THE REIGN OF ALEXANDER I, 1801–25

The book of a brilliant, magnificent reign opened! Victory is inscribed in it: the conquest of Finland, Bessarabia, Persian territories, the defeat of Napoleon and of the armies of twenty nations, the liberation of Moscow, the capture of Paris twice, the annexation to Russia of the Kingdom of Poland. Magnanimity is inscribed in it: the liberation of Europe, the placing of the Bourbons on the thrones of France, Spain, and the Two Sicilies, the Holy Alliance, the spring of Paris. There live of learning pointed to the creation of six universities, an academy, a lyceum. There mercy wrote actions worthy of it: rescue of the unfortunate ones, generous pardon of criminals and even of those who insulted His Majesty. There justice marked the affirmation of the rights of the gentry and the law giving the accused full freedom to defend themselves. All the virtues which ennable man and adorn a true mark in this book the reign of Alexander. How many sovereigns of this earth stood impressive in their power and glory, but were there many who, like him, combined humility with power and goodness to enemies with the victory? Alexander of Greece! Caesar of Rome! your laurels are spattered with blood, ambition unsheathed your sword. Our Alexander triumphed virtuously: he wanted to establish in the world the peace of his own soul.

If, during the two centuries which divide the Russia of Peter the Great from the Bolshevik revolution, there was any period in which the spell of the authoritarian past might have been overcome, the forms of the state liberalized in a constitution, and the course of Russian development merged with the historic currents of the west, it is the earlier part of the reign of Alexander I. Or so, for a moment, one is tempted to think.

ALEXANDER I WAS twenty-three years old when, following the deposition and assassination of his father, Emperor Paul, he ascended the Russian throne. The new monarch’s personality and manner of dealing with other men had thus already been formed, and it is the psychology of the emperor that has fascinated those who became acquainted with him, both his contemporaries and later scholars. Moreover, there seems to be little agreement about Alexander I beyond the assertion that he was “the most complex and most elusive figure among the emperors of Russia.” This unusual sovereign has been called “the enigmatic tsar,” a sphinx, and “crowned Hamlet,” not to mention other similarly mystifying appellations. Strik-
Behind Alexander I's reactions to particular incidents and situations of his life there was, of course, his basic character. Alexander I remains a mystery in the sense that human personality has not been and perhaps cannot be fully explained. Yet his psychological type is not especially uncommon, as psychiatrists, psychologists, and observant laymen attest. The emperor belonged with those exceedingly sensitive, charming, and restless men and women whose lives display a constant irritation, search, and disappointment. They lack balance, consistency, and firmness of purpose. They are contradictory. Alexander I's inability to come to terms with himself and pursue a steady course explains his actions much better, on the whole, than do allegations of cynicism or Machiavellianism. As is characteristic for the type, personal problems grew with the passage of time: the emperor became more and more irritable, tired, and suspicious of people, more dissatisfied with life, more frantically in search of a religious or mystical answer; he even lost some of his proverbial charm. The autocrat died in 1825, only forty-eight years old. However, as if to continue the mystery of Alexander I, some specialists insist that he did not die, but escaped from the throne to live in Siberia as a saintly hermit Theodore, or Fedor, Kazinich. Based on such circumstantial evidence as the emperor's constant longing to shed the burdens of his office, and a court physician's refusal to sign the death warrant, this supposition needs further proof, although it cannot be entirely dismissed. Suicide might offer another explanation for a certain strangeness and confusion associated with the sovereign's death.

Liberals and Reform

The Russians rejoiced at the accession of Alexander I. In place of an exacting and unpredictable tyrant, Paul, they obtained a young ruler of supreme charm and apparently enormous promise. Alexander I seemed to represent the best of the Enlightenment — that humaneness, progressiveness, affirmation of human dignity, and freedom, which educated Russians, in one way or another, fervently desired. The new emperor's first acts confirmed the expectations. An amnesty restored to their former positions up to twelve thousand men dismissed by Paul; the obnoxious restrictions on travel abroad and on the entry into Russia of foreigners as well as of foreign books and periodicals were abrogated; the censorship was relaxed, and private publishing houses were again allowed to open; torture in investigation was abolished; and the charters granted by Catherine the Great to the gentry and to towns regained their full force. But, of course, these welcome measures marked at best only the beginning of a liberal program. The key issues to be faced included serfdom and autocracy, together with the general backwardness of the country and the inadequacy and corruption of its administrative apparatus. In contrast to Catherine the Great and Paul, Alexander I brought these problems up for consideration, although, as we shall see, the tangible results of his efforts proved to be slight. The reign of Alexander I contained two liberal periods, from 1801 to 1805 and from 1807 to 1812, each, incidentally, followed by war with France.

The first period of reform, following immediately upon Alexander I's acquisition of the crown, was the most far-ranging in purpose and the most hopeful. The new emperor decided to transform Russia with the help of four young, cultivated, intelligent, and liberal friends, the so-called Unofficial Committee. The members of the committee, Nicholas Novosiltsev, Count Paul Stroganov, Count Victor Kochubey, and a Polish patriot Prince Adam Czartoryski, reflected the enlightened opinion of the period, ranging from Anglophilism to Jacobin connections. While they could not be classified as radicals or hotheads, the four did represent a new departure after Paul's administration. The emperor spoke of them jokingly as his "Commune of Public Safety," a reference to the French Revolution which would have made his predecessor shudder. He met with the committee informally and frequently, often daily over coffee.

