

NIKITA MURAVIEV

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Muraviev, Nikita (1796-1843) was one of the Russian military officers who conspired to overthrow Tsar Nicholas I of Russia on December 14, 1825. One of the key “brains” behind the coup attempt, Muraviev is best known for the constitution of the Russian state he drafted. Not having actually participated in the uprising, he was nevertheless condemned to death when it failed. His sentence was later commuted to 20 years of hard labor in the Nerchinsk mines. He died in Irkutsk Province.

In 1813, after studying at Moscow University, Muraviev had embarked on a military career and formed with other aristocratic young officers a secret society called the Union of Salvation in 1816, which was led by Paul Pestel and renamed the Union of Welfare a year later. Stimulated by the French revolution (1789) and the Napoleonic War (1812-1815), the officers had also been influenced by the liberal ideas of French and German philosophers to which they were exposed when they served in Europe or attended European universities. The new Russian literature, full of moral and social protest against Russian backwardness, also played a key role in the intellectual formation of the conspirators. Among the writers were Nikolai Novikov, Aleksandr Radishchev, and the poets Pushkin and Griboyedov. The Arzamas group, a friendly and informal literary society founded around 1815,

also attracted several men who would become “Decembrists,” including Nikita Muraviev, Nikolai Turgenev, and Mikhail Orlov.

Economic stagnation, high taxation, and the need for deep reform motivated Muraviev and other Decembrists to take action. They advocated the establishment of representative democracy, but disagreed on the form it should take; Muraviev favored a constitutional monarchy, while Pestel supported a democratic republic. To throw off guard the tsarist secret agents and purge members who were either too dictatorial or conservative, they formally “dissolved” the Union of Welfare in 1821 and established two new ones. The Northern Society, centered in St. Petersburg, was headed by Captain Nikita Muraviev and Nicholas Turgenev, a high official of the Ministry of Finance. The more radical Southern Society was dominated by Pestel. During the interregnum between Alexander I and Nicholas I, the two societies – which maintained close contact with one another – plotted the coup.

Muraviev became the ideologist for the Northern Society, drafting propaganda and a constitution that was found among his papers following his arrest. The uncompleted constitutional project reveals the strong impact the American constitution must have had on Muraviev. He, like Pestel, had republican visions: “The Russian nation is free and independent. It cannot be the property of a person or a family. The people are the source of supreme power. And to them belongs the sole right to formulate the fundamental law.” Muraviev advocated a constitutional monarchy along the lines of the 13 original states of North America, separation of powers, civil liberties, and the emancipation of the serfs. Yet, while his constitution guaranteed the equality of all citizens before the law, he emphasized the

special rights and interests of the landed classes. Thus he opposed Pestel's idea of universal suffrage. Only property-holders shall vote and have the right to seek elective office, he wrote.

What distinguishes Muraviev's draft constitution is its advocacy of federalism. Arguably, he was the first to expound it. His federalist ideas were not echoed by any major political movement in Russia until the twentieth century. "Vast territories, and a huge standing army are in themselves obstacles to freedom," he wrote. Too nationalist to recommend that the empire return stolen, non-Russian lands, however, Muraviev urged that Russia adopt a federalist system as a way to reconcile "national greatness with civic freedom."

The Decembrist uprising failed, due both to the plotters' inefficiency, reticence in spreading propaganda, and lack of mass support. Morale failed, some defected, and others failed to give the order to rise. Five of their leaders, including the poet Kondraty Ryleyev, were executed. Despite the stricter censorship Nicholas I imposed after the crushed rebellion, the memory of the Decembrists inspired many writers and revolutionaries, especially the political refugee Alexander Herzen, who established the journal *The Bell* ["Kolokol"] in London in 1857 to "propagate free ideas within Russia."

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