

HIS 241 Unit 10

Nicholas I and Official Nationality

Remarks by Professor Blois



Nicholas I in color



In black and white with sepia tones

The chaos of the Decembrist Revolt is well-described by Professor Evans in his [Unit 8 remarks](#). It was this short run chaos and the much longer run of disruptive events in Russia associated with the Napoleonic Wars and their aftermath that shaped the character of Nicholas I and of his reign. After his crisis of confidence in December 1825, he quickly stiffened his resolve. He referred to the Decembrists as "*mes amis de quatorze*", employing the French language that was much more often employed at court and among the nobility than the Russian language, hanged the ring leaders, exiled the rest, and promptly got on with one of the most conservative reigns in

Russian history, putting Russian society into what he himself termed "the ice box."

The Russian historian A. E. Presniakov, writing in the 1920s, characterized Nicholaevan Russia as the "apogee of the autocracy", and this tsar has frequently been referred to as the most consistent of Russian autocrats. Unlike his deceased brother, Alexander I, Nicholas had an iron will (notwithstanding his indecisiveness prior to assuming power), a strong sense of duty, and an unflagging capacity for work.

"Official Nationality" defined Nicholas' social philosophy. Introduced in the early 1830s, this reaffirmation of the values inherent in orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality constituted an attempt to freeze Russia into a mold from which she was already emerging. Above all other things, Nicholas admired order. Having come to maturity in so chaotic an age, perhaps this is understandable. In his conscious effort to build a "beautiful autocracy," the quest for order became tangible in the notorious Third Section, Russia's first true political police.

Our textbook author, Nicholas Riasanovsky, one of the preeminent authorities on Nicholas' reign, succinctly describes Nicholas' handling of the serf problem by saying that he was "determined to preserve autocracy, afraid to abolish serfdom, and suspicious of all independent initiative and popular participation." Personally, Nicholas disliked the serf system, seeing in it the dangers of a new Pugachev uprising. There was, in fact, a great upsurge of peasant uneasiness and disturbances during his reign (something that Soviet historians delighted in meticulously detailing in a series of thick collections of documents), and on at least one occasion Nicholas personally confronted a peasant mob, which he managed to peacefully disperse. Yet Nicholas feared the insurrectionary possibilities of emancipation more than a serf revolt. The interplay of his apprehensions forced the tsar into a position

where, despite recognizing serfdom as “an evil, palpable and obvious to everyone,” he swore not to abolish it.

Stopping short of emancipation, Nicholas did achieve more than any of his predecessors to ameliorate the harsh conditions of serfdom. Because of his distrust of popular initiative, reinforced by his experience with the Decembrists, Nicholas formed a series of secret committees to consider the serf question. Between 1826 and 1848, a succession of ten such committees met intermittently. Measures enacted as a result of these meetings included bans on the break-up of serf families, prevention of the sale of landless serfs, and establishment of village courts where, in many cases, serfs were able to handle their own legal affairs. For the first time, serfs were granted the right to own movable property. Some provisions for conditional emancipation were established, though rarely used. The Kiselev reforms for the state peasants, who comprised over forty percent of the Russian population, aimed at a general improvement of their conditions.

The last secret committee was disbanded by Nicholas when the European revolutions of 1848 turned the tsar against all consideration of reform. By then, however, he had done much to create the pathway to a transitional state between serfdom and complete emancipation, as well as to train his son and heir (the future Alexander II) for the eventual and inevitable emancipation of the serfs.

At age 20, the young Nicholas had been put in charge of disciplining and re-acculturating the veterans returning from France following the Napoleonic Wars and occupation of Paris by the Russian army. For this he was roundly disliked, if not hated, by a generation that had seen western Europe with their own eyes and could readily juxtapose a progressive Europe which they had liberated with a backward, oppressive Russia. Nicholas’ secret committees on the serf question, some years later, were invisible to Russian

society, so this important step toward a social and economic loosening was not apparent to those who condemned Nicholas in the strongest terms.

Alexander Herzen, called the father of Russian socialism, lived through the entirety of Nicholas' reign and referred to it as a period of outer slavery and inner emancipation, as well as "a thirty year lie." The poet Pushkin, whom Nicholas personally edited and censored—in one of history's most ironic cases of micromanagement—wrote that the emperor displayed his "flair and drive" when he "strung up five" of the Decembrist leaders, a group with whom Pushkin was not only in close philosophic alignment but also well acquainted. The relationship between Nicholas and Pushkin was nothing if not strange (each seems to have had "eyes" for the other's wife), and rumor has it that the tsar may have facilitated the duel in which Pushkin was mortally wounded, while defending his wife's somewhat questionable honor. A final, caustic judgment on Nicholas was pronounced a hundred years later by the novelist (*Lolita*) and translator of Pushkin's masterpiece *Eugene Onegin*, Vladimir Nabokov—"a bland, philandering tsar, an ignoramus and a cad, whose entire reign was not worth a single foot of Pushkin's verse."