“Irreconcilables? A Failed experiment in Russian-Polish Relations”

You can do anything you like with bayonets except sit on them.

–attributed to Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand at the Congress of Vienna, 1815

Few monarchs have come to the throne carrying a heavier emotional baggage than Nicholas I. His elder brother, Tsar Alexander I, had been implicated in the assassination of their father Paul I. As the youngest son of Paul, Nicholas was third in line to the throne behind his brothers Alexander and Konstantin, either of whom might have had children and thus further distanced him from the throne. Yet both were childless. Moreover, the three brothers signed a private secret contract, late in Alexander’s reign, according to which Konstantin, the next in line, renounced his right to succeed to the throne in favor of Nicholas. When Alexander died under mysterious circumstances far from the capital in the southern city of Tagentrog, confusion surrounded the succession. Because three brother’s contract was secret, known only to a few, rumors and suspicions circulated during the interregnum that was prolonged by the long distances involved in communicating the unexpected news and further complicated by the refusal of Konstantin, who was in Warsaw, to confirm in public what he had agreed to in private. The proclamation of Nicholas as tsar in St. Petersburg touched off a revolt of the crack Semenovskii Guards regiment, which was led by members of the aristocracy, who sought to topple the autocracy and replace it with a form of constitutional monarchy. An apocryphal story circulated that the rank and file of the soldiers, who ignorant of the aims of their officers, marched into the Senate Square chanting “Konstantin and a Constitution.” Nicholas acted decisively with armed force to repress what is known as the 1825 Decembrist revolt. He then launched an investigation and conducted a trial of the leaders, six of whom were executed. Several hundred officers were sent into Siberian exile. “A pretty way to begin a reign,” Nicholas is reputed to have said.¹

Nicholas’s rule as autocrat was further complicated by his personal relationship and the unprecedented political arrangement with his older brother, Konstantin. As part of the contractual agreement of the three brothers, Konstantin, who had long lived in Warsaw, spoke Polish, and had married a Polish noblewoman,

¹ The best biography is by W. Bruce Lincoln, Nicholas I. Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981)
had been designated by Alexander I as Viceroy of the Kingdom of Poland. The kingdom had been created at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 at the insistence of Alexander I, and endowed with a constitution and elected parliament, the Sejm, which endowed the Poles with rights not enjoyed by the Russians in the rest of the empire. The contradiction between the autocratic principle of imperial rule based on Russian legal and religious foundations and the constitutional charter for the Kingdom of Poland, which was also confirmed by the solemn oath of both Alexander and Nicholas, revealed a deep structural fault in the administration of the empire that haunted Nicholas in his attempt to achieve a reconciliation of the two nationalities, professing different faiths and harboring a long history of mutually hostile relations. Konstantin’s long residence in Warsaw, his strong personal attachment to his title and especially to the Polish Army, which he commanded, with its distinctive uniforms, colors, and corporate identity, and his position as older brother to Nicholas led to a tangled emotional relationship in which familial, dynastic ties intertwined with policy questions.

Highlighted against this background, Ekaterina Boltunova’s new book offers a bold interpretation of Russia’s relations with Poland leading up to and following the revolt of 1830–1831 by focusing on a little-known but key episode in the reign of Nicholas I, his coronation as king of Poland. The work is divided into two parts: part I, "The Coronation" and part II, "Forgetting as a Political Strategy," which analyzes the attempt of Alexander I and his brothers after 1815 to reinterpret the history of Russia’s conflicts with the Poles in the Time of Troubles and the Napoleonic Wars as a prelude to a strategy of integrating the Poles into a new relationship with the autocracy. The book concludes with a final short chapter on the uprising and its reception in Poland and Russia. Throughout, the author employs a variety of explanatory models, including discourse analysis, symbolic imagery, and the interpretation of emotions as culturally and temporally situated phenomena. The book is strongly documented with material from five Russian archives and material from the Polish and Finnish archives. In addition, Boltunova consulted articles in Russian and Polish periodicals and an exhaustive list of primary sources dealing with Polish-Russian relations in the latter eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries.

