ABSTRACT

AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS: A BIOGRAPHICAL PORTRAIT OF PYOTOR
YAKOVLEVICH CHAADAEV

by Jacob Dennis Beard

This thesis project, titled At the Foot of the Cross: A Biographical Portrait of Pyotr Yakovlevich Chaadaev, follows the story of the preeminent Russian philosopher Pyotr Chaadaev. Declared a madman by his government in 1836, this thesis explores the rationale behind the claim of his madness while also expanding the portrait of his life beyond the limited coverage that he usually receives. This work is an amalgamation of microhistorical biography, intellectual history, and cultural history in the hopes of filling out a picture of what life in the nineteenth century Russian Empire for a nobleman and Europe as a whole.
AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS:
A BIOGRAPHICAL PORTRAIT OF PYOTR YAKOVLEVICH CHAADAEV

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by

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This Thesis titled

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Dedication

For R. D. Mason, Jr.

I never hoped to be winner by default.
Acknowledgements

In the fall of 2012, during my final year of undergraduate, I took up the project of trying to better encapsulate the life of the prominent Russian philosopher Pyotr Chaadaev and since then my only real academic desire has been to create a project like the one provided herein. This project is the culmination of a half-decade long aspiration and certainly would not have been possible without the extensive support of the staff and faculty at Miami University. There are many people without whom this thesis project would not have been possible and I am happy to give them the floor at the opening of this work. Firstly, to Dr. Stephen Norris – without the advice of your counsel I would not have been satisfied with the quality of this project and would have only marginally accomplished what I hoped to achieve. I would like to make another monumental expression of gratitude to Dr. Zara Torlone for facilitating this project every step of the way, without your advice and guidance this project would never have properly gotten on its feet. I would also like to thank Dr. Amanda McVety for her assistance through three semesters of planning this research project and setting the groundwork of my project generally. I am also extremely indebted to Miami University Special Collection’s Masha Stepanova for facilitating the translation of the works of Mikhail Gershenzon without which my first chapter would have been much the weaker.

I am particularly grateful for my graduate cohort with whom I shared many hours of edits, brainstorming, and, most importantly, commiseration. Namely, Luke Stanek, Leigh Winstead, and Gisel Valladares for pouring over the many dozens of drafts that met their eyes well before venturing to tenured inboxes. And specifically, to Zach Golder for reading and editing my thesis project perhaps more times than even I have – a co-authorship may be more well suited than a simple expression of gratitude. Further, I am lucky to have had the support of Brittni Graham for the last five years and am glad that she drew me to Miami University. And lastly to my parents: Chad and Shaney Beard and Krista and Dustin Paddack; my brothers: Nate and Ryan; and my sisters: Alyssa, Delaney, and Aubrey – that hopefully this thesis in some way vindicates my being gone from home for so long,
Introduction: In the Throes of War

Anyone who has been through the experience of a first hot, dangerous and noisy battle can imagine the feelings of a soldier of my age. Everything seemed incomprehensible to me. I felt that I was alive, saw everything that was going on around me, but simply could not comprehend how this awful, indescribable chaos was going to end. To this day I can still vividly recall Neverovsky riding around the square every time the cavalry approached with his sword drawn and repeating in a voice which seemed to exude confidence in his troops: ‘Lads! Remember what you were taught in Moscow. Follow your orders and no cavalry will defeat you. Don’t hurry with your volleys. Shoot straight at the enemy and don’t anyone dare to start firing before my word of command.’

-Dmitrii Dushenkovich, Iz moikh vospominanii

By the lofty will of heaven
Born in the shackles of service to the Tsar;
He in Rome would have been Brutus, in Athens Pericles,
But here he is an officer of the Hussars.

-Alexander Pushkin, To the Portrait of Chaadaev

The Portrait of Chaadaev:

With the mass mobilization of many Central European states and the Russian Empire against the aggression of Napoleon in 1812, the War of the Sixth Coalition propelled the nineteenth century tumultuously forward. It was on the battlefield that the fate of Europe was set – and it is in the throes of war that our story, too, picks up on the outskirts of Saxony.

The enemy… were unexpectedly checked by this unforeseen obstacle; their crowding and confusion increased; and at that moment the Russian regiment of hussars of the guard, which Wittgenstein had sent… appeared in their rear. This caused a great panic. The unwieldy mass became noisy, and attempted to retire; the Russian light cavalry instantly followed them. The Emperor Alexander, who stood on the hill above, seized the opportunity to send of his own escort of Cossacks… who passed the stream… and took the retiring mass in the flank. This completed the panic.

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1 Dmitrii Dushenkovich, ‘Iz moikh vospominanii,’’ in Kharkevich, V., 1812 god v vospominaniiakh (Vilna: 1900-1907), p. 111
3 Dominic Lieven, Russia Against Napoleon: The True Story of the Campaigns of War and Peace (New York: Penguin Group, 2010), p. 458-459
The land shifted under-hoof as the Russian Imperial Army constricted French Imperial forces into the tripartite vice-grip of Prussian, Austrian, and Russian might. With the memory of the self-immolation of Moscow fresh in their minds, Russian fervor at the Battle of Leipzig in mid-October, 1813 proved too great for the French who buckled, at long last, to the coalition forces.

The Bitva Narodov, or the Battle of Nations, saw the mobilization of Prussian, Russian, Austrian, Polish, French, and Saxon armies, to name a few, in what was a watershed moment for Europe. Napoleon’s Grand Armeé was surrounded and the fate of his empire, as well as the long-standing struggle of Central Europe to break free of French domination, culminated in the first complete defeat of French forces – but not before nearly 200,000 men lay dead.\(^4\) This would prove to be the most carnage inflicted in any one battle during the Napoleonic Wars, particularly for the Russian Imperial Army who lost 22,000 men.\(^5\) The hard-fought victory that de facto liberated Central Europe from French control cultivated patriotic sentiment amongst Russian Imperial officers such that they were “uplifted by a sense of Russian power, prestige, and generosity… [that they] were not just defeating Napoleon but also liberating Europe from his yoke.”\(^6\) Though many officers and prominent, almost mythical, figures were present at this battle, few have paused to consider that the person that Alexander Pushkin later would simply extol as an “officer of the Hussars” numbered amongst them.

Pyotr Yakovlevich Chaadaev, a young man of only twenty at the outset of the Patriotic War, was not to make a prominent name for himself for a couple of decades still. His infamous legacy was forged in the year 1836 with the publication of his First Philosophical Letter in the Russian journal Teleskop, upon which he and the journal’s editor were arrested and punished. Chaadaev was put under house arrest and declared mentally insane – a label that has long-colored the coverage of Chaadaev’s life. This legacy has cast a shadow over the first twenty-some years of Chaadaev’s life, an unfortunate trend that historians have perpetuated in (relatively) recent coverage of his life and work. Scholars have scarcely examined the years of Chaadaev’s life before he actively began producing his Philosophical Letters. Instead, oftentimes when discussion of Chaadaev appears in historical analysis he is presented as figure through which larger dialogues might be explored. For example, most works that feature Chaadaev center on his legacy in regards

\(^5\) *Idem.*
\(^6\) *Ibid.*, p. 443

In his indispensable work \textit{A History of Russian Thought}, Andrzej Walicki analyzes Chaadaev by rooting his thought in a long legacy of intellectual traditions both in Russia and throughout Europe. Walicki, however, begins his biography of Chaadaev by simply citing that “the most comprehensive monograph on Chaadaev in English is Raymond T. McNally’s \textit{Chaadayev and His Friends}” and ends it by placing Chaadaev as the forefather to the Westernizer-Slavophile debate. While Walicki’s portrait of Chaadaev is a tremendous boon to the historicization of Chaadaev in an intellectual setting, it points to an endemic problem in the academic retelling of Chaadaev’s life story and does little for producing a rich view of the man himself.\footnote{Andrzej Walicki, \textit{A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), p. 81-91. I do not mean to belittle the contributions of Walicki’s book – it provides fantastic coverage of Chaadaev’s philosophical model and does set up quite well the importance of Chaadaev’s ideas to those that came after him as well as remarking on the philosophical lineage whence they arose; however, his chapter on Chaadaev does represent the exact kind of phenomenon that I hope to address – namely that not many people seem as interested in a reconstruction of a portrait of Chaadaev as a person as they do Chaadaev as a thinker, which dramatically limits the potential for a full historical portrait} While certainly an analysis of his philosophy and its cultural ramifications is an important endeavor, it is equally important that, in the pursuit of unveiling the staying-power of his ideas, one can contextualize Chaadaev’s thoughts with the events of his life. Towards this end, the objectives of this project are twofold: to bring Chaadaev to life by focusing on his life outside of the parameters of the typical 1836-1837 story and to use the story of his life to explore the nature of the relationship between the Russian intelligentsia and the Russian government during the early nineteenth century as well as the extent to which Nicholas I’s conservative reign managed to keep supposedly dangerous and corrosive revolutionary philosophies from entering the Russian Empire.

In this project, I have expanded the timeline of Chaadaev’s life beyond the usual 1836-1837 framework to encompass the years from his birth, in 1794, to after the publication of the notable \textit{Apologie d’un Fou}, or \textit{Apology of a Madman} in 1837, which Chaadaev published as a response to the public reception of his \textit{First Philosophical Letter}. Though there are some works
on Chaadaev that properly build up a holistic portrait of his life, nearly all of the histories in which Chaadaev appears give him the same few lines of bizarrely scripted coverage. Those lines usually read something like this:

The opening event in the intelligentsia dialogue was the 1836 Philosophical Letter by Petr Chaadaev that Aleksandr Herzen reported had an effect like “a pistol shot in the dark night.” Radically anti-nationalist… he was condemned as insane and placed under house arrest, [and] Chaadaev published an Apology of a Madman.

This kind of formulaic coverage would be understandable, especially in a textbook or non-biographic setting, if there had been a magnum opus of Chaadaev’s life towards which everyone could point and confidently claim that he had been covered in his totality; however, as it stands there is no seminal English-language source that fills this void. Instead, the oddly standardized coverage of Chaadaev has come to act not as an exercise in brevity, but rather of chosen disinterest or neglect. In order to fill in some of this empty space in English coverage of Chaadaev’s life, I will employ personal letters of correspondence between Chaadaev and a number of his contemporaries, as well as some Russian-language sources, namely Imperial historian Mikhail Gershenzon, to construct an introduction to Chaadaev’s life. While my biographic picture of Chaadaev will be quite incomplete itself, it will, it is hoped, be richer than common narratives about him – a step in the right direction, historiographically speaking.

