The best monument to the Decembrists is the USSR itself.
—Comrade Cherniak

The Decembrist centennial coincided with the 1905 revolution’s twentieth anniversary, making 1925 a pivotal year for commemorations. Capitalizing on the Decembrists’ and 1905 martyrs’ heroic deeds, the Bolsheviks emphasized their own legitimacy as the last in the long line of Russian revolutionaries. The ritualistic repetition of the recently established genealogy 1825/1905/1917 asserted the regime’s stability despite Lenin’s death in 1924. Once the beginning and end points of 1825 and 1917 had been put forth, locating and confining the pre-communist chaos, the appearance of order could be maintained, while behind the scenes the struggle for power within Party leadership raged. It was in the leadership’s best interests, then, to remind the masses of the Decembrists in all accessible media.

The Decembrists’ inclusion in the Bolshevik revolutionary genealogy was initially contested. Questions immediately arose during the centennial’s organizational meetings whether the Decembrists should be appropriated as predecessors. The intricate process of selecting some revolutionary figures (the Decembrists, Herzen and the People’s Will) and excluding the others (the Socialist Revolutionaries and, for the most part, the Social Democrats) indicates the Decembrist myth’s durability and malleability and demonstrates a conscious manipulation of their image for political purposes. This choice was ultimately determined
by two sometimes conflicting factors: the shape of the myth before the 1920s and the ideological demands of the early 1920s.

The Polemics

Plans for the centennial began in 1919 when a special commission was established to organize the celebration. Although at first it focused on the publication of archival and biographical materials, it also sought to increase the number of publications for the masses. “The history of the Decembrist movement must be popularized widely,” urged the scholar S. Shtraikh, who authored the first articles detailing anniversary plans, and later played a leading role in the Decembrists’ centennial.

In 1923, debates commenced concerning the centennial. M. S. Olminskii, an Old Bolshevik and head of the Commission for the Collection and Study of Materials on the History of the October Revolution and the Party (Istpart, 1920–1928), sparked the polemics with his article “Two anniversaries: 1905 and 1825.” Olminskii noted the overemphasis on the Decembrist centenary compared to the twentieth anniversary of 1905. He opined that the history of the Decembrists was already “chewed over and reiterated” and bemoaned the fact that “the names of the Decembrists who suffered on the gallows, in penal servitude and exile were surrounded by legend.” As he saw it, the 1905 revolution had “wrecked the legends of the batiushka tsar’ and with them the legends about the Decembrists.” Olminskii was dismayed that many good communists had forgotten about 1905 in favor of those defunct legends. Olminskii reminded his readers that the Decembrists were afraid of a popular or military uprising and that many recanted their beliefs during their interrogation and trial. Olminskii concluded: “It is understandable that the 100th anniversary will unite the White Guard, Russian and abroad, but what business is it for the Society of Former Political Prisoners? And to whom did the Petersburg comrades establish a monument, to the noblemen betrayers or to the forgotten and unhappy soldiers made fools by them?”

Olminskii’s article caused a furor. The editors of Worker’s Moscow (Rabochaia Moskva) published it with the disclaimer that they did not necessarily agree with the author and encouraged people to respond to the article. Several articles appeared in Worker’s Moscow, The News (Izvestiia) and Young Guard (Molodaia gvardiia). One response, “Is It Worth Celebrating the One Hundred Year Jubilee of the Decembrist Uprising?,” chastised Olminskii for his “moments of true personal