

ALEXANDER THE SPHINX

There was something quite strange about the character of Alexander which gave rise to a host of weird stories. There is the legend, for instance, that he died as a holy hermit in 1864 in Siberia. Paleologue, the French ambassador even said that Alexander made his way to Palestine in the yacht of an English peer. Metternich, the great Austrian statesman, said that whenever you were dealing with Alexander you knew that something would be missing, the uncertainty was that you never knew just what.

There was deep dissimulation in Alexander and he was highly suggestible, full of contradictions. He advocated the rights of man and he practiced absolutism. He was enigmatic, a sphinx. He revealed the influence of his liberal childhood teacher, the Swiss pedagogue le Harpe and he revealed the authoritarian tendencies imbibed in his childhood experience at his father's military camp in Gatchina.

He picked advisors like Speransky who wanted to institute liberal reforms and he also appointed Arakcheev who established military colonies. He connived at the murder of tsar Paul in 1801 and he was a convert to mysticism, a fad of his time. He had an unusual attachment to his sister Catherine that went beyond filial affection. He imbibed liberal ideas from western Europe quite superficially. They were half-baked by the time they came out of his mouth. He also averred that ideas were dangerous because they raised false hopes and created frustrations. The military colonies he established at the end of his reign were a sinister experiment in human manipulation.

During the year 1812, when Napoleon invaded Russia, Alexander underwent something he called a religious "conversion." There was a morbid religiosity deep in his soul which had been promoted by Koshelev and Golitsin, the procurator of the Holy Synod. Koshelev had contacts with Swedenborg, the founder of a weird cult that came to be known as Swedenborgianism. These people believed in self-expression through absorption in the deity. Alexander was also influence by the mystical teachings of Free Masonry, and the ideas of and Jung-Stillig.

He promoted the founding of the Russian Bible Society and he had contact with the Quakers. There was a strange relationship with the Baroness de Krüdener, another mystic who was said to have been the real authoress of the Holy Alliance. He also had contact with Madame Tatarinov, who thought that dancing stimulated religious emotion. As a result of all these associations Alexander developed a passion to rebuild the post-Napoleonic world on moral principles. He thought himself the instrument of providence in this ultimate aim. The Holy Alliance, simply a reactionary association of conservative monarchs eager to keep things as they are, was the only concrete result of this passion.

Social and Political Reforms

Alexander had the reputation of being a liberal. His early legislative measures were indeed enlightened. He declared an amnesty for political prisoners. He liberalized trade with other countries. He softened the harsh penal procedures in Russia. He even allowed travel abroad for Russians and the sale of foreign publications in Russia. He abolished the infamous security police of his predecessors.

Officially he promised a new government under law.

The so-called "Non-Official Committee, made up of Stroganov, Novosiltsev, Czartoryski, and Kochubey, were to plan the long-range constitutional transformation of Russia. Unfortunately this committee had no real standing in law and its deliberations were confused to say the least. It left little imprint on the governmental structure and on society as a whole. Only two administrative reforms came out of its discussions: ministries were substituted for the old colleges and an attempt was made to define the powers of the Senate with greater precision. But the collegial system was no longer quite functional and the Senate went on as had from the days of Peter the Great who invented it. Preparations for war against Napoleon (in the third coalition) dimmed whatever zest for reform there may have been at the start of Alexander's reign. By 1807 the old security police had been reintroduced.

Russia's defeats of 1805–1807 turned Alexander to reforms once more. Between 1809 and 1812 Alexander's advisor Speransky exerted considerable influence for reform. He drafted a constitution which contained trenchant criticism of the status quo and advocated a monarchy and government by law – a kind of constitutional monarchy as in Britain. While he suggested separation of the powers of legislature, judiciary and administration, all three were to emanate from the crown. This appeared to be somewhat reactionary at the time. The franchise too was to be subject to property qualifications and election to a Duma was to be indirect involving a four-stage process. Speransky did not call for immediate emancipation of the serfs, although he favored eventual abolition of serfdom as basic to his reform. He also wanted the franchise to be broadened in the long haul. Some experts believe this reform was ahead of the French imperial constitutions introduced by Napoleon.

The problem was that Alexander never put Speransky's constitution into effect, with two minor exceptions: he established a state council and he reorganized the ministries to make them more efficient. The Council ended being a purely advisory assembly since Alexander rejected the idea of genuine legislature. The members of the Council were appointed and its decisions were not binding on the crown. Yet this provision was the first in Russia to make a distinction between imperial decree and actual law. The Council was modified in 1906 and remained in effect until the Revolution of 1917, although it did not turn out to be an effective check against the overwhelming power of the crown. Yet the Council was an important step forward and an important element in Speransky's legacy.

