“Long live the constitution! Long live the republic! Long live the people! Perish the nobility and the rank of the czar!”¹

Nationalism in the East has long been considered to be different from nationalism in the West. Although Hans Kohn’s famous dichotomy has been challenged, it still determines the way most people look at Eastern nationalism.² Nationalism in the East is seen as authoritarian, ethnic and cultural in contrast to the democratic, civic, and political nationalism of the West. According to the common view, Western nationalism is based on modern liberal, constitutional ideas, which made it democratic, while Eastern nationalism is based on cultural belonging, which made it conservative or regressive and hostile to foreign influence.³

According to the conventional historical narrative, nationalism in the West grew out of the spirit of the American and French Revolutions with their concepts of national self-determination and popular sovereignty. It embraced the universalistic ideas of the Enlightenment and preached cosmopolitanism, individual liberty and the equality of man regardless of social class or nationality. As a consequence, nations were formed as unions of citizens, through the will of individuals expressed in contracts and plebiscites. Hence, the civic concept of the nation that emerged signified a sovereign citizen-people.

Scholars argue that when this original idea of the nation, connected to the development of capitalism, democracy and industrialization in Western Europe, spread east, to populations and countries in different social, political and cultural contexts, its original meaning changed and came to signify a unique people.⁴ Thus, they maintain, nations in the East appealed to collective rights rather than individual ones. In contrast to the stress on universal similarities
of nations, nationalism in the East emphasized national diversity and distinctiveness. Membership in the nation was based on custom, language and common origin. Instead of forming voluntary unions of citizens based on contracts, the nation in the East united around the Romantic concept of the people as a collective unit based on a common way of life. Here nationalism was concerned with myths of the past and dreams of the future without any immediate connection with the present. Thus, according to the common view, two types of nationalism emerged, a civic in the West, a cultural in the East.

Recently, scholars have started to question this ethnocentric typology, drawing attention to cultural manifestations of the nation in the West. But, there are very few comparable reinterpretations of nationalism in the East. Studies of nationalism in Russia have focused on cultural or ethnic expressions of the nation and on the impact of Romanticism. Consequently, there are no detailed investigations of the civic concept of the nation in Russia and so the assumption that Russians attached different meanings to the original concept of the nation remains unchallenged. The present paper is an attempt to remedy this gap in the literature. It argues that the so-called Decembrists brought the civic idea of the nation to Russia and used it, without changing its meaning, as the source of legitimacy for their attempt to transfer power from the tsar to the people.

The Decembrists were members of secret societies, the most important of which became known as the Northern Society and the Southern Society. The Northerners were in general more conservative than the radical Southerners, but their concepts of the nation were in fact rather similar. On December 14, 1825, the Northern Society staged an uprising in St Petersburg. Two weeks later there was a revolt in the South. Both failed due to bad planning, treachery, and a series of unfortunate events. Around eighty people were killed, 121 were sent to exile in Siberia, and five of the leaders were executed. This was the first time that an educated elite with its own program of social change had taken up arms against Russian
autocracy. The members of the secret societies were mostly young officers and members of aristocratic families. In this they were no different from contemporary secret reformist societies in Western Europe, which were often dominated by officers. The Decembrists were inspired by the waves of revolt, with their demands for constitutionalism and independence, that spread across Europe and South America during this period and they were partially modelled on these conspiratorial groups. Like them, they demanded a constitution and civil liberties. According to the Decembrist Vladimir I. Shteingel, “events in Spain, Piedmont and Greece inflamed minds about freedom in Russia.”

Many of the Decembrists had fought against Napoleon. The fact that the Russian army had saved Europe from “the tyranny of Napoleon” made the contrast with the despotism at home difficult to bear. Aleksandr Bestuzhev, one of the Decembrists, tried to explain the feelings of the returning soldiers in a letter to Nicholas I written after his arrest: “We delivered our homeland from tyranny but we are tyrannized anew by the master. . . Why did we free Europe, was it to put chains on ourselves? Did we give a constitution to France, so that we should not dare to talk about it? Did we buy with our blood primacy among nations, so that we should be oppressed at home.” The introduction to the proposed Russian constitution, drafted by the Northern Society, reflects this longing for liberty: “All the European nations are attaining constitutions and freedom. The Russian nation, more than any of them, deserves one as well as the other”. The fact that the tsar had already granted constitutions to Finland and Poland turned this longing into a real possibility.

In his famous book, Die nationale Gedankenwelt der Dekabristen, Hans Lemberg placed the Decembrists in the context of modern nationalism. This was an important contribution to the scholarship on the Decembrist movement, which had previously been seen in the framework of constitutional, liberal or revolutionary ideas. Lemberg studied cultural manifestations of the nation, such as the significance of a common language, myths and
memories of a common history, and national feeling to Decembrist thought. He argues that the Decembrists have left the Age of Reason and entered the epoch of Romanticism and its notion of the nation as a unique people with a unique culture and history. This, he holds, can be seen in the link between their patriotism and their interest in history and national tradition. However, it was not only Romantic nationalists who used an idealized image of history. In fact, it was not unusual for political thinkers in Western Europe and America to employ ancient rights and freedoms against royal absolutism. Like the Decembrists, French, English and American patriots tried to justify their present position by an appeal to a constructed legendary past of freedom and equality. This was in fact a common strategy to defend political claims and demands for change.  

