JENNY SCHWARZ-SOCHOR

P. I. PESTEL

THE BEGINNINGS OF JACOBIN THOUGHT IN RUSSIA

Few Western historians of Russian Revolutionary thought have shown much interest in the Decembrist movement. Its two risings of December 1825 and January 1826, unprepared and ineptly executed, are indeed of little importance. For years a group of young men, representatives of the "conscience-stricken gentry" and mostly army officers, had as members of a secret society hoped for, and finally attempted, the overthrow of Tsarism by means of a military revolt. Nicholas I was thorough, the suppression was cruel and complete, it inaugurated an era of material and moral stagnation.

Yet some of the Decembrists were people of brilliant intellectual gifts whose ideas repay examination, foremost among them P.I. Pestel.[1] The present study is not a biography [2], it is an attempt to analyse some of his views in their historical context, their origin and their affinity with latter day opinions. A Jacobin radical, a disciple of Rousseau, Pestel was one of the first to apply the maxims of eighteenth-century French egalitarianism to Russian conditions. His anticipation of much of Bolshevist thought is interesting and in so far as Bolshevism derives from the same source [3], not surprising. All he left us in a bundle of papers is an unfinished Charter of a new revolutionary Russia, *Russkaya Pravda*. It contains several drafts written between 1820 and 1825, and he considered only the first three chapters (written in 1824 and 1825) as final. But its messianic character, its totalitarian implications, and not least its lucid, logical formulations make this Charter fascinating reading.[4]

[1] Pavel Ivanovich Pestel, son of a Governor-General of Siberia, born 1793, executed 1826.

[2] For a short biography see N. P. Silvanskii, P. I. Pestel, in: Russkii Biograficheskii Slovar. Also by the same author, Dekabrist Pestel pered verkhovnym ugolovnym sudom, Rostov 1907.

[3] See above all, the interesting work by J. L. Talmon, The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy, London 1952.

[4] Russkaya Pravda P. I. Pestelya, ed. P. Shchegolev, St. Petersburg 1906.

Like the eighteenth-century "philosophes" Pestel believes in a pure science of politics, logically deduced from universally valid principles, and he therefore rejects, as e.g. Condorcet had done before him, the possibility of compromise or reform as merely perpetuating the absurdities and imperfections of the existing order. His Charter must not be burdened by historical reminiscences [1], for the shameful era of serfdom has nothing to offer. There must be no mention of the present which will have ceased to exist by the time *Russkaya Pravda* becomes the law of the land. His new society will rest on the everlasting Laws of Nature [2], not the irrational habits of man.

The doctrinaire sees his surroundings with the eyes of a mathematician. He draws his conclusions on the nature of the State from a priori maxims, from theoretical premises, which he considers self-evident and irrefutable, and he expects in consequence, that his structure too will be proof against attack and change. His men and women will, like mathematical symbols, conform to his logical thought [3], for opposition would plainly be irrational. In the manner of the enlightenment he derives his maxims from human needs, not historical coincidence, and these needs are primary and unvarying, they apply to everyone irrespective of tradition or geography.[4]

For Pestel as for Helvetius, Holbach, or Rousseau self-preservation is an elemental, primary urge, given to man by God and deeply implanted in his heart.[5] Far from being detrimental to others self-preservation or self-interest is the greatest force for universal harmony. Since it can only fulfill itself in a community, it coincides with the general well-being, and its natural aim must be the greatest possible happiness of all and everyone.[6] "People exist for their own well-being and to fulfill the will of God, who has summoned men to this earth to praise his name, to be virtuous and happy." [7] This to Pestel is a central principle, a Law of Nature, and as such self-evident and timeless. In general, his values are defined and unchangeable because they are based on what he calls the Natural Laws. This reasoning leads him,

[1] Russkaya Pravda P. I. Pestelya, ed. P. Shchegolev, subsequently quoted as Shchegolev, p. 9.
[2] Ibid., pp. 4-5.
[3] "Pestel always spoke intelligently, and firmly stood by his views, in the correctness of which he always believed as one generally believes in a mathematical truth; he was never tempted by anything. Perhaps that was why he alone of all of us for almost ten years never for a moment weakened (in his resolution) and fervently worked for the secret society. Once he had proved to himself that the secret society was the true means of obtaining the desirable end he fused all his being with it." Quotation from Zapiski Yakushkina, Moscow 1905, pp. 23-24.
[4] Shchegolev, pp. 4-5.
[5] Ibid., pp. 3-4.
[6] Ibid., p. 4.
[7] Ibid., p. 6.

as it had led his French predecessors, to view events in categories of "good" and "bad", "right" and "wrong". Doubts about the relativity of all values, about the time-bound, transitory character of much of his own concepts, have no place in his system, as they had none in eighteenth-century France. History forms no integral part of his social order. Indeed, he has no understanding of the process of centuries, which with their manifold forces have shaped European society. He uses examples from the past merely to prove his views.[1] The origins and historical causes of the plight of his fellow-citizens are of no consequence to him. He gives a sincere and moving account of the harsh conditions of life in Russia [2], but his explanations are essentially moral. With Rousseau he ascribes the prevailing misery to the strength of partial interests, "the whims of individual rulers".[3] Social harmony is to Pestel a precondition of happiness. Any self-centred egotism is, therefore, dangerous and must be extirpated. "It is tyranny, the overthrow of justice, suppression, shameful and disastrous".[4]

This is Rousseau's Social Contract with its totalitarian implications and its ambiguity of meaning. "Self-preservation" or "self-interest" is a beneficial force if it represents the "general good", it is harmful if the interest is "partial". To Pestel as to Rousseau or the Jacobins, social unity means unanimity. Factions and parties are the negation of the moral order, the very essence of "special interests". "The terrible events in France during the revolutionary period", says Pestel to his prosecutors, "made me look for means to avoid them, and this subsequently led me to the idea of a Provisional Government and its inevitability".[5] This is familiar, it is the Provisional Revolutionary Dictatorship of Robespierre or Babeuf. An application of Rousseau's ideas, the plan repeats the fundamental contradiction between the belief that, left to follow their self-interest, the people always choose what is morally right, and the need for a strong Government to make them will the "good".

"The Government exists for the people" [6], says Pestel, but he distinguishes between those that give the orders and those, whose task it is to obey them.[7] It is an ambivalent attitude, a simultaneous love for, and distrust of, man which moves him to ask for additional

[1] Tsentralnyi Arkhiv, Vosstanie Dekabristov, Materialy, Moscow 1927, vol. IV, p. 91, subsequently quoted as Vosstanie.
[2] Shchegolev, e.g. on military settlements and soldiers' children, pp. 75-81.
[3] Ibid., p. 8.
[4] Ibid., p. 8.
[5] Ibid., p. 9; also Vosstanie, vol. IV, pp. 90-91.
[6] Shchegolev, p. 6.
[7] Ibid., p. 2-3.

guarantees against "personal passions and private views".[1] He finds the safeguards in his Charter, *Russkaya Pravda*, which he writes as a guide for a future *Directoire*, "an order or directive to the Provisional Government for its activities... it contains the duties imposed on the Provisional Government and serves Russia as an assurance that the Government will act solely in the interests of the motherland".[2] He holds that the absence of such a charter in many countries had in the past fifty years led to bloodshed, civil wars, and new forms of despotism. Deprived of the benefits of "full and clear directives", the Governments could act arbitrarily, to their own personal advantage, and therefore against the common good.[3] Pestel's *Russkaya Pravda* will firmly guide the new rulers towards a gradual transformation of the conditions of life. Its publication will free the masses from the dread of the unknown, from suspicion and despair.[4] Led by a personal élite and provided with a set of laws, the Russian people should escape the dangers of civil wars and the perversion of moral values.