Historiography:

Clearly, biography and microhistory plays a pivotal role in the construction of this project and lies at the heart of my methodological approach to Chaadaev and Russia in the nineteenth century. This thesis is meant to be an exercise in microhistorical biography. Though I concede the fact that I just finished expressing my frustration with historians who use Chaadaev solely as a

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10 Valerie A Kivelson and Ronald Grigor Suny, Russia’s Empires (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p., 162 – I used this example because it contained all of the same parts that the minimalist coverage of Chaadaev usually consists of; however, I believe the coverage of Chaadaev in this textbook actually goes above and beyond the standard call of duty when it comes to introductory coverage to Chaadaev. Anyone who needs a brief synopsis of Chaadaev’s thought and importance should look here. The above lines are identical, though, to the common quick-and-dirty Chaadaevan formula: mention Herzen, mention the Teleskop Affair, mention madness, and move on to the Westernizers and Slavophiles (which is also done in the subsequent sentence in this work)

11 The most recent work that seems to serve this purpose for most is Raymond T. McNally’s Chaadayev and His Friends which was published in 1971 – quite old in historiographic terms
catalyst for conversation about other historical trends, using Chaadaev towards a similar end certainly occurs throughout this project. However, I believe that microhistory, the study of a limited, specific set of historical data to better instantiate broader historical arguments and themes, is best done when paired with biography. Despite their seemingly disparate presuppositions, microhistory and biography work well in tandem to produce a vibrant story as well as a properly inductive history. On the relationship between the two, historian Jill Lepore states that “biography is largely founded on a belief in the singularity and significance of an individual’s life and his contribution to history” whereas microhistory “is founded upon almost the opposite assumption: … the value of examining [a life] lies not in its uniqueness but in it exemplariness…”12 Most historians of the Russian intelligentsia in the nineteenth century do use Chaadaev as “an allegory for broader issues,” and in that way this project is in no way extraordinary; however, where I hope to tread new ground is in the biography of Chaadaev towards a fuller and richer allegory.

In my effort to write a good microhistorical biography of Chaadaev, I have adopted Willard Sunderland’s methodological axiom presented in his The Baron’s Cloak as foundational to my project – that “surveying empires from the great vantage of policies, structures, or ideologies, as historians usually do, we perceive one set of truths, but stepping into the shoes of imperial people, we see another.”13 More honestly, that producing a fuller biography of Chaadaev is one of, if not the main, intention of this thesis stems from an intense personal interest in him as a person. This interest is, I think, exemplary of the primary benefit of employing biography in historical works generally – that it adds a bit of personal flair to what is most often an otherwise strangely non-anthropic affair. As stated in the introduction to the work Russia’s People of Empire:

As scholars interested in the human condition, we have to appreciate this elemental frame of the human experience. And we know how useful biography can be for making readers and students feel connected to the past. Biography dramatizes history, allowing us to bring past experiences to life in ways that less personal modes of historiography never quite manage to do.14

In the contemporary historiographical atmosphere, which is so powerfully dominated by interests in cultural and social history, perhaps nowhere is this dramatization more desperately needed than

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14 Stephen M. Norris and Willard Sunderland (eds), Russia’s People of Empire: Life Stories From Eurasia, 1500 to the Present (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 6
the realm of intellectual history. By merging the two styles together, that of microhistorical biography and intellectual history, I hope to enliven those two flavors which are oftentimes seen as some of the most antiquated and bland flavors available in the historian’s pantry.

The history of thought has commonly been lumped together with the politically-centered modes of modern historical method, but intellectual historians have sought recently to make their narratives more malleable. As more recent developments in historical methodology emerge that decentralize narrative and scope, such as microhistorical analysis and, more generally, cultural history, intellectual historians have (or should have) changed to wed thought and life in historical coverage. I intend to follow along in the same vein as such historians as John Randolph, Alexander Martin, Victoria Frede, and Richard Stites who have expanded the importance of individuals in Russia’s intellectual life beyond an atomistic level and into a more holistic scope of focus, considering not only the context of the history of Russia, but the context of European history writ-large. Stites, in his work *The Four Horsemen*, and Randolph, in his *The House in the Garden*, for example, go through great pains to contextualize intellectual trends and political events in the Russian Empire with the goings-on of the whole of the European continent, including Spain, Germany, and France. These works also make great strides toward replacing the value of personal agency in historical trends and events. In this spirit, I intend to do with Chaadaev what Randolph did for the Bakunin family and what Stites did for Muraviev – that is, to take a prominent figure in Russian history and explain how they impacted, and partook in, the historical undercurrents of their day and to show that they were not constituted solely by conditions in Russia – by demonstrating that Chaadaev was a man not just of nineteenth-century Russia but of nineteenth-century Europe. One of my primary tools in the execution of this task is Peter Fritzsche’s *Stranded in the Present*, which encapsulates the pan-European scope of the effects of the Napoleonic Era, during which Chaadaev lived, and the aftermath of the Coalition Wars on European conceptions of time, history, and melancholy. Andrzej Walicki’s *A History of Russian Thought* does good work to bring the history of thought historiographically up-to-speed with changes in the field but, as previously stated, can be expanded upon to convey how European affairs abroad impacted Chaadaev directly as a person and not just a philosopher.

After having expanded the portrait of Chaadaev, I intend to discuss that most provocative facet of Chaadaev’s historical legacy – his supposed madness. Here, again, I believe that historical coverage of Chaadaev’s punishment at the hands of the Nicholaevan regime is unfortunately
inclined to deem this charge as anomalous or irrational. For example, on the opening page of Raymond T. McNally’s *The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev* he exclaims, “the Tsar chose a singular method to deal with Chaadaev. Rather than send him into the usual Siberian exile, the Tsar proclaimed that Chaadaev was officially insane!” (my italics).\(^{15}\) While surely it was an extraordinary case, being one of only a handful of dissidents to be declared mad in the Russian Empire before the twentieth century, my second chapter asserts that it was in no way an unbelievable charge. Rather, it was quite apt and was chosen by Nicholaevan censors for that very purpose. In order to prove this point, this chapter will contain a (very) brief history of melancholy and madness in Muscovy and Russia. It is absolutely essential to discuss this history because the way that madness is understood in Russian language and culture fluctuated dramatically between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and the definition of madness in Nicholas’ Russia is still more different from contemporary definitions. Also contained within this chapter is an overview of the contents of Chaadaev’s *Philosophical Letters* and his *Apologie d’un Fou*, as the *First Philosophical Letter* directly account for his punishment and his *Apologie* directly addresses the charge. Lastly, these overviews lead to a discussion on perceptions of Chaadaev in the public eye as portrayed in his friend Aleksandr Griboyedov’s renowned play *Woe from Wit* wherein the character Chatsky is popularly understood to represent Pyotr Chaadaev himself.

The subcategory of interest in Russian history of madness has been particularly vibrant since the mid-1980s and after the turn of the millennium.\(^{16}\) How historians are confronting madness in Russia, however, is changing dramatically and quickly. In the 1980s a handful of books and articles on madness in Russia centered on the relationship between modes of power and mental instability, most frequently incorporating madness to dialogues practicing political and psychological language.\(^{17}\) There were examples of the emerging cultural shift during this time as a focus regarding madness and laypersons developed.\(^{18}\) By the 1990s, however, the discussion of


\(^{16}\) This is, in no small degree, due to the works of Michel Foucault who, after all, begins his *Madness and Civilization* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2009) with a Dostoevsky quote


\(^{18}\) Some examples include: Julie Vail Brown, “Female Sexuality and Madness in Russian Culture: Traditional Values and Psychiatric Theory,” *Social Research, Vol. 53, No. 2* (Summer 1986), p. 369-385; and Julie Vail Brown,
madness in Russia had shifted to a focus on literary production and expression. While medical language remained and interdisciplinary styles still abounded, a sudden surge in structuring a discussion about madness within the Russian literary legacy became pronounced. These methods continued and many works, which have been recently produced, continue the legacy of analyzing madness in conjunction with literary production and the more common men and women in Russia. This thesis project will fit within the emerging trends of historical analysis because the evaluation of Chaadaev, his beliefs, and an exploration of the reasons for his declaration of madness will be done by juxtaposing his writings and philosophy against political institutions and agents who had a vested interest in silencing him.

A microhistorical biography of Pyotr Chaadaev provides valuable insights about the life of the Russian nobleman and intellectual in the Russian Empire during a time of rapid and seemingly total change. He is a crucial historical figure who acts as a vehicle for the discussion and elaboration of the topics of censorship, mental health, medical history, intellectual history, cultural history, religious history and theology, and many other themes; however, before he can act towards any of these ends it is the role of the responsible historian that one do their best to know and reconstruct the life of Chaadaev, not simply as a philosopher or salon savant, but as an historical actor.


19 See: Irina Paperno, Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky’s Russia (London: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness, ed. by Branimir M. Rieger (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), particularly the chapter “Madness, Masochism and Morality: Dostoyevsky and His Underground Man” by Thomas C. Fiddick

Chapter One: Monarchs and Madmen

“Revolution is on Russia’s doorstep but I vow that it will not cross her threshold as long as I still have the breath of life, as long as I am emperor by God’s grace!”

-Tsar Nicholas I

The love and hopes of quiet glory,
Have not indulged us an illusion,
Youthful amusement has gone
Like a dream, like the morning mist
in us desire still burns,
Beneath the weight of fateful powers
impatience of the soul
Heeds the Fatherland’s invocation.
...
Comrade, have faith: she will rise,
The star of captivating joy
Russia will arise from slumber,
And on the ruins of autocracy
They shall write our names!

-Aleksandr Pushkin, К Чаадаеву (To Chaadaev)

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Although Chaadaev’s life is singularly revelatory of the nuances of interaction between the Russian intellectual and the Russian state in his later life, the earliest phases of Chaadaev’s life, his upbringing and youth, more fully reveal the intellectual atmosphere for a child and adolescent in Alexander I’s Empire. Beyond simply filling out the biographic details of Chaadaev’s early life, which is a tremendous point of focus for this chapter, a study of Chaadaev’s upbringing from birth begins the longer story of state-intellectual relations in a dynamic and volatile empire. Though Chaadaev’s days of youth are clearly not indicative of the vast majority of citizens and subjects throughout the Russian Empire, his story is reflective of the conditions of life for Russian noblemen in the early nineteenth century and the circumstances of an empire shaken by the shadow of war and revolution.