Certain measures enacted in 1810–1811 brought fundamental change to the executive departments of government. Personal responsibility was imposed on ministers and the functions of executive departments were carefully delimited. Unwarranted interference with legislative and judicial functions was eliminated. Comprehensive rules were enacted for the administration of the ministries. While Speransky's attempt to reform the judiciary failed, his administrative reforms, which modernized the whole bureaucratic machine, remained in effect until 1917. Some suggest that this was the most important part of Speransky's long-range legacy.

Peter's antiquated table of ranks was abolished in the sense that court appointments no longer were entered in rank with its respective honors and prestige attached to each rank. Examinations and a university degree was now required for ministerial appointments. This particular provision greatly improved the level of the civil service. It was very unpopular with the old hands in the bureaucracy.

Speransky's financial reforms were also unpopular. His introduction of an emergency progressive tax on landed estates (1812) was in fact quite revolutionary for its time. Yet it failed to stop the depreciation of the ruble which continued throughout the nineteenth century. It is interesting to note that it was precisely these daring infringements on the landowning class which brought the downfall of Speransky. Alexander's conservative advisor Arakcheev opposed them. Since Speransky's work was done in secret, it was easy to undermine him. A cabal made up of Arakcheev, Karamzin and the grand duchess Catherine, did exactly that by picturing Speransky as somehow unpatriotic.

They themselves were extremely anti-French in their outlook. More important perhaps was the contradiction between Speransky's precise mind and the vague notions of Alexander himself. With Napoleon on the doorstep, Alexander's liberalism faltered and Speransky was sent into exile. In exile even Speransky turned more conservative. Yet his efforts were the only and the last attempts to bring constitutional reform to tsarist Russia. Alexander, meanwhile became more religious and sought to bring internal order to Russia by suppressing revolutionary movements.

We have here a striking contrast between Alexander's craving for the rule of law and his later arbitrary conduct of the administration. Secrecy pervaded all the government did. There was a great distance between the government and the people. Force and violence had a heyday.

Territorial Acquisitions

The expansionist drive of Russia continued under Alexander I. When Russia made a kind of peace with Napoleon at Tilsit (1807?) and Sweden stuck to her British alliance, Alexander felt free to invade and occupy Finland in 1808. Napoleon at this time in fact encouraged latent Russian desire to take Finland. There was some guerrilla warfare however. The Finns as the Russians were to discover later are to conquer. Then in 1809 Russian general Barclay de Tolly was sent in to occupy the Aland Islands for good measure. And in the same year a slice of eastern Galicia was added to Russia by a treaty with Austria, although Austria took it back in 1815.

Meanwhile, Alexander conducted a new war with Turkey which lasted from 1806 to 1812. When Russia gave up her claim to Moldavia and Wallachia – the perpetual problems of the infamous principalities – it furthered the making of a peace treaty at Bucharest. Tilsit had stipulated that France was to make common cause with Russia against the Turks if the latter resisted mediation by France. In the Erfurt Convention of 1808 an offer of peace was made to Great Britain if she would recognize the new order of France in Spain and Russian annexation of Finland, Moldavia and Wallachia. These aims were not entirely confirmed in the Treaty of Bucharest, but half a loaf was better than none.

Alexander also conducted a war with Persia for territory in the Caucasus (1804-1813). With the aid of Britain the Peace of Gulistan was finally signed in 1813. Russia got a piece of the Caucasus and permission to keep a fleet on the Caspian Sea, with some territory between the Black Sea and the Caspian. It seems strange that Russia had to fight for terrain which today seems to us to be intrinsically Russian. British help in these efforts was certainly encouraged by the overall struggle against Napoleon.

Let us skip over the invasion of Russia by Napoleon for the moment to finish this summary of Russian expansion. This brings us to the eternal question of Poland. Frederick William of Prussia had already abandoned large sections of Prussian Poland in the Treaty of Kalish in 1813. In the Treaty of Reichenbach in the same year Prussia, Austria, and Russia had agreed to partition the Duchy of Warsaw Napoleon had created for his Polish mistress. But at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 the Polish question created a big fuss. Alexander demanded all of Warsaw in exchange for Saxony which Prussia could annex. Both Britain and Austria opposed Alexander. It got so tense that Talleyrand resorted to the conclusion of a secret military alliance against Russia including Britain, Austria and France. Nevertheless the greater part of the duchy of Warsaw went to Russia and this enlarged Russian Poland was to become a constitutional kingdom with Alexander as king.

