

Emperor Alexander I and the Nobility in the Russian Empire, 1801-1825

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Review of: Patrick O'Meara, *The Russian Nobility in the Age of Alexander I*, Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2019. xvi + 367p. ISBN: 9781788314862.

On December 1, 2025, Russia and the world will mark the bicentenary of the death of Emperor Alexander I (1777-1825) and, twenty-five days later, the Decembrist Uprising carried out by a small section of the Russian nobility on Senate Square in St. Petersburg. In the near future, we are likely to see many works published to commemorate these anniversaries. All prospective authors eyeing up an opportunity to publish commemorative studies of these monumental events in Russian history would do well to have a copy of Patrick O'Meara's *The Russian Nobility in the Age of Alexander I* within easy reach.

Over four decades, Professor O'Meara has established himself as one of the foremost scholars of Russian history in the age of Emperor Alexander I. He has published two ground-breaking biographical studies on pivotal Decembrists.¹ However, his latest monograph encompasses a far broader panorama, which attempts to “offer readers a densely textured social and political portrait of the entire Russian nobility” (p. ix). At the same time, as O'Meara also makes clear at the very beginning of his study, this is also a work that aims “to shed new light on the character of this famously enigmatic tsar,” that is, of Emperor Alexander I (p. x). Hence, what O'Meara offers the reader is a fascinating discussion of the symbiotic relationship between the autocratic vanquisher of Napoleon Bonaparte and the key elite class in Russia's pre-revolutionary social hierarchy. As one would expect with such an ambitious work, O'Meara draws on a rich variety of primary and secondary source material. Most notably, the author effectively utilizes the Central Archive of Nizhnii Novgorod Province (*Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Nizhegorodskoi Oblasti*) to provide a perceptive case study of how the provincial nobility of the Russian empire reacted to fundamental issues of state and societal reform. What is not clear, however, is whether similar conclusions can be drawn across the vast Russian Empire, especially among the non-Russian nobility from this focus on a single province.

O'Meara's study tackles the key issues related to Alexandrine Russia: the complex dynamic between the liberal mindset of the Russian autocrat and a sizeable minority of his nobility *and* the reality of a conservative (and obdurate) majority opposed to any meaningful reform of state and society. As the author illustrates with notable assurance, this ideological struggle encompassed all aspects of Russian life, but was particularly focused on the questions of the emancipation of the serfs and whether Russia would

¹ Patrick O'Meara *K. F. Ryleev: A Political Biography of the Decembrist Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); *ibid.*, *The Decembrist Pavel Pestel: Russia's First Republican* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

become a constitutional monarchy. The six-part structure of the book also helps to highlight the importance of these two key issues, whilst also detailing a wealth of other factors at play in the relationship between the Russian monarch and the nobility. The first two parts of the book focus on the nobility's privileges and prestige; its legal and social status, as well as questions of wealth and poverty and its educational pathways. Part 1 contains an excellent examination of the effects of the re-introduction of Catherine II's Charter of the Nobility (1785), which had been jettisoned by Emperor Paul. There is also a fascinating and informative overview of the main privileges enjoyed by the hereditary nobility and a clear account of its hierarchical structure. This section also contains some discussion of the emergence of a civil society among the Russian nobility, with an acknowledgement, citing Marc Raeff, that "social life was increasingly conducted out of the public gaze" (p. 17). The importance of Masonic lodges, as well as other private associations and literary salons is mentioned here, but overall O'Meara does not devote much space to this important aspect of the associational culture of the Russian nobility.

The second part of the book focuses on education; more specifically, on the quality of home education (or lack thereof) and the efforts to improve the institutional seats of learning within the empire for those members of the nobility who could not travel beyond its boundaries. O'Meara provides a scathing account of the standard home education given by foreign (European) tutors to the children of the Russian nobility. The author goes so far as to posit that, had they been better educated, the Decembrists may have "thought twice about the wisdom of attempting to plunge Russia into a similar catastrophe" as the French Revolution (p. 37). Here, a more in-depth discussion about this contentious issue, based on primary sources, would have perhaps been warranted. This is especially the case in light of the growing historiography relating to foreign language pedagogy in the Russian Empire at this time.²

Chapter 4 (the second section of Part II) provides a succinct, yet thorough, examination of the attempts at wholesale educational reform that were undertaken in the Russian Empire in 1803 (the Preliminary Regulations of National Education) and the educational reform spearheaded by Mikhail Speranskii in 1809. Alongside these legislative acts, the author also provides a brief, but highly informative account of the principal new educational institutions that emerged at this time, such as the Tsarskoe Selo Lycée near St. Petersburg, which opened in 1811.