Pestel's rationalist mentality ignores all that is imponderable or unpredictable in human nature. His conclusions follow necessarily from his premises, namely that man is above all else a rational being and that his ultimate aim is "happiness". As he fervently believes that his plan is beneficial, he cannot accept doubts or disagreement, which he *knows* to be unnatural. He would, therefore, with Rousseau or the Jacobins (and for the same reasons)[5] stifle all opposition. That he might in the process also destroy "happiness" does not occur to him. Man can after all be made to will "the good".

A CLASSLESS SOCIETY

Pestel's harmonious society is of necessity egalitarian. Serfdom, corruption, and injustice are the results of the particular interests of the ruling class, they are artificial products of tyranny, calculated to destroy the "good" bonds that unite the citizens.[6] His eloquent hostility against "the aristocracies of any kind" [7] sounds like early Marxist denunciation. Class distinctions give a few men privileges at the expense of the masses. But the *raison d'être* of human society is the promotion of the general well-being. "The very essence of a class-

[1] Ibid., p. 11.
[2] Ibid., p. 10.
[3] Ibid., pp. 10-11.
[4] Ibid., p. 11.
[5] See Talmon, op. cit., pp. 40-42, 111-118.
[6] Shchegolev, p. 60.
[7] Vosstanie, Vol. IV, p. 91.

ridden society is its partiality".[1] He analyses the rigid social structure in Russia, its many subdivisions, its sliding scale of rights, with serfdom as its base, "this hideous and violent order of things".[2]

The desire to abolish serfdom had been the motive force in establishing the secret society, and all its members unanimously demanded its eradication. Pestel imposes this task on his Provisional Government as their holiest and most urgent duty.[3] He sweeps aside the privileges of the nobility, such as primogenitur, tax exemption, freedom from military service. The very word "aristocrat" must be erased from the Russian vocabulary, for to become separated from the popular masses is disastrous.[4] "Long enough has it been possible for a few to oppress all the others".[5] Will his measures encounter opposition? The rationalist in him hopes that the "good" nobility will gladly agree, for it is self-evident that his Russia will be a happier place to live in. Should, however, "contrary to expectations", some of them persist in "prejudices hostile to the popular masses" [6], such "monsters" [7] must be severely punished.

In his denunciations and demands Pestel does not yet move beyond the radical political egalitarianism of the French revolutionaries. The same is true of his invectives against wealth. To the moralist wealth is worse than inherited feudal rights, for feudalism, like every other institution, is subject to public opinion, whereas the rich can buy public opinion, "...with gold and silver, by means of which they stifle public opinion as they wish, and make the people entirely dependent on themselves".[8] Greed, corruption, and the inevitable deterioration of morals are the result. The general poverty increases, avarice and cruelty predominate.

These are the sentiments of a medieval monk arguing against usury, they are not those of a European citizen in an age of steam and iron. But the Jacobin attitude was similar, they too failed to understand the new forces of capitalism, the potentialities of the new industrial era. They all looked backward, including even the early nineteenth-century English reformers, and in Russia capitalism was as yet rudimentary. Nevertheless, it is the concept of wealth or property

[1] Shchegolev, p. 60.
[2] Ibid., p. 71.
[3] Ibid., p. 66.
[4] Ibid., p. 70.
[5] Ibid., p. 70.
[6] Ibid., p. 71.
[7] Ibid., p. 66.
[8] Ibid., pp. 58, 59.

that separates Pestel from his predecessors and shows him as an original, independent thinker.

In *Russkaya Pravda* he makes the interesting statement, which he partly repeats in his evidence before the Extraordinary Commission [1], that he saw the characteristic feature of his own time in the struggle between the masses and the feudal aristocracy, *at which time* there arose the aristocracy of wealth.[2] It is easy to object that he took the effect for the cause, that it was precisely this "aristocracy of wealth", or rather the new forces of production, which had undermined the rigidity of feudalism and made the social upheavals possible. But he saw the connexion, which was more than the Jacobins had done, and he drew his conclusions.

A few notes written separately, but perhaps intended to form part of his *Pravda* are worth quoting.[3]

> "The poor live solely by their work, the rich on their estates, their capital. The poor cannot put off the receipt of their earnings since they have no capital other than their work, and die of starvation if unemployed. The rich can get their income later, they can live for a while on their capital and thus force the poor to adopt their own terms so that they may be employed. The fact that some can wait and others cannot, is the cause of much evil."

These views, it is true, were held by a number of economists of the time, but Pestel's conclusions are very different, for he does not, as some of them do, call on the employers to provide a fair wage. He invokes the help of the State to abolish the dependence of the many on the few. "I know very well", he continues,

> "that all the aristocrats, both titled and moneyed will rise against those principles. But has the genius of evil ever permitted to propound what is good and has he not always waged a mortal war against it, the more embittered and obdurate the greater the interests at stake?"

Which then are his measures to abolish want and dependence? In *Russkaya Pravda* he quotes two views on the ownership of land.[4] The first is Rousseau's conception of the common ownership of all

[1] Nicholas I had set up an Extraordinary Commission to try the Decembrists.
[2] Shchegolev, p. 59; Vosstanie, vol. IV, p. 105.
[3] M. V. Nechkina, Dvizhenie Dekabristov, Moscow 1955, Vol. I, pp. 299-300. See also V. I. Semevskii, Politicheskie i obshchestvennye idei Dekabristov, St. Petersburg, 1909, p. 630.
[4] Shchegolev, pp. 203-204.

land. The second, ultimately derived from Locke, stresses individual labour as the origin of agricultural productivity and thus justifies private ownership. Pestel tries to combine the two opinions, "each of which contains much that is true". Man must live on the products of the earth, and hence the land must be held in common. But with the growth of civil society there arose the notion of private property and "safeguarding these rights of property is the chief aim of civil society and the sacred task of the Government". Every human being is justified in demanding from the State the satisfaction of his basic needs, "because he is a human being", or in different words, because he is subject to the Natural Law of Self-Preservation. But once his "essential" demands are assured, the individual has no claim on the Government, he must himself work for the "surplus", always provided he enjoys freedom of enterprise and security of tenure. The scheme is thus an ingenious blend of socialist planning and *laissez-faire*. Its details are scattered, the concrete measures have to be deduced from various fragments of his *Pravda* written over a period of some five years. It is no more than an outline and much is in need of clarification. What emerges clearly is the slow and laborious growth of his ideas and the increasingly radical trend of his thought.[1]

For administrative purposes Pestel subdivides Russia into a series of regions and subregions whose smallest unit he calls a *volost*. The *volost* is a group of villages or a small township with an average population of some four to five thousand (one thousand male voters as a minimum).[2] In each *volost* one half of the land is held in common by all its inhabitants while the other half remains with their former owners or with the Government. The common land cannot be alienated, it is redistributed annually among the members and is meant to provide for their essential needs. The other half is saleable and produces the surplus. The shares must be big enough to feed an average family of five persons. Pestel is well aware of the opposition his plan might encounter outside Russia, but he is convinced that in Russia, where this practice is customary, "the feelings of the people are inclined towards it". Every citizen asks for as much land as he desires, although the ultimate size of his holding will depend on circumstances. The poorest have first claim, they can also rely on agricultural banks for their initial expenses.[3] Since Russia had only some forty million

[1] M. V. Nechkina, op. cit. Vol. I, pp. 403-426 and Vol. II, pp. 70-86. Also S. M. Faiershtein, Dva Varianta Resheniya Agrarnovo Voprosa v "Russkoi Pravde" Pestelya, published in Ocherki iz Istorii Dvizheniya Dekabristov, ed. N. M. Druzhinin, Moscow 1954, pp. 15-61.