The Decembrists used the city-republic of Novgorod and its popular hero Vadim as symbols of ancient Russian liberty. Here are clear links to ancient Rome and Greece and its republican, civic values. There are also explicit references to ancient heroes. Vadim is hailed as a Russian Brutus – a tyrannicide and a symbol for rule by the people, liberty and equality. These were the same civic values that were endorsed by the “patriots” of the American and French revolutions and their followers around the world. Decembrist patriotism is indeed permeated with the republican ideas that prevailed in Europe and America after 1777. These ideas were used in the political language of the pre-Romantic period, the language that is commonly associated with civic nationalism.

There are definitely elements of Romanticism in Decembrist thought, primarily in their literature, but their political driving force was the modern civic concept of the nation, the original idea that was formed in the West and expressed in the American and French Revolutions. This idea spread over the world and continued to have an immense impact at least until the 1840s. That is not to say that the civic idea of the nation lacked cultural components. On the contrary, notions of cultural superiority can be found both in the practices
of states identified as civic nations and in the ideas of political thinkers associated with this type of nationalism. For example, civic nationalism was sometimes used to support the assimilation of cultural minorities. Such notions of assimilation are found in the Decembrists’ concept of the nation as well. Hence, the claim that the civic idea of the nation is a political concept without any cultural content needs to be questioned. But so does the claim that the civic concept of the nation does not exist in Eastern Europe. The main point here is that the Decembrists used a similar concept of the nation as Western thinkers who could be associated with civic nationalism.

Both the Northern and the Southern Society proposed constitutions for a future Russia, written by Nikita Muraviev and Pavel Pestel respectively. Although they did not express the views of all its members, they were supported by a significant part. In both draft constitutions, the idea of the nation and the citizen are treated at length.

The nation

Authorities on nationalism tell us that the civic concept of the nation was defined by the French *philosophes* as a community of people sharing the same laws and political institutions within a defined territory. According to the *Encyclopædie* edited by Denis Diderot the “nation” is used to describe a considerable number of people inhabiting a specified extent of land delineated by fixed limits and obeying the same government. The Modern Dictionary of Arts and Sciences from 1774 presents a similar definition. Laws and institutions played a vital role in the shaping of the character of a people. It was these laws and institutions that formed the nation, rather than language or common origin.

Rousseau saw national character as products of history and education, not gifts of nature. He thought it possible and important to rectify or improve the national character by legislation and national education. “[I]t is the laws, the mores, the customs, the government, the
constitution, and the mode of existence that results from all these [that make la patrie].”  

In the draft for the constitution of Poland, Rousseau wrote that “[I]t is national institutions which form the genius, character, tastes and manners of a people, which make it what it is and not something else”. While Montesquieu held that national character forms the political life of a country, Hume maintained that a number of individuals become a nation when they are united in one political body. In the words of Abbé Sieyès, the “creator” of the National Assembly in France, the nation was “a body of associates living under common laws and represented by the same legislative assembly”. The belief that the state could turn strangers into citizens, peasants, or immigrant workers, into Frenchmen had been taken over from the Roman tradition. Given the general view of Russian nationalism as being based on an ethnic, cultural idea of the nation, one would not expect this political concept of the nation to be prominent in Russian nationalism. But in fact it was, as can be seen from the draft constitution of the Southern Society.

Reminiscent of the philosophical founders of civic nationalism, this constitution states that the experience of all periods and all states has proven that nations are everywhere what their governments and their laws have made them. Consequently, “political laws are the nation’s most effective teachers: they form and, so to speak educate the people and it is from them that the customs, habits, and conceptions receive their characteristic traits and forms of action…it is political and civil laws which make the nations what they are”. The political dimension of civic nationalism can hardly be more clearly manifested.

The concept of citizenship as voluntaristic grew out of this political definition of the nation as a people with common laws and government. Since political institutions form the nation, allegiance to these institutions becomes the essential criterion for nationhood in civic nationalism. The nation is a free association of rational human beings which individuals enter into voluntarily and which is based on an a subjective identification. For Rousseau the
nation was a product of the will of individuals. Men united as a nation by free declaration, that
is, by acts of free will.  
This conception lies at the basis of Abbé Sieyès’ description of the
formation of the nation. First “a fairly considerable number of isolated individuals…wish to
unite.” By working together they form “a common will.” Eventually, “they put a few of their
number in charge,” and finally they “delegate” responsibility to a “body of representatives”
who act on behalf of the whole body. America is a good example of a nation constituted by
covenants. Because there was no nation in America before the Declaration of Independence,
the Americans established themselves as a nation by a voluntary act. The French
Constitution of 1791 states that a foreigner may be naturalised as long as he chooses to live in
France (fixer son domicile) and to swear the civic oath (le serment civique). The same
principle was followed in American legislation at this time.  
In the sense that the individual
can, in principle, choose to which nation he belongs, the nation is a contractual political
association.

