

The Decembrist Revolt of 1825 as a Tool to Assess the Modern Russian Call for Freedom: The Case of the Russian Protests of 2011-2012

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a comparative historical analysis of two events from Russian history: the Decembrist Revolt of 1825 and the Russian uprising of 2011-2012. The analysis is aimed at defining features that both events have in common. Based on the aftermath of the Decembrist revolt, the implications of the Russian uprising of 2011-2012 for Russian domestic politics in the long-run are foreseen. The study uses a multidisciplinary and holistic approach, covering political, socio-cultural, and economic perspectives. After a general description of both events the comparison takes place, followed by a conclusion.

Keywords

Decembrist revolt, Russian protests, comparative history, protest studies, Bolotnaya Square, Russia, Russian studies

INTRODUCTION

The October revolution of 1917 is considered the first significant revolution in Russian historiography, however not many are aware of another particular event that challenged Russian society and became a premise for the revolution of 1917. Anatole G. Mazour refers to the Decembrist revolt as the First Russian Revolution [4].

The Decembrist revolt was organized by the Russian army officers and their soldiers, the members of the former secret society "Union of Welfare" (later known as the Northern and Southern Societies), against Emperor Nicolas I in the Peter Square in Saint-Petersburg on December, 14th. The secret society's members planned to totally reform the governmental system and abolish serfdom. It took long eleven years of preparation and organization to make the revolt happen. It was cruelly suppressed, and most Decembrists were either sentenced to death, or life in Siberia. In the aftermath of the revolt, the Emperor's government became more oppressive and imposed control on social, cultural and political spheres of life.

The Russian protests of 2011-2012 were the series of rallies and uprisings against the fraudulent elections and corruption that took place in 2011 and continued into 2012. The main demands of the protesters were fair elections, fighting corruption, immediate release of all political prisoners, more democratic legislation on political parties and elections. At the beginning, the government tried to negotiate with the protesters, but following the presidential elections of 2012 the protests started to be suppressed, and many activists were arrested and imprisoned.

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The "Bolotnaya Square" case has still not been closed by October 2016. Since 2012, the state of democracy and liberalism in Russia has largely deteriorated.

Research question

Because both events share some common features, it is interesting to compare them and not only see the degree to which the two events are comparable, but whether there are lessons that can be derived from the event that took place 190 years ago. The central research question of this article is to what extent the Decembrist revolt of 1825 is related to the uprising in Russia in 2011-2012 and how the Decembrist revolt can offer relevant lessons from history to modern Russia.

Sub-questions

The sub-questions asked throughout the research include the similarity of the historical background of both events, namely political, economic and socio-cultural problems of the epochs. Next, the general flow of events and the actual content of the protests, their inspirations, influences, and main ideas are compared. Finally, a thorough look at the aftermath of the Decembrist revolt and the Russian uprising enables us to make predictions about the future scenario in Russia.

This comparative analysis is original in the sense that these two events have never been compared. It is also scientifically relevant because by means of historical comparison it becomes possible to make sense of the Russian protests of 2011-2012 in terms of its causes, chronology and aftermath. It can improve understanding of the relationship between the society and the government as well as identify common mistakes from both sides. As history patterns tend to repeat one way or another, it is becoming more influential to search answers to difficult questions in history, because history is the only place where concepts and theories can be observed in practice.

Since two initial chapters of the original Bachelor thesis (*The Decembrist revolt: Back in history for the first Russian revolution* and *The Russian protests of 2011-2012: background, dynamics, analysis and aftermath*) are descriptive in nature and merely give a general account of the causes, chronology, and results of the two events by a careful selection of sources, this article will present only the Discussion and Conclusion parts. The role of the two above-mentioned descriptive chapters is by no means diminished, as they served as a basis for the comparative analysis.

DISCUSSION

After having studied various academic and non-academic

sources that describe the Decembrist revolt of 1825 and the Russian uprising of 2011-2012, a substantial amount of common features was found. Only the most used sources were included in the References section of this article.

Both events appear to be similar when it comes to *Western cultural-political influence*. In the case of the Decembrists, they were inspired by Western thinkers and writers of the beginning of the nineteenth century, namely Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, Benjamin Franklin, Montesquieu and Destutt de Tracy [4]. The protest movement in Russia also found inspiration from abroad – the gathering “Okkupai Abbai” was based on New-York’s “Occupy Wall Street” street movement in the 1980s [7].