[3] Shchegolev, pp. 24, 25, and 196.

[2] Ibid., pp. 204-207.

inhabitants at the time, the possibility of overpopulation and scarcity of arable land could not be even remotely conceived.

The detailed programme for the division of the land and the emancipation of the serfs is contained in two distinct versions of *Russkaya Pravda*, the latter being more radical and decisive.[1] They were obviously written in different years and reflect Pestel's conflict with other more moderate members of the society. His belief in the sanctity of property leads him at first to envisage a gradual process of emancipation, lasting some fifteen years, with the peasant buying his freedom by working on the farm of his former owner as well as on his own share of the common.[2] He even invites the landowning aristocracy to put forward precise practical suggestions.[3] In his final draft (written in 1825) serfdom is to be abolished unconditionally and without compensation "in the shortest time possible, decisively and effectively"[4] and the peasant settled on the communal land. Since his plan for the division of the land into a private and a common sector cannot be effected without alienation from the big estates, Pestel would confiscate without payment all private lands beyond 5,000 desyatin[5], while fully compensating the owners of less than 5,000. Thus, although he leaves the landowner in the possession of a large estate, he also establishes the principle that the inviolability of property which he so often proclaims, is limited by the requirements of the State and to some extent subject to it.

In essence it is an agrarian society where the rights of citizenship are concomitant with the ownership of land and where, therefore, foreigners are forbidden to hold immovable property.[6] Some of its features, such as the distinction between man's basic needs and the surplus, or the stress laid on the sanctity of private property, can again be found in Jacobin thought. But what a gulf separates Robespierre's narrow-minded confiscation of the property of the suspects and his ideal of a society of smallholders from Pestel's radical division of the whole of the arable land into two parts, one of which is owned by the whole people and redistributed annually. In spite of its obvious shortcomings his is an original contribution to Socialist thought, a bold and

[1] M. V. Nechkina, op. cit. Vol. II, pp. 73-80. S. M. Faiershtein, op. cit., pp. 33-56.
[2] Shchegolev, p. 89, p. 205. Also Gosudarstvennyi Zavet, publ. in Krasnyi Arkhiv, Vol. VI (13), Moscow 1925, p. 282, col. 2.
[3] M. V. Nechkina, op. cit. Vol. I, pp. 411-418. Also by the same author, Iz Rabot nad "Russkoi Pravdoi" Pestelya, publ. in Ocherki iz Istorii Dvizheniya Dekabristov, pp. 62-83.
[4] Shchegolev, p. 66.
[5] M. V. Nechkina, Dvizhenie, Vol. II, p. 78. S. M. Faiershtein, op. cit., pp. 56-58. One desyatin is appr. 2, 7 acres.
[6] Shchegolev, p. 54.

generous measure. I know of only one other economist of that period who had arrived at similar conclusions, Charles Hall, and his writings remained unknown until the eighteen fifties, i.e. long after Pestel's death.[1]

Pestel does not wholly ignore the potentialities of trade and industry. Indeed, he envisages their expansion, for given the basis of economic security, man would develop his activities and create more and better amenities. But trade and industry are not fundamental to his plan, they are additional. They embellish and enrich life, they create the "surplus" not the "basic minimum". This may well be the reason why he does not at all challenge the rules of capitalism, as applied to trade and industry, the sanctity of property and contract or the passivity of the State towards individual initiative.[2] Freedom of enterprise is essential, the more so as individual economic misfortune is compensated by the common ownership of the land. "Wherever he wanders, wherever he looks for happiness, if suffering follows success, he will forever bear in mind that in his *volost*, his political family, he will always find a refuge and his bread".[3]

Needless to say, Pestel's attitude to property involves him in a series of contradictions. In turn he attacks and protects property. It is essentially evil, yet it is a "sacred duty" to defend it. He decrees the abolition of the aristocratic titles because their bearers, dissatisfied with the shadow of a mere name, might attempt to regain the substance of class privilege.[4] But although he demands legal equality and the ending of fiscal advantages, he leaves the rich in the enjoyment of their capital.[5] In fact, Pestel's whole social planning exhibits the unresolved conflict between his ascetic egalitarianism and the nineteenth-century principle of unhampered individualism.

The cardinal problem for the implementation of his ideas is the question of labour, and this is barely touched on. Where is the labour force to come from for all the many and varied activities he envisages?[6] Admittedly, he assumes that the greater general well-being will result in a growing population. But essentially every Russian is a landowner

[1] Charles Hall, The Effects of Civilization, first published in 1805 but unknown until its republication in 1850. See Max Beer, A History of British Socialism, vol. 1, pp. 126-132; G. D. H. Cole, A History of Socialist Thought, vol. 1: The Forerunners, London 1953, p. 35.

[2] Shchegolev, pp. 71, 72.

[3] Ibid., p. 207.

[4] Ibid., p. 70.

[5] Ibid., p. 233, e.g.: taxes should be based on earnings only, capital is to be tax-free.

[6] Ibid., pp. 208-209.

of private or common land [1] and the shares vary in accordance with the size of the family. Which labour force would in this case operate on private holdings or in urban industries? The question is left open, although Pestel's whole elaborate structure depends on a satisfactory answer.

Pestel dwells on his vision of the new Russia with eloquence and warmth. It is a society where poverty is abolished and crime whose origin is largely social, diminished. The general knowledge that the function of the Government is to promote the happiness of the individual will give birth to a new patriotism, "this source of all public virtues". The close bonds among the members of the same *volost* will make them act in unison and solidarity. Objections to this society are based on lack of understanding, and what is more serious, on "a wickedness of character which opposes the establishment of true freedom in the State".[2]

Clearly, this is again Rousseau's ideal. It is his small egalitarian community, the lack of social groupings, which he considers selfish and unjust. There is the patriotic solidarity, the condemnation of opposition as morally opprobrious, and there is the belief fervently held that with all the restrictions inherent in such a society, "true freedom" has at last been established. A social group cemented by moral principles rather than convenience is essentially totalitarian, and Pestel's Russia with its roots in the France of Robespierre, foreshadows the "monolithic" Communist State of the future. In such a society his proposals for a "mixed economy" as an ultimate aim, become even more incongruous.

