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Absolute Freedom of Choice - Decembrists' Wives

Since the time when Homer coined the word 'hero' to describe the Greeks and the Trojans the concept of a hero and of heroism has essentially remained the same.

A Greek hero was a young man of superior strength, courage and beauty who was chosen by the Gods to die a glorious death for the sake of his people. During the Christian era Christian martyrs were the men and women chosen by God to die for the sake of their faith.

A Greek hero always knows what his fate is going to be - through dreams or prophecies Gods warn him. He may refuse to follow on his course, but he does not. A Christian martyr is inevitably offered a choice between recanting or being tortured and executed. Free choice is one of the most important attributes of heroism and sacrifice its supreme value.

Today historians still apply the same criteria to their subjects. They watch to see “whether a man, during his life, shows any evidence of acting according to a divine or moral law outside himself; whether he ever sacrificed his own profit or pleasure for the sake of a person or a principle, whether he shows evidence of loving other men... whether he puts love before expediency and whether he is sincere and truthful”¹

I am going to speak of the people who grew up in Russia in the early nineteenth century. They were shaped by two strong influences: the eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy and Christian values, which did not differ much on the issue of heroism – or martyrdom.

Who is a hero? - Jean Jacques Rousseau considered that it was the person who did the most for the humanity because of the ability to dominate his passions in order to follow his moral duty² Rousseau juxtaposes two human types: the philosopher and the hero.

A philosopher looks after his own happiness while a hero looks after the happiness of the others.

A philosopher teaches lessons, while a hero by his own example forces men to listen to reason.

¹ David Knowles, “The Historian and Character”, in *The Historian and Character, and Other Essays* by David Knowles (Cambridge[Eng]: University Press, 1963), p.5.

² J-J Rousseau, *Discours sur la vertu*, on <http://books.google.fr/books?-id.>, p.158-160.

A philosopher is wise, a hero is generous.

- Rousseau believed that the list of possible human virtues is infinite, but there are some which are definitely not heroic: moderation, prudence and temperance. Why? Perhaps, because prudence and temperance require that you look after yourself first.

Moderation and fairness fail to achieve the maximum when they lead an individual to act for the sake of others. At best they will produce charity. The difference between charity and generosity is easy to discern. When you ask for an apple and are given an apple - that is charity. But when you ask for an apple and are given two or three, it is generosity.

What it offers it offers willingly and unstintingly. Generosity is only possible when there is compassion and there is no moral judgment while charity may coexist with moral judgment and thus, does not preclude contempt and arrogance. Charity stops at sacrifice. It is not a characteristic of a heroic action.

Rousseau's reasoning is rooted in the Christian doctrine, which postulated in the Galatians 6:2, 'Carry each other's burden and you will fulfil Christ's law' Christ did not say: 'Carry the burden of those who deserve'. Nor did he say, 'Carry half of their burden.' Whether a mythical hero or a legendary figure, or a real-life person, a hero has flaws, but he is saved by his virtues. In the Christian teaching: self-discipline and self-control are necessary for those who follow a vocation. People who are prone to mood swings, anger, fear are not their own masters. They are dominated by passions or instincts and are constantly distracted.. In order to follow the path which they chose, they must learn to say no to everything that makes them swerve from it. Only in this way people achieve maturity and, therefore, libertas, absolute freedom in the choices.

Generosity and compassion make a hero feel responsible for the others to such an extent that he freely chooses to sacrifice his own expediency and pleasure for their sake.

And now I will tell you about the people who had practiced these values for thirty years, between 1826 and 1856.

Soon after the Napoleonic wars a secret political society emerged in Russia. Most of its members were military officers, all were of the noble class and many belonged to Russia's aristocracy. Idealistic and selfless, these privileged men wanted to free the serfs and abolish the political privileges of their own class; make citizens out of Russian

peasants, give equal rights to all nationalities and religions and transform Russia into a constitutional monarchy, like the British one, or a republic, like the United States – they never entirely agreed about this.

In December 1825 the Emperor suddenly died. The plotters saw a chance to carry off their coup before they had pledged allegiance to the new emperor. They were honourable men and it troubled them to violate their oath. .

So, when troops were brought to the Senate to swear allegiance, the plotters – who were in command of the troops, ordered the soldiers to demand a constitution for Russia, but they did not want to resort to violence. After a day of negotiations, the government used violence and the uprising was over. Within the next six months several hundred men, known as the Decembrists, were imprisoned, interrogated and sentenced.

