Chapter 18

The Reigns of Paul and Alexander I, 1796–1825

Both Paul, the son of Catherine II, and his son Alexander I ruled following the French revolution and during the Napoleonic threat to Europe. Partly for these reasons they presented themselves less as enlightened rulers, as Catherine II had depicted herself, and more as military leaders. Thus, it was no coincidence that during their reigns "the parade became the principal ceremony of the Russian monarchy and the role of parade commander the principal persona of the Russian emperor."[1]

Yet there were also significant differences between this son and grandson of Catherine II. Whereas the brief rule of Paul contrasted in many ways with that of his mother, the longer reign of Alexander I was more similar to his grandmother's. Four similarities are immediately evident: (1) Alexander I came to power as a result of a coup that killed his predecessor. (2) He began his reign talking and planning reforms, but when faced with harsh Russian realities (and his own autocratic inclinations), he discovered that talk of reform was easier than enacting it. (3) He started off with a peace policy but then engaged in wars and diplomacy that helped significantly expand the Russian Empire and Russia's European standing. (4) He became more conservative during the end of his reign and then faced his most serious intellectual opposition, which, after his death, culminated in the Decembrist revolt of 1825.

EMPEROR PAUL AND HIS DOMESTIC POLICIES

When Emperor Paul came to the throne in November 1796, at the age of forty-two, he was determined to undo some of his mother's policies. One reason for this determination was his hostility toward her. The earlier relationship between mother and son had been an abnormal one. After his birth in 1754, Empress Elizabeth snatched Paul away from Catherine and began overseeing his

[1]Richard S.Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy,* Vol. 1 , *From Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I* (Princeton, 1995), p. 170.

upbringing. During his first six years, Catherine I had little contact with him, and he was left mainly in the care of Elizabeth's female servants. The mysterious death of his "father," Peter III, and Catherine II's fears of conspirators favoring her son also probably helped prevent the development of a normal mother-son relationship.

In 1773, Catherine allowed Paul to choose one of three princesses of Hesse Darmstadt to be his wife, but she died in childbirth in 1776. Later that same year, he married another German princess, who took the Russian name of Maria Fedorovna. She was an intelligent, cultured woman and a loving wife, who gave birth to six daughters and four sons.

Primarily because of Catherine's distrust of Paul, the two decades between 1776 and 1796 were frustrating ones for Paul and Maria. Catherine failed to allow Paul much in the way of real responsibility and treated him and Maria much as Elizabeth had treated her and Peter III: Not long after the births of the future Alexander I (1777) and his brother Constantine (1779), she took each boy from his parents and brought him up under her own supervision. In Catherine's final years, she thought of bypassing Paul and passing the throne directly to her beloved grandson Alexander. But she never got around to it.

Under such conditions, Paul became increasingly hostile toward his mother. He also became contemptuous of her advisers—on a trip abroad in 1781–1782, he stated, "as soon as I have power, I shall flog them, break them, and kick them all out." Finally, he began to act more like his "father," Peter III, whom Catherine had overthrown. At Paul's Gatchina estate, he started displaying a passion akin to Peter III's for Prussian drill and appearances.

FIGURE 18.1. Saints Peter and Paul Fortress and Cathedral, St. Petersburg.

Some of Paul's directives after coming to the throne in 1796 seemed belated retaliation against his mother and her advisers. He had Peter III's remains dug up and interred next to her body in the Sts. Peter and Paul Fortress Cathedral, and he freed many persons she had imprisoned or exiled, including Radishchev and Novikov. He also changed Peter the Great's succession law, which had allowed a monarch to select his or her own successor. No doubt wishing to insure that no future monarch could contemplate what his mother had—denying him the right to succeed her—Paul decreed a firm male line of succession, topped by the reigning monarch's oldest son.

Other forces, besides squaring accounts with his mother, also shaped his domestic policies. Among the most prominent were his personal insecurities and impetuousness; his political ideas; and contemporary domestic and foreign conditions, especially in France.

Although apparently not insane, Paul was suspicious and at times unstable enough for this charge to surface among some of his contemporaries. Even more fearful of French revolutionary influence than his mother had been, this intelligent and well-read monarch outlawed math and music books because they might contain subversive codes. He increased the Secret Expedition's investigative labors, especially against suspected nobles, and thousands of officers were arrested, including more than 300 generals. Paul violated noble rights, including that of freedom from corporal punishment, and he decreased the government's reliance on elected nobles in the countryside. Partly to improve the sorry fiscal conditions that his mother bequeathed to him, he cut local government spending and began taxing noble estates. He also forbade nobles to work their serfs on Sundays and recommended that they allow them at least three days a week to work their own allotments.

In practice, the lives of the serfs probably changed little during his reign. Although Paul had been more benevolent toward his own peasants at Gatchina than were most nobles, after coming to the throne he continued the practice of turning some state and crown peasants into serfs by giving them away to new favorites.

Yet he was much more popular among the peasants than among the nobles. Many of the latter, after their favorable treatment under Catherine, resented Paul's new decrees, his Prussian ways, and his impetuous temper—on at least several occasions, he became so angry at officers on the drill field that he sent them directly to Siberia.

If such behavior calls to mind Peter III, so too does Paul's removal in 1801. The coup almost seemed a reworked version of that of 1762. In place of the Orlov brothers, there were the Zubov brothers, with Catherine's last lover, Platon Zubov, being one of the chief conspirators. Also involved was another Nikita Panin, the nephew of the same-named man who had tutored Paul and helped Catherine come to power. And like the earlier coup, this one had the support of Guards officers and members of leading noble families (including the Dolgorukovs, Golitsyns, and Viazemskys). Again, there were strong hints of foreign encouragement to remove the reigning monarch, and the successor (Paul's son Alexander) knew of the plot, although perhaps not that the overthrown ruler would be killed.

Yet there were also differences between the coups. Catherine was a more active plotter than Alexander, who had to be persuaded to go along with the coup against Paul (The coup's most visible leader was Count Peter Pahlen, the military governor of the capital). After Paul was killed in his Mikhailovskii Castle (March 1801), Alexander I—whether or not he ever really believed assurances that his father's life would be spared—was much more troubled by Paul's death than Catherine II had been over Peter III's.

ALEXANDER I AND REFORM, 1801–1812

Alexander I was twenty-three when he became emperor. He was tall and had blue eyes, blond hair, and great charm. Karamzin wrote that he shone "like a divine angel." (Alexander was often portrayed in this manner, both during and after his reign, see, for example, Figure 18.2). But his charm masked a personality that has mystified historians ever since—a 1937 French biography of him is subtitled "*un tsar énigmatique*."

