“The Decembrist uprising’s anniversary [December 14, 1917]. They, too, almost one hundred years ago, were here in these cells [in Peter-Paul Fortress]. . . . They died believing in their cause. . . .
—A. I. Shingarev

Prerevolutionary Commemorations

Although the Decembrist uprising was celebrated before the 1917 Russian revolution(s), the practice became legally sanctioned and officially established only after 1917. Prior to this time, celebrations took place only in secret or abroad. Incarcerated Decembrists commemorated December 14 with a celebratory dinner; they also sang “Whatever the wind blows” (“Chto ni vetr shumit”), M. Bestuzhev’s composition in honor of the “solemn, holy day.”

As early as the 1830s, Polish radicals commemorated the Decembrist revolt at home and abroad. The first Russian affirmation outside Decembrist circles dates to 1855 (also the year of Nicholas’ death), to a literary evening dedicated to the 30th anniversary, organized by Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev.

Only in the twentieth century did celebrations of the Decembrists’ political significance echo back to Russia. In Geneva in 1900 the Decembrist uprising was commemorated by the leading Social Democrat, Georgii Plekhanov. He began by attributing great significance to the Decembrist movement, placing it in the context of world
Sympathetic remembrance about it makes the hearts of all those Russians—and perhaps not only of Russians alone, but of those people not interested in supporting autocracy and not indifferent to those institutions that turn its Philistines into citizens, that is, those which secure the benefit of political freedom for their country—to beat with great force.” Unlike others, Plekhanov discussed the Decembrists’ predecessors and posited Alexander Radishchev as the first staunch Russian revolutionary from the intelligentsia, a position that the Decembrists later assumed in the Russian revolutionary martyrology. Plekhanov cited Herzen and Pushkin as well as Iakushkin, N. Bestuzhev, and Ryleev to demonstrate the Decembrists’ civic motives and their centrality in the Russian revolutionary movement. Emphasizing the Decembrists’ sacrificial role, Plekhanov claims the Decembrists as the forefathers of the Social Democrats: “Seventy-five years have passed since this time and our unfortunate country witnessed many other executions, many other sacrifices were carried out for the cause of Russian freedom! But the names of Pavel Pestel, Kondratii Ryleev, Sergei Muraviev-Apostol, Petr Kakhovskii, and Mikhail Bestuzhev-Riumin will remain in the memory of all freedom-loving Russian people, as the names of the first of our numerous martyrs” (29–30). Plekhanov highlights the enduring appeal of martyrs to the revolutionary movement. Though he discusses the reason for their failure (no popular support), he insists that they should be exalted: “Namely because we esteem these people as our forefathers and want to continue their cause, we do not have the right to close our eyes to those circumstances that hindered their immediate success” (30, author’s emphasis).

Plekhanov suggests that his contemporaries have much to learn from their predecessors. In closing he confirms that Social Democrats have found the proper program of action allowing them to defeat tsarism and obtain political freedom while also avenging “these victims who have fallen and who fall beneath its blows”(30). Subsequent enthusiasts and detractors of the Decembrists return to these motifs of self-sacrifice, suffering for the people’s cause, and lack of the masses’ support.

The Social Democrats’ newspaper, The Spark (Iskra), edited by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, not coincidentally carried an epigraph from the Decembrist poet Odoevskii, “The flame will flare up from the spark” (Iz iskry vozgoritsia plamia). It publicized literary evenings dedicated to the Decembrists in the years immediately prior to 1905 and discussed the revolt for agitational purposes in leaflets and other materials. Published abroad in Leipzig beginning in December 1900, Iskra was the central ideological organ of the new organization that would