The first part, "Coronation," which is introduced by a chapter entitled "Fear" (Strakh), sets the tone. Boltunova argues that Nicholas was fearful from the outset of his reign that his older brother, despite having renounced the throne, nevertheless may have aspired to become king of Poland in the confused period of the interregnum or later to gain full control over the kingdom by exercising his authority as viceroy. She attributes this fear as the basis for Nicholas’s manifesto in December 1826, which was directed at the Poles, and which asserted his endorsement of the rights grants by Alexander I to the Poles, including the dual title of the tsar as king of Poland. Given Nicholas’s opposition to this arrangement when he was grand duke, Boltunova further suggests that this fear overcame Nicholas’ traditional conservative and autocratic mentality, in the way that “an individual possessed by fear is capable of action which he could not conceive of under different circumstances” (29). The same fear, she adds, continued to nourish Nicholas’s relations with Konstantin.

In chapter 2 entitled “I…will observe the Constitutional Charter,” she emphasizes the disagreements between the two brothers over issues concerning the degree of autonomy that Konstantin would enjoy in his role as viceroy. The most serious concerned Konstantin’s desire to maximize his control over the Polish Army and to assert his authority over the military units that were stationed outside the official boundaries of the

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2 For a recent survey of the question see Vladimir B. Lobanov and, Roman A. Nalivaiko, “Russian-Polish Relations of the XVIII-XIX Centuries in Light of Contemporary Russian Historiography, Bylye gody 16:1 (2021): 5-14.
3 For example, A.B. Nance, Literary and Cultural Images of a Nation without a State. The case of 19th Century Poland (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) and the many works of N.M. Filatov on Polish images and cultural symbols. See, for example, N.M. Filatov, Istoriia kraev i oblastei Rossiskoe Federatsii (Perm: Perm University Library, 2007). Also see M.O. Dolbilov “Ok kontseptsiakh i emotsiiakh. Otvet avtora knigi uchastnikam diskussii,” Rossiiskaiia istoria (2012), no. 4 (2012): 85-92.
kingdom in the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that had been annexed by Catherine the Great in the first partition and incorporated as provinces into the Russian empire but placed under the administration surveillance of the viceroy of Poland by Alexander I. In his correspondence with Nicholas, Konstantin engaged his brother in a discussion on the unification of Lithuania to Poland which Nicholas refused to countenance. Konstantin defined himself as Russian although he considered himself both Russian and Polish within the kingdom. The disagreement extended to the use of the Lithuanian Corps who were under the command of Konstantin and extended to the use of the Polish Army. When Nicholas requested the Army’s participation in the Russo-Turkish War of 1828–1829, under Konstantin’s leadership, to help cement Russo-Polish comradeship in arms, Konstantin demurred, He then resisted sending his army to the Danube front, insisting that this would denude the western frontier of a defense force, and that it thus could prove strategically dangerous given Russia’s relations with Prussia and Austria and difficult to carry out for logistical reasons.

Boltunova discounts these excuses, arguing that Konstantin’s decision stemmed from his opposition to the war. The incident ended in a face-saving compromise by Nicholas, who accepted his brother’s offer to send eighteen Polish officers to serve at the front. The incident may have had deeper roots in Konstantin’s deplorable role as an officer in the Napoleonic Wars, and his reluctance to spoil his beloved creation that was based on strict discipline, elegant uniforms, and parade ground maneuvering in the image of his childhood veneration of the idealized soldier untouched by war. Ironically, his refusal to participate in the Russo-Turkish War had a poor effect on Polish opinion, which he was so anxious to cultivate. His obsession with the army as his play toy, combined with his vision of himself as a Pole, were undoubtedly the basis for his decision in 1830 to refuse to use the Lithuanian Corps, which was by this time mainly dominated by Russian officers, or the Polish Army to repress the uprising in Warsaw. Boltunova concludes that these brotherly quarrels reinforced Nicholas’s determination to crown himself king of Poland, although his hesitation to do so over four years from the time of his initial idea reflected his doubts about how, when, and where to do it.

The author’s emphasis on conflict and tension between the two brothers allows little room for their mutual exchanges of brotherly love, or their shared emotional attachment to their brother Alexander who served them both as a source of inspiration and guidance, or their strong familial bonds that were centered on their veneration for their mother. Was Konstantin in his outbursts and complaints being just his peevish self, with a volatile and even unstable personality that had been well apparent since childhood, or truly antagonistic toward his brother? And was Nicholas fearful of him or rather tolerant, seeking to placate and calm him by consulting him and at times conceding to his wishes?