LOCAL ADMINISTRATION AND CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

At first sight Pestel's advocacy of Representative Government as opposed to Rousseau's Direct Democracy is somewhat surprising. But a citizen of the Russian Empire faces tasks of organization that cannot be solved in terms of the Geneva Assembly, however great the concessions Pestel undoubtedly makes. Le Commentaire sur l'Esprit des Lois de Montesquieu, by Destutt de Tracy, first published in France in 1817 [3], stirred Pestel deeply [4] and offered theoretical explanations where Rousseau had none. Here was the distinction that Pestel repeats, between Direct Democracy as a primitive form of Government, possible only in a primitive society, "l'état de la nature

[1] Ibid., p. 209.
[2] Ibid., pp. 207-211.
[3] The original edition was printed in English and appeared in Philadelphia in 1811.
[4] Vosstanie, Vol. IV, p. 91.

brute"[1], and Representative Government as "celui de la nature perfectionnée".[2] Direct Democracy disintegrates as distinctions begin to appear and gradually harden, Aristocratic rule replaces free self-determination and the majority of the people suffer oppression.[3] In modern times, Representative Government by reasserting "the general will", has again established equality.[4] No wonder, says Pestel, that the masses everywhere so urgently desire its introduction.[5] It is a progressive and liberating force, it spells the end of the rule of force.

Nevertheless, as a disciple of Rousseau Pestel envisages a very broad basis of *local* Government. His *volost* is the centre of general political activity. Here all the male citizens meet once a year for a period not exceeding six days to elect their deputies (women are not entitled to vote), and since these are numerous in relation to the voting population (from one hundred to two hundred, according to the size of the *volost*), everyone stands a fair chance of ultimate success. The citizens also elect increasingly smaller numbers of councillors for the higher tiers of local Government, the districts (*uyezd*), comprising a number of *volosts*, and finally the provinces composed of a number of districts. The *volost* deputies whose office is unpaid, confer the rights of citizenship on foreigners, subdivide the land, nominate the *volost* officials, listen to petitions, and decide on matters deemed important.[6] They are responsible for everyone of their citizens in his relations with the higher governmental organs and must act on his behalf.[7] This "principe de solidarité" was meant as an important safeguard against despotism from above, a practical token of the close bonds uniting the *volost* "political family". District and provincial councillors are paid for a maximum working period of two months, after which they are expected to return to their *volosts*. Their separate functions, the method of voting, the local revenues remain undefined, but it is noteworthy that the provincial councillors have the task of electing the deputies for the Legislative Assembly.[8] Thus the broad foundations on which local Government rests are narrowed by indirect elections for the high governmental organs.

Pestel is convinced that his methods are egalitarian and beneficial, that they preclude the dangers of unrest, since all political activities of immediate interest to the people will be decided within their own

[1] Commentaire, p. 24, p. 73.
[2] Commentaire, p. 24, p. 49; Shchegolev, pp. 211, 212, 213.
[3] Commentaire, p. 74, 75; Shchegolev, p. 212.
[4] Commentaire, p. 75.
[5] Shchegolev, p. 212.
[6] Ibid., pp. 214-217.
[7] Ibid., p. 211; also Krasnyi Arkhiv, vol. VI (13), p. 282, col. 2.
[8] Shchegolev, p. 217.

volost. "Outside considerations and passions" [1], the source of agitation and fratricidal wars (a reference to the French Revolution) will, therefore, not influence them. A satisfied community will reject attempts at bribery by the rich. Lastly, Pestel continues, echoing the words of Robespierre [2], fear of the "so-called" mob rule is groundless, "for all the chronicles bear witness that disorders in the State have never been produced by the mob, but always by the rich and aristocrats".[3]

The idyllic picture with its optimistic belief in the essential goodness of man as a rational being is, however, contradicted by considerations affecting the Central Government. For in spite of safeguards limiting the power of its various organs, the influence of the Provisional Government (Pestel discusses only the Provisional Government) is decisive and all-embracing. It consists of a Directoire of five members, a Legislature, and a Supervisory Senate.

Since the country lacks even the rudiments of a representative order Pestel holds that the Constitution must be built on entirely new foundations. During this period the possibility of civil war is ever present, its dangers are sufficiently illustrated in the recent history of Europe, and the argument for a strong Central Government and a Code of Laws as an additional pledge, is therefore irrefutable.[4]

For details about the composition and powers of the Government we must look to sources other than *Russkaya Pravda*, for this chapter has not come down to us, and we have to rely on a very short summary of his views, *Gosudarstvennyi Zavet* [5], dictated to a fellow-member, Bestuzhev-Ryumin, and conceived, as internal evidence suggests, earlier than the final draft of his Charter.[6] Supplementary information is contained in the evidence given by the accused during the trial, more especially the same Bestuzhev-Ryumin, to whom we also owe some knowledge on details of Local Government.[7]

Pestel's republicanism was slow to evolve [8], but once he had taken

[1] Ibid., p. 11, p. 218.
[2] Charles Vellay, Discours et Rapports de Robespierre, Paris 1908, p. 96.
[3] Shchegolev, pp. 217-218.
[4] Ibid., p. 9.
[5] Published in: Krasnyi Arkhiv, vol. VI (13), pp. 281-284. See also Pestel's evidence on the destruction of most of his papers when suspecting arrest. Vosstanie, vol. IV, p. 113. On the final planning of his chapters, see Vosstanie, vol. IV, pp. 114-115; also Shchegolev, pp. 11-12.
[6] M. V. Nechkina, Iz Rabot nad "Russkoi Pravdoi" Pestelya, pp. 73-83.
[7] Vosstanie, vol. IX, p. 57 sq.
[8] Vosstanie, vol. IV, pp. 90-91.

the final decision he knew no doubts or compromise. The "mad tyranny" of Tsarist rule [1] proved to him Destutt de Tracy's belief that hereditary absolutism inevitably ends in despotism, and the treachery of the Kings of Spain, Portugal, and Naples undermined his trust in Constitutional Monarchy. "I found", he writes to the Extraordinary Commission, "that in France and England the Constitutions serve only as a cover, which does not prevent the Ministry in England and the King in France to do whatever they like". His reading of Roman and medieval Russian history confirmed his conviction that the monarchy sustained and deepened human inequality and unhappiness.[2] The first step in the Revolution must be the forcible elimination of Alexander I. This was an agreed decision, taken as early as 1820 by all the leading members of the society. But Pestel goes further. So long as any members of the Imperial family are alive Russia will know no peace. Their very existence is a challenge, they are bound to foment unrest and create factions, which will result in civil war. It was as a potential regicide that Pestel was executed, however much he emphasized the gulf between action and thought, and though he was arrested before any armed rising had taken place.[3]

In his constitutional project Pestel rejects Montesquieu's separation of powers and substitutes for it a "definition of specific activities".[4] The meaning of these words remains unexplained, but the framework plainly amounts to a separation of powers, and he certainly had the example of the United States in mind when drafting it.[5]

The Legislative Assembly, indirectly elected, has a life of five years, but one fifth of the deputies submit themselves for re-election annually. The Assembly is unicameral, it declares war and concludes peace. Changes in the Constitution are subject to a referendum. In the intervals between its meetings a special Commission takes its place. The Assembly cannot be dissolved, since "it represents the will of the people, the conscience of the people".[6]