Early Life:

With respect to potential families, social classes, and regions of the Russian Empire that one could be born into, Pyotr Chaadaev found luck on all three accounts. Born not far from the old

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21 Quoted in B.V. Ananich, ed., Vlast’ i reform. Ot samoderzhavnoi k sovetskoi Rossii (St. Petersburg, 1996), p. 256
Imperial capital of Moscow, in the region of Nizhnii Novgorod, Chaadaev was the son of the prominent noblewoman Princess Natalia Mikhailovna Scherbatova whose father was a distinctly famous Russian historian. In as much as Chaadaev lucked into a fortunate caste and prosperity in the Empire, he and his brother, Mikhail, did not solely enjoy luxury for long. By the time Chaadaev was nine years old he had lost both his mother and his father and care of both P. and M. Chaadaev transferred to their aunt (lovingly referred to by Chaadaev as tetushka or ‘auntie’) and uncle in Moscow.

While under the care of his aunt and uncle, Chaadaev was still quite fortunate insofar as his uncle, Mikhail Shcherbatov, chose widely-praised German tutors to educate him during his youth. If, as is averred by Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd, “the home was imagined, in nineteenth-century domestic discourse, to provide a powerfully influential space for the development of character and identity,” Prince Shcherbatov’s choices of tutors for Chaadaev surely seem to have accounted for a significant influence on the man he would become. Because of the emerging popularity of German Idealism amongst the Russian intelligentsia in the nineteenth century, it should come as no surprise that Chaadaev’s tutors included Moscow University professors Christian von Schloezer, son of German historian August von Schloezer, and Gottlieb von Buhle who taught philosophy. The result of Chaadaev’s privileged education and socio-economic status coupled with the loss of his parents was a boy who: “[was] intelligent, sharp of tongue and sarcastic; [and] unpleased with nearly everything that was around him; he was independent and lived outside of service.”

Having been strenuously educated the whole of his young adult life, Chaadaev was known not only throughout Moscow’s community of book salesmen but, even, by Firmin Didot as a serious customer of rare books by the age of fourteen. The culmination of this effort, both on Chaadaev’s part and the part of his aunt and uncle, came in 1809 when Chaadaev enrolled at Moscow University. While there, Chaadaev excelled in his studies while enjoying the company of a close cohort with whom he would intellectually and personally engage. Namely, in his time at

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24 Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd, *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 2
25 Raymond T. McNally, *The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev*, p. 4
26 Mikhail Gershenzon, 2000 [1908]: 424. In Russian: [был] умен, остер на язык и саркастичен; он был недоволен почти всем, что делалось вокруг него; он держался независимо и жил вне службы.
27 Raymond T. McNally, *The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev*, p. 4-5
Moscow University Chaadaev met and befriended Nikolai Turgenev and Ivan Yakushkin – future members of a secret society known as the Decembrists who would attempt a coup after the deference of succession to the Russian Imperial throne by Constantine Romanov in favor of his brother, who would become known as Tsar Nicholas I. In 1812, however, Chaadaev completed his studies after four years at university and enlisted, alongside his cousin and brother, in the Russian Imperial Army to fight in the Patriotic War.

**The War of the Sixth Coalition:**

Chaadaev served in the Imperial Army’s renowned Semenovsky Hussar Regiment and, with this unit, he experienced such pivotal battles of the Patriotic War as Borodino, Lützen, and Leipzig. Throughout his service he distinguished himself winning both the Prussian Iron Cross as well as the Anna Order, Fourth Class. However, this war against Napoleon was not all glory and honor – the French Revolution and the many Napoleonic and Coalition wars changed Russia and the whole of Europe at the level of both the mundane and the ideological. Napoleonic control of Central Europe had been a cumbersome burden for the people of the German states, and the liberation of the people from the ‘Napoleonic yoke’ came at a high price. More than just widespread conflict and mobilization on a scale that had not yet been seen in European history, the Coalition Wars and the French Revolution seemed to have ushered along a new era – an era in which time moved more quickly and violently, the past seemed lost to ambiguity, and general anxiety and melancholy reigned supreme. Chaadaev found himself in the center of this destabilizing set of circumstances, a time defined by its “deepening sense of loss, a feeling of disconnection with the past, and a growing dread of the future.” Even the German Idealist heir-apparent to Immanuel Kant’s legacy, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, affirmed the sentiment of

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28 Pyotr Chaadaev, interview with Captain-Commander Kolzakov on 26 August 1826 upon his return from his grand tour of Europe. He was met in the Russian heartland and ‘debriefed’ on his tour abroad and affiliation with the Decembrists and other secret societies as he had been away for both the Decembrist Revolt and the succession of the throne. M. Gershezon, ed., *Sochineniia i piš’ma P. Ia. Chaadaeva*. Moscow: Tov. Tip. A. I. Mamontov, 1913. T. 1., p. 67-72

29 The Patriotic War is the preferred Russian name for the War of the Sixth Coalition. This interview, as well as all letters of personal correspondence that will be cited in this project, come from the above cited massive, digitized copy of a collected works of personal correspondences written to and by Pyotr Chaadaev.

30 Raymond T. McNally, *The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev*, p. 5

31 There is no specific page in Peter Fritzsche’s *Stranded in the Present* wherein all of these can be found but the introduction of his work contains all of these points, between pages 1-10

the age remarking that modern history seemed to be defined by a tenuous balance of fear and hope – an “eternally restless time.”

In an age, currently, defined by its blisteringly fast technological advancement, perhaps the contemporary reader can empathize with the notion expressed by François-René de Chateaubriand who stated:

The old men of former times were less unhappy and less isolated than those of today: if, by lingering on earth, they had lost their friends, little else had changed around them; they were strangers to youth but not to society… [now] a straggler in this life has witnessed the death, not only of men, but also of ideas: principles, customs, tastes, pleasures, sorrows, opinions, none of these resembles what he used to know. He belongs to a different race from the human species among which he ends his days.

While the Russian and Coalition forces brought liberation to Europe, their reward and their legacy was this seemingly omnipresent mood – a somber gift and it followed the soldier, peasant, and noblemen home just the same.

In April of 1814, after Coalition forces had pushed Napoleon back to Paris and sent him fleeing into exile, Chaadaev began his journey home to Russia where he was stationed as aide-du-camp to Prince I.V. Vasilchikov for four years. Chaadaev’s regiment mutinied during their stay in the Imperial capital prompting, under uncertain circumstances, Chaadaev’s resignation from the military and thus ending his illustrious military career. Though there is some indication to historians that Chaadaev’s resignation from the military was a forced and dishonorable one, evidenced by his failure to receive the customary end-of-service promotion awarded to most noblemen, it was stated in an interview in 1826 between a Russian Imperial administrator and Chaadaev himself that his exit from service was solely due to “matters of the household.”

Returning home to the estate of his aunt in 1821, Chaadaev considered a grand tour of Europe for two years before departing in 1823.

The Grand Tour:

Chaadaev travelled from Saint Petersburg to Kronstadt where he boarded a ship on the 19th of July and departed for England, arriving in London where he stayed for many months. At the outset of his journey, Chaadaev began many letters home to his brother, Mikhail Chaadaev, his

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33 Ibid., p. 45
34 Ibid., p. 55
aunt, and friends such as A. I. Turgenev. This practice of personal correspondence and memoir-writing, according to John Randolph, was not uncommon for noblemen and women of the post-Napoleon age. The apparent boom in the production of personal letters of correspondence was informed by a shift in the realms of intellectual power in Russia during the nineteenth century away from the government and the military to a more domestic place – the home and the salons and circles that formed therein.\(^{36}\) The result of this relocation of the “loqi of power” in Russian society was the accumulation of “family chronicles, correspondences, and diaries… creating materials from which later scholars would try to imagine the history of modern Russian society, independent of the records preserved by the state” – and in Chaadaev’s case, accumulate they did.\(^{37}\)

According to his letters with his brother and aunt, to whom he very frequently wrote, his letters from London never seemed to reach his family (or they certainly did not appear to, in Chaadaev’s opinion) and he plead in one letter to his brother – “write to me for Christ’s sake!”\(^{38}\) Regular correspondence with his family seems to have been reestablished upon Chaadaev’s arrival to Paris on New Year’s Day, 1824 – the fourth stop on his tour – where he took time to reflect on the seemingly constant flux of the world in the tumult of nineteenth-century Europe. Chaadaev reported to his brother, a fellow veteran of the Patriotic War, that Paris was “not as loud, not as joyous as before,” that if not for his common sense he would have considered it altogether a separate place than where he had been during the occupation of Paris. Chaadaev took his time between England and France, spending between the 12\(^{th}\) of September, 1823 and August of 1824 between London and Paris before moving on to Switzerland and Italy. His “grand tour” began feeling less and less grand as Chaadaev felt the purse-strings tightening and the hourglass running ever emptier on his state-approved time abroad – in one letter Chaadaev even had to ask his brother to front 10,000 rubles just so that he could make his way beyond France.\(^{39}\)

Chaadaev arrived in Rome on March 19\(^{th}\), 1825 finally writing to his brother that he was enjoying the tremendous relief of reestablished regular contact with his aunt about whom he had been in a state of constant fear since he stopped receiving her letters.\(^{40}\) Expressing, again, that his


\(^{37}\) *Ibid.*, p. 8


\(^{39}\) Chaadaev may not have considered how truly expensive this tour could be, but he budgeted and financed the trip by selling many of his serfs; *Ibid.*, p. 16

\(^{40}\) *Ibid.*, p. 54
money had run out Chaadaev reported to his brother that he had been stalled on his slow voyage home in Florence awaiting a package of money from Mikhail before he could move on. His tour ended with the slow return home through Karlsbad, Dresden, and Brest-Litovsk. Having made it back to the Russian Empire, Chaadaev remarked to his brother that “something strange had happened” as he approached the border and that he was uncharacteristically scrutinized at a Russian checkpoint before being sent on. Chaadaev had surely returned to the Russian Empire – but to Nicholas’ Empire.

**Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality:**

Having arrived in St. Petersburg on the 26th of August, 1826 – over two years after his departure for an approved travel time of roughly one year – Chaadaev was quickly shown that the atmosphere of the Empire had changed in his absence. On December 14th, 1825, while Chaadaev was somewhere between Dresden and Brest-Litovsk, Grand Duke Nicholas was sworn in as the Tsar of Russia; however, not before facing, only moments into his reign, an attempted coup d’état. The Decembrists, “a secret patriotic society composed of elite veterans of the Napoleonic Wars” attempted to install a ruler of their own, Prince Sergei Trubetskoi, in place of Nicholas I; however, their rebellion was quickly put down and “in a bloody massacre… seventy or eighty lay dead and the rebel officers were arrested.”