There is one further footnote that needs to be mentioned since it involved America. The Russian-American Company created in 1799 had jurisdiction of the American coast north of 55° north latitude. This had to do largely with fishing rights. In 1821 Alexander issued a decree which claimed

Russian right down to 51° north latitude and prohibited all non-Russian vessels within 100 Italian miles of the coast. This was in direct conflict with the American Monroe Doctrine. So a Treaty was concluded with the U.S. in 1824 which put the boundary at 54°40' and provided freedom of navigation and fishing in the Pacific. It was the first important agreement between Russia and the United States.

Napoleon's Invasion in 1812

Napoleon had established the so-called continental system which prohibited trade outside the continent of Europe. It was a severe blow to trade especially with England and brought about a serious depreciation of the Russian ruble. When Napoleon tried to strengthen the system by introducing the Trianon Tariff on colonial products in 1810, Alexander largely evaded it. Alexander even put tariffs on overland imports, mostly from France. All of this raised Napoleon's ire. The little duchy of Oldenburg then got into the picture. The heir apparent to this duchy, George, was the husband of Alexander's sister Catherine. At Tilsit Napoleon had guaranteed the integrity of Oldenburg, but now he decided to annex it anyway.

Alexander was beginning to see what was coming. Early in 1812 he made a military alliance with Prussia and Austria and also tried to win over Czartoryski and Warsaw but failed. He was more successful with Sweden which promised to support him if she got Norway in compensation. He then brought the Turkish war to a timely end and made military agreements with Spain and Britain. In this way it looked like Russia was ready for Napoleon.

When Alexander's last minute efforts to make a deal failed, Napoleon decided to launch his invasion. He had assembled the largest army ever for this gargantuan task. Grand Army composed of many nationalities had 575,000 men. The Russian army 220,000, but only 180,000 were considered to be effective troops. It was an uneven match no matter how looked at it. But there were other ways to defeat an invader, as many invaders of Russia have found out over the years.

When Napoleon reached the borders of Russia, Russian generals Begratton, Barclay de Tolly, and Tomasov immediately withdrew. At Smolensk General Raevsky decided to take a stand. The battle turned out to be a victory for Napoleon. Kutuzov was then promoted to supreme Russian commander. The big battle took place at Borodino on September 7. It was huge and it was devastating. Russia lost 58,000 men and France lost 50,000. Nothing like this had happened before. Moscow was evacuated, but at the same time there was an outburst of patriotism in all over Russia. Napoleon could have countered this by freeing Russian serfs, but he did not: a serious mistake repeated by Hitler later. Napoleon occupied Moscow and thought that this would cause Alexander to sue for peace, but that also did not happen.

Impatient and bored, Napoleon decided to withdraw from Moscow on October 19. Mysteriously a fire broke out in Moscow and destroyed large sections of the city. On the way out of Russia Napoleon had to contend with guerrilla type warfare from the Russians. At Berezina a large battle took place. If Kutusov, Wittgenstein and Chichagov had met to prevent Napoleon from crossing the Berezina they could have finished the Grand Army for good. Also the Austrian allies under Prince Schwarzenberg failed to move in support of Russian troops. The Russian generals, while they did a lot of damage to the French army, spent so much time and energy quarreling with each other that the Russians were not able to take full advantage of the situation.

As it was Napoleon clearly was defeated. Only some 40,000 soldiers of his Grand Army survived the Russian campaign. The main reasons for his defeat are

- the failure to declare the emancipation of the serfs;

- his diplomatic isolation;
- the failure of the continental system;
- the fact that most of his troops were foreign;
- the lack of plans for a winter campaign and his inadequate supply system.

The War of 1812 and the Second World War cry out for comparison.

From the Russian point of view there were some interesting parallels. In both cases we have a surprise attack, although there were some rather obvious warnings if Russian officials had been more alert. In both instances the Russian tactics which succeeded were those of withdrawal, sucking the invader into the huge interior of the country and extending his supply lines. Both Napoleon and Hitler failed to use the one measure which might have given them success: the freeing of the serfs and the satisfaction of social discontent among the peasants. The result in both cases was a great wave of Russian patriotism among the lower classes. In both cases the Russian governments had to deal with some rather incompetent generals and mediocre officer corps. In both cases we have an ideological war: Napoleon after all was a son of the Revolution and Alexander the anti-revolutionary conservative; Hitler clearly thought of this as a war of competing ideologies – National Socialism versus evil Communism.

