CHAPTER ONE

The Decembrist Myth in the Nineteenth Century

Without the Decembrists, there wouldn’t have been Pushkin.
—Natan Eidelman

The cannons’ thunder, ringing out on Senate Square, roused an entire generation.
—Alexander Herzen

From the moment of the uprising, the Decembrist myth developed in elite Russian society. It found its form through the literary culture, in allusions and veiled references. It spread through word of mouth and private correspondence among the Decembrists’ sympathizers. The myth was nurtured and fostered by the Decembrists themselves in their writings and their memoirs’ eventual publication. This chapter traces the Decembrist myth’s evolution in the nineteenth century among the intelligentsia, examining literary representations to see how the Decembrists’ image changed over time. Certain portrayals later became canonical and propagated the myth more widely. In the twentieth century, these canonical texts resurface in Soviet historical accounts, criticism and literature during the centennial.

My exploration will be divided into three parts. First I analyze the works of the Decembrists’ contemporaries, Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837) and Alexander Griboedov (1795–1829), to demonstrate the complex interrelationship of literature, life, and censorship affecting the myth’s early evolution. Second I focus on literary representations by Alexander Herzen (1812–1870), Nikolai Ogarev (1813–1877),...
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and Nikolai Nekrasov (1821–1878) to show how the succeeding generation took up the Decembrists’ banner and sacralized them in their works. Third, I examine portrayals by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) to illustrate how he counteracted the hagiographic depictions of other writers.

The Contemporaries

Alexander Pushkin and Alexander Griboedov were the Decembrists’ contemporaries and friends. In their cases, biography and artistic production intersect and impact later interpretations of their literary works. These writers engaged in a lively critical and stylistic dialogue with Decembrist writers such as Ryleev, Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, and Kiukhelbeker before the uprising. Afterward, Pushkin’s and Griboedov’s earlier works were reinterpreted as either supportive or critical of the revolt and its participants. Certain characters and phrases were taken as emblematic references to the Decembrists by their contemporaries. This rereading brought them under the imperial authorities’ suspicion. Hence, both writers discovered that they had to be vigilant to avoid censure for sympathy to the Decembrists’ cause. In any case, given the official ban on representations of the Decembrists, there would be little point in writing explicitly about the revolt and its participants. Instead, a few ambiguous references appear because of the personal danger in referring to the revolt. These ambiguous representations allowed for reinterpretation after the 1917 revolution. Thus Pushkin’s and Griboedov’s works play a central role in the Decembrist myth as much for the way they were read by succeeding generations as for the specific images that they provided.

Though Pushkin never explicitly represented the Decembrists in work published in his lifetime, many scholars argue that he obliquely addressed the issue of revolutionary action and its consequences in his letters, sketches, and literary works. Such popular rereadings of his work began immediately after the Decembrist revolt but appear in prerevolutionary criticism only in the late 1890s. Pushkin’s poem, “André Chénier,” written in 1824, was excerpted and distributed anonymously as “On December 14” (“Na 14 dekabria”) after the uprising. The authorities called Pushkin to account for his authorship and the poem’s distribution under the new title. Pushkin knew of the malleability of his poetry, his inability to control its form once it was released to the public and the consequences of political readings