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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Political reform and national politics : Russian Empire incl. Russia

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In the 1820s and 1830s, a generation of young noblemen, brought up during the relatively liberal first decade of Alexander I's reign and the Napoleonic wars, started to discuss social and political issues in their native Russia, which had just demonstrated its strength in the liberation and re-ordering of Europe. Impressed with the general intellectual ferment of the time, they organised themselves in secret societies modelled along the lines of masonic lodges and the [German *Tugendbund*](#). Freemasonry had spread in the late 18th century but was suppressed after the French Revolution, readmitted only under Alexander I.

Societies like the "Union of Salvation" (1816), which had some 30 members, saw themselves as fora for the study and discussion of the state of affairs in Russia; aspiring to advise the government on the need for reform and change. Among liberal intellectuals, there was widespread disappointment about the tsar's reluctance to offer reforms along the line of the Polish constitution (1816). Young officers in particular were worried by the rising influence of Count A.A. Arakčeev (1769-1834), whose abusive treatment of the army peaked in the broad introduction of the so-called military colonies in 1816, exposing recruits to a double exploitation as servicemen and peasants. Against this backdrop, associations like these took a more secretive form such as the "Union of Philanthropy" (*Sojuz blagodenstvija*, 1818-21), even though the majority of its 200 members still supported efforts of government reform in the hope that reactionary circles at court could be neutralised.

When Alexander, upset by ongoing reformism in the early 1820s elsewhere in Europe, moved towards an anti-liberal stance, the Union of Philanthropy was disbanded by its members (1821) and replaced by two more radical and regional secret societies. The "Southern Society" in Ukraine was led by P.I. Pestel' (1793-1826), S.M. Murav'ev-Apostol' (1796-1826) and M.P. Bestužev-Rumin (1803-26); the "Northern Society" in St Petersburg by N.M. Murav'ev (1792-1863), Prince S P. Trubeckoj (1790-1860) and the poet K.F. Ryleev (1795-1826). Another secret society formed in Kiev by Pjotr Borisov in 1823, "The Society of the [United Slavs](#)", merged in 1825 with the Southern Society. The aim was now to overthrow autocracy by military force and to facilitate more political participation of the educated classes and a gradual liberation of the peasantry. Through the contemporary [Polish underground](#), both societies had loose links to the [Carbonari](#) in Southern Europe.

The unexpected death of Alexander I in November 1825 forced the conspirators into action. As the ostensible heir, Grand Duke Constantine, had renounced claims to the Russian succession, his younger brother Nicholas, who was very unpopular in the army, ascended the throne. The radical wing of the Northern Society, aiming to prevent the oath of loyalty to Nicholas, marched troops onto the Senate square but were defeated after a brief skirmish. The Southern Society's insurrection was suppressed in the early days of January 1826. Nicholas created a special commission which interrogated more than 500 people; 131 were tried before the Supreme Court in St Petersburg, five were hanged in 1826, 121 others banished to Siberia.

This was the Decembrist Uprising. Failure though it was, its afterlife in Russia was enormous: the Decembrists' political discussions and conceptions had been well documented and most leading participants formed part of the educated high nobility which dominated intellectual and literary life in Russia in the 1830s and '40s. Besides Ryleev, poets like V.K. [Kjuhelbeker](#) (Wilhelm Küchelbecker, 1797-1846), F.N. [Glinka](#) (1786-1880) or P.A. [Katenin](#) had been at times active members of the secret societies. Earlier close links of friendship facilitated the creation of martyr-figures venerated among others by [Puškin](#) and [Ševčenko](#).

Due to the close links between the revolutionaries and the empire's elite, the uprising would overshadow the long rule of Nicholas I. Decembrists in Siberian exile became idols of following generations of dissenters. Associational culture, however, which had never enjoyed much room to manoeuvre in Russia, was effectively stifled, intellectual coteries and literary salons remaining under close surveillance. The Stankievič circle in Moscow, where the basic political outlooks of Slavophiles and Westerners took shape

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