Our information about the work of the Unofficial Committee — which includes Sinyavsky's notes on the meetings — suggests that at first Alexander I intended to abolish serfdom and serfdom. However, the dangers and difficulties associated with these issues, as well as the unpreparedness for reform of the administration and the mass of people, quickly became apparent. Serfdom represented, so to speak, the greatest single interest in the empire, and its repeal was bound to affect the entire Russian society, in particular the extremely important gentry class. As to autocracy, the emperor himself, although at one time he had spoken of a republic, hesitated in practice to accept any diminution of his authority. Characteristically, he became disillusioned and impatient with the proceedings and called the Unofficial Committee together less and less frequently. The war of 1805 marked the conclusion of its activities. Russia, thus, went unprepared and unformed. Even more limited projects such as the proclaimation of a Russian charter of rights failed to be translated into practice.

Although the grand scheme of reform failed, the first years of Alexander's reign witnessed the enactment of some important specific measures. For example, the Senate was restored, or perhaps promoted, to a very high position in the state: it was to be the supreme judicial and administrative institution in the empire, and its decrees were to carry the authority of those of the sovereign, who alone could stop their execution. Peter the Great's colleges, which had a checkered and generally unhappy history in the eighteenth century, were gradually replaced in 1802 and subsequent years by ministries, with a single minister in charge of each. At first there were eight: the ministries of war, navy, foreign affairs, justice, interior, finance,
commerce, and education. Later the ministry of commerce was abolished, and the ministry of police appeared.

The government even undertook some limited social legislation. In 1801 the right to own estates was extended from the gentry to other free Russians. In 1803 the so-called "law concerning the free agriculturists" went into effect. It provided for voluntary emancipation of the serfs by their masters, assuring that the emancipated serfs would be given land and establishing regulations and courts to secure the observance of all provisions. The newly emancipated serfs were to receive in many respects the status of state peasants, but, by contrast with the latter, they were to enjoy stronger property rights and exemption from certain obligations. Few landlords, however, proved eager to free their peasants. To be more exact, under the provisions of the law concerning the free agriculturists from the time of its enactment until its suspension more than half a century later on the eve of "the great reforms," 384 masters emancipated 115,734 working male serfs together with their families. It may be added that Drushinin and other Soviet scholars have disproved the frequently made assertion that Alexander I gave no state peasants, with state lands, into private ownership and serfdom.

Russian backwardness and ignorance became strikingly apparent to the monarch and his Unofficial Committee as they examined the condition of the country. Education, therefore, received a high priority in the official plans and activities of the first years of the reign. Fortunately too this effort did not present quite the dangers and obstacles that were associated with the issues of serfdom and autocracy. Spending large sums of money on education for the first time in Russian history, Alexander I founded several universities to add to the University of Moscow, forty-two secondary schools, and considerable numbers of other schools. While education in general during the first half of the nineteenth century will be discussed in a later chapter, it should be noted here that Alexander I's establishment of institutions of learning and his entire school policy were distinctly liberal for his time. Indeed, they have been called the best fruits of the monarch's usually hesitant and brittle liberalism.

The second period of reform in Alexander I's reign, 1807-12, corresponded to the French alliance and was dominated by the emperor's most remarkable assistant, Michael Speransky. Speransky, who lived from 1772 to 1839, was fully a self-made man. In contrast to the members of the Unofficial Committee as well as to most other associates of the sovereign, he came not from the aristocracy but from poor village clergy. It was Speransky's intelligence, ability to work, and outstanding administrative capacity that made him for a time Alexander I's prime minister in fact, if not in name, for no such formal office then existed. As most specialists on Speransky believe, that unusual statesman sought to establish in Russia strong monarchy firmly based on law and legal procedure, and thus free from arbitrariness, corruption, and confusion. In other words, Speransky found his inspiration in the vision of a Rechtstaat, not in advanced liberal or radical schemes. Still, Raife, the latest major author on the subject, goes too far when he denies that the Russian statesman was at all liberal. In Russian conditions Speransky's views were certainly liberal, as his contemporaries fully realized. Furthermore, they could have been developed more liberally, if the opportunities had presented themselves.

In 1809, at the emperor's request, Speransky submitted to him a thorough proposal for a constitution. In his customary methodical manner, the statesman divided the Russians into three categories: the gentry; people of "the middle condition," that is, merchants, artisans, and peasants or other small proprietors who owned property of a certain value; and, finally, working people, including serfs, servants, and apprentices. The plan also postulated three kinds of rights: general civil rights; special civil rights, such as exemption from service; and political rights, which depended on a property qualification. The members of the gentry were to enjoy all the rights. Those belonging to the middle group received general civil rights and political rights when they could meet the property requirement. The working people too obtained general civil rights, but they clearly did not own enough to participate in politics. Russia was to be reorganized on four administrative levels: the Volost — a small unit sometimes translated as "custom" or "township" — the district, the province, and the country at large. On each level there were to be the following institutions: legislative assemblies — or dumy — culminating in the state duma for all of Russia; a system of courts, with the Senate at the apex; and administrative boards, leading eventually to the ministries and the central executive power. The state duma, the most intriguing part of Speransky's system, showed the statesman's caution, for in addition to the property restriction imposed on its electorate, it depended on a sequence of indirect elections. The assemblies of the volosts elected the district assemblymen, who elected the provincial assemblymen, who elected the members of the state duma, or national assembly. Also the activities of the state duma were apparently to be rather narrowly restricted. But, on the other hand, the state duma did provide for popular participation in the legislative process. That, together with Speransky's insistence on the division of functions, strict legality, and certain other provisions such as the popular election of judges, if successfully applied, would have in time transformed Russia. Indeed, it has been observed that Speransky's fourfold proposal of local self-government and a national legislative assembly represented a forinted outline of the Russian future. Only that future took extremely long to materialize, offering — in the opinion of many specialists — a classic example of too little and too late. Thus Russia received district and provincial self-government
by the so-called zemstvo reform of 1864, a national legislature, the Duma, in 1905–06, and volost self-government in 1917.