Both Alexander I, the Emperor who was in power before the Decembrist revolt, and Vladimir Putin, the prime-minister of Russia during the protest movement, claimed that Western liberal thinking was a threat to Russian sovereignty and attributed the reason for protests to the liberal illness from the West [6], [3]. Another factor related to the influence from abroad is that the Decembrists were ex-soldiers who attended the Napoleonic wars, marched through whole Europe and familiarized themselves with European liberalism [6]. Future modern Russian protesters had opportunity to visit Europe and the US in the next decade after the collapse of the USSR – when the borders opened and the financial situation of average citizens improved [7]. Both the future Decembrists and the protesters in the Russian uprising saw a connection between liberalism, good economy and the level of life of average citizens.

The economic situation is another common feature for both events, but it is accountable to mostly all protests. The serfdom of the nineteenth century Russia, one of the reasons for the Decembrist revolt, was an obstacle to entering the industrial era and a condition that substantially slowed the Russian economy. Russia also suffered from the consequences of the five-month Napoleonic invasion and the budget deficit since the rule of Catherine II [4]. The year of 2011 was perceived by Russian citizens as the year of deep economic instability since the financial crisis of 2008. People did not have the feeling of life improvement or general optimism that is characteristic of any election campaigns [7].

Both for Alexander I’s Russia and Vladimir Putin’s Russia it seemed that there was a *timeliness for changes*. Alexander I was perceived as Europe’s liberator from Napoleon and his positive image should have been matched with the state of affairs at home, while in reality it could not be [6]. Because the USSR collapsed and Russia chose a democratic path in the 1990s, by 2010 Russia was supposed to continue improvement and growth in that direction after having fought the disastrous consequences of its transition in 1990s. This way, the changes were timely and as both governments chose to ignore the signs that the society was actively giving them, the protests could not be avoided.

The so-called “*interregnum*” became a turning point for both protests. After the death of Alexander I in November 1825, Nicolas I, his third brother, inherited the throne under vague circumstances. The decision was discussed only in the secret letter and private conversations, and was not made public until the last moment [4]. In 2011, Dmitry Medvedev suggested Vladimir Putin as a candidate from “Yedinaya

Rossiya” political party for the presidential elections, and this action was considered as a transfer of authority which was inappropriate for a democracy [8].

Looking at *the social background* of the protesters from both revolts, it can be stated that neither of the movements represented “revolutions of the poor”. The Decembrists descended from rich aristocratic families and received good education [6]. The modern protesters represented the Russian middle class, 80 % of people held university degrees [7]. Touching upon *nationalism* and *patriotism* in both protest movements leads to a conclusion that these notions stay unchanged for the Russian character, regardless the epoch in which the protest occurs. The early Decembrists stuck to chauvinistic views, proposing to exile or kill all foreigners in the Russian state service. Also, they demanded a total russification of the Polish kingdom and the joining of all Slavic states into the Russian Empire [4].

Alexei Navalny, an unofficial protest leader during the rallies in 2011-2012, took part in “Russky Marsch”, a mass nationalist demonstration, where he openly shouted the slogan “Stop feeding the Caucasus”, which referred to a problematic Russian region which is inhabited by predominantly non-ethnic Russian people of Muslim background. Another reference to nationalism in the modern protest was Gennady Zyuganov’s (The Russian Communist Party leader) suggestion to restore the fifth graph (the graph in the Soviet passport, where the nationality was indicated) in Russian passports [8].

When it comes to *patriotism*, for both protests it was different in quality. After analyzing both events, it can be concluded that the Decembrists’ patriotism was formed as a set of feelings of a winner-nation after Russia’s victory over Napoleon. The Decembrists wanted to make Russia match the image it created for Western Europe – to be not only the liberator of Europe but of its own people at home. The Russian post-Soviet society suffered from the inferiority complex after the collapse of the Soviet Union and it was not proudly patriotic, but desperately patriotic to make Russia great again. This way, both the Decembrists and the protesters were highly-educated, patriotic and politically active, and their social background matches as much as it can match in regard to a 190 years’ difference.