To counteract the effect from the uprising the government attempted to pretend that nothing much had happened. Official silence would obliterate their memory. The five ringleaders were executed in secret, to this day no one knows where they were buried. All others – several hundred -were stripped of their military rank and noble status, and sent to do forced labour in Siberia.

After doing their sentence they were to remain in exile. They were not allowed to correspond with their families. The fortune of the convicted men passed to the next of kin. Traditionally, wives and children of common prisoners accompanied them to the place of confinement, but not in this case. Instead, the Decembrists' wives were given the option of having their marriages annulled and were free to remarry.

One by one, eleven women after many petitions obtained permission to join their husbands in Siberia. The authorities tried to intimidate them by imposing very harsh terms. They were not allowed to take their children with them. They could not return to Russia until their husbands died. The amount of money they could take with them was limited 'for their own safety', so as not to tempt criminals who would become their company in Siberia, Emperor Nicholas I warned Princess Wolkonsky. Their family arrangements and their financial affairs would be supervised and regulated by the prison authorities. Any children born to them in Siberia would not bear their fathers' names – which was both painful and insulting to the nobility, always so conscious of their family

honour and status - and would become crown serfs.³ This never took place – I am telling you in advance – but nobody knew it would not.

These women, except for one, were in their early to mid-twenties. Nearly all belonged to very wealthy or well-to-do families. Several belonged to the highest aristocracy, but two were commoners. Three were Catholic, the rest were Orthodox. Most were Russian, but there were one Polish and two Frenchwomen. Not all were married when they set out. Not all were happily married, either.

At one extreme was Alexandra Mouravieva, who wrote to her husband while he was still in St Petersburg under arrest ‘My good friend, my angel... you ask for my forgiveness... you are breaking my heart. I have nothing to forgive you for.’ She told him that although their three years of marriage had been heaven, yet she accepted that happiness could be eternal. So, she asked him: ‘Do not despair, it is not worthy of you... Do not fear for me, I have overcome everything.’⁴

Alexandra’s mother-in-law was equally devoted to her only son. She took care of the three grandchildren and the twenty-four year old woman joined her husband in Siberia. But another woman, the twenty-year old Princess Maria Wolkonsky, married a man twice her age, bowing to her family’s pressure. He was wealthy, a hero of the Napoleonic wars, a general of the army and a member of a very powerful family. When her family learned that Prince Wolkonsky was arrested they at once told Maria that she had to divorce him. He had no sympathy from them for having married a young innocent creature knowing full well that his future was uncertain. She asked her father to petition the emperor to let her join her husband. He refused for a long time. Most of her family broke with her over her decision and it took years for them to ‘forgive’ her.⁵

Two women were mistresses kept by wealthy guardsmen who did not think of marrying below themselves, even though they loved these women. The proud families, which would never have allowed the marriage a year before, now arranged for these women to join their lovers. They were married in Siberia.

Another girl was a daughter of a French governess in a Russian family. She was in love

³ inwerden.de/pdf/volkonskaya_zapiski.pdf, p.11.

⁴ E.Dementieva, in ‘Schastliva’ia Alexandrina’ [The Fortunate Alexandrina] published online: www.sudarushka.su/index.php?aid-2414.

⁵ www.inwerden.de/pdf/vokonskaya_zapiski.pdf, p. 9.

with the son of the family a young guardsman who did not know of her feelings, in fact did not even notice her. After he was convicted the girl confessed to her mother that she loved him and wanted to join him – if he would accept her.

So, they were a very disparate group in all respects and yet their actions were similar as they were inspired by the same ideas, which they absorbed from their families, their teachers and priests.

What do young, pampered and fragile women do when they come to a village of 10 houses, a prison, barracks and a mine shaft in the midst of the Siberian forest? When Princess Troubetskaya saw her husband – emaciated, pale, dressed in rags – she fainted. The misery and physical hardships were exacerbated by the despotism of the local administration, but they bore them without complaint. Hardships were a part of life as they saw it. The only one who was prepared for the material difficulties was Pauline Geble, a shop girl, who came to Siberia to marry her lover. She told her daughter, years after that her aristocratic neighbours admired her for knowing how to pluck chickens and cook. But they soon learnt from her and cooking chicken soup was not the hardest task they had to face in Siberia.

The men were working in the mines, and twice a week they were allowed to visit their wives. The women spent their days in preparing food and doing the prisoners' laundry, sewing clothes for them. Later they planted vegetable gardens. Every afternoon they went to the prison and sat outside the tall fence in which someone made a little hole. When the men were taken out for exercise, they would approach the hole and have a few words with one of the women.