This was not the end of the tribulations of Nicholas’ rise to power, however, as a second coup d’état was attempted by Sergei Muraviev-Apostol, the cousin of one of Chaadaev’s Decembrist acquaintances from Moscow University, Nikita Muraviev, in Vasilkov, Ukraine on December 31st of the same year. These Decembrists, like those on Senate Square in Petersburg, went to arms over the Tsar “steal[ing] their freedom,” ultimately proclaiming that Russians must “repent of their age-old servility and, taking up arms against tyranny and misery, swear: let there be for everyone a single Tsar in heaven and on earth – Jesus Christ.”

The outcome here, however, was much the same for the Decembrist cause. There was to be no enforcement of Nikita Muraviev’s constitution and revolution seemed to meet its end in the Empire. Of the Decembrists, five were hanged and quartered, thirty-one were beheaded, and the rest were exiled or punished on economic or political grounds – a show of power that Tsar Nicholas

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41 John Randolph, *The House in the Garden*, p. 125
regarded was “necessary both for Russia’s sake and for Europe’s” that the wills of “evildoers and madmen” would no longer hold sway in the cataclysmic atmosphere of post-Napoleonic Europe.\textsuperscript{43}

Nicholas’ Russia varied greatly in its values and laws from his brother Alexander I’s early reign. Starting in the 1820s and continuing into the 1830s, after Chaadaev returned home, Russian conservatism under Nicholas I began to metamorphose the country into the intellectual’s – and the publisher’s – worst nightmare. Fears of revolution and radical liberalism had permeated into the Russian Empire and, in response, Nicholas’ Imperial platform ran on the veneration of three things: Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality. Towards these ends, Nicholas sought to eradicate the cause of the corruption of Europe and Russia which was “an idleness of the mind” that had become manifest in “a handful of monsters” who attempted to bring low European civilizations.\textsuperscript{44} Russian society under Nicholas was meant to become regimented, free of radical tendency, and to regain its sense of moral direction – anyone who had participated in or had ties to secret societies were to be considered complicit with the Revolt and rooted out.\textsuperscript{45} Russia, which had once been a land predicated upon service but had since become increasingly undermined by reforms centered on the service of noblemen since the reign of Peter I, had to find its bearings again and state-bound service was the vehicle through which that could be realized.\textsuperscript{46}

On a widespread political level, sweeping legal reform punished intellectuals and publishers alike by making free expression in the Empire nearly impossible. The development of a new political police force, the Third Section of His Majesty’s Personal Chancery, facilitated a crusade against radical noble society at various levels – be it censorship of journals and magazines or actively interrogating people of interest. On the importance of Third Sector activities, Leonty Dubelt, an officer in the Third Section, remarked that Russia needed to reinforce its historical values or else face collapse. He stated that Russia, “can be compared to a harlequin’s costume, the many-colored pieces of which have been sewn with a single thread and hold together splendidly. That thread is autocracy. Pull it out, and the costume will fall apart.”\textsuperscript{47} To avoid such a travesty, and to avoid any semblance of revolutionary thought that would threaten the monarchy again, the

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 319
\textsuperscript{44} John Randolph, \textit{The House in the Garden}, p. 125-126
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 126
\textsuperscript{47} Leonty Dubelt, quoted in \textit{Golos Minuvshego}, No. 3 (1913), p. 141
Empire’s censorial law code was revised in 1826 and again in 1833 to constrict intellectual openness.

Censorship in the Russian Empire manifested itself in a multitude of practices and institutions. Defined by Charles Rudd in his work *Fighting Words*, censorship was “in its strictest definition the formal pre-publication prohibition by a government of words it [found] unacceptable” but was actualized in various other ways. Namely, exercises of autocratic, and bureaucratic, power supplemented pre-publication suppression. The multifaceted mechanisms of autocratic control over publication included “licensing, official warning, fines, committees of persuasion, prosecutions, and directives.” The Russian Empire quickly adapted the use of these Western forms of suppression despite the delayed appearance of private printing in the eighteenth century, and concertedly focused on quelling dissent.

The French Revolution hastened the development of an already ingrained tendency of the Russian government to censor private works that dated decades before the reign of Nicholas. Shortly after Paul I became Tsar of Russia in 1796 he tightened censorship to the point that he forbade reference to the French Revolution and to the Enlightenment. He even went as far as to require censors to check for contraband material aboard arriving naval vessels and penalized those who failed to catch such publications from entering the Empire or publicly circulating thereafter. His son, Alexander I rose to power after Paul’s assassination in 1801 and ushered along, albeit only temporarily, a period of harmony between publishers and the government that was “unmatched at any other time in the history of [Russian] imperial censorship.” Foreign books could again enter and be read throughout the Empire, authors and publishers were no longer treated as enemies of the state, and private printing was permitted within reason. Alexandrian censorship was used towards educational ends, not to limit the amount of information that one may have access to, and was a kind of “quality-control” for the information that was being published and not an exclusively punitive measure. Alexander’s policies of censorship in the Empire remained quite open and unrestricting even after the French invasion of the Empire, drawing the ire of such prominent administrators as the president of the Russian Academy – Admiral A. S. Shishkov. The

49 *Idem.*
50 Charles A. Rudd, *Fighting Words: Imperial Censorship and the Russian Press, 1804-1906*, p. 22
52 *Ibid.*, p. 27
clemency of Alexander’s censorship policy met tumult, however, with the attempted publication of the book *The Spirit of the Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, Vol. I: a Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* by the German mystic Gosner. Gosner’s book was considered by many in the Russian government, including Shishkov, and the Russian Orthodox Church to be corrosive to Russian political and spiritual values – a view that was confirmed when Metropolitan Serafim personally delivered the work to Alexander to explain the damaging implications of publishing it in the Empire. The Church considered the work so dangerous that Archbishop Photius anathematized the Minister of Public Education, Prince Alexander Golitsyn, for even allowing it to be considered for publication.53 Following a formal investigation of the book by Shishkov, it was deemed too dangerous to publish and Alexander immediately dismissed Golitsyn, replacing him with Admiral Shishkov as Minister of Public Education, functionally placing him at the helm of censorship in Russia. When Alexander died in December of 1825, censorship in the Empire began to revert to a more constricted state and with the reign of Nicholas I it tightened all the more.

In 1826 a new legal code regarding publication was passed under Nicholas I headed by Shishkov, returned conditions for publication to a state that was reminiscent of the reign of Paul I. It was nearly impossible for anyone in the Empire to publish their work unless it was overtly pro-Tsarist. Part of these reforms aimed at the reformation of the structure of censorship throughout the Empire. The existing structure of censorship was replaced with the *verhovnyi tsensurnyi komitet* that headed a multi-departmental system of censorship divided into separate offices: the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Internal and Foreign Affairs, which governed three separate censorship committees, and university censorship committees for every prominent university in the Empire. What was legal or, most importantly, illegal to produce in the Empire also changed dramatically within these reforms. For example, it was illegal after the 1826 reforms to publish anything that: 1) was anti-government or spoke negatively about the government in any way, 2) weakened the loyalty of Imperial subjects and citizens to the Imperial government and its laws, 3) spoke of any need for reform or change of rights unless those reforms were already underway and only if those reforms were reflected upon positively, 4) discussed the power of any specific administrative body of the Russian government, 5) discussed, negatively, anything about foreign countries, specifically the members of the Sacred Union, unless it was posed as humble criticism,

53 Charles A. Rudd, *Fighting Words: Imperial Censorship and the Russian Press, 1804-1906*, p. 45
6) offered any unwarranted or unwanted advice whatsoever towards any government apparatus, and lastly 7) discussed any theory of legitimation or sources of governmental authority derived from any source other than the divine right of God.\textsuperscript{54} Even more pertinent to Chaadaev’s predicament, as will soon be seen, were the establishment of the following two precedents: that 1) all philosophically-minded productions of literature were outlawed except for those items which were absolutely necessary for the education of the Russian youth and 2) that in any cases where language may, reasonably, be considered counter to the values of the Imperial government it \textit{will} be understood as such and the author punished accordingly. This last point stands as the exact opposite of a law passed in 1804 under Alexander I. Despite a brief reprieve in 1827 when Admiral Shishkov relaxed censorship some, S. S. Uvarev, Nicholas’ Minister of Education, enforced a legal code in 1833 that further controlled publication throughout the Empire. The result of the 1833 law code was an even harsher intellectual environment in Russia. Almost all of the prohibitions of 1826 either resurged or remained unaltered after 1833 and, as Russian author A.V. Nikitenko put it, “If you count everyone responsible for censorship you’ll count more people than books being published in a year.”\textsuperscript{55} These legal changes and shift in political climate were immediately made known to Chaadaev at the moment of his return to the Russian Empire in 1826 when he was interrogated by an Imperial administrator.

\textbf{The End of the Tour:}

A known friend of Decembrists in his college years, Chaadaev was met with a less-than-warm welcome when he made his way back home in 1826. Received by Captain-Commander Kolzakov on the 26\textsuperscript{th} of August in the Imperial capital, “Captain P. Ya. Chaadaev” was interviewed regarding his affiliation both with secret societies, regarding his supposed Decembrist and Masonic activities, as well as his activities while abroad. Kolzakov immediately began the interview by establishing that Chaadaev’s involvement with the Decembrists was a known fact and asked if Chaadaev had planned to travel abroad before or after his resignation from the military (as Chaadaev had met and fraternized with still more Decembrists in the Imperial Army).\textsuperscript{56} Having apparently gone through Chaadaev’s belongings at his time of arrival, the official chastised

\textsuperscript{54} Mikhail Gershenzon, \textit{Epokha Nikolai I} (Miami University Special Collections), p. 98-106
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 103
\textsuperscript{56} This interrogation is supposed to have lasted 40 days, though the source that I found this in, Raymond McNally’s \textit{Chaadaev and his Friends} did not cite a source for this datum. M. Gershezon, ed., \textit{Sochineniia i pis'ma P. Ia. Chaadaeva}. Moscow: Tov. Tip. A. I. Mamontov, 1913. T. 1., p. 67-72
Chaadaev for the language used in letters between himself and A. I. Turgenev (sent while Chaadaev was in Italy) that remarked on the apparent “stupidity” in Russia. Chaadaev, luckily, avoided any punishment as a result of this interview, it seems, as he was sent on his way but not before renouncing his previous Masonic affiliations, the corrosive language he used about the Russian Empire in his private letters of correspondence, justifying his fascination with all matters religious, and denouncing the “criminal and insane” intentions of his radical colleagues.