Both episodes, interestingly enough, were preceded by temporary and most unlikely alliances: Tilsit and the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact. Also in both England became the ally of Russia. In both instances Finland and Bessarabia were annexed by Russia and Poland was a major bone of contention and exploitation. After each war Russia sought and got territorial and political aggrandizement in the west, followed by conflict with her former allies. The brutality of the battles and the great losses of man and material was different only in magnitude. It might be interesting to compare Borodino and Stalingrad in detail. In both cases too the issue of supplies and the terrible Russian weather played a significant role.

Finland and Poland

Both of these countries came under Russian control after the Congress of Vienna and were a kind example of "oppressed nationalities" typical many others in the nineteenth century. Alexander summoned Finnish delegates to St. Petersburg to deliberate on the organization of their country. The Russians called this an election, but the Finns deny it and refuse to work on the creation of a Finnish diet. Alexander then convenes a diet of his own at Borgo and promises to maintain fundamental laws, meaning the rights and privileges of the estates. But Finland's constitutional position remains murky. No real parliament or executive exists. The diet and executive council appointed by the crown act on behest of a governor-general and secretary of state for Finland -- all hand picked by the tsar after 1826. The diet was purely advisory and soon dissolved, not to be convened again until 1863.

Yet a substratum of civil and criminal law remained in tact. Taxation, budget, judiciary, local government and the church remained essentially under Swedish law. The secretary of state was usually a native, although he took his orders from St. Petersburg. While Finland was somewhat unique in its local autonomy – not unlike the autonomy enjoyed by Poland between 1815 and 1830 – she was not entirely an autonomous constitutional state. The grand duke Alexander was the real boss.

Congress Poland had a constitution prepared by Alexander's Polish advisors. This made Poland essentially an hereditary monarchy autonomous except for foreign affairs. Poland had her own army

and only Polish citizens were eligible for public office, but they were subject to a viceroy assisted by an appointed state council. There was a diet with two houses: a senate appointed by Alexander with the advise of the viceroy and a lower house elected by nobles and burghers. Property qualifications limited the representation of the lower house. It met only four times between 1815 and 1830. It could petition but really legislate. The state council had five departments and was headed by the viceroy as president. The nobility elected local judges and for all practical purposed ran the local administration. While there was some protection of civil rights, Jews and peasants were excluded from aspects of the government.

It should be said that this was an "enlightened" constitution for its time, but in the end brought only misery to the average Pole. The Viceroy-General, Joseph Zaionczek, was weak and basically subject to the wishes of grand duke Constantine, the commander of the Polish army. Constantine had only contempt for the constitution. The same held true or the high commissioner, Novosiltsev, who was by this time in a reactionary mood. So Alexander's constitutional in Poland was quite brief. Polish public opinion wanted an extension of liberties, but got quite the reverse. Polish nationalism also clamored for the annexation of the Lithuanian provinces which had once belonged to Poland. Various secret societies began to organize themselves and work against Russia. This brought official censorship in 1819 and a show trial of the "Patriotic Society" leaders in 1820. Stern police measures tried to keep the lid on restless Poland.

So, it can be said that both Finland and Poland were suppressed nationalities, but no more so than the oppressed population of Russia itself.

Reform and Rebellion: 1800–1825

The radicalism of a section of the Russian upper class had its roots in the Western liberal and revolutionary ideas, which had become increasingly popular wince Catherine the Great. But there was no organized political opposition until the 1870s. This took the form of secret societies which attempted the coup of 1825 known as the Decembrist Revolt. It was limited to the upper class particularly young officers in the guards and bore the imprint of its social origins. Alexander's presumed "liberalism" had encouraged the development of the reform movement. Large segments of the aristocracy and the military officer corps knew that Alexander personally preferred constitutional government and detested serfdom. The constitutions he granted to Finland and Poland proved this predisposition.

He had even promoted a constitutional regime in restoration France and he had been quite critical of Ferdinand VII's abrogation of the Spanish constitution. His speech to the Polish diet in 1818 and his encouragement of constitutional project prepared by Speransky and Novosiltsev all speak to this fact. Many Russians resented the fact that Alexander had granted more liberties to Poland and Final than to Russia itself and his use of foreigners in his immediate entourage. Arakcheev in particular was universally hated for reactionary opinions and their impact on the tsar.