The ideological-spiritual content of both events became a controversial philosophical discussion in the original Bachelor thesis. The article by Olga Karbasova [1] was used as a counterargument to falsify my own analysis of the ideological-spiritual content of the protests. To summarize the discussion, she claimed that the Decembrist revolt was more spiritual and moral and did not include the economic aspect. In reality, it did, as Pavel Pestel, the think-tank and main ideologist of the Decembrist movement, wrote that the abolition of serfdom was not only necessary from the moral account, but would also be beneficial for the economy [4]. In Karbasova’s opinion, the rallies of 2011-2012 bore substantially political and economic character. The conceptual difference in attitudes is that she perceives the political motive as a down to earth motive, not deserving the moral grounds and appreciation of the protest for the sake of the protest. However, demand for respect for the law and constitutional rights as well as disgust by corruption are high motives in themselves. Gathering and protesting against injustice for the common cause and collective good deserves the same moral attribute as the Decembrist revolt. Another

argument Karbasova used in discrediting the modern protesters was the procurement of victimhood and spirituality by the means of art, that is the participation of artists, singers and public figures in the protest. The Decembrist revolt was also largely supported by artistic figures such as A. Pushkin and A. Griboedov, so it would be unfair to blame the modern protest for attracting artists and public figures. In the end, there is the ideological-spiritual content in both protests, induced by injustice, the sense of honor, respect and certain benefits, such as economic ones.

The respect for the law appeared in both revolts. The Decembrists could not break the oath to the Emperor, either by killing him or by organizing a palace coup. Even in the last year before the actual revolt, the Decembrists still considered it possible to confess to the Emperor and share their economic and political agenda with him. Their loyalty to the Emperor and the fact that they took an oath was one of the reasons why the revolt failed and, most importantly, why no one dared to assassinate the Emperor either before the revolt or during the revolt itself, when the Emperor was present with his guards in the Peter Square [4]. The modern protesters respected the law in the sense that they did not engage in a bloody coup d'état, but negotiated with the government until the very end. They also respected the Constitution of the Russian Federation that granted their rights, and demanded the same from the government.

The disapproval of a violent revolution was shared by both the Decembrists and the modern protesters. The former favored the Spanish scenario of a military revolt which would not engage the civilians. As it was mentioned before, the modern protesters kept on negotiating with the government until it became clear that the government was not going to comply with the protesters' demands. In return, the government showed visible disrespect for the protesters and never tried to negotiate on the same level with them [7].

In both protests there were *betrayals*. P.M. Grivovsky, who was a member of the Northern Society, was the Emperor's informer [4]. P.K. Lebedev was an agent of Russian Special Forces (FSB), and a member of the Organizational Committee of Protesters at the same time [8]. In both cases, the governmental structures had been long informed about all the steps that the Decembrists and the modern protesters took. The scenario by which both revolts developed could have been different if the organizations could preserve the secret status of both their actions and their members.

As far as *the actual protests and their leadership* are concerned, both the Decembrists and the modern protesters shared enthusiasm and readiness to act, but in both cases there was a general inconsistency and the lack of overall plan of actions. Most importantly, both revolts lacked a prominent leader. N. Trubetskoy, a supposed leader of the Decembrist revolt, did not even come to the Square on the planned day of the revolt [4]. The systematic opposition leaders in the modern protests such as G. Zyuganov and M. Kasyanov never dared to address the audience from the tribunes, probably fearing the failure of the protests and avoiding the chance to be persecuted [7].

The absence of a common plan (contradictions between the agendas of the Northern and Southern societies in the case of the Decembrists and inability to cooperate among the

members of the Organization and Coordination Committees of Protesters in the case of the modern uprising), ideological differences (a constitutional monarchy versus a republic in the case of the Decembrists), lack of consent among the leadership of both protests (N. Muraviev versus P. Pestel in the Decembrist movement and the Coordination Committee members, the non-systematic opposition and systematic opposition in the case of the modern protests) led the revolts to failure [4], [8].

The difference between the Decembrist revolt and the modern protests of 2011-2012 that should be mentioned in this section is the fact that the leaders of both protests differed from each other qualitatively. If N. Muraviev and P. Pestel were too modern for their time, M. Kasyanov and G. Zyuganov were people with solely Soviet background who were outdated and could not be liberal by their nature, even though M. Kasyanov claimed to be so. Moreover, if the Decembrists who were executed or exiled became martyrs, notwithstanding the propaganda of the government, the modern Kremlin propaganda completely ruined the reputations of many prominent figures that took part in the protests. Also, some members of the modern protests were not trusted by the audience. Apart from the criminal cases that A. Navalny was engaged in, he was too young and inexperienced to lead the whole country. K. Sobchak, the daughter of Anatoly Sobchak, a popular liberal politician in the 1990s in Russia, was not trusted either due to her vague reputation (she was usually referred to as Russia's Paris Hilton) and the connections her father had with the Yeltsin's government and most importantly, Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. The latter worked in his office in the 1990s [4], [7].