In 1809 and the years following, Alexander I failed to implement Speransky's proposal. The statesman's fall from power in 1812 resulted from the opposition of officialdom and the gentry evoked by his measures and projects in administration and finance, from the emperor's fears, suspicions, and vacillations, and also from the break with Napoleon, Speransky having been branded a Francophile. Although Speransky was later to return to public office and accomplish further useful and important work, he never again had the opportunity to suggest fundamental reforms on the scale of his plan of 1809. The second liberal period of Alexander I's reign, then, like the first, produced no basic changes in Russia.

Yet, again like the first, the second liberal period led to some significant legislation of a more limited nature. In 1810, on the advice of Speransky — actually this was the only part of the statesman's plan that the monarch translated into practice — Alexander I created the Council of State modeled after Napoleon's Conseil d'État, with Speransky attached to it as the Secretary of State. This body of experts appointed by the sovereign to help him with the legislative work in no way limited the principle of autocracy; moreover, the Council tended to be extremely conservative. Still, it clearly reflected the emphasis on legality, competence, and correct procedure so dear to Speransky. And, as has been noted for the subsequent history of the Russian Empire, whereas "all the principal reforms were passed by regular procedure through the Council of State, nearly all the most harmful and most mischievous acts of succeeding governments were, where possible, withdrawn from its competence and passed only as executive regulations which were nominally temporary." Speransky also reorganized the ministries and added two special agencies to the executive, one for the supervision of government finance, the other for the development of transport. A system of annual budgets was instituted, and other financial measures were proposed and in part adopted. Perhaps still more importantly, Speransky did yeoman's service in strengthening Russian bureaucracy by introducing something in the nature of a civil service examination and trying in other ways to emphasize merit and efficient organization.

Speransky's constitutional reform project represented the most outstanding but not the only such plan to come out of government circles in the reign of Alexander I. One other should be noted here, that of Novosiltsev. Novosiltsev's Constitutional Charter of the Russian Empire emphasized very heavily the position and authority of the sovereign and bore strong resemblance to Speransky's scheme in its stress on legality and rights and its narrowly based and weak legislative assembly. Novosiltsev differed, however, from Speransky's rigorous centralism in allowing something to the federal principle: he wanted the Russian Empire, including Finland and

Russian Poland, to be divided into twelve large groups of provinces which were to enjoy a certain autonomy. The date of Novosiltsev's project deserves attention: its second and definitive version was presented to Alexander I in 1820, late in his reign. Furthermore, the monarch not only graciously accepted the plan, but — it has been argued — proceeded to implement it in small part. Namely, by combining several provinces, he created as a model one of the twelve units proposed by Novosiltsev. Only after Alexander I's death in 1825 was Novosiltsev's scheme completely abandoned, and the old system of administration re-established in the experimental provinces. The story of Novosiltsev's Charter, together with certain other developments, introduces qualifications into the usual sharp division of Alexander I's reign into the liberal first half and the reactionary second half, and suggests that a constitution remained a possible alternative for Russia as long as "the enigmatic tsar" presided over its destinies.

Russian Foreign Policy, 1801–12

While the first part of Alexander's rule witnessed some significant developments in internal affairs, it was the emperor's foreign policy that came to occupy the center of the stage. Diplomacy and war in the early years of Alexander I's reign culminated in the cataclysmic events of 1812.

At the beginning of Alexander's reign, peaceful intentions prevailed. After succeeding Paul, who had both fought France and later joined it against Great Britain, the new emperor proclaimed a policy of neutrality. Yet Russia could not long stay out of conflicts raging in Europe. A variety of factors, ranging from the vast and exposed Western frontier of the empire to the psychological involvement of the Russian government and educated public in European affairs, determined Russian participation in the struggle. Not surprisingly, Alexander I joined the opponents of France. Economic ties with Great Britain, and traditional Russian friendship with Austria and Great Britain, together with the equally traditional hostility to France, contributed to the decision. Furthermore, Alexander I apparently came early to consider Napoleon as a menace to Europe, all the more so because the Russian sovereign had his own vision of a new European order. An outline of the subsequent Holy Alliance and concert of Europe, without the religious coloration, can be found in the instructions issued in 1804 to the Russian envoy in Great Britain.

The War of the Third Coalition broke out in 1805 when Austria, Russia, and Sweden joined Great Britain against France and its ally, Spain. The combined Austrian and Russian armies suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Napoleon on December 2, 1805, at Austerlitz. Although Austria was knocked out of the war, the Russians continued to fight and in 1806 even obtained a new ally, Prussia. But the French armies, in a
nineteenth-century version of the "Blitzkrieg" promptly destroyed the Russian forces in the battles of Jena and Auerstädt, and, although they could not destroy the Russians, finally succeeded in inflicting a major defeat on them at Friedland. The treaties of Tilsit between France and Russia and France and Prussia followed early in July 1807. The Franco-Prussian settlement reduced Prussia to a second-rate power, saved from complete destruction by the insistence of the Russian sovereign. The agreement between France and Russia was a different matter, for, although Alexander I had to accept Napoleon's redrawing of the map of Europe and even had to support him, notably against Great Britain, Russia emerged as the hegemon of much of eastern Europe and the only major power on the continent other than France.