The Executive consists of five members, also elected for five years, one of whom is replaced yearly. The successor is again elected indirectly, the Provinces submitting lists of candidates and the Legislature finally selecting from among them. The Executive is responsible for the administration of the country, Foreign Affairs, and negotiations for peace. Its great powers are to some extent curtailed by the

[1] Shchegolev, p. 77.
[2] Vosstanie, vol. IV, pp. 90-91.
[3] Vosstanie, vol. IV, pp. 103-104, p. 137, pp. 142-3, p. 160, p. 184.
[4] Krasnyi Arkhiv, vol. VI (13), p. 182, col. 2.
[5] Bestuzhev-Ryumin, Vosstanie, vol. IX, p. 60.
[6] Krasnyi Arkhiv, p. 283, col. 1.

existence of a supervisory organ, a Supreme Council or Senate, numbering one hundred and twenty and nominated for life. Its vacancies are also filled by the Legislature making the final choice from among candidates proposed by the Provincial Councils. No law is valid without their consent, though their duties do not include debating the contents of a bill; they merely examine its form and legality within the Constitution. From among their numbers they nominate high supervisory officials for every Ministry, and Governors-General for the provinces, whose task it is to prevent abuses. Their influence on the ruling organs of State and the Civil Service could be substantial. The Executive has itself no departmental duties, but appoints the Ministers whom it can dismiss at will.[1]

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries the main political weapon against the monarchy was a democratic constitution, and the greatest importance was attached to the principles governing its composition, the limitation of its parts, the electoral procedure. To-day, it is a truism to say that political democracy depends on the interpretation of the constitutional formulas, which is in turn determined by outside factors, and that in the last resort the usefulness of a constitution will be decided by these factors.

Pestel is, of course, well aware that his own project is open to a broadly liberal interpretation, for he uses all the devices of the balance of power, supervisory organs, annual elections, and referenda. But *Russkaya Pravda* makes it abundantly clear that Liberal Democracy is not his aim and that far from circumscribing power, he merely transfers it from the Tsar to the Executive, while at the same time enlarging its content.

Pestel's Executive of five members, which is responsible for the centralized Administration of the country and its Foreign Affairs, is aided by a highly significant force, the Secret Police. According to an early draft, the Secret Police exist to counter "the wicked will-power of man" [2], the spirit of subversion. By means of espionage they supervise all foreigners, including members of foreign legations, they observe the institutions of Government, they watch over heresy and immorality, they uncover preparations for revolt and secret societies.[3] For in Pestel's Russia there is no room for secret societies. Once *Russkaya Pravda* is the law of the land, secret societies become subversive conspiracies, both harmful and dangerous.[4] "...for the order

[1] For details of the Constitution, see Krasnyi Arkhiv, pp. 283-284 and Vosstanie, vol. IX, pp. 58-60.
[2] Shchegolev, pp. 107-112.
[3] Ibid., pp. 110-111.
[4] Ibid., pp. 237-238.

of the State set out in this *Russkaya Pravda*, obviates the need to hide what is good and useful, on the contrary, it supplies all the means necessary to introduce and proclaim it legally." [1] These words almost paraphrase the speeches of Saint-Just.[2] To the Jacobin, opposition to the *general will* is a crime. Equally, *Russkaya Pravda* rests on the Laws of Nature and there is no truth outside it. Different political parties holding different political views are plainly irrational, for truth is one and indivisible.

A totalitarian State which lays claim to every aspect of human life, needs special agencies of supervision, and power is ultimately in the hands of those who control the Secret Police, namely the Executive. They have the means to influence the masses, and they begin by educating the young. Education is uniform and private schooling is forbidden. Pestel, it is true, does not object to parental teaching at home.[3] No doubt he follows Destutt de Tracy's view that this type of education is rare and subject to public opinion and to the spirit of the governmental schools, and that it is therefore easier for a Government to obtain the same results by shaping the mind of the father rather than by pettily preventing him from teaching his own son.[4] Printing is uncensored [5], but the libel laws are severe and anonymity is forbidden.[6] Information coming from abroad is sifted by a "team of scholars", who extract and publish only what they consider useful.[7] This predigestion of ideas obviously amounts to a limitation of knowledge and the exclusion of "subversive" outside influences. *Within* Pestel's society the legislator will shape the mind of man, he can afford to free him from some onerous restrictions, his all-pervading influence will be strong enough to bring about compliance with his rulings, provided the outside world is excluded. In a period of transition from old traditions to new ways of life Pestel will take no risks.

Thus, in spite of all the constitutional safeguards Pestel's Executive is in the possession of powers over thought and actions that no despotic monarch can ever hope to emulate. Yet in his closely knit system there is a gap, the possibility of religious and consequently, political non-conformism.

Formally, he complies with the decision taken by the Secret Society

[1] Ibid., p. 238.
[2] Charles Vellay, Oeuvres Complètes de Saint-Just, Paris, e.g., vol. II, p. 268: Que le peuple réclame sa liberté, quand il est opprimé...
[3] Shchegolev, pp. 236-237.
[4] Commentaire, pp. 37-38.
[5] In an earlier draft censorship is retained.
[6] Shchegolev, pp. 238-239.
[7] Bestuzhev-Ryumin in: Vosstanie, vol. IX, p. 59.

(in 1823), to keep the Greek Orthodox faith as the State religion.[1] In consequence, the clergy ceases to be a separate corporation and becomes a body of Civil Servants.[2] The Roman-Catholic clergy is automatically deprived of its functions, for "Russia must never recognize any outside influence, let alone foreign authority over its citizens".[3] But if the activities of the priesthood and monastic institutions are minutely regulated and strictly circumscribed [4], toleration of man's inner relationship to God is absolute. "Inner faith is the unlimited property of every man as a rational being, and he has not the slightest obligation to answer for it".[5] It can by no means be discounted that in a later draft Pestel would have altered this passage. But it is more likely that he favoured religious toleration because of his own ambiguous attitude. He accepted religion as the fount of morality and the basis of the habits and life of a people.[6] Austere and dedicated, he imposed an ascetic life on his community.[7] But he had no religion himself. He had expressed his doubts in letters to his mother.[8] Pushkin quotes a remark of his, "Mon coeur est matérialiste, mais ma tête s'y refuse" [9], and in the last hours of his life before his execution, he firmly refused the attendance of a priest.[10] These were his private views, he was prepared for others to hold different opinions, for he may not have realized that religious individualism and the collective "general will" are incompatible, and that sooner or later the one or the other will have to be modified.