This idea is reflected in the draft constitution of the Northern Society. According to this
document, a foreigner not born in Russia but having lived there for seven consecutive years
had the right to request Russian citizenship through the courts, so long as he renounced on
oath all allegiance to the government to which he was previously subject. All native
inhabitants of Russia and the children of foreigners born in Russia were considered to be
Russians, unless they declared that they did not wish “to enjoy this privilege”. Hence, it was
in terms of adherence to shared political principles, rather than culture, ethnicity or language
that membership of the civic nation was conceived. As Brubaker puts it, “the dominance of
citizenship over nationality, of political over ethnocultural conceptions of nationhood is
perhaps best expressed in Tallien’s remark of the spring of 1795: ‘the only foreigners in
France are the bad citizens’.”
However, this dominance of political over ethnocultural conceptions in civic nationalism is problematic. There is a conflict between the concept of an indivisible nation and cultural diversity which sometimes turns civic nationalism into an imperialist force. In Russia this tendency is most visible in the proposal of the Southern Society, where assimilation of national minorities is an explicit goal. A unitary nation cannot allow for cultural difference. Consequently, special rights, or laws that in any way come into conflict with national ones, cannot be accepted. This is the reason why Pestel in the proposal of the Southern Society stresses that “the laws of religion” must be combined with “unitary political laws” and not influence them in different ways. He holds that “variety in the religious laws may be combined with uniformity in the political laws.” Christianity is upheld as a norm and “the acts of all non-Christian faiths which are contrary to the spirit of the Christian law must be prohibited,” but everything that is “not contrary to its spirit, even though different from it, may be permitted according to circumstances”. Thus, the Tatars, who profess Islam, “are allowed to keep this faith and any persecution of it is forbidden”. In the Manifesto of the Senate drawn up by Trubetskoi on the Eve of December 14, 1825, religious tolerance to all faiths is proclaimed. Hence, the Decembrists believed that freedom of religion was significant to the formation of a modern nation, but it should be accepted only as long as religious rules were not in conflict with the laws of the nation.

Linguistic diversity was treated in a way similar to religious differences. Pestel insisted on the primacy of Russian over all other languages of the empire. With respect to language requirements, Muraviev wrote that twenty years from the promulgation of his Constitution only those who have become literate in the Russian language would be recognised as citizens. To the French revolutionaries it was a matter of political pragmatism that a nation based on the common will of the people should share the same language. Only when all citizens spoke the same language could all citizens “communicate their thoughts without
hindrance” and enjoy equal access to state offices. Moreover, a high culture could not
prosper without a common language. Linguistic diversity was denounced as conducive to
reaction, while linguistic unity was advocated as indispensable to Republican citizenship.

The concept of a unitary nation pertains not only to religion and language, but also to
ethnicity. It concerns minority rights and the right to nationhood. Ultimately, it affects the
form of government and issues of representation. The importance of this principle and the
degree of its applicability is of course dependent on the ethnic, linguistic, and religious make-up of the country to which it is applied. The concept of an indivisible nation does not have as
far-reaching consequences in a relatively homogenous state as it does in a multi-ethnic empire
of the Russian type. Hence, both Societies’ draft constitutions treat this issue at length.

Pestel believed in the importance of a unitary nation, despite the many different
nationalities living on Russian territory. He argued that all peoples and races must be formed
into one sole nation, dissolving all differences into one common mass so that all the
inhabitants throughout the entire territory of the Russian state were to be Russians. This
nation should be accomplished politically, by applying the same laws and system of
administration to all, using the same (Russian) language. In addition, the state was to attend
to the economic development of the different peoples, particularly those on the borderland. In
the same way, Sieyès had argued for a unitary nation in France. Thus, he fought against the
representation of local interests. Sieyès held that a political representative should represent the
nation as a whole. “It belongs to the National Assembly, and to it alone, to interpret and
present the general will of the nation,” he said. A similar concept of the nation was
articulated in Velestinlis’ draft Greek constitution from 1797. “The Greek Republic is one, for
all it contains within it [sic] different races and religions”. It constitutes “a unitary,
indissoluble body…. Those people living in this Empire, without distinction of religion or
language are to be divided into primary assemblies”. They are divided “for administrative
convenience and so that justice shall be done everywhere in like manner.”51 Thomas Jefferson and Destutt de Tracy who agreed on many fundamental points disagreed on the subject of federalism and the role of central government. Destutt, who like Sieyès believed in the advantages of a centralised state administration, argued that “the confederate system” might work well in America, “because they have no powerful neighbours.” But if “France had adopted this form, it is doubtful whether it could have resisted all Europe, as it did by remaining one and indivisible”.52