Upon his return to the Empire, Chaadaev found himself in the uncomfortable predicament that most intellectuals experienced at the outset of Nicholas’ reign. The intellectual and political climate of Europe had become even more suspect in the eyes of the Russian government and, by extension, men like Chaadaev who travelled abroad and were well-versed in languages like French and German seemingly transformed into potential threats to Russian patriotism and national security. Though he survived his return to Russia despite his deeply suspicious pedigree, Chaadaev did not stay safe in Nicholas’ empire for long. Between 1826 and 1836 Chaadaev lived amongst the nobility in Nizhnii Novgorod, Moscow, and St. Petersburg participating in salon high-society and circulating the drafts of his Philosophical Letters – a series of writings that would act as the first major intellectual rupture in Nicholaevan Russia since the Decembrist Revolt and that would, as is well known, concretize Chaadaev’s historical legacy forever as Russia’s ‘madman.’

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57 Ibid., p. 70
58 Ibid., p. 68-70
Chapter Two: The Fate of St. Paul

“Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Bear all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.”

- St. Paul, 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7, the first lines of the Apologie d’un Fou

“We Russians, like illegitimate children, come to this world without patrimony, without any links with people who lived on the earth before us; we have in our hearts none of those lessons which have preceded our own existence. Each one of us must himself once again tie the broken thread of the family… This is a natural result of a culture based wholly on borrowing and imitation. There is among us no inward development, no natural progress; new ideas throw out the old ones because they do not arise from the latter, but come among us from Heaven knows where… Isolated from the world, we have given nothing to the world, we have taken nothing from the world; we have not added a single idea to the mass of human ideas; we have contributed nothing to the progress of the human spirit. And we have disfigured everything we have touched of that progress.”

-Pyotr Chaadaev, Philosophical Letters to a Lady

Upon his return to the Russian Empire, the true extent of shifting tendencies in the Empire towards extensive censorial control to mitigate the chances of revolution and unrest made itself known to Chaadaev. Imperial desire to quell unwanted intellectual developments within Russia that undermined the tripartite aspirations of Nicholas’ government can be seen vicariously through Chaadaev’s life. Under Nicholas I, the Russian intelligentsia became so proficient at dancing around Imperial regulations and attempts to control publication and expression that they, paradoxically, ushered along what is reflected upon by historians as the Golden Age of Russian cultural expression; however, their tactics, such as using Aesopian language and biting symbolism, did not come without dire risk – a lesson that Chaadaev experienced first-hand in the 1820s and 30s.

Life in Nicholas’ Russia:

In the years following his grand tour of Europe, Chaadaev dedicated himself to both the production of his philosophy and an attempt to recover the good graces of the Emperor who was clearly suspicious of his values and personal history. Shaken by the interrogation upon his return to the Empire, Chaadaev spent time in seclusion from Russian society between the years 1826 and 1831. Thus he developed reputation as a recluse which became widespread throughout Russian high society, so much so that the woman to whom he would write the *First Philosophical Letter* in 1829 remarked on their meeting “you naturally have a lot of severity in your character… I noted that lately you have removed yourself even more from our society, but I did not guess your motive. A word which you spoke to my husband enlightened me on this matter.” Chaadaev worked his way out of his self-imposed seclusion by 1833 and returned to the bustling life of the Moscow and St. Petersburg nobility.

To Chaadaev’s relief, on June 1st, 1833, as he noted in a letter to Count Alexander von Benkendorf, the head of the Nicholas’ secret police, one General Vasiltschikoff had instructed him to write the letter because Nicholas was interested in offering him an opportunity back into the service of the nation. In this letter, Chaadaev blamed his poor finances and his poor health for keeping him away from service for so long and apologized for the foolishness of his actions upon his resignation from service which, he conceded, had rightfully earned him the frustration of the Tsar. Chaadaev’s desire to return to service in this letter is palpable as he requested to be employed in matters of foreign affairs – specifically that he would be of most use watching the spread of ideas throughout Germany. Unfortunately for Chaadaev, however, Nicholas had different plans for his return to service later offering him a position in the Ministry of Finances rather than the diplomatic position Chaadaev had requested. In a humble letter to Tsar Nicholas himself Chaadaev appealed for a different posting, noting that he would be of next to no service in such a position. He instead suggested that if Nicholas could only place him in some area of diplomacy or public education he would be able to serve well. Peculiarly, Chaadaev writes this

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60 Author’s original stress, quoted in a translation of the letter from Ekatrina D. Panova in Raymond T. McNally, *The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 234. This letter is discussed more at length below but is employed here simply to introduce the life of Chaadaev in the years after his return to the Empire. I struggle with understanding the indicated stress of the author in this letter – to me it seems like Chaadaev clued Ms. Panova’s husband in to the fact that he was producing his philosophy in seclusion which prompted her to reach out to Chaadaev regarding her spiritual anguish, seeing him as a potential source of healing for her spiritual discontent but this is merely speculative.


letter to the emperor in French so that, as he explains to Benkendorf in a letter dated the same day, he did not err in his appeal to the Tsar and further frustrate him in any way. Unfortunately for Chaadaev, despite a couple more letters to Benkendorf between 1833 and 1834, no resolution regarding his qualifications for a position in Nicholas’ government other than one in the Ministry of Finances was agreed upon before Chaadaev’s arrest in 1836. Once his First Philosophical Letter had been published and his philosophical worldview was thrown into public view, Chaadaev’s hopes of reconciliation with Nicholas and a return to service were dashed.

**Philosophical Foundations:**

Before engaging with Chaadaev’s philosophy and *Letters*, one must look at the intellectual tradition from which they arose. Chaadaev’s thought, like that of most of his contemporaries, was deeply rooted in the school of German Idealism. A continuation of the legacy of Immanuel Kant and his Idealist philosophy grounded in a Rationalist view of the world that turned away from the radically Empirical philosophies of philosophers like John Locke, the German Idealists, like Friedrich Schelling who Chaadaev studied intensely and met during his time in Karlsbad with their philosophical models in abstracted reality. Following the lead of Kant and the development of his notion of Transcendental Idealism, Idealists conceived of reality as follows:

> We ourselves impose spatiality, temporality, substantiality, causality, and other forms upon our experience and precisely because we know these forms *a priori* cannot regard them as also the real forms of objects independent of ourselves, with a kind of ontological realism, the view that in some sense ourselves and our objects really do exist independently of our representations of them.

At its most basic level, metaphysically, Kant’s Transcendental Idealism placed rational agents in such a position that their reason informed the way that they experienced the world through a set of mental categories. Though this did not entail, in Kant’s philosophy, that the mind was constitutive of reality, nor that physical reality did not exist outside of phenomenological experience, it elevated reason to a far more metaphysically powerful position – a belief that was continued in the philosophies of the inheritors of Kant’s philosophical model’s namesake of Idealism. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, who appears to have had the greatest impact on Chaadaev’s philosophy, built from the Kantian notion of the Rationalist experience of the world by conceptualizing reality

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as ‘an original unity’ (ursprüngliche Einheit) or a primordial totality (uranfängliche Ganzheit) of opposites that is internally differentiated in such a way that every particular item within reality can be seen as a partial, incomplete, or one-sided expression, manifestation, or interpretation of the most basic dynamic opposition characteristic of the whole of reality.” Schelling rooted this axiom in the perceived fact that “the system of Nature is at the same time the system of our mind” meaning “nature and mind, matter and concept [are] identical in the sense of being the same: the one is the other and vice versa.”

Russian Schellingians, the self-proclaimed Wisdom-lovers, picked up on this notion of duality in nature and struggled against atomistic and mechanistic physics in favor of a view of nature as “a living, spiritual whole containing within it the creativity, movement, and struggle of opposites, both attraction and repulsion; at the same time nature was only the outer garment of the spirit and all its manifestations therefore had a secret symbolic meaning.” In the Russian context, the adoption of this metaphysical model had important implications outside of the world of philosophy – namely in the construction of a Russian national identity.

Working from the transcendental and idealist, non-empirical basis of reality that they had adopted, the Wisdom-lovers conceived of the national self to be an “aggregation of citizens” representing a unique collective individuality that evolved historically in different places and amongst different sets of peoples in accordance with the principles of that place and people. Stemming from this belief, the philosophy of the Wisdom-lovers began to turn away from a theory of nature to a fuller focus on the philosophy of history. On Russia, members of the Wisdom-lovers remarked that their culture lacked an essential “native principle” and as such had no set pattern of evolution and would continue to have no such path until the discovery of that principle. This notion, coupled with the gradually increasing focus by both Schelling and the Wisdom-lovers on religious notions, powerfully influenced the model from which Chaadaev would work in his Philosophical Letters.

Chaadaev’s philosophical system appears to have taken shape throughout the 1820s, during which time he secluded himself from society noticeably enough to draw a reaction from his peers in Russian high society. Though he chose not to disclose the nature of his philosophical model in

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66 Idem.
67 Andrzej Walicki, A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism, p. 76
68 Andrzej Walicki, A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism, p. 77
69 Idem.
a letter to Schelling, dated 1832, due to what appears to be a sense of self-assumed inferiority and being star-struck, Chaadaev expressed his elation at Schelling’s turn to a philosophy of revelation – a belief that defined Chaadaev’s emerging philosophy. From Kantian Idealism, German Idealism thereafter, and the still more recent Russian Idealist schools, Chaadaev developed a model of reality, and of the national self, that was broken into four parts. This hierarchy, known as the “Great All,” was crowned by God underneath whom the social sphere of interpersonal interaction through a collective consciousness, primarily composed of the connections between the people and the Church, provided individuals with the capacity to link up their individual minds with the divine will, which was the driving force of history and knowledge. Still further down the hierarchy was man’s direct and given experience of the world followed by nature prior to mankind. On the fusion of God’s will with the will of individual, and communal, consciousness, Chaadaev states in the Fifth Philosophical Letter:

just as a certain plastic and perpetual work of the material elements or atoms, the generation of physical beings, constitutes material nature, so also then a similar work of intellectual elements or ideas, the generation of spirits, constitutes spiritual nature; and just as I conceive of all tangible matter as one whole, then I must also conceive of the succession of intelligences as a single and sole intelligence.