Within the limits of his rigid system Pestel considers personal liberty as the first and most important right of every citizen.[11] He decrees freedom from arbitrary arrest and its safeguards, such as the production of warrants, no entry without consent, habeas corpus, trial by jury, the abolition of *ad hoc* commissions, which ignore the existing laws.[12] These demands are not new, they merely point to the abuses and arbitrariness of officialdom, but they are, therefore, no

[1] Shchegolev, p. 239.
[2] Ibid., p. 62.
[3] Ibid., p. 64.
[4] Ibid., pp. 61-65, p. 239.
[5] Ibid., p. 239.
[6] Ibid., pp. 4-5, p. 38, pp. 239-240.
[7] Ibid., pp. 237-238.
[8] S. Y. Shtraikh, Izbrannye sotsialno-politicheskie i filosofskie proizvedeniya Dekabristov, Moscow 1951, vol. II, pp. 498-501.
[9] A. S. Pushkin, Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii, Moscow 1933, vol. V, p. 803.
[10] Vospominaniya P. N. Myslovskovo, printed by S. Y. Shtraikh in: op. cit. vol. II, pp. 501-502. On Pestel's religious outlook during the last months of his life see M. V. Nechkina, Dvizhenie, Vol. II, pp. 120-125.
[11] Shchegolev, p. 230.
[12] Ibid. pp. 230-231.

less valid. Criminal Law, says Pestel echoing Jeremy Bentham [1], must be humane, the more cruel the punishment the more brutal does it make the people [2], its aim is not revenge but rehabilitation.[3] He decisively rejects the death penalty, since civil society is strong enough to ensure its safety without recourse to execution, and measures that go beyond necessity lose their meaning and turn into despotism. Man is not omniscient and death is irrevocable. "Praise to the Russian Government that has understood this great truth." [4] These are noble and tragic words. For Nicolas I set up an Extraordinary Commission, reintroduced the death penalty for the express purpose of executing the Decembrists, and used legal procedure that amounted to a travesty of justice. To-day however, over a century later, we know the full implications of a closed system meant to embrace the whole of life. If opposition is a moral wrong, tolerance is connivance, and freedom of thought is jeopardized.

HOMOGENEITY, UNIFORMITY, UNANIMITY

The full and merciless implications of Pestel's abstract logic become apparent in his attitude towards the problem of nationalities. To Pestel the word "solidarité" [5] is full of meaning. It denotes the unity of outlook and purpose, the identity of interests, which bind the citizen to his *volost*, but which must naturally extend beyond to include the whole of the homeland. Unity of purpose is synonymous with unanimity, and since "political and civil laws make people into what they are" [6], and since "the experience of all the ages and all the States has shown that people are everywhere such as the Governments and the Laws under which they live, make them" [7], Pestel will use uniform laws to create his highly centralized, undifferentiated State, his *République une et indivisible*.[8] True attachment to the homeland depends on, and is strengthened by, identical laws and forms of government.[9] The more unified the State the closer the bonds among the citizens. A Federal Government does not fulfill these requirements, Pestel rejects it forcefully and would forbid even the thought of Federalism as inherently evil.[10] (His vehement attack must be read in the context

[1] Bestuzhev-Ryumin, Vosstanie, Vol. IX, p. 58.
[2] Shchegolev, p. 190.
[3] Ibid., pp. 100, 188.
[4] Ibid., pp. 101, 188, 189.
[5] Ibid., p. 211.
[6] Ibid., p. 38.
[7] Ibid., p. 56.
[8] Ibid., pp. 21, 23.
[9] Ibid., pp. 36, 37.
[10] Ibid., p. 23.

of disputes within the Secret Society, the strong opposition to his centralizing ideas, and the advocacy of federalism by a not inconsiderable section under the leadership in St. Petersburg of Nikita Muravyov). Federalism is a disruptive force, and in a country whose border provinces are peopled with various nationalities, speaking different languages, professing different religions, and obeying different laws, it will enhance the fissiparious tendencies, weaken the power of the State, and perhaps even endanger its existence.[1] His aim is homogeneity, uniformity, and unanimity [2], and it follows that the various nationalities must be absorbed by the more numerous Russian people, and that in order to eradicate their national consciousness their languages, their customs, even their national names must be abolished.[3] Pestel brushes aside as irrelevant the notion of the separate national identity of the Finns, the Latvians, or the Moldavians.[4] Men are all alike, it is for the Legislator to shape them. He finds, admittedly, two groups that he cannot easily fit into his State, certain turbulent Caucasian tribes and the Jews. His solution is in both cases more akin to later practice than nineteenth-century notions. The Caucasians will be deported and settled in separate units within the interior of Russia, and the Caucasus resettled with reliable men and women.[5] His attitude towards the Jews is one of undisguised hostility. Here is a people with a distinctly separate existence, a State within a State. He does not attempt a rational examination of cause and effect. An inherent, virulent, illogical anti-semitism breaks through, for, somehow, the existence of the unassimilated Jewish people is an affront to his dogma of uniformity, a refutation of his beliefs. He is doubtful of their willingness to yield their corporate identity in his new Russia, although he would give them the option to do so. Otherwise they must leave, and Pestel suggests the alternative of founding a separate Jewish State in Asia Minor. Russian and Polish Jews numbering some two millions and accompanied by Russian armed forces could in all probability overcome Turkish resistence.[6] It will be shown later that Pestel's foreign policy is distinctly anti-Turkish, and his proposals, which are tentative in view of the many unforeseen contingencies [7], are naturally based on the possibility of a Russo-

[1] Ibid., p. 23.
[2] Ibid., pp. 55, 56.
[3] Ibid., pp. 55, 56.
[4] Ibid., pp. 41-43.
[5] Ibid., pp. 47, 48.
[6] Ibid., pp. 50-53.
[7] Ibid., p. 53.

Turkish war. But the idea expounded as early as 1825 is an interesting anticipation of subsequent events.

All in all, Pestel's negative attitude to the question of minorities shows a striking disregard of the new forces of nationalism, to which the Napoleonic wars had given so great an impetus. Clearly, the doctrinaire cannot admit any irrational, purely sentimental, or traditional cause for the continued existence of a nation. Let the Legislator perform his task and there will be no distinctive national consciousness. Instead, there will be a Russia, stronger, more prosperous, and more powerful than ever before.[1] This is, indeed, the aim underlying his abstract reasoning, for Pestel is not merely an eighteenth-century European, his policy especially in its international aspects, shows unmistakable traces of Great-Russian chauvinism. He is afraid of a weak, disunited Russia, he desires "the highest degree of power" [2], and to attain it, he is prepared to sacrifice the national existence of the non-Slavonic peoples within the realm. His ideal is a highly centralized, unitary Russia, made all the more formidable by her totalitarian traits.

PESTEL'S FOREIGN POLICY

It is understandable that the Polish question should have loomed large in the deliberations of the Secret Society and that they should have proclaimed the independence of the country. In their minds political morality mingled with expediency, for their success depended on the attitude of the Polish armies. The heir to the Russian throne, Constantine, was the virtual ruler of Poland, and it was only to be expected that as Commander-in-Chief, he would mobilize his troops to crush the rising. Thus in 1823, feelers were put out, and eventually closer ties established between the Decembrists and some leading members of a corresponding secret society in Poland.[3] Pestel who at one stage had conducted the negotiations himself, could therefore, obviously, not deny the Poles their right to independence, but he does so unwillingly and conditionally. The Polish question is discussed in one of the latest sections of his Charter [4], and the opinion reached must be considered as final.