One clue to his puzzling personality was that he grew up caught in the middle of the tensions between his grandmother Catherine II and his own parents. He was brought up at his grandmother's court under her solicitous supervision. She appointed the Swiss republican LaHarpe as his principal tutor. When Alexander was barely fifteen, she had him married to a fourteen-year-old German princess, who became Grand Duchess Elizabeth. In his early teens, Catherine's influences were partly counterbalanced by Alexander's regular visits to his parents. At Gatchina, he grew fond of a rougher military life, and Captain Alexei Arakcheev, a strict disciplinarian, introduced him to Paul's Prussian-style military drills.

During his quarter-century reign, Alexander sometimes seemed a split personality, displaying both a LaHarpian side and an Arakcheevian one. When young, seeing that neither his grandmother nor his parents were completely right or wrong, he tried to please both—and in the process furthered his gift for dissembling.

This upbringing partly accounts for the liberalism and conservatism that oscillated within him during his years as emperor. Another cause was the discrepancy between Enlightenment sentiments and Russian reality. LaHarpe had planted noble ideas in his young pupil but had few insights on how to make them bloom in Russia. Finally, although Alexander's ideas for reform were vague, his instinct to resist any outside challenges to his powers was concrete. He wished to be a reformer, but a paternalistic one.

At the beginning of his reign, the youthful Alexander was faced with many problems, both foreign and domestic. The French Revolution, followed by the rule of Napoleon, presented the main foreign-policy challenge. Moreover, by questioning the legitimacy of monarchical absolutism and the noble domination of society, these French developments also helped unsettle Russian internal conditions. To deal with these challenges, Alexander had his high ideals and his absolutist powers. Before he could confidently wield his full authority, however, he had to overcome the attempt of Count Pahlen—leader of the coup against

The Young Alexander

The following excerpt is from the *Memoirs of Prince Adam Czartoryski and His Correspondence with Alexander I*. 2d ed (London, 1888), Vol. 1, pp. 117–120, 128–129. Czartoryski (1770–1861) was a Polish prince brought to court in St. Petersburg in 1794 to insure his family's loyalty to Russia. He soon became a close friend of the young Alexander. Ellipses and bracketed material are mine.

His [Alexander's] opinions are those of one brought up in the ideas of 1789, who wishes to see republics everywhere, and looks upon that form of government as the only one in conformity with the wishes and the rights of humanity. . . . He held, among other things that hereditary monarchy was an unjust and absurd institution, and that the supreme authority should be granted not through the accident of birth but by the votes of the nation, which would best know who is most capable of governing it. . . . Sometimes during our long walks we talked of other matters. We turned from politics to nature, of whose beauties the young Grand Duke was an enthusiastic admirer. . . .

. . . His sincerity, his frankness, his self-abandonment to the beautiful illusions that fascinated him, had a charm that was impossible to resist. . . .

Besides our political discussions, and the ever-welcome topic of the beauties of nature, and the dream of a quiet country life after the destinies of free Russia should have been secured, Alexander had also a third object to which he ardently devoted himself, and which was not not all in accordance with the others, namely, the army, which was his hobby, as it was that of his father, the Grand-Duke Paul. . . .

. . . Alexander's education remained incomplete at the time of his marriage [1793], in consequence of the departure of M. de la Harpe. He was then eighteen years old [in 1795, when La Harpe actually left Russia]; he had no regular occupation, he was not even advised to work, and in the absence of any more practical task he was not given any plan of reading which might have helped him in the difficult career for which he was destined. I often spoke to him on this subject, both then and later. I proposed that he should read various books on history, legislation, and politics. He saw that they would do him good, and really wished to read them; but a Court life makes any continued occupation impossible. While he was Grande-Duke, Alexander did not read to the end of a single serious book. I do not think he could have done so when he became Emperor, and the whole burden of a despotic government was cast upon him.

. . . The passion of acquiring knowledge was not sufficiently strong in him, he was married too young, and he did not perceive that he still knew very little. Yet he felt the importance of useful study, and wished to enter upon it; but his will was not sufficiently strong to overcome the daily obstacles presented by the duties and unpleasantnesses of life.

Paul—and others to place limits on his powers (sources of the time are hazy about the exact nature of these limits).

In the face of this challenge, Alexander acted resolutely. He forced Pahlen and others into retirement and surrounded himself with an Unofficial Committee, consisting of four of his youthful friends—Adam Czartoryski, Viktor Kochubei, Paul Stroganov, and Nikolai Novosiltsev.

The liberal ideas of these men and Alexander at the beginning of his reign are well documented—especially in recent decades by the St. Petersburg historian M. M. Safonov. They wished, for example, to end serfdom and to ground government firmly on fundamental laws. On the crucial question of limiting tsarist powers, however, there was not only the paternalistic, authoritarian streak in Alexander that would have to be overcome, but also an inescapable dilemma. However desirable it might be in the future, in the early 1800s any "power-sharing" would play into the hands of the nobility, the most educated estate. Nobles might then use their powers to frustrate any reforms that would lessen their powers.

The Unofficial Committee also soon realized, as Catherine II had early in her reign, that serfdom was too dangerous to touch. Attempting to abolish it might create chaos, stirring up, in different ways, both serfowners and serfs. (Ironically, one of the committee members, the ardent Count Paul Stroganov, who had once alarmed Catherine II by his zeal for the French Revolution, came from one of the largest serf-owning families in the empire.)

Yet if such considerations seemed to prevent the most sweeping reforms, they still left the door open for lesser ones. In the first four years of Alexander's reign—before war with Napoleon diverted attention from domestic policies—Alexander began strengthening civil liberties. He freed and brought back into service more than 10,000 individuals whom Paul had jailed or exiled without a trial. He eased censorship and travel restriction. And he reaffirmed Catherine II's Charter of Nobility, some of whose stipulations, such as the nobles' right to be free from corporal punishment, his father had violated. Reflecting his desire to strengthen the rule of law, he abolished the Secret Expedition, whose secret-police work had expanded under Paul.

During this same period, Alexander removed many restrictions on imports and exports and issued several decrees designed to help the serfs. In 1803, for example, he encouraged voluntary emancipation by spelling out the conditions under which it could be undertaken (see Chapter 20 for the meagre results of this decree). Alexander also expanded educational opportunities, most significantly by the 1804 Statute of Schools and the establishment of several new universities (see Chapter 21).

If Alexander and his Unofficial Committee thought Russia was not yet ready for power-sharing and a constitution, education could at least prepare the way. In the meantime, the emperor and his friends attempted to strengthen and streamline his powers so that he could more effectively continue his reforms.