It was the temporary settlement with France that allowed the Russians to fight several other opponents and expand the boundaries of the empire in the first half of Alexander's reign. In 1801 the eastern part of Georgia, an ancient Orthodox country in Transcaucasia, joined Russia, and Russian sway was extended to western Georgia in 1803-10. Hard-pressed by their powerful Muslim neighbors, the Persians and the Turks, the Georgians had repeatedly asked and occasionally received Russian aid. The annexation of Georgia to Russia thus represented in a sense the culmination of a process, and a logical, if by no means ideal, choice for the little Christian nation. It also marked the permanent establishment of Russian authority and power beyond the great Caucasian mountain range.

As expected, the annexation of Georgia by Russia led to a Russo-Persian war, fought from 1804 to 1813. The Russians proved victorious, and by the Treaty of Gulistan Persia had to recognize Russian rule in Georgia and cede to its northern neighbor the areas of Dagestan and Shemakha in the Caucasus. The annexation of Georgia also served as one of the causes of the Russo-Turkish war which lasted from 1806 to 1812. Again, Russian troops, this time led by Kutuzov, scored a number of successes. The Treaty of Bucharest, hastily concluded by Kutuzov on the eve of Napoleon's invasion of Russia, added Bessarabia and a strip on the eastern coast of the Black Sea to the empire of the Romanovs, and also granted Russia extensive rights in the Danubian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. Finally, in 1808-09 Alexander I fought and defeated Sweden, with the result that the Peace of Fredrikshamm gave Finland to Russia. Finland became an autonomous grand duchy with the Russian emperor as its grand duke.

The first half of Alexander's reign also witnessed a continuation of Russian expansion in North America, which had started in Alaska in the late eighteenth century. New forts were built not only in Alaska but also in northern California, where Fort Ross was erected in 1812.
1812

The days of the Russian alliance with Napoleon were numbered. The agreement that the two emperors reached in Tilsit in 1807, and which was renewed at their meeting in Erfurt in 1808, failed in the long run to satisfy either side. The Russians, who were forced to accept it because of their military defeat, resented Napoleon's domination of the continent, his disregard of Russian interests, and, in particular, the obligation to participate in the so-called continental blockade. That blockade, meant to eliminate all commerce between Great Britain and other European countries and to strangle the British economy, actually helped Russian manufactures, especially in the textile industry, by excluding British competition. But it did hurt Russian exporters and thus the powerful landlord class. Russian military reverses at the hands of the French cried for revenge, especially because they came after a century of almost uninterrupted Russian victories. Also, Napoleon, who had emerged from the fearful French Revolution, who had upset the legitimate order in Europe on an unprecedented scale, and who had even been denounced as Antichrist in some Russian propaganda to the masses, appeared to be a peculiar and undesirable ally. Napoleon and his lieutenants, on their part, came to regard Russia as an utterly unreliable partner and indeed as the last major obstacle to their complete domination of the continent.

Cries and tensions multiplied. The French protested the Russian perfidy, and in fact feigned, participation in Napoleon's war against Austria in 1809, and Alexander I's failure, from 1810 on, to observe the continental blockade. The Russians expressed bitterness over the development of an active French policy in the Near East and over Napoleon's efforts to curb rather than support the Russian position and aims in the Balkans and the Near East: the French opposed Russian control of the Danubian principalities, objected to Russian bases in the eastern Mediterranean, and would not let the Russians have a free hand in regard to Constantinople and the Straits. Napoleon's political rearrangement of central and eastern Europe also provoked Russian hostility. Notably his deposing the Duke of Oldenburg and annexing the duchy to France, a part of the rearrangement in Germany, offended the Russian sovereign who was a close relative of the duke. Still more ominously for Russia, in 1809 after the French victory over Austria and the Treaty of Schönbrunn, West Galicia was added to the Duchy of Warsaw, a state created by Napoleon from Prussian Poland. This change appeared to threaten in turn the hold of Russia on the vast lands that it had acquired in the partitions of Poland. Even Napoleon's marriage to Marie Louise of Austria added to the tension between Russia and France, because it marked the French emperor's
Napoleon a major battle on the seventh of September near the village of Borodino, seventy-five miles from the great Russian city. The battle of Borodino had few equals in history for the severity of the fighting. Although it lasted but a single day, the Russians suffered 42,000 casualties out of 112,000 combatants, the French and their allies 58,000 out of 130,000. The casualties included scores of generals and thousands of officers, with Prince Bagration and other prominent commanders among the dead or fatally wounded. By nightfall the Russians in the center and on the left flank had been forced to retreat slightly, while they held fast on the right. Kutuzov, however, decided to disengage and to withdraw south of Moscow. On the fourteenth of September Napoleon entered the Kremlin.