The new State, he writes, will not be created by independent Polish action, it will come about when Russia surrenders her former provinces

[1] Ibid., p. 56.
[2] Ibid., pp. 36, 56.
[3] L. A. Medvedskaya, Yuzhnoe Obshchestvo Dekabristov i Polskoe Patriotichskoe Obshchestvo, printed in: Ocherki iz Istorii Dvizheniya Dekabristov, ed. N. M. Druzhinin, Moscow 1954, pp. 276-319.
[4] Shchegolev, pp. 18-21.

to a new Polish Government.[1] Indeed, Pestel does not hide his suspicions. Will the Poles betray him at the critical time of the Revolution? If so, there will be no Poland at all, and she will remain what she has been, a conquered Russian province. But surely, one could not reasonably doubt her will to cooperate, as she stands to gain so much more than even Russians? Her actions during the Revolution will show whether she has earned her freedom.[2] (The main task of the Polish revolutionaries was "to deal with the Crown Prince as we deal with the other Great Dukes".)[3] His patronizing Russian nationalism is undisguised. What matters is Russian power, not Polish freedom, and he draws the territorial frontiers for the convenience and security of Russia. No doubt, his demarcation is generous, the frontier runs substantially to the East of the present day line.[4] It was left to future generations to argue the exact delimitations on the basis of the different nationalities inhabiting the area. To Pestel nationality meant nothing, unless it was that of a Great Power, and his condescending superiority was bound to hurt the sensivity and pride of the Poles. "Indeed", he writes, "it is surely right and proper for the generous, fine Russian people to grant independence to a subjugated people at a time, when Russia is about to secure a new life for herself".[5] Moreover, he had stated in his negotiations with the Polish spokesmen, and confirmed in *Russkaya Pravda*, that Poland could not expect freedom from occupation other than on strict conditions, which would determine her Foreign Policy for good.[6] A close alliance with Russia would pledge her to follow Russian Foreign Policy at all times, in wartime her armies would fight under Russian command, as a sign of "sincere friendship and gratitude" to Russia. In return, Russia would take Poland under her protection and guarantee her frontiers and, thereby, her existence. But Foreign Affairs are conducted by Governments, and their spirit and stability primarily depend on the composition and type of those Governments. Thus as a safeguard, without which Poland cannot expect to gain her independence, Pestel insists on the following three basic conditions: *a*) The Government of Poland is to be composed in exactly the same way as that of Russia. *b*) All local elections and all appointments to administrative offices must follow the same principles as in Russia. *c*) The aristocracy of birth or wealth must be abolished forever, and the whole Polish

[1] Ibid., pp. 18, 19.
[2] Ibid., p. 20.
[3] See Vosstanie, vol. IV, pp. 85, 107.
[4] Shchegolev, p. 20.
[5] Ibid., p. 18.
[6] Ibid., p. 19.

people must form only one class. Only then will a Polish State be set up.[1]

Are certain presuppositions of Soviet diplomacy so very different from those advocated by Pestel?

It is characteristic of Pestel's mentality that, not content with the conditions imposed, he should stipulate additional legal engagements. The Poles must confirm the permanency of the Russo-Polish frontier in "fundamental, unalterable laws", for they alone will, in times to come, assure Russia against "all activities that might be contrary to her absolute security and complete peace".[2] Pestel's dogmatic mind is obviously blind to the concept of historical evolution, to developments that might sweep aside his "immutable laws". The application of certain basic principles, which derive from the Laws of Nature will with mathematical certainty produce results that can be calculated in advance. This is true in every field of activity, including the relationship of nations. Like his French masters Pestel has no use for historical experience. He subjects social and international phenomena to the same criteria of judgement as moral valuations.[3] The absolutist approach gives Pestel's own views the halo of infallibility and transfers his totalitarian concepts from the domestic to the international field.

The evidence given by one of the leaders of the Polish Secret Society states that Pestel promised him the return of the Austrian and Prussian provinces of Poland.[4] That he was indeed thinking on those lines, is confirmed by a paper he wrote as early as 1818, where he lists certain garrison towns on the Russian frontiers. Among them he names Tilsit and Cracow, the one Prussian and to the West of the former Polish frontier, the other in Austrian Poland.[5] He knew, of course, that this meant war, and *Pravda* proves that Pestel actively contemplated this possibility. For what he calls the improvement and rounding off of the frontiers of Russia [6], is in fact a far reaching expansion at the expense of Turkey and China. He claims Moldavia on the ground of the greater security of the Carpathian Mountains and the affinity of the Moldavians with the Bessarabian people, then under Russian domination.[7] In the above mentioned draft of 1818 he expressly names Kars, Ardahan, and Batum as Russian garrison towns,

[1] Ibid., p. 19.
[2] Ibid., p. 18.
[3] For the attitude of the French enlightenment, see J. L. Talmon, op. cit., p. 71 sq.
[4] L. A. Medvedskaya, op. cit., p. 303.
[5] B. E. Syroechkovskii, Balkanskaya Problema v Politicheskikh Planakh Dekabristov, printed in: Ocherki iz Istorii Dvizheniya Dekabristov, ed. N. M. Druzhinin, Moscow 1954, pp. 186-275.
[6] Shchegolev, p. 21.
[7] Ibid., p. 16.

thus drawing the line to the South of the present day boundary, as the conquest of the Caucasian provinces adjoining the Black Sea was essential to pacify the raiding frontier tribes, paid for, and supplied with, weapons by the Turk.[1] Further to the East, he speaks of the lands of the Kirghiz Nomads adjoining the Aral Sea, to-day's Kazakhstan, which being fertile could be utilized to Russia's advantage, while the Nomads would be settled.[2] In the Far East he does not specify the frontier, he merely mentions the Altai Mountains, the Sayan, the river Amur, and the Pacific.[3] Russian maritime power and trade could benefit from these conquests, while the loss to China would be negligible, as she does in any case not govern the provinces effectively.[4]

These new frontiers would set a limit to Russia's expansion, she does not need more land.[5] Indeed, she is powerful enough to explain her aims openly to the world, for the re-creation of Poland would serve to confirm her generosity and moderation.[6] There exist, he says in justification of his claims, two principles, that of nationality, which is stressed by the peoples within the dominion of a Great Power, who long for their independence, and the principle of the convenience of the Great Power, which needs strong frontiers for its security, and aims at preventing another powerful State from utilizing the small border nationalities to its own advantage. These two opposing principles could be reconciled by a third, namely, the rights of nationality should belong solely to those nations that may be presumed strong enough to preserve their independence, such as Poland. Elsewhere the security claims of the Great Powers prevail, and "it would be better and more useful for themselves (the small nations) if they unite spiritually and socially with the Great Power and completely fuse their existence with the nationality of the ruling people."[7] Once, however, a safe frontier has been reached further expansion is unnecessary and unjustified.[8]

At what stage does a State attain its final security? Why of all the border nationalities should only the Poles fulfill the stipulated requirements? Pestel does not ask these obvious questions. His sympathies are on the side of the strong State, and he fully agrees with the concept of Power Politics. Yet the Foreign Policy of a new Revo-

[1] Ibid., pp. 16, 17.
[2] Ibid., p. 17.
[3] Ibid., pp. 16, 20.
[4] Ibid., p. 17.
[5] Ibid., pp. 18, 21.
[6] Ibid., p. 21.
[7] Ibid., p. 14.
[8] Ibid., pp. 13-15.