A major step in this direction occurred in 1802, when Alexander established ministries to replace Peter I's system of administrative colleges. Although the ministries (of Foreign Affairs, War, Navy, Commerce, Education, Finance, lnterior, and Justice) were legally subject to Senate overview, their eight ministers, in fact, were directly under the Emperor's control.

After an interlude of war (1805–1807) and the signing of peace with Napoleon at Tilsit in 1807, Alexander renewed his concern with domestic reforms. Although the Unofficial Committee no longer operated, Alexander came to rely heavily on Mikhail Speransky (1772–1839), who had served as a secretary to one of its members, Count Viktor Kochubei.

The son of a provincial priest, Speransky was one of the most intelligent men of

his day. Despite his earning of hereditary noble rank and the early support he received from the important Kurakin clan, he remained an outsider among the aristocratic ruling elite. His wife was an English governess' daughter, and he made little effort to endear himself to those who considered themselves his social superiors. Although a man of liberal ideas, he realized the need of proceeding cautiously and of pleasing his emperor.

After many discussions with Alexander and with his support, Speransky put forth a plan in 1809 to reorganize the Russian government. Although six years earlier he had shared the Unofficial Committee's belief that Russia was not yet prepared for sweeping governmental changes—and warned of chaos if Russia moved too fast—by 1809, he thought that educated society was ready for his proposed revisions.

Even though the emperor was to keep most of his powers, the plan (and Speransky's summary outline of it) called for the creation of a State Duma that could reject new laws proposed by the administration. Members would be elected to this body by those serving on provincial dumas, who, in turn, would be elected by those on district dumas, who themselves would be selected by those on dumas of the smallest government unit, the *volost* (township).

The plan also called for separate judicial and executive institutions on all four levels, from the national down to the *volost*. The Senate was to act as a supreme court, and the chief national administrative functions would remain in the hands of the ministries. Finally, an appointed State Council was to be established to advise and assist the emperor on legislative, legal, and administrative matters.

Speransky's plan divided society into three estates: the nobility, a middle estate, and "working people." Like most liberal Western thinkers of his time, he believed the right to vote should be restricted to owners of property or sufficient capital. His plan therefore excluded all "working people" from voting. But they would enjoy certain basic civil rights, for example, the right to a trial. The nobles were to enjoy not only these rights, but also certain special rights, such as exemption from military service.

Although opposed to serfdom in principle, Speransky, in his final 1809 draft, did little more than suggest the possibility of abolishing it. No doubt, he believed Alexander much more willing to risk governmental reform than the emancipation of the serfs.

Circumstances and Alexander's ambivalence, however, prevented him from implementing Speransky's plan. In 1810, he created a State Council but with more limited advisory functions than Speransky had intended. Nevertheless, it did help produce less arbitrary laws than in the past. Henceforth the council was to review proposed statutory laws, though not administrative orders, and make recommendations before the emperor approved them. In 1810–1811, Alexander also reorganized some of his ministries as suggested in the 1809 plan. Yet, despite Alexander's failure to do more, Speransky remained close to him until 1812. A French diplomat referred to Speransky in 1811 as a sort of "minister of innovations" and stated that he influenced everything.

Meanwhile, many leading nobles were trying to undermine Speransky. They disliked some of his initiatives, such as an 1809 law requiring a university degree

for the passing of a difficult examination as a prerequisite for holding certain upper-level positions. They were upset with an 1812 decree stipulating an emergency progressive tax on estate incomes. And they feared continuing Speransky-generated innovations and that the expanding military forces and civilian bureaucracy were creating too many opportunities for outsiders like him. Their aristocratic dominance of the country's most important military and governmental positions seemed to be eroding. Rumors that Speransky was pro-French also helped weaken him. In March 1812, just a few months before Napoleon's invasion of Russia and at a time when Alexander greatly needed noble support, he dismissed Speransky.

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1796–1812

When Paul came to the throne in late 1796, French armies had been advancing for several years and were then, under Napoleon, in the midst of a successful Italian campaign. At one time or another during the mid-1790s, a coalition of forces, including Austria, Prussia, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sardinia, had fought against France. Although under Catherine II Russia had stayed out of the wars, both Paul and Alexander I were swept into the conflict. Until 1815, Russia alternated between warring against France or allying with it.

Foreign Policy of Paul I

Although Paul began his reign by emphasizing peace and recalling troops sent to the Caucasus as part of Platon Zubov's Oriental Project, in 1798 he went to war against France. Paul hated revolutionary France and feared its advances in the eastern Mediterranean. Strangely enough, it was Napoleon's takeover of the island of Malta in mid-1798, en route to seizing Egypt, which most galvanized Paul into allying against Napoleon. In 1797, Paul had become a protector of a Catholic order that ran the island, the Maltese Order of the Knights of St. John.

Thus roused, Paul played a leading role in a Second Coalition against France. It included Russia, Austria, Great Britain, Turkey, Portugal, and Naples. Russian forces fought on both land and sea. Most notable were General Suvorov's victories against the French in Italy and Switzerland. Almost seventy years old, Suvorov surprised the French with one daring attack after another in 1799 and became legendary by cutting through a larger French force and crossing the Alps.

But discord among coalition members led to Russia's withdrawal from the Second Coalition in 1799. In 1800, Russia and Sweden played the leading roles in reviving an Armed Neutrality League to protect their shipping trade against British interference. That same year, Paul moved closer to France. Napoleon's political takeover in late 1799 had encouraged Paul to believe that France's revolutionary challenge to more traditional regimes had ended, and Napoleon pursued a diplomacy designed to win Paul over to his side. Hoping, with Napoleon's backing, to gain Constantinople and Balkan territories, Paul agreed to support France against England. Shortly before his overthrow, Paul ordered more

than 20,000 Cossacks to cross Central Asia and invade British India. The order was just more fuel for the flames of domestic resentment already burning against him.

Peace and Wars, 1801–1812

Like Paul, Alexander I began his reign by calling for peace and recalling troops sent out by his predecessor on a far-fetched scheme—in this case, the Cossacks dispatched toward British India. Also like his father, he then entered a coalition against France, only to make peace later with Napoleon and turn against England.

While Napoleon's boundless ambitions propelled him toward conflict with Russia, Alexander was also nudged toward war by other considerations. Among them were frustrations with the difficulties of implementing reforms at home, Russia's traditional trade ties with Great Britain, and Alexander's own personality. He was attracted both to military heroics and to idealistic international "grand designs." He outlined his first such plan in 1804. It called for an end to French "tyranny" and the establishment of just European frontiers.

The Third Coalition against France began in 1805 and included Russia, Great Britain, Austria, and Sweden. Late that year at Austerlitz (northeast of Vienna), Napoleon crushed a Russian-Austrian force. The defeat forced Russia to withdraw her remaining troops from Austrian lands and led Austria to negotiate a peace with Napoleon.