His expectations of final victory and peace were cruelly deceived. In a rare demonstration of tenacity, Alexander I refused even to consider peace as long as a single French soldier remained on Russian soil, and the country backed its monarch. Far from providing sumptuous accommodations for the French emperor and his army, Moscow, still constructed largely of wood, burned down during the first days of the French occupation. It is possible that Count Theodore Rostopchin, the Russian governor and military commander of the city, deliberately started the conflagration— as most French and some Russian specialists assert—but this remains a disputed issue. Unable to obtain peace from Alexander and largely isolated in the Russian wasteland, Napoleon had to retreat before the onset of winter. The return march of the Grande Armée, which started on October 19, gradually became a rout. To begin with, the action of the Russian army at Malojaroslavets prevented the French from taking a new road through fertile areas untouched by war and forced them to leave the way they had come. As Napoleon's soldiers marched slowly westward, winter descended upon them and they were constantly pressed by the pursuing Russian forces— although Kutuzov chose to avoid a major engagement—and harassed by cossacks and other irregulars, including peasant guerrillas. The French and their allies perished in droves, and their discipline began to break down. Late in November, as the remnants of the Grande Armée crossed the Berezina River, they were lucky to escape capture through the mistake of a Russian commander. From 30,000 to 50,000 men, out of the total force of perhaps 600,000, finally struggled out of Russia. By the end of the year no foreign soldiers, except prisoners, remained in the country.

The epic of 1812 became a favorite subject for many Russian historians, writers, and publicists, and for some scholars in other lands. Leo Tolstoy's peerless War and Peace stands out as the most remarkable, albeit fictionalized, description of the events and human experiences of that catastrophic year. Other treatments of the subject range from an excellent seven-volume history to some of the best-known poems in Russian literature. While we cannot discuss the poets here, certain conclusions of the historians deserve notice. For example, it has been established that the Russian high command had no overall "Scythian policy" of retreat with the intention of enticing Napoleon's army deep into a devastated country. The French advance resulted rather from Russian inability to stop the invader and from Napoleon's determination to seize Moscow, which he considered essential for victory. The catastrophic French defeat can be ascribed to a number of factors: the fighting spirit of the Russian army, Kutuzov's wise decisions, Napoleon's crucial mistakes, Alexander's determination to continue the war, the winter, and others. But the breakdown of the transportation and supply of the Grande Armée should rank high among the reasons for its collapse. More soldiers of Napoleon died from hunger and epidemics than from cold, for the supply services, handicapped by enormous distances, insecure lines of communication, and bad planning, failed on the whole to sustain the military effort. Finally, it is worth noting that the war of 1812 deserves its reputation in Russian history as a popular, patriotic war. Except for certain small court circles, no defeatism appeared in the midst of the Russian government, educated public, or people. Moreover, the Russian peasants not only fought heroically in the ranks of the regular army but also banded into guerrilla detachments to attack the enemy on their own, an activity unparalleled at the time except in Spain. In fact, as the revising of Tarle's study of the war of 1812 and other works indicate, Soviet historians, while they had once neglected it, later even tended to overstate the role of the Russian people in the defeat of the French invaders.

Russian Foreign Policy, 1812–25

Alexander I continued the war beyond the boundaries of Russia. Prussia and several months later Austria switched sides to join Russia, Sweden, and Great Britain. The combined forces of Austria, Prussia, and Russia finally scored a decisive victory over Napoleon in the tremendous Battle of Leipzig, known as the "Battle of the Nations," fought from the sixteenth through the nineteenth of October, 1813. Late that year they began to cross the Rhine and invade France. After more desperate fighting and in spite of another display of the French emperor's military genius, the allies entered Paris triumphantly on March 31, 1814. Alexander I referred to that day as the happiest of his life. Napoleon had to abdicate unconditionally and retire to the island of Elba. He returned on March 1, 1815, rapidly won back the French throne, and threatened the allies until his final defeat at Waterloo on the eighteenth of June. The events of the "Hundreds Days" moved too quickly for the Russian army to participate in this last
war against Napoleon, although, of course, Alexander I was eager to help his allies.

The French emperor's abortive comeback thus failed to undo the new settlement for Europe drawn by the victors at the Congress of Vienna. The Congress, which lasted from September 1814, until the Act was signed on June 8, 1815, constituted one of the most impressive and important diplomatic gatherings in history. Alexander I himself represented Russia and played a leading role at the Congress together with Metternich of Austria, Castlereagh of Great Britain, Hardenberg of Prussia, and, eventually, Talleyrand of France. It must be assumed that the reader has a general knowledge of the redrawing of the political map of Europe and of the colonial settlement that took place in Vienna; however, certain issues in which Russia had a crucial part must be mentioned here. Alexander I wanted to establish a large kingdom of Poland in personal union with Russia, that is, with himself as king; and, by offering to support the Prussian claim to all of Saxony, he obtained Prussian backing for his scheme. Great Britain and Austria, however, strongly opposed the desires of Russia and Prussia. Talleyrand used this opportunity to bring France prominently back into the diplomatic picture, on the side of Great Britain and Austria. The conflict, in the opinion of some specialists, almost provoked a war. Its resolution — which angered the Russian public who expected “gratitude” for “liberating Europe from Napoleon”— constituted a compromise: Alexander I obtained his Kingdom of Poland, but reduced in size, while Prussia acquired about three-fifths of Saxony. More precisely, the Kingdom of Poland contained most of the former Grand Duchy of Warsaw, with Warsaw itself as its capital, but Prussia regained northwestern Poland, and Austria retained most of its earlier share of the country. Cracow became a free city-state under the joint protection of Russia, Austria, and Prussia. New Poland received a liberal constitution from Alexander I. He thus combined the offices of autocratic Russian emperor, constitutional Finnish grand duch, and constitutional Polish king. It might be added that he also favored constitutionalism in France, where the Bourbons returned to the throne as constitutional, not absolute, monarchs.