The author devotes the next three chapters to the detailed planning and ceremonious celebration of the coronation. As Boltunova points out, this was an unprecedented act. Her fascinating detailed description of the preparations, the ceremonial journey of Nicholas, his family, and his suite from St. Petersburg to Warsaw and the event itself that was filled with symbolic references, is a valuable reminder of how shallow the historical tradition was in Russia, how much continued to be invented. The problem for Nicholas was how to reconcile his religious faith, his national identity, his conscience, and his sense of duty with his aspiration to win the loyalty and obedience of his Polish subjects, who were Russia’s historical enemies with a different faith and nationality. If the symbolic design of the coronation along Polish lines was meant to accomplish this task, then, as the author points out, it failed.

Shifting in part II to the immediate background of the coronation, Boltunova presents a highly detailed, deeply research, and convincing analysis of the three brothers’ long-term efforts to win the loyalty and affection of the Poles. They generously acknowledged the bravery of the Polish forces who had engaged in

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fighting their Russian enemy as signifying a brotherhood of warriors. They also reminded the Poles that they had enjoyed a high degree of autonomy within a powerful united government, and had gained financial concessions and profited from economic development under Russian rule.

At different times, all three brothers were even willing to assume a degree of guilt for Russia’s having participated in the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The emotional language in which these concessions were expressed reached a high point when Alexander invoked Christian forgiveness to absolve the Polish forces for having participated in the invasion of Russia and the occupation of Moscow in 1812. Boltunova uncovers real ties of affection, expressed in the narrative of romantic love, which characterized the relations between the Petersburg elite and Polish women, who were praised for their extraordinary beauty. But the effect of invoking these emotional bonds on Russian and Polish opinion was by no means uniform, and often hostile. The Russian reinterpretations of the Time of Troubles and 1812 of course failed to mitigate anti-Polish feelings in Russia or placate Polish opinion, which understandably preferred the historical interpretations of Polish historians.

In describing the reaction of Nicholas, Konstantin and the top Russian commanders of the army to the Polish revolt of 1830–1831, the author stresses the initial readiness of the tsar to negotiate with Polish representatives from Warsaw who sought to avoid an armed conflict and the unwillingness of Konstantin to use the Polish troops who were loyal to him to put down the rebels before the outbreak took on mass proportions. Up to the time the Sejm voted to depose Nicholas as king of Poland, the tsar issued conciliatory appeals to the Polish army, invoking their common bonds as brothers, and imploring them to reject what he called the handful of miscreant rebels who had fallen under foreign influence. When the Sejm ignored these appeals, Konstantin and Nicholas both denounced the Poles as “ungrateful” and began the process of reversing their earlier, “forgiving” interpretation of the Time of Troubles, the campaign of 1812, and the brotherhood of arms; they launched a military intervention, although not immediately. As the author writes, “the psychology of war and the psychology of peace literally and sharply contradicted one another” (76). Even after the storming of Warsaw, Field Marshal Prince Ivan F Paskevich addressed the inhabitants in a remarkable speech expressing more regret and reproach and denying any recourse to revenge. Boltunova concludes by drawing a parallel with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s speech of April 1945. Stalin invoked the theme of brotherhood to “bury” the turbulent historical relationship. Her comment reflects the persistent attempts to reconcile the Poles to accepting the domination of Russia. In both cases, however, the Russian manipulation of disputed memories failed to prevent the Poles from maintaining their invocation of the opposite interpretation of sovereign independence. By this time, however, the accumulation of disputed memories had become nightmares.

This is a remarkable work filled with interesting insights and invoking the emotions that have always characterized the stormy relations between Poles and Russians but have so rarely been so eloquently expressed.

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See L.E. Gorizontov, Paradoksi imperskoi politiki. Polskie v Rossii i russkie v Pol’she (XIX-XX v.) (Moscow: Indrik, 1999).
1991), and prize-winning *The Struggle for Supremacy in the Eurasian Borderlands from the Earliest Times to the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). He has taught and lectured extensively in the United States and Europe and conducted research in Russian archives over the past sixty years.