Pestel advocated the French position. He held that in order to form a single, indivisible nation, one language, one government and one unified political order for the entire country were needed. Pestel was afraid that a federal system would weaken the link between the regions which would lead to weaker support for the union, or even secession. In either case the new Russian nation would be destroyed. As with religion and linguistic diversity, common laws are contrasted to separate laws, institutions and practices. Pestel believed that in a federal system each regional government would argue that it could arrange the public affairs of its own region better without the interference of the supreme authority. Each region, forming a small separate state within the federal state, would be only tenuously connected to the whole. “The particular wellbeing of the region might in the short term have a more decisive influence on the imagination of its rulers and people than the general wellbeing of the whole state, the benefits of which for the region may not be readily apparent. The word ‘state’ will in such a system be an empty word, since nowhere will people be aware of the state, only of their region”. The consequence of such a system would be that the “love of the fatherland” would turn into allegiance to a region. As far as Russia was concerned, Pestel believed that the federal system would be ruinous. Not only were its regions governed by different institutions and judged by different civil laws, but they also spoke different languages and professed different faiths. Their inhabitants were of different origins and at times belonged to
different powers. So, “if this heterogeneity were to be reinforced through a federal system, it is easy to predict just how quickly these diverse regions would secede from the Russian core”.  

Muraviev, on the other hand advocated a federal system for Russia modelled on the United States. However, as in the American Constitution (and even more so the legislation regulating the creation of new territories and states in the American union), the autonomous states that were to be created in Russia would not reflect the ethnic make-up of their population. In this way the same principle of a unitary nation was employed in both Societies’ proposals. Their disregard for ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences in the multi-national Russian empire had parallels in the West. Indeed, many political thinkers, who could be associated with civic nationalism, argued in the same way. Contrary to what might be expected, it was often “liberal” and “radical” thinkers who promoted assimilation of cultural minorities, while conservative thinkers opposed it.  

A common belief was that the welfare of the nation was dependent on its prosperity, security and progress. In order to be viable a nation had to be of sufficient size. In Friedrich List’s words, “large population and an extensive territory endowed with manifold national resources are essential requirements of the normal nationality… A nation restricted in the number of its population and in territory, especially if it has a separate language, can only possess a crippled literature, crippled institutions for promoting art and science. A small state can never bring to complete perfection within its territory the various branches of production”. To Pestel, federalism would weaken the Russian state in exactly these respects. As we have seen, he believed that federalism would lead to the secession of regions. Then Russia would lose not only its power, greatness and strength, but perhaps also its very existence. “Russia would once again experience all the harm inflicted in ancient times by the appanage system, which was nothing more than a kind of federal state structure”.
Pestel echoes the prevalent French view that, because of the competitive international states system, strong central governments were necessary to the survival of European nations.\textsuperscript{58} There was a belief among many political thinkers in the West that small, and especially small and backward, nationalities had everything to gain by merging into greater nations and making their contribution to humanity through these. This, they believed, was simply a consequence of the laws of progress.\textsuperscript{59} Destutt de Tracy asserted that a people often gain a great deal by being conquered. “[T]his is particularly true, of those whose fortune it is to be conquered by a representative government, for they thereby gain both liberty and economy… To be thus conquered, is in truth more like a rescue from bondage, than a subjection.”\textsuperscript{60} A couple of decades later John Stuart Mill described colonial rule as a system that is “as legitimate as any other if it is the one which in the existing state of civilization of the subject people most facilitates their transition to a higher stage of improvement.” Thus, superior societies possessed a historical mission to enlighten the natives.\textsuperscript{61}

The case for the establishment of a nation-state depended on whether it could fit in with or advance historical evolution and progress. Hence the defence of small cultures became an expression of conservative resistance to the inevitable advance of history.\textsuperscript{62} Jefferson agreed with Destutt de Tracy that the measure of a nation’s greatness was the freedom that the people generally enjoyed in pursuing their individual interests and thus in promoting the wealth and welfare of the community as a whole.\textsuperscript{63} This thinking is reflected in the proposal of the Southern Society, which states that the right to nationhood must prevail in the case of those peoples who can enjoy their own political independence (such as Poland), whereas “the right of convenience” must prevail over those peoples that cannot themselves make use of their political independence and must of necessity come under the power of some stronger state (such as Finland !).\textsuperscript{64} Thus, the principle of self-determination, characteristic of civic
nationalism, was not promoted in order to encourage the realisation of a distinct cultural identity, but to give expression to the universal desire for liberty among all peoples.\textsuperscript{65}

To Pestel, it certainly seemed obvious that the many peoples of the empire were much better off as members of a Russian nation than on their own. “The nomadic peoples are half savages, and some are even complete savages; they live in ignorance and degradation. Consequently, even out of Christian duty one should endeavour to improve their condition, the more so… [considering] that they live in our state, in our fatherland. The goal is that they will become our brethren. It may be reached by settling them permanently and turning them to agriculture”.\textsuperscript{66}

Hence, imperialist sentiment is integrated into the civic idea of the nation. As Anthony Smith argues, civic nationalism often demands “as the price for receiving citizenship and its benefits, the surrender of ethnic community and individuality, the privatization and marginalization of ethnic culture and religion of minorities within the borders of the national state”.\textsuperscript{67} This was actually one of the reasons why Herder reacted against Enlightenment thinkers, accusing them of eliminating cultural diversity.\textsuperscript{68}

The concept of a single, indivisible nation is also related to the role of privileges. A basic prerequisite for this nationalism, based on political principles and institutions, is that the people is sovereign and possess a general will, which means that special rights for various separate groups cannot be accepted, whether it involves local, cultural, or noble privileges.