The third part of O'Meara's study concentrates on the role of the nobility in local government and administration. It is here, especially in chapter 5, which is entitled "The Nobility as Office Holders," that O'Meara makes excellent use of the archival research that he undertook in Nizhnii Novgorod. In this chapter he provides a case study that documents the role of Prince P. S. Trubetskoi as the Marshall of the Nobility in Nizhnii Novgorod Province. Through an analysis of Trubetskoi's correspondence with the central government in Petersburg, the reader learns of the demands placed on him by ministers, as well as the everyday responsibilities that he was expected to carry out as part of his regular duties as the head of a provincial noble association. Indeed, we are

² Most notably, see Derek Offord, Vladislav Rjéoutski and Gesine Argent, *The French Language in Russia: A Social, Political and Literary History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), chapter 2, pp. 123-172.

provided with a fascinating account of the role of the provincial marshal in both peace and wartime (during the Napoleonic invasion of Russia).

The author also makes extensive use of the Central Archive of Nizhnii Novgorod Province in Part V of his work, which focuses on the nobility and the “peasant question.” Again, it is the provincial case studies developed by O’Meara from archival research that provide this reader at least with the most satisfying and informative sections of the entire book. In Chapter 9, for example, O’Meara offers a series of case studies regarding how the nobility in Nizhnii Novgorod Province responded to the 1803 law on “free cultivators,” which allowed those landowners who wished to do so to free their peasants with land in entire villages or as separate families on mutually agreed terms. The case studies highlighted by O’Meara, which span from 1807 to 1814, reveal how the petitions sent to Petersburg by the provincial nobility in Nizhnii Novgorod Province almost always came up against a bureaucratic wall that seemed to make it all but impossible for the nobility to emancipate the peasants on their land.

The first two petitions cited by O’Meara come from widows—Elizaveta Zinovieva and M. A. Bogorodskaiia—both of whom encountered frustrating procedural problems. The fact that 50% of the case studies selected by the author featured widows begs the question of whether noblewomen were more likely to request free cultivator status to relieve their financial burdens or for other reasons. This is an untouched area of enquiry, but could, perhaps, have built on the pioneering research of Michelle Lamarche Marrese.³ Another interesting figure cited by O’Meara is that Prince A. N. Golitsyn, one of leading conservative figures during the reign of Alexander I and a prominent minister and confidante of the emperor, freed 13,371 peasants in 1807; an extraordinary number for the time. This figure seems to have been first quoted in 1888 by V. I. Semevskii.⁴ The background as to why Golitsyn, a reactionary conservative, undertook this seemingly progressive act is not discussed by O’Meara (or in the older sources).

The topic of the nobility’s response to constitutionalism, which figures in Part IV, is also highly informative. Central to the author’s discussion here is the public reaction to the speech delivered by Emperor Alexander to the Polish *Sejm* in March 1818. In that speech, the tsar outlined Poland’s constitutional framework and hinted at the fact that he intended to eventually extend a similar form of political organization into the core of the Russian empire itself. Lastly, Part VI, is devoted to how more radical visions of constitutional and political reform among the Russian nobility challenged the autocratic foundations of the tsarist regime after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. These final chapters reveal a two-fold failure: first, the failure of the Decembrists to radicalize the Russian nobility in order to achieve a critical mass of support; and second, the failure of the political tactics employed by the emperor himself. Here, Emperor Alexander’s inherent caution and unwillingness to go against the conservative majority of the nobility is critiqued by the author. As O’Meara argues at the beginning of his book, the reigning Russian emperor was incapable of overcoming the barrier of the low political culture of his nobility (p. xi).

In his afterword, O’Meara reflects on the relevance of Alexander’s reign—and his symbiotic relationship with the Russian nobility—in light of V. V. Putin’s rule two

³ See, in particular, Michelle Lamarche Marrese, *A Woman’s Kingdom: Noblewomen and the Control of Property in Russia, 1700-1861* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 123-128.

⁴ V. I. Semevskii, *Krest’ianskii vopros v Rossii v 18 veke* (St. Petersburg: “Obshchestvennaia pol’za, 1888), vol. 1, 266.

hundred years later. The complex imperial legacy bequeathed by Alexander I, in which tentative efforts at reform largely gave way to increasing conservatism, has not gone unnoticed by Putin. However, it should be noted that Putin did not even attempt a modicum of political or social reform at the beginning of his first term as president. Yet, like Emperor Alexander I, he has displayed a seemingly ever-increasing obsession with Russia's imperial past in the latter part of his rule. Indeed, in 2014 Putin honoured Alexander I with a new monument in the Alexander Park outside the Kremlin walls. This concluding nod to 21st-century Russia, though short, highlights the heuristic value of studying Alexandrine Russia in terms of the dynamic between an autocratic leader and his nobility/ruling oligarch class and in terms of rejuvenating the role of the Russian leader as a curator and defender of the country's imperial heritage.