Chaadaev predominantly sought to convey a religious and metaphysical argument through his works; unfortunately for him, however, the introduction to this world-view was a letter whose message was predominantly political and violently pessimistic on the state of the Russian Empire. The First Philosophical Letter:

As a man who very frequently wrote letters, and given the previously discussed popularity of letter-writing as a genre in European intellectual society in the post-Napoleonic era, it should come as no surprise that Chaadaev presented his world-view in the form of a series of correspondences rather than a grand treatise or monograph. The Philosophical Letters themselves were written in response to Ekaterina D. Panova who wrote to Chaadaev regarding spiritual anxieties that she faced in her life. She wrote:

70 M. Gershezon, ed., Sochineniia i pis'ma P. Ia. Chaadaeva. Moscow: Tov. Tip. A. I. Mamontov, 1913. T. 1., p. 169-173. It is strange that he is unwilling to share his philosophy at this point as his first philosophical letter had been dated 1 December, 1829. To me this implies that his philosophy was being amended or expanded upon but I am not sure which

71 Andrzej Walicki, A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism, p. 76

… you believe, I know, that there was some fakery on my part in the desire which I manifested to you to instruct myself in religious subject matter: I find this thought intolerable. Undoubtedly I have many faults, but never, I assure you, has the idea of pretending ever had a place in my heart for a moment. I saw you so entirely absorbed in religious ideas that it is my admiration, my profound esteem for your character, which inspired in me the need to devote myself to the same thoughts as you. 

Obliging Panova, Chaadaev wrote to her in response on December 1st, 1829 with what would later be called the *First Philosophical Letter*, published in Nikolai Nadezhdin’s journal *Teleskop* in 1836.

In stark contrast to his appeals to Benkendorf and Nicholas between 1833 and 1834, the Chaadaev that appears in the pages of the *First Philosophical Letter* was unrelenting, scathing, and merciless in his assault on the Russian past. Even Pushkin expressed concern for his friend regarding this *Letter*, warning “I am afraid that your historical opinions may do you harm.”74 From the outset of his *Letter*, Chaadaev began an unyielding assault on the trajectory of Russian history declaring that Russia had not yet come to know those fundamental truths that so many nations had embraced for centuries – that Russia alone stood apart from the whole of mankind, outside of both time and history.75 Lacking a “moral personality,” the supraindividual consciousness of nations that are a result of the collective minds of its “aggregation of citizens,” as the Wisdom-lovers referred to it, Russia existed as a place where history could never take root. Russian history had never begun because it lacked the necessary political and metaphysical prerequisites to exist. In this first letter, Chaadaev also encapsulated the spirit of the post-Napoleonic age that had so consumed Europe:

> We live only in the narrowest of presents… and if we happen to bestir ourselves [it is because of] the childish frivolousness of the infant, who raises himself and stretches his hands toward the rattle which his nurse presents him…we have absorbed none of mankind’s ideas of traditional transmission… we have somehow to repeat the whole education of mankind… ‘What is the life of man,’ Cicero asked, ‘if the memory of past events does not come to bind the present to the past?’ …

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73 Cited in Raymond T. McNally, *The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 233. The post-script of the letter was very entertaining to me and kept with a recurring theme of many of the letters Chaadaev wrote – namely, the theme of Chaadaev constantly being owed or needing money. It reads, from Panova, “my husband is sorry that he cannot return the money to you right away, he is doing all that he can to obtain it, but I doubt whether he will succeed before a month or six weeks pass.” I feel like, based on his many correspondences with various individuals, interesting work could be done on the nature of cash transactions of Russian Imperial high-society as it seemed to be an omnipresent concern


75 Mary-Barbara Zeldin, *Putor Yakovlevich Chaadayev: Philosophical Letters & Apology of a Madman*, p. 5
[but] our memories go no further back than yesterday; we are, as it were, strangers to ourselves. We walk through time so singly that as we advance the past escapes us forever. This is a natural result of a culture based wholly on borrowing and imitation… We grow, but we do not mature; we advance, but obliquely, that is, in a direction which does not lead to the goal.⁷⁶

The *Letter* disparaged Russian heritage on all fronts, claiming that Russians suffered a dearth of natural, “physiological,” traits that Europeans enjoyed from birth – duty, justice, law, and order. Chaadaev even confronted the Russian spiritual legacy of Orthodoxy, noting “we are certainly Christians: but are not the Abyssinians, too?”⁷⁷ Ultimately, the overall tone of the letter can best be summarized in the following excerpt, coupled with the fact that he, a few pages later, signs off from “the city of the dead:”

> Alone in the world, we have given nothing to the world, taken nothing from the world, bestowed not even a single idea upon the fund of human ideas, contributed nothing to the progress of the human spirit, and we have distorted all progressivity which has come to us. Nothing from the first moment of our social existence has emanated from us for man’s common good; not one useful idea has germinated in the sterile soil of our fatherland; we have launched no great truth; we have never bothered to conjecture anything ourselves, and we have adopted only deceiving appearances and useless luxury from all the things that others have thought out.

Having known that he was already on the wrong side of Imperial attention, Chaadaev, wisely identified the precarious position that the publication of this letter would put him in and acted accordingly. Between the creation of these letters and their publication, they were never publicly disseminated and circulated only privately. As we have seen, Chaadaev had been made aware of the harsh nature of the Nicholaevan Russian state in his first days home from his tour and, surely, he hoped never to repeat the affair. Unfortunately, however, Chaadaev’s *Letter* did not remain within the domain of private correspondence and, after a long and difficult battle against Imperial censors to produce novel and interesting content, Nikolai Nadezhdin, owner of the journal *Teleskop*, published *The First Philosophical Letter* in October of 1836.

Nadezhdin was professor of fine arts and archaeology at Moscow University and, like many Russian intellectuals of his day, was almost exclusively interested in finding answers to some of the most fundamental questions facing his society – problems of faith, truth, and historical

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⁷⁶ Mary-Barbara Zeldin, *Pytor Yakovlevich Chaadaev: Philosophical Letters & Apology of a Madman*, p. 36-37

⁷⁷ Raymond T. McNally, *The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev*, p. 42
destiny among other prominent themes. In an attempt to facilitate discussions about these issues, Nadezhdin headed publication projects for the dissemination of philosophical works, of which *Teleskop* was one. He considered the journal to be one of “contemporary enlightenment” wherein he furthered his aim to see Russia “abandon the empty quarrels of the previous decades over whether Russian culture should develop in a ‘classical’ or ‘romantic’ direction” and instead “absorb the best and most vital currents of European philosophy” in order to find its own way in the world. Before Russia could do this, however, the intelligentsia needed to, in the words of Immanuel Kant, “take account of its own powers and learn to know itself.” And insofar as this was both Nadezhdin’s goal and the goal of his journal, Chaadaev’s *First Philosophical Letter* was a perfect fit for this pursuit. The *Letter* had circulated discreetly amongst intellectual circles in Moscow and seemed to resemble some literary expressions that had come before from such authors as Ivan Kireevsky. Moreover, the recent debut of the play *Inspector General* by Gogol, which criticized Russian provincial government and resulted in no major punishment for the author or the editorial/censorial staffs involved, may have prompted Nadezhdin to think that Chaadaev’s *Philosophical Letter* was safe to publish. But, in the words of historian Charles Rudd, “Gogol’s lampoon against bureaucracy was one thing; Chaadaev’s profoundly gloomy survey of the Russian national past was another.”

Upon the publication of Chaadaev’s work, in an address to the Governor General of Moscow, Prince Dmitry Golitsyn, Benkendorf called for Chaadaev’s arrest and declared him mad stating:

>The author speaks of Russia, of the Russian people, their ideas, religion, and history with such contempt that it is inconceivable how a Russian could degrade himself to such an extent as to write things of that sort. But the residents of our ancient capital, always known for their clear, common sense and filled with the feeling of the dignity of the Russian nation, have at once realized that such an article could not have been written by a compatriot of theirs fully in possession of a sound mind… It is therefore His Imperial Majesty’s wish that Your Excellency undertake the necessary means to supply M. Chaadaev with medical care and attention.

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78 These themes are mentioned in the introduction to Victoria Frede’s *Doubt, Atheism, and the Nineteenth-Century Russian Intelligentsia* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011)
81 Charles Rudd, *Fighting Words: Imperial Censorship and the Russian Press*, 1804-1906, p. 70
82 *Idem*.
83 Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky (eds), *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 23
Nadezhdin suffered as well – *Teleskop* was blacklisted and he was sent into exile in the Far East. Even the censor assigned to the journal, A. V. Boldyrev, was removed from his posts as censor and rector of Moscow University.\(^4\) And with this, for the second time in Chaadaev’s life, he found himself face-to-face with a government interrogator on November 17\(^{th}\), 1836.

**The Apologie d’un Fou:**

In this interrogation Chaadaev clearly communicated that between him and Nadezhdin, there had been a serious communications breakdown – Chaadaev pursued publication of the *Letter* only after he was led to believe that it had been approved by censors. Upon its publication, both Chaadaev and Nadezhdin thought that they might be able to mitigate the damage of its publication to some extent but that their efforts never harmonized to produce favorable results.\(^5\) When Nadezhdin began to worry that punishment might swiftly follow, Chaadaev reported that Nadezhdin came to him for comfort. Chaadaev knew that his letter had already been read by members of the Ministry of Education and believed, surely, that they would not have allowed it to be published if it would result in any legal reprimand.\(^6\) Forlornly, Chaadaev assured the interrogator that “no one more than myself regrets that the work was published, and no one less than myself hoped to see it published.”\(^7\)

For some weeks after his interrogation, Imperial police searched through his estate, removing his papers and books to assess if Chaadaev was guilty of subversive activities and thought. He seemed to take this in good spirits reporting to his friend A. I. Turgenev that it was “the most bored he had even been in his life” and even requesting some reading that he had hoped to catch up on for some time.\(^8\) During the investigation, Chaadaev was placed under house arrest and his actions were closely scrutinized by Imperial officials, including an Imperial doctor who was charged with his care. In letters with Turgenev and his brother, Chaadaev began to adopt the title of madman that had been bestowed upon him and sarcastically signed-off as *Le Fou* (the fool) or “бе зумный”/“bezumnyi” (madman). In one letter to Turgenev, Chaadaev further expands upon his relationship with his new title, stating:

\(^4\) Charles Rudd, *Fighting Words: Imperial Censorship and the Russian Press*, 1804-1906, p. 70
\(^7\) Idem.
They [have] often called me mad and I never rejected this appellation, and this time I say – amen – as I always do when a brick falls on my head, as any brick from the sky. Here I am again in my Thebes, again on my shuttle to the foot of the cross, and so on until the end of my days; I will say again, “wake up, wake up.”

