were, as Marc Raeff says, “in the tradition of service to country and people in which the eighteenth-century elite had been raised.”⁷ This tradition, combined with post-Napoleonic nationalist sentiment, prompted them to visit, study, and promote the various regions of the empire — particularly the lesser known and lesser developed parts, chiefly Siberia and Russian America.

In addition, as Raeff also notes,⁸ the Decembrists were in the tradition, too, of the Russian intelligentsia. They tended to discover their own country only after first discovering others, usually European states, and then drew comparisons (usually unfavorable) with Russia, and then urged reforms. So they were eager to travel abroad to sample foreign lands and peoples, and such opportunities were made readily available by the round-the-world voyages of both the Russian navy (from 1803) and the Russian-American Company, as well as the latter’s foreign dealings.

Furthermore, the Decembrists may have been attracted to the company insofar as it represented what they believed the stagnant Russian economy needed — progressive economic institutions, in this case corporate enterprise. Moreover, the firm’s annual meetings of shareholders appealed to Zavalishin, at least, because they offered some degree of “freedom and equality.” There was the freedom to participate in the unrestricted economic and even political discussions and equality in voting, which was dependent upon one’s number of shares, not upon rank or status, so that “the merchant was upon the same footing as the important courtier or the celebrated grandee.”⁹ Finally, the interest of the Decembrists in the company was motivated by the desire to strengthen ties with disaffected members of the merchant class. Both foreign and domestic trade had slumped in the second half of Alexander I’s reign, causing widespread mercantile discontent that the Decembrists wanted to exploit. Batenkov told the tribunal that, “More often than anywhere else I used to go to the merchants’ houses, and inasmuch as that class is generally dissatisfied with the restrictive regulations on commerce, associating with them acted as an incitement to the desire for a change.”¹⁰

But under Nicholas I there was to be little change and much reaction until his death thirty years after the Decembrist rebellion. The atmosphere for Rotchev was much less repressive in Russian California, where, as a saying went, “God is high above and the Tsar is far away,” and much change was afoot next door in Alta California, where events would soon help bring an end to Ross Counter itself.

⁷ Raeff, 1966, p. 27.

⁸ Ibid. p. 19-21..

⁹ O’Meara, 1984, p. 63, quoting D. I. Zavalishin, *Zapiska Dekabrista* (St. Petersburg, 1906).

¹⁰ Okun, 1979, p. 108.