The following year, however, Prussia joined the coalition against France. It did not stop Napoleon, now labeled the anti-Christ in Orthodox sermons. In October, he routed Prussian troops and occupied Berlin. Alexander increased Russian forces but was woefully short of muskets for them. In June 1807, Napoleon's army defeated Russian troops at Friedland. Less than a month later, near Tilsit in East Prussia, Napoleon and Alexander signed a peace treaty on a raft in the Nieman River.

Although Alexander did what he could for his Prussian ally, this agreement, and another Tilsit treaty between France and Prussia, recognized significant French gains at Prussia's expense. Included in France's gains were Prussia's previous Polish holdings. Alexander also secretly agreed to ally with France against Britain if he could not persuade the British to accept a French-offered peace.

Unable to do so and angered by several British actions, Alexander kept his promise and broke off diplomatic relations with Britain in late 1807. Early the next year, encouraged by Napoleon and fearful of any possible threat from Britain's ally Sweden, Alexander sent Russian troops to attack Swedish forces in Finland. In 1809, Sweden ceded Finland to Russia, and it remained part of the Russian Empire for over a century (see Map 18.1).

The first decade of Alexander's reign witnessed even longer periods of war in the south. Russia's enemies in that region included some Caucasian peoples, Persia, and Turkey. In September 1801, Alexander issued a proclamation annexing Georgia—it reinforced a similar one issued by Paul in 1800. Although many Georgians, including its king, had wished for Russian protection against Georgia's many Muslim neighbors, they did not wish to be annexed. This action, plus the presence of the arrogant General Paul Tsitsianov (d. 1806) as commander of the

MAP 18.1

Caucasus, led to further campaigns in the region. In an area of many nationalities and local varieties of both Christian and Muslim beliefs, Russia played upon tribal rivalries, religious differences, and the absence of any coordinated Persian-Turkish assistance for their fellow Muslims. As a result, Russia was able to annex or create vassal states in additional Caucasian lands.

Annexing territory was one thing; keeping it another. Besides sporadic rebellions against Russian control, Russia had to fight wars with both Persia (1804–1813) and Turkey (1806–1812). Both countries resented Russian expansion in the Caucasus. By the Treaty of Golestan in 1813, however, a defeated Persia recognized Russian gains extending from Georgia eastward to the khanate of Baku.

Russia's war with the Ottoman Turks resulted not only from Russian moves in the Caucasus, but also from Balkan Turkish-Russian tensions. The latter were partly stimulated by Napoleon, who in 1806 wished Turkish help against Russia. Then, after the Tilsit peace of 1807, he suggested to Alexander a plan for partitioning the Ottoman Empire, but the two emperors could not agree on control over Constantinople and the Black Sea Straits. Only in mid-1812, fearing war with Napoleon, did Alexander make peace with the Turks. By the Treaty of Bucharest, Russia received Bessarabia, formerly part of Turkey's Moldavian principality.

NAPOLEON AND RUSSIA, 1812–1815

After Tilsit, Russian-French tensions gradually increased. Not only did the two emperors disagree on how to partition the Ottoman Empire, but also further Napoleonic gains in Germany and, at Austria's expense, in Poland alarmed Alexander. He was especially upset when in 1811, contrary to the Tilsit treaty, Napoleon annexed the Duchy of Oldenburg—Alexander's sister Catherine was married to its heir. Conversely, Napoleon was angered by Russia's gradual withdrawal from his Continental Blockade against the British.

In June 1812, Napoleon led a massive army across the Nieman River. With later reinforcements, it numbered almost 600,000 men, including troops from allied and occupied countries stretching from Portugal to Poland. The Russian forces that met it were outnumbered about three to one. But even before the war, Alexander had stated that in case of a French attack Russia had space, time, and weather on its side and that he was prepared to retreat all the way to the Kamchatka Peninsula rather than accept defeat.

The first major battle was in early August at Smolensk. Both sides lost heavily, and the Russians retreated, pursuing a scorched earth policy to deny Napoleon needed supplies. This policy helped debilitate and demoralize Napoleon's troops, and many of them died or were weakened, especially from intestinal illnesses.

On August 26, about seventy-five miles west of Moscow, at the village of Borodino, Napoleon sent some 130,000 men against a slightly smaller Russian force. It was led by Mikhail Kutuzov, an old one-eyed general recently appointed supreme commander. Earlier labeled General Slowpoke by some of Alexander's

advisers, he eventually proved to be a wily strategist. By nightfall at Borodino, bullets, bayonets, shells, and swords had done their job: On the fields perhaps 100,000 dead and wounded lay, almost evenly divided between the two opposing forces.

After the battle, Kutuzov retreated toward Moscow but soon abandoned it. When Napoleon entered it at the beginning of September, Moscow was nearly deserted. Almost immediately, homes and other buildings began going up in flames, started perhaps either by careless French troops or patriotic Russians desiring to leave little to the French "anti-Christ."[2]

With most of the city burned, winter approaching, and short on supplies, Napoleon was forced to retreat after only thirty-five days in Moscow. Faced with Kutuzov's army to the more fertile south, Napoleon's troops had to retreat nearly the same war-scarred way they had come, via Smolensk. Russian partisans (including many peasants), cold weather, hunger, sickness, and Kutuzov's pursuing army, avoiding any major battles, decimated them as they retreated. By the time they left Russian territory in early December, this once Grand Army of 600,000 was only a small fraction of what it had been. The rest had deserted, been taken prisoner, or perished. The invasion had also taken hundreds of thousands of Russian lives. Kutuzov advised Alexander not to lose more in pursuing Napoleon once he had left Russia.

Alexander, however, decided otherwise. Prussia and Austria, seeing Napoleon now in retreat, joined Russia, Great Britain, and Sweden in a new coalition. Although Napoleon recruited a new army and won some minor victories, he was defeated in October 1813 at the decisive battle of Leipzig, in which Alexander himself played a major role. On March 31, 1814, allied forces paraded through Paris. Alexander, atop a horse once given to him by Napoleon, was cheered by many Parisians as he rode by on this sunny day.

Indeed, Parisians had good reason to cheer: Alexander and the other allied leaders did not impose a vindictive peace. Despite Napoleonic wars that had cost several million lives, the allies restored the French monarchy and the French borders of 1792, which included gains made after 1789. They also encouraged the new king, Louis XVIII, to issue a constitution. Napoleon was banished to the island of Elba.