Alexander I's elated, mystical, and even messianic mood at the time of the Congress of Vienna — a complex sentiment which the Russian sovereign apparently shared in some measure with many other Europeans in the months and years following the shattering fall of Napoleon, and which found a number of spokesmen, such as Baroness Julie de Krüdener, in the tsar's entourage — expressed itself best in a remarkable and peculiar document known as the Holy Alliance. Signed on September 26, 1815, by Russia, Austria, and Prussia, and subsequently by the great majority of European powers, the alliance simply appealed to Christian rulers to live as brothers and preserve peace in Europe. While the Holy Alliance had deep roots in at least two major Western traditions, Christianity and international law, it had singularly little relevance to the international problems of the moment and provided no machinery for the application or enforcement of Christian brotherhood. Indeed, Castlereagh could well describe it as a piece of sublime mysticism and nonsense, while the pope remarked drily that from time immemorial the papacy had been in possession of Christian truth and needed no new interpretation of it.

But, if the Holy Alliance had no practical consequences, the Quadruple Alliance, and the later Quintuple Alliance with which it came to be confused, did. The Quadruple Alliance represented a continuation of the wartime association of the allies and dated from November 20, 1815. At that time Great Britain, Austria, Russia, and Prussia agreed to maintain the settlement with France — that is, the Second Treaty of Paris, which had followed the “Hundred Days” and has superseded the First Treaty of Paris — and in particular to prevent the return of Napoleon or his dynasty to the French throne. The alliance was to last for twenty years. Moreover, its sixth article provided for periodic consultations among the signatory powers and resulted in the so-called “government by conference,” also known as the Congress System or Confederation of Europe. Conferences took place at Aix-la-Chapelle in 1818, Troppau and Laibach in 1820-21, and Verona in 1822. At Aix-la-Chapelle, with the payment of the indemnity and the withdrawal of allied occupation troops, France shed its status as a defeated nation and joined the other four great European powers in the Quintuple Alliance. The congresses of Troppau and Laibach considered revolutions in Spain and Italy. Finally, the meeting in Verona dealt again with Spain and also with the Greek struggle against the Turks, to which we shall return in the chapter on the reign of Nicholas I.

After an impressive start, highlighted by the harmony and success of the Aix-la-Chapelle meeting, the Congress System failed to work. A fundamental split developed between Great Britain, which, as the British state paper of May 5, 1820, made plain, opposed intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states, and Austria, Prussia, and Russia, who, as the Protocol of Troppau spelled out, were determined to suppress revolution, no matter where it raised its head. France occupied something of an intermediate position, although it did invade Spain to crush the liberal regime there. Metternich tended to dominate the joint policies of the eastern European monarchies, especially in the crucial years of 1820-22 when Alexander I, frightened by a mutiny in the elite Semenovski guard regiment and other events, followed the Austrian chancellor in his eagerness to combat revolution everywhere. The Semenovski uprising, it might be added, really resulted from the conflict between the regiment and its commanding officer, not from any liberal conspiracy.
The reactionary powers succeeded in defeated liberal revolutions on the continent of Europe, except in Greece, where Christians fought their Moslem masters and the complexity of the issues involved upset the usual diplomatic attitudes and alignments. To be sure, these victories of reaction proved to be short-lived, as the subsequent history of Europe in the nineteenth century was to demonstrate. Also, the British navy prevented their possible extension across the seas, thus barring reactionary Spain and its allies from any attempt to subdue the former Spanish colonies in the new world that had won their independence. The Monroe Doctrine, proclaimed on December 2, 1823, and aimed at preventing European intervention on the American continent, represented the response of the United States to the potential threat to the countries of the Western hemisphere posed by the reactionary members of the Confederation of Europe, and also, incidentally, a response to the Russian expansion in North America.

The Congress System has been roundly condemned by many historians as a tool of reaction, both noxious and essentially ineffective in maintaining order and stability in Europe. Yet at least one more positive aspect of that unusual political phenomenon and of Alexander I’s role in it deserves notice. The architects of the Congress System, including the Russian emperor, created what was at its best more than a diplomatic alliance. In the enthusiastic words of a British scholar writing about the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle:

It is clear that at this period the Alliance was looked upon even by British statesmen as something more than a mere union of the Great Powers for preserving peace on the basis of the treaties; and its effect, during its short session the Conference acted, not only as a European representative body, but as a sort of European Supreme Court, which heard appeals and received petitions of all kinds from sovereigns and their subjects alike.

To be sure, this European harmony did not last, and “the Confederation of Europe” seems too ambitious a designation for the alliance following the Congress of Vienna. Yet, if a true Confederation of Europe ever emerges, the Congress System will have to be accepted as its early, in a sense prophetic, predecessor. And it was Alexander I who, more than any other European leader, emphasized the broad construction of the Quadruple and the Quintuple alliances and tried to develop co-operation and unity in Europe. Although Austrian troops intervened in the Italian states and French troops in Spain, the Russian ruler was also eager to contribute his men to enforce the decisions of the powers. In fact, he proposed forming a permanent international army to guarantee the European settlement and
offered his troops for that purpose, but the suggestion was speedily rejected by Castlereagh and Metternich. He also proposed, and again unsuccessfully, disarmament.

The Second Half of Alexander's Reign

While "the emperor of Europe" attended international meetings and occupied himself with the affairs of foreign countries, events in Russia took a turn for the worse. The second half of Alexander's reign, that is, the period after 1812, saw virtually no progressive legislation and few plans in that direction; Novosilov's constitutional project formed a notable exception. In Poland the constitutional regime, impressive on paper, did not function well, largely because Alexander I proved to be a poor constitutional monarch because he quickly became irritated by criticism or opposition and repeatedly disregarded the law. Serfs were emancipated in the Baltic provinces, but, because they were freed without land, the change turned out to be a doubtful blessing for them. Serfdom remained undiminished and unchallenged in Russia proper, although apparently to the last the sovereign considered emancipating the serfs.