The apparent boredom of his time under house arrest afforded Chaadaev the opportunity to produce a new work and in 1837 he penned his *Apologie d’un Fou* – The Apology of a Madman. Just as he had in his appeals to Benkendorf and Nicholas in the early 1830s, Chaadaev sought to redeem his public image in the *Apologie* after this newest flare-up of controversy; however, one can sense in this work a tenuous balancing act between self-rectification in the eyes of Nicholas and his regime, and the conservation of credibility as a serious intellectual amongst his peers. It is apparent that Chaadaev thought that his life’s work was ruined and his reputation forever tarnished. He lamented at the outset of this letter that his arrest “crushed [his] philosophical existence and [threw] the work of an entire life to the winds.” Though he questioned the caliber of the public reaction to his philosophy, Chaadaev claimed to hold no animosity towards the government. After all, Chaadaev wrote, “what could the most well-meaning government do other than conform to the general tone?” The *Apologie* was not a refutation of his beliefs – more honestly some of the claims made throughout the work seem like they could have easily come from the *Letter* itself; however, what Chaadaev sought to do with his *Apologie* was place his *Letter* in the proper context to understand its intended purpose and to shed light on those aspects of the *Letter* that he no longer believed or had amended.

By this point, the *First Philosophical Letter* was eight years old and, as Victoria Frede remarked in her history of Russia’s nineteenth-century intelligentsia, Russian intellectuals tended to “change viewpoints with dizzying speed” and that a work “might accurately reflect its writer’s opinions for only days, sometimes for weeks and months, rarely for years, and almost never for a lifetime.” Such was the case with Chaadaev and his *First Philosophical Letter* as, in his *Apologie*, he admitted to have exaggerated his views on the almost exclusively corrosive influence on Russian culture by the Russian Orthodox Church and claimed that he was eager for Russia’s

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89 Ibid., 207-209. In Russian: “Меня часто называли безумцем и я никогда не отрекался от этого звания и на этот раз говорю - аминь, - как я всегда это делаю, когда мне на голову падает кирпич, так как всякий кирпич падает с неба. И вот я снова в своей Фиваиде, снова членок мой пристал к подножию креста, и так до конца дней моих; скажу еще раз "буди, буди".
80 Raymond T. McNally, *The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev*, p. 199
81 Idem.
82 Victoria Frede, *Doubt, Atheism, and the Nineteenth-Century Russian Intelligentsia*, p. 5
greatness. Namely, a shift in Chaadaev’s evaluation of Russia’s position in the world occurred alongside the July Revolutions in 1830 in Paris.\textsuperscript{93} His eagerness, however, was that of a pan-Europeanist, Idealist philosopher – an intellectual who took the Socratic and Kantian dictum to know oneself (and, in this case, one’s country) truly as the gospel and produced a philosophical model towards that end. His hopefulness for the nation did not resemble that of the quintessential Nicholaevan nobleman, but instead a relic of past hopefulness for an enlightened Russian Empire. Chaadaev called for the people of the Russian nation to shed their empty veneration of the Empire, a product of their “lazy patriotism.”\textsuperscript{94} Instead, Chaadaev called for a Petrine patriotism, a love of country that embraced all of those failings and shortcomings of the nation and avoided “superstitions, … blindnesses” and unfounded “infatuations.”\textsuperscript{95} In an attempt to counteract his public reputation as a man of some ire and frustration, the \textit{Apologie}, at times, resounds more loudly with an uplifting, almost messianic tone for the role of Russia in the world. He placed the impetus for the realization of Russia’s potential onto the very same people who would see him persecuted for his \textit{Philosophical Letter}, stating:

\begin{quote}
It is up to you, my dear friends and fellow-citizens, who live in a century of lofty teaching and who have just taught me how inspired you are with the holy love of the fatherland… So if such epochs are rare in your history, if life in your country was not always powerful and profound, do not shun the truth, do not feed upon lies, do not imagine then that you have lived when you drag yourself from one grave to another, but after that, if throughout this nothingness you come to a moment in which the nation began to feel itself living earnestly, in which its heart began to beat and if you hear the sound of the popular wave catching hold and mounting around you, then stop, meditate, study; your efforts will not be in vain. You will learn what your country can do in days of greatness, what I can hope for in the future.\textsuperscript{96}
\end{quote}

Unfortunately for Chaadaev, his \textit{Apologie} would never be published in his lifetime – but all the same, he sought to curb, as far as he could, the damage to his philosophical reputation by having been declared Russia’s madman – a burden which he bore out in his letters to friends and in his \textit{Apologie d’un Fou}.

In December of 1837 Chaadaev penned a letter to his brother regarding the burden of his “madness.” He stated that, while his publisher was in exile and the censor had also been removed

\textsuperscript{93} Raymond T. McNally, \textit{Chaadaev and His Friends} (Tallahassee: The Diplomatic Press, 1971), p. 29
\textsuperscript{94} Raymond T. McNally, \textit{The Major Works of Peter Chaadaev}, p. 213
\textsuperscript{95} Idem.
\textsuperscript{96} Idem., p. 207, 211-212
from his post, he “continued to be insane” and that there was “nothing to be forgiven, and no one.” The *Teleskop* affair and the subsequent, many-months-long investigation seemed to encumber Chaadaev’s mental and emotional life as, in the same letter, he reported “I will tell you, my friend, that many works will remain unfinished, and finally, that the earthly firmness of my being is shaken forever.” While surely this statement was partially informed by the fact that Chaadaev was aware that his letters were being scrutinized by the Imperial officials overseeing his house arrest, this letter to Mikhail indicates that, to at least some degree, the *Teleskop* affair had left a mark on Chaadaev. Unfortunately, not only did this imposition of madness affect Chaadaev as a person, but it also still colors his reputation today.

**The Madhouse:**

Nicholas’ desire to surveil Chaadaev as well as his intention to crush Chaadaev’s expression against Russian official nationality are often understood by historians to have been the driving factors behind the declaration of Chaadaev’s insanity. One author reports that Chaadaev’s punishments were “disguised as medical care” and that the claims of his madness were “calculated slander against the author.” Nicholas’ punishment for Chaadaev, the imposition of madness, certainly was calculated, however it was not calculated solely to give Nicholas a reason to search Chaadaev’s home and strip him of some of his intellectual integrity. The primary utility of the claims that Chaadaev was mad resided in the believability of the assertion. Though many historians consider to the tactic of having Chaadaev declared mad as absurd, it certainly seems that it was more believable at the time than it is to the contemporary sensibilities of academics. It was so perfectly believable in nineteenth-century Russia, in fact, that one of Chaadaev’s close friends from his time at Moscow University, Aleksandr Griboyedev, seemed to foretell the events of 1836 in a play titled *Woe from Wit*. A prerequisite to understanding why the claims of Chaadaev’s madness would have been so believable, however, is a brief look at definitions of melancholy and madness in the Russian culture to see what, in Chaadaev’s day, would have qualified a person as a being mad.

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98 *Idem.*
99 Charles Ruud, *Fighting Words: Imperial Censorship and the Russian Press, 1804-1906*, p. 70
For much of Russian history, until the eighteenth century, notions of madness and divinity were closely linked. Holy Fools, individuals defined by their eccentric behavior (spitting, nudity, incoherent speech, wearing chains) were thought to be divinely inspired and many individuals who exhibited traits that were considered mad oftentimes ended up in monastic service.\textsuperscript{100} At the onset of the Age of Reason, however, conceptualizations of madness began to shake the foundations of cultural and medical understandings of the mad – in Europe notions of madness also moved away from religious roots to Cartesian associations of the mad with individuals who exhibited an absence or illness of reason or Lockean notions of one’s failure to properly exercise cognitive abilities.\textsuperscript{101} In Russia, the reforms of Peter III in 1762 saw the transition of care for the mad away from monasteries to “special houses” and the image of the madman began to drift away from a spiritual connotation toward a medical one.\textsuperscript{102}

Though medical definitions of madness in the Russian Empire fluctuated wildly over the course of three centuries, one constant through-line stood unwavering – namely that, more honestly, the history of madness in Russia was not the history of philosophical or medical theorization, but rather the history of the “relations between the Russian radical intelligentsia and the conservative elements of society and government.”\textsuperscript{103} The madness of radical intellectuals was defined by the danger of their beliefs to official national understandings as well as their unethical, misanthropic foundations. Namely, the madness of Russian madmen was understood to be rooted in their melancholy – that is, their “sadness” and “fear of everything” caused by “vexations, distresses… solitude and the lack of mirth.”\textsuperscript{104} This was not just a physical or mental disease of the individual, however, as the radical madman was also understood to be morally and spiritually diseased, exhibiting “dissatisfaction with himself, with family authority, with political authority, and with the entire world.”\textsuperscript{105} Feofan Prokopovich, an eighteenth-century Russian politician and ideologue, described these madmen as:

people [who] are either possessed by a secret demon or oppressed by melancholia, and who have such distorted reasoning, that everything wonderful, gay, great, and splendid, as well as righteous and correct and not impious, seems to them sinful

\textsuperscript{100} Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky (eds.), \textit{Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 8
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Idem.}
\textsuperscript{102} Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky (eds.), \textit{Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture}, p. 8
\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 23
\textsuperscript{104} Ilya Vinitsky, “A Cheerful Empress and Her Gloomy Critics,” in Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky (eds), \textit{Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture}, p. 27
\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 29
and foul. For example: they prefer bad weather to fine; they welcome sad news over good; they do not like happiness itself and I do not know how they think of themselves, but about others they think this: ‘if they see someone healthy and with good conduct – then, of course, he is not holy; they would wish everyone deformed, benighted, hunchbacked, and bad and would actually like them this way.’ Such people the ancient Greeks called misanthropes, that is, people haters.  

And so, if intellectuals exhibited, in their work, an apparent hatred of their fellow man, of their surroundings, or the state of affairs in the world; if one seemed misanthropic in their intentions for others or their views of them; if one expressed a consistent message of sadness or vexation, they were well-within the cultural parameters of matching a definition of a melancholic person or, in the worst case, a madman. Fitting nearly all of these categories (with bull-headedness to boot), Chaadaev, well before the Teleskop affair, had defined himself as a philosopher and an individual in such a way that accusations of his madness could be readily accepted.

Chaadaev’s friends may also have diagnosed him in this regard, as can be seen in the depiction of Chaadaev presented by his friend Aleksandr Griboyedov in his play Woe from Wit, written in 1823, wherein one of the main characters named Aleksandr Chatsky (a pseudo-biographical character based on Chaadaev) is declared mad by the esteemed members of Russian high society.