Both revolutions failed. The Decembrist revolt was cruelly suppressed with death penalties, exiles in Siberia and forced army service in the Caucasus. The criminal case against the participants of the Russian uprising in 2011-2012 still goes on. The leaders of the protest movement as well as prominent participants are denied access to the state-run media and are constantly discredited on various controlled TV channels and media sources. Sometimes criminal cases are initiated on doubtful grounds, not relevant to the uprising. The most recent case of the 19th of May 2016 against A. Navalny involves charges for libel [9].

After both revolutions, the control of the state over its citizens was tightened, namely by enhancing censorship, accepting conservative legislation and erasing everything that had to do with the Western harmful influence. Both Nicolas I and Vladimir Putin appealed for nationalism to restrict Western influence on Russia and called for rebirth of "original" Russian values such as the Russian orthodoxy and Russian culture. Neither after the events of 1825 nor after the uprising in 2011-2012, did the Western countries intervene in the Russian domestic politics. In the aftermath of the Decembrist revolt, right until the fall of czarism in Russia, the nineteenth century was known as a century of struggle between czarism and the radical terror-oriented organizations. One of them succeeded by assassinating Alexander II, the only liberal Emperor who abolished serfdom in 1861 [3], [6]. No liberal emperor would be liberal enough for the outrageous society.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the Decembrist revolt of 1825

and the Russian uprising of 2011-2012 showed that two events not only can be compared but also have common features. Both revolts had a similar background, problems and outcomes. The main idea behind both revolts was to make Russia move forward and match the image of a modern European country it tried to create and simply make all people stand equal by the law.

Returning to the initial question that concerned the future scenario of the Russian domestic politics, the Decembrist revolt's case showed that following the years of oppression from the government's side, radical organizations started to evolve, ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the common cause and change of the regime in the country. If the Decembrists lacked the consent, plan, and essentially confidence, the future radical terror organizations had abundance of it [6].

Despite the calm period in Russia, visible absence of any civil activism and high appreciation ratings of Vladimir Putin (April 2016, 82 %), a disastrous state of affairs in the country regarding the recent financial crisis caused by the sanctions, political freedoms and conservative attitude towards any socio-cultural activities substantially lowered the society's support of the current government (April 2016, 49 %) [2]. The president and the government are things that are perceived as separate entities in the Russian mind. Because the government consists mostly of the supporters of Vladimir Putin, as long as the latter stays in power, the current government will stay, and vice versa. The protest potential in Russia nowadays is very low. According to the most recent polls, 74 % of people indicated that it was not likely that the new protest movement was to occur; 82 % of people said that they were not going to take part in any protest movements. Moreover, only 13 % of the society thinks that the Western type of democracy can be applied to Russian national character. Only 52 % of people indicated that the opposition as such should exist, and around half does not trust the opposition leaders [2].

The general tendency derived from the comparative analysis is that there will be oppression of all spheres of life and prevalence of conservatism, which has already taken place in Russia. The more conservative and oppressive the state is, the more violent and uncontrollable the society will become. How much time it will take until the society turns into chaos is unknown – it may be five, ten or even seventy years, but it will be impossible to avoid the civil unrest. Vladimir Putin and the government are aware of this scenario, but they act on a short-term basis and do not seem interested in the future of the country, as both they and their families are guaranteed a comfortable life in case of any scenario. The fact that conservatism and authoritarianism always worked for a long time until the next collapse (1825-1917-1991-2011-?), makes the current political leaders less inclined to reform the country. Rather, intimidated legislation is accepted and restrictive measures are taken. As long as the president's rating is above the 50 %, the system has nothing to fear.

Taking into account the fact that this research had limitations, such as the difference in time periods and the political system, it is necessary to continue deeper research as this work could not cover many interesting topics in detail. For example, it would be important to study the perception of liberalism then and now, public reaction to the revolts in their aftermath, the leadership problems of the

protesters and the methods deployed by the governments in stiffening the legislation.

In conclusion, it should be said that the Decembrist revolt is an event that repeated itself in one form or another throughout the history of the modern Russian state. That is why knowledge, understanding and attention to history are so crucial – they would help both the political system and the potential protesters not to make the same mistakes and, possibly, avoid confrontation as such in the first place.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Vera Ande was an initiator of the research topic as she believes that comparative history is a scientific direction that nowadays is under-estimated and that it can be used to make predictions and foresee future scenarios. She chose the two events for comparison, performed the literature research and analysis, and wrote the entire paper. Throughout the research, Vera Ande was assisted by her thesis supervisor, prof. dr. R.C.H Lesaffer who made useful text suggestions.

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