From September 1814 to June 1815; allied statesmen, and eventually even Talleyrand of France, met in Vienna to draw up a postwar settlement. Their work was temporarily interrupted by Napoleon's return from Elba and the start of his "Hundred Days" rule in France from March until the end of June 1815. Even before Napoleon was finally defeated at Waterloo, however, the Congress of Vienna had concluded its work. Alexander I gained about four-fifths of the Polish territory that Napoleon had fashioned into the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. Under the agreement, this portion became the Kingdom of Poland (also known as Congress Poland), with Alexander I as its king. He willingly granted the Poles a constitution that promised various liberties, their own bicameral assembly (the *Sejm*), and an independent judiciary.

[2]For the response of various social groupings to the French occupation of their city and for government policies in the city after the French departure, see Alexander M. Martin, "The Response of the Population of Moscow to the Napoleonic Occupation of 1812." in MSR.

FIGURE 18.2. The Alexandrine Column (1830–1834), to the left, on St. Petersburg's Palace Square commemorates the Russian victory over Napoleon in 1812. On the top of the column, Alexander is symbolized by an angel. In the left rear is the dome of St. Isaac's Cathedral and on the right the golden spire of the Admiralty Building.

In Napoleon's final defeat during June 1815, Russia played little part. Therefore, it was primarily Prussia and Britain that decided the harsher terms of a second Peace of Paris (November 20, 1815). It scaled the French borders back to those of 1790 and forced France to pay a $700 million indemnity and the cost of an allied occupation of seventeen French fortresses for up to five years.

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1815–1825

During the last decade of his life, Alexander's diplomacy was primarily concerned with safeguarding the post-Napoleonic arrangements he had been instrumental in creating. Thus, his objectives generally coincided with those of the influential Austrian foreign minister, Metternich. But they also sometimes displayed a more utopian, mystical side than those of the ever-pragmatic Metternich.

Alexander's mysticism was best exemplified in his September 1815 proposal for a Holy Alliance. Although by no means a man completely of the spirit—for more than a decade, he had been having an affair with a beautiful Polish princess—Alexander had gradually become more interested in mystical matters during the 1812–1815 period. In the months immediately preceding his Holy Alliance proposal, he had numerous conversations with Baroness von Krüdener, a woman of strong mystical inclinations. Although historians have debated the degree of

influence she had on his proposal, it did call upon his fellow European monarchs to rule in the spirit of the Scriptures and be guided by charity, peace, and justice. Although most European powers, including Austria, signed this pious declaration, Metternich thought it a "loud-sounding nothing," and Britain's foreign minister, Lord Castlereagh, refused to sign—"a piece of sublime mysticism and nonsense."

Again in 1816, Alexander put forth another pious proposal in a letter to this same Castlereagh. It called for a joint Russo-British effort to bring about disarmament. Again Castlereagh was skeptical, and nothing came of the project.

On a more practical level, Russia did renew (on November 20, 1815) its Quadruple Alliance with Austria, Prussia, and Great Britain. The signatories pledged themselves to preserve the post-Napoleonic order for the next twenty years and to meet regularly to discuss European concerns. In 1818, the rulers of this Concert of Europe met at the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle, where they agreed to end the occupation of France and admitted it into a new Quintuple Alliance.

Three more congresses were held between 1820 and 1822, primarily to deal with revolutions in Spain and Italy. These years were ones of revolution, with outbreaks also occurring in Portugal and Greece. Alexander believed that the monarchies of Europe had to work together to stamp out such revolts. He offered Russian troops to help Austria quell a rebellion in Naples and aid to the Spanish monarch to throttle revolution in both Spain and Latin America. Meanwhile, Britain began parting company from its more conservative allies, especially regarding Spain and its possessions in South and Central America; in the Monroe Doctrine (1823), the United States also announced its opposition to European intervention in the Americas.

Although firmly opposed to rebellions against the Christian monarchies of Europe, the Russian government was more ambivalent toward the Greek rebellion against the Muslim Turks. Greeks in the Russian city of Odessa had founded a "Friendly Society" in 1814, devoted to obtaining Greek independence. They backed one of Alexander's generals and aides-de-camp, the Greek Alexander Ypsilanti, who personally began the armed revolt in March 1821, when he led a small force across the border from Russia into Moldavia. The Greek John Capodistrias, who together with K. Nesselrode was acting as joint Russian foreign minister when the rebellion began, tried to convince Alexander that Russia should send troops to support the Greeks. Despite these pressures and Russians' natural sympathy for their Orthodox brethren, the tsar repudiated Ypsilanti, allowed a disappointed Capodistrias to resign (in 1822), and did not unilaterally intervene.

RULING THE EMPIRE, 1796–1825

The addition of Finland, Congress Poland, Bessarabia, and new areas in the Caucasus was comparable to the imperial gains made in the previous three decades by Catherine the Great. Alexander I, however, was less concerned with imposing uniformity than his grandmother had been. Among the most important reasons for this were Alexander's interest in federalism and constitutional projects,

the increasing differences between newly annexed peoples and the Russian majority in the empire, and the political and economic demands of the Napoleonic era.

New Territories

Although the Grand Duchy of Finland and Congress Poland were brought into the Russian Empire, they were granted considerable autonomy. Finland's was less solidly grounded, more based on Alexander's good will, than was Congress Poland's, where Alexander granted a constitution in 1815. In Finland, he did not grant one; and after 1809, he never allowed another diet to meet, as he did in Poland. But he did grant the duchy more self-rule than had Sweden; appointed a Finnish governor-general, who was advised by a duchy Government Council (in 1816 renamed the Finnish Senate); and generally abided by the traditional laws of the region.

By a statute of 1818, Alexander also approved of considerable Bessarabian autonomy. This statute reflected an idealistic belief that by respecting local laws and customs and by working through the Rumanian noble class, Russian administrators could use Bessarabia for the overall good of the Russian Empire. By 1823, however, enough bad reports from Russian officials in Kishinev had reached Alexander to convince him that his plans were not working. Rumanian nobles and Russian officials simply had not worked well together, each group being wary of, and often hostile toward, the other.

FIGURE 18.3. From 1828 to 1848, Mikhail Vorontsov had the above palace in Alupka (in the Crimea) built based on plans by English architects. The southern portico pictured here, reflecting Islamic influence, looks out on to the Black Sea.

To improve the administration of Bessarabia, Alexander turned to Mikhail Vorontsov (1782–1856). In 1823, the tsar made him the first Russian civilian to govern it; he was also given jurisdiction over the provinces of Kherson, Ekaterinoslav, and the Crimea. Vorontsov had been brought up in England, where his father was the Russian ambassador, and later, before leaving the military, he commanded Russian troops occupying post-Napoleonic France. Upset by local corruption and overburdened peasants, he reduced Bessarabian autonomy in the hope of establishing a more humane, efficient government. Later, this process was greatly accelerated after Alexander's death in 1825.