The common view of the civic concept of the nation is that it was not only anti-monarchical but also anti-aristocratic, breaking with the world of the ancien régime.\textsuperscript{69} In America, despite the structure of colonial society, debates and concerns over the role of the aristocracy in political life remained central well into the nineteenth century. In Europe, the existence of an
aristocracy was a fundamental social problem and became a structural problem in European constitutionalism. It involved the issue of privilege and social oppression and thus lay at the heart of political struggles and dominated the debates on the forms of governmental institutions.  

The French nation-state had been constructed in opposition not only to the absolute power of the monarch, but also to corporate and provincial privilege. The nation was contrasted to the privileged orders and corporations of the *ancien régime*. It was in this spirit that Destutt de Tracy refuted Montesquieu’s typology, which defined governments as either despotic, monarchical, or republican. Instead, Destutt divided all governments into two classes, one of which he called “national, in which social rights are common to all; the other special, establishing or recognizing particular or unequal rights”. Sieyès asserted that the nobility simply had no grounds for their special rights: “Is it not obvious that the nobility possesses privileges and exemptions which it brazenly calls its rights and which stands distinct from the rights of the great body of citizens?” Because of these special rights the nobility did not belong to the common order, nor was it subjected to common laws. Thus, its private rights made it “a people apart in the great nation… As for its political rights, it also exercises these separately from the nation. It has its own representatives who are charged with no mandate from the people… They are foreign to the nation first because of their origin, since they do not owe their powers to the People; and secondly because of their aim, since this consists in defending, not the general interest, but the private one”.  

In the same way, Pestel justified removing noble rights and privileges, because all members of the nation were entitled to the same universal rights. He argued that the advantages enjoyed by the Russian nobility were not based on any corresponding obligations. On the contrary, these advantages served to excuse those who enjoyed them from all obligations; and so, Pestel held, they must be recognised as privileges rather than rights.
Hence, the nobility should no longer enjoy the exclusive right to occupy all public offices. This right should be distributed among all Russians. Whoever deserved a public office by virtue of his knowledge, capabilities and qualities should be entitled to it, regardless of his background or class. Talents, knowledge, and virtue could be found in all estates. Thus, entry to the governmental bureaucracy should be based on merit rather than social status.\textsuperscript{74}

Furthermore, Pestel criticized the existing criminal law which meted out different punishments to perpetrators depending on social status. The nobility, he argued, should be subject to the same punishments as other Russians for similar crimes. To Pestel, the nature of punishment should correspond to the nature of the crime and not to the social class of the criminal; for crime is the product of a person’s moral qualities and not a mark of his belongings to a particular class.\textsuperscript{75} This can be compared to The French Constitution of 1791 which guarantees that all appointments to government offices will be made on the basis of talent and virtue only; that all contributions will be repaid equally; that the same offence will be punished in the same way, regardless of the status of the perpetrator. This constitution also states that there no longer exists any nobility, nor any hereditary distinctions, or distinctions by privileged orders.\textsuperscript{76}

The American Constitution asserts that “[n]o Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States: And no Person holding any Office of Profit or Trust under them, shall, without the Consent of the Congress, accept of any present, Emolument, Office, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State”.\textsuperscript{77} In the United States, the presence of an aristocracy was a central issue to political theory, but was hardly a social reality. France, on the other hand, was a country where ancient privileges and special rights were entrenched. Thomas Paine emphasised that the French constitution brought about a complete change in this hierarchical society: “The French constitution says: \textit{there shall be no titles}; and of
consequence all that class… which in some countries is called ‘aristocracy,’ and in others ‘nobility,’ is done away, and the peer is exalted into the man.”\textsuperscript{78}

Pestel declared that people are all born for the good in the sense that they are all created by the Almighty, and therefore it is unjust to reserve the term “wellborn” only for the nobility. Consequently, the nobility’s privileged use of this term should be abolished. The titles of Prince, Duke, Count, Baron, etc derive from the time when such titles indicated different positions in the power structure. Such titles cannot exist in a state based on real justice, true morality, good sense and reason. For that reason, noble status and all titles and ranks should be abolished.\textsuperscript{79} In the constitution of the Northern Society, Muraviev argues against the division of men into grades: “Civil ranks adopted from the Germans are to be abolished in accordance with ancient resolutions of the Russian people.” The titles and classes of smallholders (\textit{odnodvorets}), petit bourgeois (\textit{meshchanin}), nobleman (\textit{dvorianin}) and distinguished citizen (\textit{imenityi grazhdanin}) should all be replaced by the titles “Citizen” or “Russian.”\textsuperscript{80}