Chatsky was born, like Chaadaev, into a noble family and shared in his family’s capacity for distinguished military service. Chatsky’s public reputation, again emulating that of Chaadaev, was that of a melancholic man. Overtly disenfranchised, distraught, and uncomfortably blunt, Chatsky was a foreign sympathizer with a poisonous sense of humor. In this play, Griboyedov systematically sets the character of Chatsky against the society within which he finds himself and in conversation with the character Liza, the maid of a Russian princess, for example, Chatsky (while weeping) laments “who can say for sure what I shall find hereafter, how much, perhaps, is lost to me?” Despite apparent measures to prevent such melancholic fits, as Chatsky is alleged to have been “made to drink the bitter waters” to keep his moods in check, he still manages to offend the senses of proper noblemen and women throughout the play. At one point his behavior is so eccentric and abhorrent to the character of Sophya, a noblewoman, that she exclaims “it’s

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106 Idem.
107 Alexander Griboyedov, Woe From Wit in, Masterpieces of the Russian Drama edited and translated by George Rapall Noyes, p. 94
murderous the coldness that you show; to see you, hear you speak, it’s more than I can bear…”108 – a sentiment seemingly echoed by many in 1836 in regards to the *First Philosophical Letter*. While the play and Chaadaev’s life often mirror one another, the stories of diverge in their outcomes. Where Chatsky’s character escapes to life abroad and flees Russia, Chaadaev fades into relative obscurity and, for the last twenty years of his life, serves a far less pivotal role than in his earlier life. In a Socratic twist, the message that Chaadaev espoused earned him such popular ire that his fate that he became hazardous to employers and citizens alike. Though he enjoyed some noble and intellectual activities to his death, Chaadaev’s capacity to influence Russian intellectual society, though not eradicated entirely, had been limited severely.

108 *Ibid.*, p. 113
Epilogue: Adveniat Regnum Tuum

“Almost all of us knew Chaadaev, many loved him, and perhaps he was not as dear to anyone as much as to those who considered themselves to be his opponents. An educated mind, artistic feeling, noble heart – these were the characteristics which attracted everyone to him, and at that very time when thought apparently became immersed in a terrible and involuntary dream, he was especially dear to them, because he himself kept awake and awakened others – because in the thickening twilight of that period he did not let the lantern die out…”

- Aleksei Khomyakov’s Epitaph for Chaadaev

To all my friends and fellows say, that I ask of your forgiveness
Of all that, which may have deserved their displeasure.
Pyotr Chaadaev

- The Last Will and Testament of Pyotr Chaadaev

Predominantly, the story of the end of Chaadaev’s life is one that demonstrates the relative success in the Nicholaevan strategy to suppress persons throughout his empire while simultaneously demonstrated the overall failure of Nicholas’ government to maintain a bulwark against Western philosophies and influence. As will be seen, the impact of Chaadaev’s beliefs resonated well after the suppression of his writings and, through such prominent figures as Aleksei Khomyakov and Alexander Herzen, his ideas lived on either in their public exaltation or refutation. And though Chaadaev was never to publish again, the avenues of intellectual exchange and influence that produced his philosophy, such as letter exchanges with foreign philosophers like Schelling, continued on in Chaadaev’s life and in the lives of his peers.

At the Foot of the Cross:

While it seems that Chaadaev’s self-appraisal in his *Apologie d’un Fou* was a bit hyperbolic, that his legacy had been destroyed by the *Teleskop* affair, he certainly did produce fewer philosophical writings after 1836-7; however, he continued a part of salon culture in Moscow. In the early 1840s he wrote responses to the emergent philosophies of Professor Shevyrev of Moscow University in his “The Decline of the West,” Mikhail Pogodin’s article “Peter the Great,” and some works by Aleksei Khomyakov. Namely, Chaadaev seemed to busy himself

predominantly with rebutting and combating some of Khomyakov’s views through the early
1840s. In one such rebuttal, Chaadaev prods Khomyakov’s belief that “the forms of our [Russian]
existence… contain the mysteries of our greatness” by declaring that, by that reasoning, then
serfdom in some way must contain the mystery of Russian greatness as well.110 Similarly, Chaadaev took it upon himself to attend Yuri Samarin’s doctoral defense at Moscow University
to combat the student’s attempt to justify Russian Orthodoxy by way of a Hegelian philosophical
model.111

Chaadaev did not simply spend his time responding to others’ philosophies in the 1840s,
however, and in a letter to Schelling, dated 1842, Chaadaev demonstrates that he and some of his
peers were still evolving their philosophies alongside developments in Schelling’s model. He
wrote this letter to congratulate Schelling on obtaining a new position in Berlin but, most
importantly, remarks that new advancements in Schelling’s philosophy were helping to shape, in
some ways, the fate of Russian civilization.112 In this it is clear that Chaadaev is still very
interested in the issue of Russia’s destiny as he, seemingly unabated from nearly two decades of
persecution for this belief, makes it known to Schelling that the nationalist sentiment of Nicholas’
regime is both unnatural to Russia and corrosive to the Russian people as a whole.113

Though the Teleskop affair is considered to be the biggest dust-up of Chaadaev’s life, his
engagement with Russian intellectual culture and the continued proliferation of his beliefs, albeit
not formally in any kind of publication after 1836, resulted in his official reprimand by the Russian
government into the last decade of his life. On August 7th, 1847, for example, Chaadaev received
a letter which he reported to his friend Mikhail Zhikharev as being “without exaggeration, [a] real
death-note…”114 The stresses of his life that had been accumulating seemingly since 1826
continued to build around this time and, with further unfortunate governmental attention being
drawn to him and with more prominent intellectuals (including Yuri Samarin) being arrested and
exiled for their works, Chaadaev’s mental health appears to have been quite affected by the
Imperial atmosphere as rumors of his madness, again, surfaced in the late 1840s and early 50s.115

110 Raymond T. McNally, Chaadayev and His Friends, p. 48
111 Raymond T. McNally, Chaadayev and His Friends, p. 48-49
113 Idem.
114 Raymond T. McNally, Chaadayev and His Friends, p. 49
115 Raymond T. McNally, Chaadayev and His Friends, p. 49
Though having begun under the auspices of nobility and wealth, Chaadaev’s life proved to be hard – his parents were both dead well before he matured, many of the friends that he made in his youth were killed or exiled, his past interactions with revolutionaries and governmentally black-listed societies alongside the philosophy that he developed meant that he was too toxic to ever find work in professional governmental service, in letters to friends and family he was seemingly always having some kind of financial problem, and he had, through some amalgamation of poor health and an eccentric persona, earned the reputation of a madman perhaps even before the *Teleskop* affair. In the last fifteen years of his life one can see that Chaadaev’s financial problems as well as issues of health became nearly the sole topics of his letters. Culminating in 1845, Chaadaev wrote a letter to Princess N. D. Shakhovskii wherein he discloses that his mental health has deteriorated to a dangerous degree. “The whole of yesterday has passed in an appalling manner” he said to her, “I had moments when I did not know what to do, or ideas of suicide came involuntarily to my mind.”

His state of mind seemingly, by this point in his life, had become dangerous and he ends the letter to the Princess simply stating “I do not know what will become of me today, the day begins with sad auguries.”

In 1855, Chaadaev codified his last will and testament. In this surprisingly short document Chaadaev makes very few final requests. Namely, that his belongings, other than his books and pictures, be given to “his people” Titus and Vasilisa for their “service and friendship,” that his pocket watch be given to Sophia Yakovlevna Schulz, and that the rings on his hand be given to Princess Elizabeth Dmitrievna Scherbatova. He asked to be buried in the Donskoi Monastery near the grave of Avdotiya Sergeevna Norova or near the grave of Catherine Gavriolovna Levasheva. If neither were possible, he requested to be put to rest in the village of Goveinovo next to his aunt Anna Mikhailovna Scherbatova. He wished that whoever notified his brother of his death would ask his forgiveness for griefs accidentally inflicted on him and that Yegor, “who served with me,” was offered freedom if he so desired it. And lastly, Chaadaev asked, of all his friends, that they forgive him for the things he had done that earned their displeasure.

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117 Idem.

Around one year later, on April 14th, 1856, Chaadaev fell ill and took Holy Communion. At four o’clock that day he suffered a heart attack and died the Saturday before Easter, aged sixty-four. Per his final will, he was interred at the Don Monastery and buried near the grave of his professed love, Avdotiya Norova.119

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What I have attempted to do in this project is draw out from a fuller picture of Chaadaev’s life a useful reflection for life in the Russian Empire during what proved to be a particularly volatile, unsettling, and dynamic period of not only its history, but of European history generally. The unmoored and unsettled feeling that drove Chaadaev, in his life, to feel disconnected from his society, that led members of his society to declare him mad, that influenced him to produce a philosophical portrait of his nation as one of disconnectedness from history is indicative of the time and place in which he lived. These feelings were shared by his colleagues and peers in Russia but so, too, were they felt abroad by intellectuals throughout. Though Chaadaev seems, in retrospect, to have been an anomalous figure and man who stood out from the rest in the blunt, aggressive, and fervent elocution of his incredibly divisive worldview, the story of his life is invaluable to the historical reimagining and encapsulation of the experience of the Russian intellectual in the nineteenth century. The value of writing a microhistorical biography, such as this was meant to be, lies not only in the capacity of the story of a life to draw out richer meaning of a specific historical era but also to make powerful macroscopic historical observations.

Most importantly, though, I wish that anyone who reads this thesis would leave it knowing that it is dangerous to the historical pursuit to overly-simplify the story of a life. While historians unquestionably face a monumentally difficult task in managing innumerable currents of historical data, one ought to never lose sight that while certain historical systems and processes may move history more powerfully than individuals, history is ultimately a human science of the experience of those processes, currents, and effects of historical change. By moving the coverage of Chaadaev’s life beyond just a few lines, one can more viscerally feel such events as the Allied occupation of Paris after the War of the Sixth Coalition, Nicholaevan censorship and the toll it took on many hundreds of Russian intellectuals during the reign of Nicholas I, the pervasiveness of melancholy in Europe after Napoleon, and the aspiration of a nation to find its footing amidst civil and political unrest the likes of which shook Europe to its core. In that way, the allegory of

119 Raymond T. McNally, Chaadayev and His Friends, p. 55
Chaadaev’s life is not only valuable to historians because of the capacity of his life to catalyze historical conversation but because of the invaluably disclosive nature of his life in itself.
Bibliography