The situation in the Caucasus was more bellicose. Between 1802 and 1806, Russian authority was in the hands of General Tsitsianov, himself a Georgian. Contemptuous of Muslims and even of most non-Muslim peoples of the region, and believing in fear as an instrument of rule, he angered many by his policies. In 1804—when war with Persia also began—an anti-Russian rebellion broke out in Georgia as well as in several other areas of the Caucasus. Additional rebellions occurred in subsequent years, especially in 1812, against Tsitsianov's stern military successors. For the remainder of Alexander's reign, Russian troops often attacked Muslim mountaineers in an attempt to pacify them.

Annexed areas, such as Georgia, were ruled more directly than Caucasian vassal states such as Karabagh. But each of the latter states usually was required to turn over control of its foreign policy to Russia, to pay tribute (although economic difficulties sometimes prevented this), and to allow the garrisoning of Russian troops in its capital. Although in most respects vassal rulers were free to rule according to traditional methods, they were liable to be overthrown and replaced if they angered Russian authorities. And sooner or later, either in Alexander's reign or in subsequent decades, their states completely lost their autonomy.

In both vassal states and in directly annexed areas, Russia was forced to rely at least partly on native elites and sometimes to advance native pro-Russian commoners to elite status. Attempts were made, through such means as education and the awarding of Russian ranks, to coopt the old non-Russian elites into willingly serving Russian interests. To the extent money would allow—and it would not allow much—Russian officials and Russian troops were also increased in the Caucasus. By 1819, there were about 50,000 to 60,000 Russian troops there. Despite some limitations on both Islam and Georgian Orthodoxy (for example, the Georgians lost their right to their own patriarch), the Russian government generally did not interfere with the religious beliefs and practices of the Caucasian peoples.

Older Western Regions

Although in ethnic Russia, both Paul and Alexander I supported more government centralization than had Catherine II, in most non-Russian western regions conquered before Paul's reign the two male tsars were less rigorous centralizers than Catherine had been. As in Finland and Congress Poland, concessions to local sentiments resulted partly from the desire to gain local support in the Napoleonic wars and partly from other personal and administrative reasons.

In the areas of Livland, Estland, and Courland, the Baltic German elite regained some local controls lost under Catherine II. Although pressured by St. Petersburg to emancipate their serfs, when it occurred (1816–1819), the serfs received no land, and the Baltic nobles benefited in many ways more than the serfs. By 1825, the Germanic nobles, along with Lutheran pastors, also dominated an educational system more developed than Great Russia's.

In Lithuania, Belorussia, and part of Ukraine, education was overwhelmingly under Polish influence, and St. Petersburg ceased actively supporting the conversion of Catholic Uniates. One of Alexander's influential young friends and Unofficial Committee members, the Polish Prince Adam Czartoryski, served for two decades as educational curator over this large region—all encompassed in the Vilna School Region. From its language of instruction and textbooks to its administrators, it was basically Polish. Only toward the end of Alexander's reign, when he became more conservative, did Russian policies, educational and otherwise, become less tolerant of Polish influence in the partitioned territories.

Among Alexander's Unofficial Committee, there was a Ukrainian as well as a Pole. The Ukrainian, Viktor Kochubei (also Alexander's first minister of interior), was not an ardent spokesman for his nationality. In fact, he shared the Little Russian mentality of many Ukrainian nobles: He was opposed to any talk of Ukrainian autonomy. Partly as a result of such attitudes, the government continued its policy of gradually integrating Ukraine into the empire's administrative structure. Paul introduced military conscription to the area in 1797, and many Ukrainians, including Ukrainian Cossacks, loyally supported the tsar against Napoleon.

Siberia and Russian America

Under Alexander I, Siberia experienced one of its worst governor-generals and one of its best. The first was Ivan Pestel, who, from 1806 to 1818, despotically ruled over both native peoples and Russians alike. The second was the reformer and former chief adviser of the tsar, Mikhail Speransky. Although he was governor-general for only two years, he drew up a series of reforms that Alexander promulgated in 1822. They outlined certain native rights and represented a distinct improvement in bringing a more orderly, less corrupt, and less arbitrary administration to Siberia. Yet even these reforms continued to aim toward the eventual Russification of Siberia.

The reigns of Paul and Alexander were full of Russian activity in Alaska and even further south on the American Continent. In 1812, the Russian-American Company founded Fort Ross, some hundred miles north of San Francisco Bay. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 was aimed not only at European interference in Latin America, but also at Russian expansion in North America.

The main Alaskan attractions were sea otters and fur seals. In 1799, Paul granted the Russian-American Company a monopoly to exploit Russian possessions in North America. From its regional capital of New Archangel (later Sitka), it oversaw an increasingly profitable operation until, by the end of Alexander's reign, government interference contributed to reversing profitability.

DOMESTIC POLICIES, 1815–1825

In the last decade of his reign, Alexander's enthusiasm for reform proposals waned but did not completely disappear. With few exceptions, such as Speransky's Siberian reform plan, even less came of them than earlier ones.

One such plan, finalized in 1820, was composed by a former Unofficial Committee member, Nikolai Novosiltsev, who also had participated in drawing up the constitution for Congress Poland in 1815. Although similar in some respects to Speransky's 1809 constitutional project—but even more firmly maintaining tsarist powers—it proposed a more decentralized administrative structure for the tsar to oversee. His empire was to be divided into large administrative areas, each containing at least several provinces.

Novosiltsev's plan was probably promoted not only by Alexander's interest in constitutions, but also by the addition of so many new non-Russian areas to the empire. With Congress Poland, Finland, and Bessarabia already receiving considerable autonomy, and other new peoples from the Caucasus becoming part of the Russian Empire, some new thinking about how to rule such a heterogeneous empire seemed fitting. Yet, except for creating a few new large administrative areas and putting strong administrators in charge of them— such as Vorontsov in the south-southwest—Alexander introduced little from this reform plan.

Instead, partly because of his escalating fear of rebellious forces, both at home and abroad, and because of his growing mysticism and religiosity, he became more conservative. He began relying more than ever on General Alexei Arakcheev, the man who had introduced him to military life at Emperor Paul's Gatchina. The radical Alexander Herzen later described Arakcheev as: "without a doubt, one of the most vile characters emerging after Peter I to the heights of the Russian government." His character traits, thought Herzen, included "superhuman devotion, mechanical exactness, the precision of a chronometer, [and] no feeling whatsoever." Although Herzen was not being completely objective and Alexander I once wrote of Arakcheev's "sensitive soul," Herzen's remarks mirrored the feeling of many intellectuals of the general's own era.