The French Revolution created a class of individuals enjoying common rights, bound by common obligation, formally equal before the law. It substituted a universal law for privilege and maintained that “all are equally dependent on the law”.\textsuperscript{81} “There are no longer any privileges or exceptions to the common law of all Frenchmen for any part of the Nation, nor for any individual”.\textsuperscript{82} This egalitarian idea of the nation had its most influential expression in the American Declaration of Independence of 1776 which stated that “all men are created equal” and “endowed…with certain unalienable Rights”.\textsuperscript{83}

The same conception of the nation is expressed in the draft Constitutions of the Decembrist Societies. Both Muraviev and Pestel state that all Russians must be equal before the law. In Pestel’s words, “any statute which violates this equality is an intolerable abuse which must be eradicated.”\textsuperscript{84} According to Muraviev, “the distinction between nobleman and commoner is
not recognised in that it is contrary to our faith, whereby all men are brothers, all are well-born in that they are born by the will of God, all are born for the good and are simply men.”

This statement can be compared to Sieyès remarks on the same subject: “Inequalities of wealth or ability are like inequalities of age, sex, size, colour, etc. In no way do they alter the nature of the equality of citizenship; the rights inherent in citizenship cannot attach to differences”. The same concept is found Velestinlis’s Rights of Man from 1797, which states that “when someone is at fault, whatever his position, the law is that for the fault [sic] and is unalterable.” That is, “the rich man is not punished less and the poor man more for the same wrong act, but equally”.

According to Pestel, the aim of society is the gratification of common needs, which as they arise from common and identical properties in human nature, are the same for all men. Distinctions between classes prevented this aim from being fulfilled. They ruined the bonds between citizens so that separate factions were formed. They aimed exclusively at granting greater privileges to some people and of oppressing the mass of the nation for the selfish interest of a minority. “It follows from this that in the state all men without exception must be completely equal before the law…the estates [both the aristocracy based on wealth and on hereditary rights] must be eliminated…all men must form but a single estate which may be called civic estate, and all citizens of the state must have one and the same rights”. All Russian citizens must have equal enjoyment of private, civil, and political rights throughout the state. The Decembrists saw serfdom as the main obstacle to the drawing together of all classes. Trubetskoi’s “Manifesto” therefore stated that the right to own men should be abolished and that there should be equality of all classes before the law.

Civic nationalists imagine the nation as a community of equal, rights-bearing citizens. But these rights are linked to duties. In Rousseau’s words “all should employ the same rights, bear the same burdens without aristocracy, privileges, or hereditary distinctions.” According
to the Spanish constitution of 1812, every Spaniard, without exception, was obliged to contribute to the expenditure of the State in proportion to his means.\textsuperscript{95} This was also the view of the Decembrists, who maintained that civil society was created for the greatest possible good of each and every citizen and not for the good of the few at the expense of the majority. Consequently, not only did all the people in a state have equal rights to the benefits afforded by that state, but everyone was equally obliged to bear the burdens associated with state organisation.\textsuperscript{96}

In order to achieve the aim of the greatest possible good, the state had to collect revenues and because all citizens had equal rights to enjoy society’s benefits, they also had equal obligations to contribute to the creation of these benefits. As Muraviev stressed, “every citizen is obliged to carry out his social duties.” Therefore, the Decembrists argued, it was not right that only a part of the people carried the entire burden of taxation, while others did not contribute. Thus, the nobility could not be exempted from the payment of taxes on equal basis with others. Nor should they be exempted from military service on par with other citizens. Since all members of society benefited equally from military power, all social classes should contribute to maintain this power. The nobility, therefore, should not be exempted from personal obligation to serve and its present privilege not to do so should be abolished.\textsuperscript{97}

The purpose of the French Revolution, in Sieyès view, was to deprive the nobility and the clergy of their ancient privileges because neither of them contributed to the well-being of the whole nation. Instead the third estate should lead the French nation. The third estate is the one body “containing within itself everything needful to be a complete nation.” It is “like a strong and robust man with one arm still in chains. If the privileged order were removed, the nation would not be something less but something more”.\textsuperscript{98}

The absence of a bourgeoisie in much of Eastern Europe is a commonly stated reason why civic nationalism did not develop there. However, although most of the Decembrists were
landlords of noble origin, they tried to build a modern liberal nation with a capitalist organisation. In this sense they worked against their own class. Acting against privileges and for the common good, the Decembrists spoke of the important role of the middle class in building a citizen-nation. They lamented the fact that “[t]he middle class is respected and important in all other countries; in our country this class is miserable, poor, burdened with obligations, deprived of means of a livelihood”. Leading Decembrists like Pestel, Kakhovskii and Bestuzhev complained that the burgesses were overburdened by duties and taxes and that the time had come for them to be freed from the old guilds which only hampered industry.