While Spiransky was Alexander I's outstanding assistant in the first half of the reign, General Alexis Arakcheev came to occupy that position in the second half — and the difference between the two men tells us much about the course of Russian history in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Arakcheev, once a faithful servant of Emperor Paul and a distinguished specialist in artillery and military matters in general, was brutal, rude, and a martinet of the worst sort. He became Alexander's minister of war and eventually prime minister, without the title, reporting to the sovereign on almost everything of importance in the internal affairs of Russia and enrobed with every kind of responsibility. Yet the rather common image of the evil genius Arakcheev imposing his will on the emperor badly distorts the relationship. In fact, it was precisely the general's unquestioning and prompt execution of Alexander's orders that made him indispensable to the monarch, who was increasingly peremptory and at the same time had lost interest in the complexities of home affairs.

Although Arakcheev left his imprint on many aspects of Russian life during the second half of the reign, his name came to be connected especially with the so-called "military settlements." That project apparently originated with Alexander, but it was executed by Arakcheev. The basic idea of military settlements was suggested perhaps by Turkish practices, a book by a French general, or the wonderful precision and order which reigned on Arakcheev's estates — where, among other regulations, every married woman was commanded to bear a child every year — and it had the appeal of simplicity. The idea was to combine military service with farming and thus reduce drastically the cost of the army and enable men to lead a normal family life. Indeed, in one of their aspects the military settlements could be considered among the emperor's humanitarian endeavors. The reform began in 1810, was interrupted by war, and attained its greatest impetus and scope between 1816 and 1821, with about one-third of the peasant men forming the Russian army established in military settlements. Troubles and uprisings in the settlements, however, checked their growth.

After the rebellion of 1831 Nicholas I turned definitely against the reform, but the last settlements were abolished only much later. Alexander I's and Arakcheev's scheme failed principally because of the extreme regimentation and minue despotism that it entailed, which became unbearable and resulted in revolts and most cruel punishments. In addition — as Pipes has forcefully pointed out — Russian soldiers proved to be very poor material for this venture in state direction and paternalism, resenting even useful sanitory regulations. Arakcheev himself, it may be noted, lost his position with the accession of a new ruler.

Until 1824 two important areas of Russian life, religion and education, remained outside Arakcheev's reach because they formed the domain of another favorite of Alexander's later years, Prince Alexander Golitsyn. Very different from the brutal general, that aristocrat, philanthropist, and president of the important Bible Society in Russia nevertheless had disastrous effects on his country. Like the emperor, Golitsyn was affected by certain mystical and pietistic currents then widespread in Europe — the favorite's eventual fall resulted from allegations of insufficient Orthodoxy. He believed that the Bible contained all essential knowledge and distrusted other kinds of education. It was during Golitsyn's service as minister of education that extreme, aggressive obscurantists, such as Michael Magnitsky and Dmitri Ruthe, purged several universities. Magnitsky in particular made of the University of Kazan a peculiar kind of monastic barracks: he purged the faculty and the library of the pernicious influences of the Age of Reason; flooded the university with Bibles; instituted a most severe discipline among the students, with such support as mutual spying and compulsory attendance at religious services; and proclaimed a double system of chronology, the one already in use and a new one dating from the reform of the university. Magnitsky's fall swiftly followed the change of men, for in a secret report he had accused Emperor Nicholas, then a grand duke, of free thinking!

The Decembrist Movement and Rebellion

Disappointment with the course of Alexander I's reign played an important role in the emergence of the first Russian revolutionary group, which came to be known after its unsuccessful uprising in December 1825 as the Decembrists. Most of the Decembrists were army officers, often from
aristocratic families and elite regiments, who had received a good education, learned French and sometimes other foreign languages, and obtained a first-hand knowledge of the West during and immediately after the campaigns against Napoleon. Essentially the Decembrists were liberals in the tradition of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution; they wanted to establish constitutionalism and basic freedoms in Russia, and to abolish serfdom. More specifically, the Decembrist plans ranged from those of Nikita Muraviev, who advocated a rather conservative constitutional monarchy, to those of Colonel Paul Pestel, the author of the Russian Justice, who favored a strongly centralized republic along Jacobin lines as well as a peculiar land reform program that would divide land into a public and a private sector and guarantee every citizen his allotment within the public sector. While the Decembrists — “our lords who wanted to become shoemakers,” to quote Rostopchin’s ironical remark — included some of the most gifted and prominent Russian youth, and while they enjoyed the sympathy of many educated Russians, including such literary luminaries as Pushkin and Griboedov, they had little social backing for their rebellion. That the standard of liberalism had to be carried in the Russia of Alexander I by aristocratic officers of the guard demonstrates well the weakness of the movement and above all the feebleness and backwardness of the Russian middle class. Russian liberalism in the early nineteenth century resembled Spanish liberalism, not English or French.