lutionary Government is not, and cannot be devoid of proselytism. Far from being mutually antagonistic, Power Politics and Revolutionary Ideology support each other. For the new Government is the bearer of a message, and by advancing the truth to the outside world it increases and deepens its own prestige and influence. Bestuzhev-Ryumin says in his evidence that it was to be the task of the Minister of Foreign Affairs to propagate the advantages of Representative Government and facilitate its introduction among the European nations, and that in Asia he had to spread education and "urge the peoples to change their Governments".[1] Pestel adds that his ambassadors and agents had to keep him informed on the state of mind abroad.[2] "We were not afraid of war", he writes to the Extraordinary Commission. In his opinion a war of intervention was most unlikely in view of the events of 1812. Moreover, once the Revolution had started inside Russia, the Foreign Governments, "whose peoples are even more bent on revolution", would be fully occupied in attempting to suppress unrest at home.[3] The Decembrists were indeed thinking of themselves as the liberators of Europe. "Soon", says Bestuzhev-Ryumin, the Secret Society "will free Russia and perhaps the whole of Europe".[4] This belief in Russia as a dynamic, liberating force was to re-appear again and again throughout the century, until in our own times it came to be accepted as an integral part of Soviet Foreign Policy.

The sympathies of Pestel and the other Decembrists were deeply involved in the Greek struggle of independence. They felt acutely the sufferings of their coreligionists and the humiliation of being mere onlookers. The vacillations of Alexander I, the officially recognized protector of the Greek Orthodox faith, only served to deepen their hatred of the monarchy. Their emotions were further complicated by their hostility towards Turkey and their dreams of aggrandisement at her expense.

In 1821 Pestel was officially sent to Bessarabia on a mission of enquiry and like most of his more progressive contemporaries, he advocated war against Turkey.[5] We know that he returned to this plan in 1824.[6] The creation of a Greek Republic, he is reported to have said, would enhance Russian prestige abroad, while diverting

[1] Vosstanie, vol. IX, p. 59.
[2] Shchegolev, p. 120.
[3] Vosstanie, vol. IV, p. 112.
[4] Vosstanie, vol. IX, p. 117.
[5] V. I. Semevskii, op. cit., pp. 250, 254, 255; B. E. Syroechkovskii, op. cit., pp. 188-206.
[6] Vosstanie, vol. IV, p. 144.

in a period of transition and hardship, possible discontent at home. The Greek war would, it was reasonable to assume, turn into a great war of liberation, and the formidable armies of the citizen soldiers of Revolutionary Russia would win against the decrepit old monarchies of Turkey, Austria, and Prussia, whose energies would be used up in the negative task of preventing revolution at home. Their inevitable defeat must be deduced from the expansion of Russian territory, Pestel's new frontiers.[1]

Pestel's policy towards the new Greece is contained in a highly significant answer to his Judges, "Your supposition is correct in so far as it concerns a war, which was both to preoccupy the minds, and by setting up Greece as an independent State to prove the disinclination of Russia towards the system of conquest and its transformation into one of protection".[2]

We see, Pestel makes a distinction between the old policy of conquest and occupation and the new system of protection and independence. He does not go into details, but we know from his thoughts on Poland what he meant by protection. It is an open question whether he would have granted a greater measure of real freedom to the Greeks, whose links with Russia had in the past been so much looser than those of Poland.

The influence of Britain and France would, it must be inferred, diminish correspondingly. Pestel had no sympathy for either. He deeply distrusted the system of Parliamentary Government, which he calls a screen [3], behind which a merciless class struggle was being fought out. He thought that in England the aristocracies of "birth and wealth" [4], "the lords and merchants" [5], had become more powerful than the monarch himself and that their existence constituted the main obstacle to the general well-being.[6] His remarks must be read in conjunction with his statements on the corrupting and degrading influence of money.[7] To the Jacobin puritan the most advanced industrial State was merely the prototype of an "acquisitive society", and its party system a manifestation of disunity and internal weakness. And yet, even there, he detected the first stirrings of revolution, for "...every century has its special characteristics, ours is distinguished by its revolutionary ideas. From one end of Europe to another, from

[1] Shchegolev, p. 20.
[2] Vosstanie, vol. IV, p. 160.
[3] Vosstanie, vol. IV, p. 91.
[4] Vosstanie, vol. IV, p. 91; also Shchegolev, pp. 58, 59.
[5] Vosstanie, vol. I, p. 178.
[6] Vosstanie, vol. IV, p. 91.
[7] B. E. Syroechkovkii, op. cit., p. 208. See also p. 75.

Portugal to Russia, not excluding a single State, even in England and Turkey, contrasting though they are, the same thing can be seen. The whole of America too, shows the same sight. The spirit of revolt agitates all minds [*fait bouillir les esprits*]." [1]

On the whole, the attitude of the Decembrists towards Britain is coloured by traditional Russian suspicions of her Foreign Policy, and particularly her alleged support of a Polish rising. "...j'appris.... que les machinations de cette puissance se dirigeaient surtout contre la Russie, et qu'elle cherchait à porter à la révolte les provinces du second partage".[2] It was for Russia alone to grant Poland her independence, of her own volition and without any outside pressure.

In this analysis I have tried to trace certain aspects of early nineteenth-century Russian thought. It is obvious that there is a continuity of underlying principles, an affinity with present day politics, although I have on the whole refrained from drawing comparisons. Pestel was a doctrinaire of the eighteenth-century enlightenment, he was not a Marxist. His static world with its unchanging values had little in common with the concept of dialectical materialism. But eighteenth-century ideas and their application during the French Revolution had a profound effect on Marxism on the one hand, and pre-Marxist Russian revolutionary thought on the other. The Jacobins had created a lasting climate of opinion, a specific attitude of mind, which they bestowed on future generations.[3] Pestel's economic egalitarianism was more developed than that of the Jacobins, although he did not go as far as Babeuf. He allowed private enterprise, for he was more concerned with the abolition of poverty than with absolute equality. His plans are impracticable, yet in his search for a solution he showed a remarkable insight into the social and economic process of his time. His views on Foreign Policy anticipate many of the ideas prevailing in Russia to-day. In the world of Great Power rivalry proselytism naturally becomes an instrument of Foreign Policy. To some extent, this is true of any country, though the revolutionary State is immeasurably strengthened by the sense of its own infallibility. Pestel had his full share of self-righteousness and a deep understanding of the realities of power. In his attitude towards Poland, which combines both these elements, he came very near to present-day Soviet Policy.

In all probability, Pestel had no immediate influence on subsequent political thought. In a genealogy of ideas we rarely find direct

[1] Vosstanie, vol. IV, p. 105.

[2] Bestuzhev-Ryumin, Vosstanie, vol. IX, p. 71, p. 233. Vol. IV, pp. 98, 118. L. A. Medvedskaya, op. cit. pp. 308-309.

[3] On Jacobin influence on Communism, see esp. J. L. Talmon, op. cit.

succession. Pestel's writings were confiscated and not accessible until 1905. But this is immaterial. Within the movement the main lines of his theories were known, and the Decembrists too, like the Jacobins before them, had contributed towards the creation of a way of reasoning, a general outlook, which was to leave its mark on future generations. In the formation and development of the Decembrist movement P. I. Pestel played a prominent part.

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