The elimination of corporate privilege was essential to Adam Smith’s critique of the mercantile system. The French physiocrats also promoted laissez-faire economics. They demanded the abolition of all traditional restraints, prohibitions, and regulations which prevented the free development of individual property and the optimum utilization of its productive capacity. Their ideas were institutionalised in the French constitution of 1791 which asserts that “there are no longer any guilds, nor professional, craft, or arts corporations”. In the draft constitution of the Northern Society, Muraviev underlined the importance of abolishing existing merchant and trade guilds and corporations. “Everyone has the right to engage in whatever trade that seems to him the most profitable: agriculture, cattle, hunting, fishing, craftwork, factory work, trade, etc”. Pestel agreed with this economic liberalism, arguing in the proposal of the Southern Society that there should be freedom to engage in economic activity for all citizens alike. Everyone should have the right to form corporations and companies. “Townspeople should have the same civil rights as other citizens, their guilds abolished, and liberty to live and work wherever they wish to”. The Decembrist Manifesto echoed these views, stating that every citizen had the right to choose whatever occupation he wishes; to acquire every kind of property and make every kind of
contract. Poll tax and arrears should be cancelled and monopolies on salt and alcohol abolished.\textsuperscript{107}

The concept of equal citizenship also applied to the form of government. In this sense, civic nationalism was a democratic nationalism shaped around the citizen-nation. Hence, to the French revolutionaries the civic idea of the nation applied not only to the whole people, i.e. to all the inhabitants of a country, but also to the principle of popular sovereignty. Instead of king and nobility the whole people was considered to be sovereign and the source of the authority of the state.\textsuperscript{108} Most importantly, the people should write their own laws in accordance with which they should live. Rousseau wrote that “obedience to a law which we impose upon ourselves is what constitutes liberty”.\textsuperscript{109} This idea is expressed in the Spanish constitution: “Sovereignty lies by its nature in the People. Precisely for this reason, it has the exclusive right to formulate its fundamental laws”.\textsuperscript{110} Destutt de Tracy tried to explain the difference between such a “national” regime and other regimes. The “national” regime was founded on “the principle, that all rights and power originate in, reside in, and belong to, the entire body of the people or nation; and that none exists, but what is derived from, and exercised for the nation.” A “special” regime, in contrast, recognises particular or unequal rights. In a “special” government the legitimate source of power does not belong to the general will of the nation.\textsuperscript{111}

This new idea of popular sovereignty is reflected in the proposal of the Northern Society, where it is written that “[t]he people is the source of sovereign power; to whom belongs the exclusive right to make fundamental statutes for itself”.\textsuperscript{112} The new concept also applied to the organization of government in the sense that the People’s Assembly, which was to be composed of men elected by the Russian people and representing it, “assumed the character of Majesty”.\textsuperscript{113} This Assembly, consisting of the Sovereign Duma and the Chamber of the People’s Representatives, should be invested with all legislative power.\textsuperscript{114}
The French Constitution of 1791 stated that: “[S]overeignty is one, indivisible, inalienable and indispensable. It belongs to the Nation”. All the powers emanate from the Nation alone.115 Velestinlis’s Greek constitution conveys a similar conception: “the general power of the Republic consists in the entire Nation.” The people name their delegates, give authority to those chosen from them, and decide if the appointed laws are “good for [their] happiness”.116 Because “the nation is essentially the source of all sovereignty,” Thomas Paine writes, no individual, or “body of men”, may “be entitled to any authority which is not expressly derived from it”.117 In the same way the Spanish constitution of 1812 states that, “the Spanish people are free and independent, and are, and cannot be the inheritance of any family or individual.”118 The Decembrists believed the same to be true for Russia. One cannot allow the arbitrary rule of one man to become a principle of government, Muraviev writes, “not only because the experience of all nations and all epochs has shown that autocratic power is equally ruinous for both rulers and society, but because the Russian people is free and independent.” Therefore, he continues, “it is not and cannot be the property of any single person or family.”119 Pestel uses the very same phrase. The government, he continues, also belongs to the people. “It exists for the good of the people, and has no other grounds for its existence, whereas the people exists for its own sake and not for the good of the government”.120 As is stated in the American Declaration of Independence, “Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.”121

Destutt de Tracy held that the modern concept of representation, whereby a nation delegated the effective power to functionaries elected by the people for a limited period, enabled a “special” regime to become “national”.122 Pestel agreed with this view, making it clear that a representative system had to be installed and the aristocratic order to be eliminated.123 To be a citizen, Muraviev asserted, meant to have “the right to participate in the government of society, either indirectly, i.e., by choosing officials or electors – or directly, by
standing oneself for election to public office in the legislature, executive or judiciary.” As the old world gave way to the new, “special” regimes would become “national.” This development, which was stimulated by republican revolutions, indicated the progress of civilisation. The Decembrists believed that time was ripe for Russia to become “national.”