Arakcheev's influence on domestic policies was extensive during Alexander I's last decade, and he is best known for his association with Military Settlements. They were begun by the tsar in 1810 and greatly expanded beginning in 1816. Estimates of the percentage of Russian soldiers serving in these settlements by 1825 vary, but some place them as high as about 30 percent of the total army. Most were in the areas of Novgorod and in the south between the Dnieper and Bug rivers.

Alexander began the settlements with the best of intentions. They were to save the government money and create a more humane environment for soldiers. The savings—much needed by a government heavily in debt—were to come primarily by combining farming and military training, thus supplying the settlements' food. Some able-bodied men were to be primarily farming peasants, others primarily soldiers, but all were to do at least some drilling and farming. The more humane environment was to come chiefly by allowing the families of the soldiers to live in the settlements—normally soldiers were separated from their families during their twenty-five years of service. Health care, sanitary conditions, and education were to be superior to that normally provided for either soldiers or peasants.

Once again, however, reality thwarted good intentions. As implemented by Arakcheev and his subordinate officers, military savings (and even profit making) far outweighed humane considerations in dealing with perhaps as many as 750,000 colonists (including men, women, and children). Given Arakcheev's emphasis on stern discipline, this is hardly surprising. The lives of the settlements' peasants, women, and children became more militarized and regimented, and those of the soldiers more laborious. Huts were all uniform—and crowded—and their inhabitants uniformed. Living conditions were harsh. When rebellions broke out, as they often did, the usual punishment for ringleaders was running the gauntlet (where thousands of blows often resulted in death) or being sent to Siberia—and sometimes, if one survived the gauntlet, both.

If Arakcheev appealed to Alexander's military side and love of order, Alexander Golitsyn (1773–1844), his procurator of the Holy Synod, appealed to his growing religiosity. In 1812, the tsar had followed Golitsyn's recommendation to create a Bible Society, and by 1824 it had close to 300 branches and was dispensing Bibles and New Testaments in various languages of the empire. Both Golitsyn and Alexander were quite ecumenical in their Christian mysticism, and the society included Christians of different denominations. In 1817, the tsar named Golitsyn to head a new Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs.

Golitsyn's goal was to base education on religious principles. This goal was sometimes applied in an extreme manner, especially by the opportunist Mikhail Magnitsky, who began purging the University of Kazan of "Godless" professors and books. This began in 1819, soon after he was named as curator of the Kazan educational district.

By 1824, Magnitsky had become part of a plot to oust Golitsyn. The most prestigious plotter was Arakcheev, who had long resented Golitsyn's influence over Alexander. Already in 1822, Arakcheev had introduced the tsar to a fiery Orthodox monk, Photius, who had little tolerance for Enlightenment ideas, Golitsyn's more ecumenical religious views, or the Bible Society. Alexander soon came to regard Photius as divinely inspired and followed his advice to dissolve Masonic lodges (1822) and, in 1824, to dismiss Golitsyn, who was rumored to be sympathetic to Freemasonry.

POLITICAL OPPOSITION AND THE DECEMBRISTS

By the time Masonic lodges were prohibited, educated opinion had grown and become more independent. Alexander Martin has written of the beginnings of a "civil society" during Alexander's reign, although cautioning that it meant something different here than in Western Europe (see Chapter 17). The growth of education, social, cultural, and philanthropic organizations, student "circles," private clubs and salons, and fraternal societies (including Masonic lodges) all helped bring educated people together and fostered discussions and thoughts about civic concerns. In the first half of Alexander's reign, the problem of Napoleon was often central to such concerns—as Tolstoy's opening chapters in *War and Peace* remind us. Although social standing affected political attitudes, it did not determine them.

Among aristocratic families, for example, both conservatives and radicals could be found.

The growth of educated society and public opinion gave more breadth to political opposition. Before 1812, it came primarily from conservative aristocratic nobles, some of whom were senators (there were ninety-one senators in 1809). These conservative aristocrats were resentful of the Unofficial Committee, of Speransky, and of the failure of the Senate to play a more important governmental role. They found allies at court among relatives of Alexander and in the writer and historian Karamzin. The latter's *Memoir of Ancient and Modern Russia*, presented to Alexander I in 1811, reflected conservative opposition to reform schemes such as those of Speransky, which were believed to be foreign-inspired. Karamzin argued that historical continuity demanded the maintenance and support of autocracy, noble privileges, serfdom, and Orthodoxy. The dismissal of Speransky in 1812 reduced such criticism, as did new appointments of a few conservative nobles such as Fedor Rostopchin, who became military governor of Moscow. Once Napoleon was defeated, however, Alexander I replaced Rostopchin and became less concerned with appeasing public opinion.

Within educated society (*obshchestvo* in Russian), there was a smaller group, sometimes later labeled the intelligentsia. Although debates have existed for more than a century on just who should be included in this category, it certainly included radical critics of autocracy and serfdom and had come into being by 1825. Most of its members were of noble origin, and many of them later became involved in the Decembrist conspiracy of 1825, the seeds of which were sown much earlier.

Most Decembrist leaders were from the upper nobility, including Prince Sergei Trubetskoi (1790–1860); Prince Sergei Volkonsky (1788–1865); Paul Pestel (1793–1826), son of the former governor-general of Siberia; and several Muravievs and Muraviev-Apostols. Many of the leaders had been young Guards officers who fought against Napoleon, both in Russia and in other parts of Europe, and remained officers afterwards.

The Decembrists belonged to a sequence of secret societies between 1816 and 1825. The first was the Union of Salvation (or Society of the True and Loyal Sons of the Fatherland), founded in 1816 in St. Petersburg. At its maximum, its membership consisted of about thirty Guards officers. In early 1818, it was succeeded by the Union of Welfare, which expanded to about 200 members (still mainly Guards officers). Partly because of increasing government pressure and the dispersion of military officers, it, in turn, was transformed into two new societies in 1821: the Northern Society and the Southern Society. A final group, the Society of United Slavs, was formed in 1823 and had about fifty members, almost all junior officers, when it merged with the Southern Society in 1825.

Ultimately, almost 600 men were implicated in the Decembrist conspiracy, almost half of whom received sentences. These Decembrists differed considerably in their political ideas but agreed in their opposition to serfdom and autocracy. Illustrative of their differences by 1825 are two chief documents: a draft constitution drawn up by the Northern Society's Nikita Muraviev and another, more radical one, called *Russian Justice*, written by the Southern Society's leader, Colonel Paul Pestel.