The internal mess in Russia also stirred up revolutionary feelings. The courts were notoriously corrupt and the government graft was rife largely on account of low salaries. There were starving convicts in inhuman prisons. The crushing burden of taxation impoverished even the nobility. The clergy of the official church was literally ignorant and not all that virtuous. The plight of the peasants in particular concerned the liberals. Although they disagrees on method, all wanted emancipation of the serfs as a basic initial reform. Besides, only emancipation would prevent social upheaval.

Conditions in the armed forces were not all that pleasant either. Privates has to serve for a period of 25 years and the salary amounted to about 9.50 rubles per year. The Commissariat of the army was a

hotbed of corruption, far beyond any other army supply system. Discipline in the army was harsh and ruthless. The size of the army was raised from 394,000 in 1800 to 800,000 in 1825. There was plenty of discontent and even mutinies, especially in the Semenovskiy regiment – in 1820 in particular. The Russian participation in the campaign of 1813–1815 against Napoleon was the most potent factor in the desire for a constitution and general social change. It showed the clear difference between Russia and the West. Professors and teachers became more liberal too – even in the military academies. Pushkin's popularity increased as he extolled the virtues of freedom and liberality. But Russian liberalism had a nationalistic tinge since the ancient institutions like the zemskie sobors remained popular.

Yet the policies of the government after 1815 moved further to the right under the influence of advisors like Golitsyn and Arakcheev. The importance of the security police, censorship, military colonies, and campaigns against the universities should not be underestimated. There was a kind of triumph of mystical religious orthodoxy. The Holy Alliance was seen by the liberals as a betrayal of liberty and national independence so often praised by Alexander. The Russian intervention in Spain and Italy against revolutionaries and the lack of intervention in Greece on behalf of them was unpopular. Revolutionary outbursts in Europe inflamed the Russian imagination. Karl Sand's murder of the liberal playwright Kotzebue had a great impact (see Pushkin's book, "The Dagger"). Even the revolutions in far away South America earned the sympathy of the Russians.

The secret societies played a central role in the Decembrist revolt. They were linked to the Masonic movement for some reason. The Union of Salvation was one of them, started in 1816 by Trubetskoy, Murave-Apostol, and Paul Pestel. The aims were representative government based on a constitutional monarchy. The Union of Public Good began in 1818 by doing social work, and called for special education, social justice, economic welfare, representative government, and emancipation of the serfs. Memberships of these societies were small, however, and they could not agree on measures to be taken. They unified and then split into a northern and southern society. The government knew about their activities, but thought that conflict within the groups would make them irrelevant.

The northern group wanted constitutional monarchy and the southern group led by Paul Pestel called for a more radical transition to a democratic republic without rank and privilege. Serfdom should be abolished and the land should be divided among tenant farmers. Pestel, however, also added an aggressive nationalism to his political, social, and economic radicalism. He advocated a program of russification and the annexation of Moldavia, although he was prepared to give Poland independence.

The aristocratic and wealthy guardsmen were represented in the Northern Society. They wanted constitutional monarchy with protection of private property. The regimental officers of the line were represented in the Southern Society and came largely from the lesser nobility. There was considerable friction between the two of them in 1823–1825, although both wanted a provisional government after a successful coup d'état. Trubetskoy even thought that the tsar might be persuaded to accept a constitutional regime. Pestel in turn wanted a revolutionary dictatorship. Attempts to bring these two positions together failed. The hand of the revolutionaries was forced prematurely by Alexander's death in November 1825. They had planned a coup for the spring of 1826.

There is a kind of dynastic riddle which enters the picture at this point. Grand duke Constantine was next in line for the tsarship. But an agreement had been made to have Nicholas succeed. Yet Nicholas feared a revolt if he did not bow to Constantine who was perceived as more liberal. Constantine refused to declare publicly that he had renounced the throne. So for three weeks Russia had no government. This was an opportunity for the conspirators to act, but they were too disorganized to do so.

The insurrection which occurred on December 14, 1825 was actually a farce. The plan was to prevent the Senate and the State Council from taking the oath to Nicholas and force him to summon a

constituent assembly for the purpose of setting up a provisional government according to the Speransky proposal. The execution of the plan amounted to "a non-revolutionary revolution." When some 700 soldiers marched to the Senate Square, the Council had already taken the oath to Nicholas. The Southern Army had no part in these events of December 14. The revolt collapsed almost immediately and opened the door for the extreme repression upon which Nicholas now embarked.

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