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the civic concept of the nation appeared in Russia at about the same time as it did so in the rest of Europe and that the Decembrists were the first to employ it in Russian political struggle. They brought the modern idea of the nation to Russia and used it, without changing its meaning, as the source of legitimacy in their attempt to transfer power from the tsar to the people. The Decembrist uprising failed, but this idea of the nation changed the way in which relations of power were conceived and claims to legitimacy were made. It contributed to a change in political rhetoric from a concern with the role of subjects to that of the rights of citizens.

On a more general note, the paper challenges the problematic dichotomy between a Western civic and an Eastern cultural nationalism. It suggests that Russian intellectual history is integrated into European intellectual history to an extent that its social and political history is not, and that there is reason to make further investigation of the presence and role of liberal ideas in Russian history.
Notes


2 For a recent discussion of the Kohn’s dichotomy and its prevailing role in the study of nationalism, see A. Liebich, "Searching for the perfect nation: the itinerary of Hans Kohn (1891-1971)", *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 12 (October 2006).


Soviet scholars have taken an interest in what they refer to as the “civic literature” of the Decembrists, which is seen in the framework of a specific Russian revolutionary tradition. See M. V. Nechkina, *A. S. Griboedov i dekabristy* (Moscow, 1951); V. G. Bazanov, *Ocherki dekabristskoi literatury. Poeziia* (Moscow, 1961).


Many scholars stress the differences between the Southern and the Northern Societies. See for ex J. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York, 1966), pp. 264-267; A. Ulam,


13 V. I. Shteingel cited in Prousis, Russian Society, p. 47.

14 Mazour, The First Russian Revolution; Yarmolinsky, Road to Revolution.

15 M. V. Dovnar-Zapolskii, Idealy dekabristov, (Moscow, 1907), p. 94.


Lemberg, Die nationale Gedankenwelt, pp 91-102.


Kemiläinen, Nationalism, pp. 55, 26, 32.


Ibid., p. 204.


Ibid., p. 153.

See Kohn, Idea of Nationalism.


43 Ibid., p. 143.


57 Pestel, Russian Law in Documentary History, pp. 54-55.

58 See Destutt de Tracy, Review of Montesquieu, pp. 82, 181, 232; Sieyès, What is the Third Estate?; Idem, Dire – sur la question du veto royal – a l’Assemblée Nationale (Paris, 1789); See also O’Meara, The Decembrist Pavel Pestel, pp. 77-78, 83; Baker, Inventing the French Revolution; Brubaker, Citizenship and Nationhood.

59 Hobsbawm, Nations and nationalism, pp. 34-35. See also Smith, Nations and Nationalism, p. 186.

60 Destutt de Tracy, Review of Montesquieu, pp. 91-92.


62 Hobsbawm, Nations and nationalism, p. 41.


64 Pestel, Russkaia Pravda, pp. 107-111.

65 Brubaker, Citizenship and Nationhood, pp. 1, 7.

66 Pestel, Russkaia Pravda, p. 165.

67 Smith, Nations and nationalism, p. 186.

68 Rabow-Edling, Slavophile Thought, pp. 62-71.


71 Brubaker, Citizenship and Nationhood, pp. 12, 6.

72 Destutt de Tracy, Review of Montesquieu, p. 12.

73 Sieyès, What is the Third Estate? p. 58.

74 Pestel, Russkaia Pravda, p. 187.

76 La constitution Francaise, 1791, pp. 13-15.


79 Pestel, Russian Law in Documentary History, pp. 55-57.

80 Muraviev, Project for a Constitution in Documentary History, p. 45.

81 Brubaker, Citizenship and Nationhood, p. 39; Sieyès, What is the Third Estate? p. 162.

82 La constitution Francaise, 1791, p. 14.


84 Muraviev, Project for a Constitution in Documentary History, p. 44; Pestel, Russian Law in Documentary History, p. 55.

85 Muraviev, Project for a Constitution in Documentary History, p. 44.


87 Clogg, Movement for Greek Independence, p. 151.

88 Pestel, Russian Law in Documentary History, p. 51.

89 Pestel, Russkaia Pravda, pp. 191, 113.


93 Ignatieff, Blood and Belonging, p. 6.


95 Politisk Constitution för Spanska Monarkien af Cortes antagen den 19 Mars 1812 (Stockholm, 1821), section 2, p. 5.

96 Pestel, Russian Law in Documentary History, p. 55.


98 Onuf & Onuf, Nations, Markets and War, p. 213; Sieyès, What is the Third Estate?, pp. 56-57.


104 Muraviev, *Project for a Constitution* in Documentary History, p. 44.


106 Ibid., p. 152.


110 *Constitution för Span ska Monarkien*, Title I, First section, p. 4.


113 Ibid., p. 112.

114 Ibid., p. 109.

115 *La constitution Française*, 1791, Title III, Article I-II p. 25.


118 *Constitution för Span ska Monarkien*, Title I, First section, p. 4.


121 *The Declaration of Independence*, p. 73.