Among the inspirations for Muraviev's draft were the U.S. Constitution and Nikita Panin's eighteenth-century reform ideas. The draft called for a federation of thirteen states and two provinces. It would have a hereditary emperor, but his powers would be limited, more analogous to those of a U.S. president. He would have to share federal powers with a bicameral People's Assembly. Serfdom, censorship, and official classes and titles were to be abolished and civil liberties, such as freedom of assembly, recognized.

This document, although liberal, was not democratic: The right to hold office and vote was based on property qualifications. (This, however, is hardly surprising at a time when neither Great Britain nor the United States yet allowed all white men full suffrage rights.)

It also did not threaten noble landholding rights. Although the serfowners were to lose their serfs, they were to keep their estates—Muraviev subsequently bowed to pressure from more radical Northern Society members and agreed that freed serfs should be provided with a very small amount of land. Providing no or insufficient land would guarantee that many former serfs would continue laboring on their former masters' estates

Although Muraviev's constitution was willing to grant considerable local powers to his proposed states and regions, some of which contained primarily non-Russians, Pestel's draft called for rigid centralization and even Russification. It stated that its proposed new administration should "constantly aim at making them [the nationalities] into *one* single nation and at dissolving all differences into one common mass."[3] Only for Poles and Jews was Pestel willing to make concessions. He held secret negotiations with some Poles and suggested in his draft the possibility of Polish independence under certain conditions. For Jews who would not wish to assimilate, Pestel's document suggested helping them emigrate to Asia Minor, where they could establish their own state.

Pestel's *Russian Justice* also differed from Muraviev's plan in calling for a republic. In it, power would be divided between a unicameral People's Assembly, a 5-person State Duma, and a 120-member Supreme Council. To bring about his system, Pestel counted on a military coup, followed by a temporary dictatorship; like most Decembrists, he did not intend to stir the masses to rebellion.

Although Pestel's document also called for eliminating serfdom, censorship, and official class distinctions, its insistence on a secret political police and a ban on private organizations and societies was hardly liberal. The radical and rationalistic French Jacobean thinking seemed to influence him more than did the moderate and pragmatic American or British traditions.

This can be seen further in Pestel's granting of full citizenship rights—to all men over twenty—and in his radical land reform plans. Half of all land of the country's wealthiest property owners was to be confiscated, and every citizen was to have the right to enough public land (from communes) to provide for his family.

The ideas in the two documents were generated by many causes, especially the

[3]Marc Raeff, ed, *The Decembrist Movement* (Englewood Cliffs, N J., 1966), p. 147.

turmoil of the Napoleonic wars and their aftermath, which exposed some Decembrists to foreign lands and ideas. Early expectations and later frustrations also played their part. The first were stimulated by Alexander's initial and lingering liberal sympathies and his rhetoric against the "universal tyrant" Napoleon, by the philanthropic ideas of Freemasonry, by foreign revolutionary and patriotic examples (stretching from Spain to Germany and Greece), and by the heroic Romanticism of the period. Later Decembrist frustrations were created by seeing post-Napoleonic France and Congress Poland receive constitutions while Russia did not; by the contrast between a freer, more prosperous West and Russia; and by hatred of Arakcheev and all he stood for, including the military colonies and harsh, cruel discipline in the army. The final fuel to the fire was unexpected and occurred in Taganrog, on the Azov Sea. There, on November 19, 1825, a visiting Alexander I died after a brief illness.[4] His death, followed by almost a month of dynastic uncertainty, seemed to present the Decembrists with an opportunity not to be missed.

Alexander and his wife had no sons and accordingly—as decreed by Emperor Paul—the emperor's oldest surviving brother was to become the next ruler. This was Constantine, but he had secretly given up his right to the throne several years earlier. Yet the next oldest brother, Nicholas, although aware of this renunciation, still thought it proper to swear allegiance to his older brother. Only after Constantine, the governor-general in Congress Poland, again renounced his claim did Nicholas set December 14 as the date for officially proclaiming himself emperor.

On that day, the Northern Society attempted to incite a rebellion that would impose a new constitutional regime on Russia. Its specific plans were hazy, however, and hindered by the last-minute defection of several conspirators, including the movement's so-called temporary dictator, Prince (and Colonel) Sergei Trubetskoi.

Nevertheless, Decembrist officers did muster about 3,000 troops to march to the Senate Square, where the famous statue of Peter the Great stood looking out over the Neva River. The officers convinced their troops not to swear allegiance to Nicholas because he was usurping his brother's crown. To counter them, Nicholas, who was forewarned of a conspiracy, massed a force at least three times as large. Before unleashing his loyal troops on the rebels, Nicholas sent both the capital's governor-general and its metropolitan to persuade them to cease their rebellion. The first was shot and the second told to stay out of politics and stick to prayer. After several hours, and with late-afternoon darkness approaching in this northern capital, Nicholas ordered a Horse Guards' attack. Partly because of the slippery ice, it was ineffective. Finally in desperation, he began his reign as he hoped he would not have to—he ordered his cannons to fire on the rebels.

[4]Later unfounded rumors and a few works on Alexander I, most recently Alexis Troubetzkoy's *Imperial Legend: The Disappearance of Czar Alexander I* (New York, 2002) claimed he did not then die, but lived on for many years as a hermit. Most experts on the period, however, continue to believe that he did die in 1825.

FIGURE 18.4. The grave site of Princess Catherine Trubetskaia, at the Znamenskii Convent, Irkutsk. She died in 1854, a year and a half before her husband, Sergei, was finally permitted to leave Siberia.

The cannons did their job. Some rebels were killed or wounded; others fled, especially toward the Neva, where cannon shots broke through the ice, causing some drownings. Although no exact death toll is known, most estimates place the number under 100. Almost immediately the roundup of conspirators began. One prominent Decembrist had even been arrested the day before the outbreak in the capital. This was Colonel Paul Pestel, leader of the Southern Society. Within a few weeks, that society's Sergei Muraviev-Apostol, with the help of other southern conspirators, led troops in an armed uprising in Ukraine. They too, however, were soon suppressed.

For their plotting and insurrections, close to 300 men were sentenced to imprisonment or exile. Most of them were officers, including a total of more than thirty colonels and generals. Among them were the princes Colonel Sergei Trubetskoi and General Sergei Volkonsky, whose wives followed their husbands to the Siberian mines of Nerchinsk. Five men were hanged, including Kondrati Ryleev (a poet and secretary of the Russian-American Company), Pestel, and Sergei Muraviev-Apostol. In the hanging, three of the five nooses slipped. After falling to the scaffold floor, and before being lifted up for a second, more successful attempt, Muraviev-Apostol uttered: "Poor Russia! We can't even hang someone decently!"

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