At first the liberals who later became Decembrists were eager to cooperate with the government on the road of progress, and their early societies, the Union of Salvation founded in 1816 and the Union of Welfare which replaced it, were concerned with such issues as the development of philanthropy, education, and the civic spirit in Russia rather than with military rebellion. Only gradually, as reaction grew and hopes for a liberal transformation from above faded away, did the more stubborn liberals begin to think seriously of change by force and to talk of revolution and the regicide. The movement acquired two centers, St. Petersburg in the north and Tula, the headquarters of the Second Army in southern Russia. The northern group lacked leadership and accomplished little. In the south, by contrast, Pestel acted with intelligence and determination. The Southern Society grew in numbers, developed its organization, discovered and incorporated the Society of the United Slavs, and established contacts with a Polish revolutionary group. The United Slavs, who pursued aims vaguely similar to those of the Decembrists and had the additional goal of a democratic federation of all Slavic peoples, and who accepted the Decembrist leadership, consisted in particular of poor army officers, more democratic and closer to the soldiers than were the aristocrats from the guard. Yet, when the hour of rebellion suddenly arrived, the

Southern Society, handicapped by Pestel’s arrest, proved to be little better prepared than the Northern.

Alexander I’s unexpected death in southern Russia in December 1825 led to a dynastic crisis, which the Decembrists utilized to make their bid for power. The deceased emperor had no sons or grandsons; therefore Grand Duke Constantine, his oldest brother, was his logical successor. But the heir presumptive had married a Polish aristocrat not of royal blood in 1820, and, in connection with the marriage, had renounced his rights to the throne. Nicholas, the third brother, was thus to become the next ruler of Russia, the entire matter having been stated clearly in 1822 in a special manifesto signed by Alexander I’s signature. The manifesto, however, had remained unpublished, and only a few people had received exact information about it; even the two grand dukes were ignorant of its content. Following Alexander I’s death, Constantine and the Polish kingdom where he was commander-in-chief swore allegiance to Nicholas, but Nicholas, the Russian capital, and the Russian army swore allegiance to Constantine. Constantine acted with perfect consistency. Nicholas, however, even after reading Alexander I’s manifesto, also felt compelled to behave as he did: Alexander I’s decision could be challenged as contrary to Paul’s law of succession and also for remaining unpublished during the emperor’s own reign, and Nicholas was under pressure to step aside in favor of his elder brother, who was generally expected to follow Alexander I on the throne. Only after Constantine’s uncompromising reaffirmation of his position, and a resulting lapse of time, did Nicholas decide to publish Alexander’s manifesto and become emperor of Russia. The entire labyrinthine entanglement of succession has been examined yet again very recently by Academician A. N. Sakharov with some surprising results, such as the involvement of Empress Mother Mary, who wanted power herself.

On December 26, 1825 — December 14, Old Style — when the guard regiments in St. Petersburg were to swear allegiance for the second time within a short while, this time to Nicholas, the Northern Society of the Decembrists staged its rebellion. Realizing that they had a unique chance to act, the conspiring officers used their influence with the soldiers to start a mutiny in several units by entrusting them to defend the rightful interests of Constantine against his usurping brother. Altogether about three thousand mutinous rebels came in military formation to Senate Square in the heart of the capital. Although the government was caught unprepared, the mutineers were soon faced by troops several times their number and strength. The two forces stood opposite each other for several hours. The Decembrists failed to act because of their general confusion and lack of leadership; the new emperor hesitated to start his reign with a massacre of his subjects, hoping that they could be talked into submission.
But, as verbal inducements failed and dusk began to gather on the after-
noon of that northern winter day, artillery was brought into action. Several
canister shots dispersed the rebels, killing sixty or seventy of them. Large-
scale arrests followed. In the south too an uprising was easily suppressed.
Eventually five Decembrist leaders, including Pestel and the firebrand of
the Northern Society, the poet Conrad Ryleev, were executed, while al-
mast three hundred other participants suffered lesser punishment. Nicholas I was firmly in the saddle.

### XXVII

The Reign of Nicholas

Here (in the army) there is order, there is a strict unconditional
legality; no impertinent claims to know all the answers, no con-
tradiction, all things flow logically one from the other; no one
commands before he has himself learned to obey; no one steps in
front of anyone else without lawful reason; everything is subordi-
nated to one definite goal, everything has its purpose. That is why I
feel so well among these people, and why I shall always hold in honor
the calling of a soldier. I consider the entire human life to be merely
service, because everybody serves.

Nicholas I

The most consistent of autocrats.

Riemann

As man and ruler Nicholas I had little in common with his brother
Alexander I. By contrast with his predecessor’s psychological paradoxes,
ambivalence, and vacillation, the new sovereign displayed determination,
singleness of purpose, and an iron will. He also possessed an overwhelming
tense of duty and a great capacity for work. In character, and even in his
striking and powerful appearance, Nicholas I seemed to be the perfect
deep. Appropriately, he always remained an army man, a junior officer at
heart, devoted to his troops, to military exercises, to the parade ground,
down to the last button on a soldier’s uniform — in fact, as emperor he
ordered alterations of the uniforms, even changing the number of but-
tons. And in the same spirit, the autocrat insisted on arranging and order-
ing minutely and precisely everything around him. Engineering, especially
the construction of defences, was Nicholas’s other enduring passion. Even as
a child “whenever he built a summer house, for his nurse or his governess,
out of chairs, earth, or toys, he never forgot to fortify it with guns — for
protection.” Later, specializing in fortresses, he became head of the army
corps of engineers and thus the chief military engineer of his country,
perhaps his most important assignment during the reign of his brother;
still later, as emperor, he staked all on making the entire land an im-
pregnable fortress.

Nicholas’s views fitted his personality to perfection. Born in 1796 and
nineteen years younger than Alexander, the new ruler was brought up, not
in the atmosphere of the late Enlightenment like his brother, but in that
of wars against Napoleon and of reaction. Moreover, Nicholas married a
Prussian princess and established particularly close ties with his wife’s