The women's presence gave moral support to the men, created a semblance of normality and moderated the harshness of the authorities.

They were the link between the Decembrists and their families. They were the only ones who were allowed to write to Russia, so each of them wrote ten to twenty letters a week on behalf of the prisoners to their families, passing on requests, information. Aleksandra Davydova apologized to her children in Russia that her letters were short, because she had to write so many for the others.⁶

Some of the women who stayed in Russia suffered because they could not make up their

mind, whether to stay with the children or join the husband. The Decembrists' wives proved their generosity in this respect also, as they never set themselves as a paragon for others nor reproached the other women for failing to follow their example. Princess Wolkonsky, a girl of twenty, wrote to one such woman: "*In your position you cannot simultaneously do two equally sacred duties. Do that which your heart prompts you and you will see that it is the only way to recover that peace of mind which you crave.*"⁷ Their presence made the material conditions of the prisoners' life somewhat more acceptable, as they brought medicines, clothing, bedding, kitchenware, and later even furniture.

After the Decembrists had done their sentence and were free, though banned from returning to Russia, the women enabled their husbands and their mates to practice and develop their skills. They had books, journal subscriptions, writing materials, tools, instruments brought from Russia.

The first qualified medical doctors, agronomists, engineers, surveyors, geologists, ethnographers, teachers in Siberia were the Decembrists. Prince Wolkonsky built the first hothouses in Siberia, others opened schools, orphanages, mechanical shops.

They did not concentrate on their own families to the exclusion of other sufferers around them. After the Polish rebellion of 1831 many Poles were sent to Siberia and when they arrived the Decembrists' wives provided them with money, food and friendship.

What moved them - Love? Certainly, in many cases. But not only that, and probably never only that.

Their upbringing emphasized personal dignity, honour and loyalty. They matched their husbands' selflessness by their own because it corresponded to their strong moral conviction.

In the 19th century, a Russian gentlewoman considered it humiliating to be reduced to the function of a mistress. The romantic epoch cultivated the concept of "friendship". The prevailing idea was that there were no 'males' and 'females', but human beings. In a man-woman relationship, friendship was placed on a pedestal because it was a feeling which made a woman and a man equal. Friendship was the highest human bond which

⁶ Footnote, *Rossiiskii Arkhiv* (Moscow: Rossiiskii Arkhiv, 2001), vol. MMI, p. 58.

⁷ M.N.Volkonsky to V.A. Muraviova, 17.01.1830, *Rossiiskii Arkhiv* (Moscow: Rossiiskii Arkhiv, 2001),

alone could sanctify marriage.⁸ A marriage like this is not easy to dissolve.

Like countless other people in history, these eleven women faced an ethical choice between conformism, clinging to power and standing up to it, between expediency and compassion and they made a choice, giving an example for the generations which came after them. They proved that it was possible.

In the 20th century the Freudian theory treats a human being as a bundle of instincts. We are all mechanisms which are activated by a lever – hunger, fear or libido. There is no personality and there is no freedom of choice. These women asserted the freedom of conscience and freedom of moral choice and continue to remind us that there is more to life than living in comfort.

Through carrying out small duties they taught others to understand greatness. Through their acceptance of the routine, temporal difficulties, they teach us to be loyal to the eternal truths.

They had their human weaknesses, like all of us, and yet they had the strength to carry out their task. The Russian Orthodox doctrine says that the only difference between a saint and a sinner is that a saint sets himself a task and does not abandon it. He may drop it, may despair, but then he picks it up again and he will accomplish what he set out to do. These women may have been angry with their husbands, they may have fallen out of love, they may have quarreled with each other – but all this was nothing in comparison with what they accomplished, by and large. One of them wrote: “constant work for others made me a different person” - and in her modesty, she never said “a better person”. An artist creates his work and the work creates the artist. While you are accomplishing a task, the task is shaping you.

The 20th century created a painful confusion in the minds by asserting that evil cannot be conquered and therefore moral choices are pointless. So, the man has to lie down and relax, meditate – and this is a very reasonable way to respond to the evil. Become a vegetarian, do yoga – and you are entitled to feeling both safe and good.

But, like their husbands, the Decembrists' wives had compassion, they had conscience and they transformed them into action. They were “God's candles in the darkness”. They

vol.MMI, p.58.

⁸ (N.Berdayev. “Tragedia i obydenost” [Tragedy and routine] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1994), vol.2, p.220.

did not disperse the darkness, but they created a circle of light where they lived.