

Ideas, Empires, and Historical Memory: A Reading of Susanna Rabow-Edling's *The First Russian Revolution*

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ABSTRACT

This review essay examines Susanna Rabow-Edling's *The First Russian Revolution: The Decembrist Revolt of 1825* as a significant contribution to the evolving historiography of the Decembrist movement. While recognizing the book's success in moving beyond the traditional romantic image of the Decembrists and restoring them as serious political actors, the essay argues that an important analytical dimension remains underexplored. In particular, it considers the relationship between political ideas and the economic and institutional structures of the Russian Empire, with special attention to the Russian-American Company and the figure of Kondraty Ryleev. By placing Rabow-Edling's interpretation within a broader comparative framework of ideas, empires, and historical memory, the essay suggests that the Decembrist movement can be understood not only as an intellectual and political phenomenon but also as a response to deeper structural contradictions within the imperial system.

Keywords: Decembrists; Russian Empire; Russian-American Company; historiography; historical memory; imperial history; political thought.

The Decembrist uprising of 1825 is traditionally interpreted—especially within Russian historiography—as a primarily ideological and political phenomenon. It is commonly associated with the influence of European liberalism, Enlightenment philosophy, and the romantic worldview of the officer elite in the first third of the nineteenth century. Within this framework, the participants in the uprising are typically portrayed as young aristocrats who, having returned from the victorious campaigns against Napoleon Bonaparte, became inspired by European political ideas. In many accounts, they appear as bearers of abstract ideals—absorbed abroad and insufficiently rooted in the socio-economic realities of their own country—while the uprising itself is presented as a tragic yet almost inevitable attempt to impose these ideals upon a society unprepared for them.

It is important to note that this interpretation was not formed exclusively in the nineteenth century but was significantly reinforced in later historiography, including Soviet and post-Soviet narratives, where the Decembrists were often depicted as moral pioneers and precursors of future reform. This tradition of interpretation, while intellectually influential, has contributed to a certain romanticization of the movement, emphasizing its ethical and ideological dimensions while downplaying its material and institutional context. Such an approach, for all its conceptual coherence, has a clear limitation: it largely excludes economic factors from the analysis of the causes and motivations of the Decembrist movement. Yet early nineteenth-century Russia was characterized not only by the growing political self-awareness of the educated nobility, but also by the gradual emergence of elements of proto-bourgeois relations associated with trade expansion, colonial projects, and the development of large corporate structures. Ignoring this context inevitably leads to an oversimplification of events and reduces complex historical processes to the sphere of purely ideological borrowing.

Rabow-Edling's study represents one of the most important recent contributions to overcoming this traditional interpretation. Rather than treating the Decembrists as merely romantic idealists, she restores them as serious political thinkers whose constitutional projects, moral philosophy, and intellectual debates deserve to be understood within their own historical context. The present essay fully shares this reassessment. Its purpose is not to challenge Rabow-Edling's interpretation, but to broaden the analytical framework by examining an

additional dimension that falls beyond the primary scope of her study: the institutional and economic environment within which Decembrist political thought evolved.

Of particular relevance in this regard is the activity of a unique economic institution within the Russian Empire—the Russian-American Company. This entity combined the functions of a trading monopoly, a colonial administrator, and, to a certain extent, an instrument of foreign policy. By the end of the reign of Alexander I of Russia, the position of the Company had become increasingly complicated due to both external and internal pressures. These included shifts in Russia's foreign policy—especially the post-Napoleonic rapprochement with Great Britain—as well as structural challenges within Russian America, most notably a chronic shortage of labor and the extreme geographical remoteness of the territories now known as Alaska.

In this context, particular attention should be paid to the figure of Kondraty Ryleev, traditionally regarded primarily as a romantic poet and one of the leaders of the Decembrist movement. However, his official position as head of the chancery of the Russian-American Company—the first state-supported commercial monopoly in the Russian Empire—raises the question of a possible intersection between political and economic interests in the preparation and execution of the events of 14 December 1825.

Ryleev's dual position—as both a participant in a revolutionary circle and a high-ranking representative of a major commercial structure—opens the possibility for a more complex interpretation of his motivations.

The purpose of this article is to examine the events of December 1825 not only as a product of the ideological influence of European romanticism, idealism, and liberalism, but also as a possible manifestation of an early conflict between the autocratic structure of the Russian state and emerging economic interests.

At the center of this study lies the hypothesis that the institutional and economic interests associated with the Russian-American Company may have played a more significant role in shaping the political activity of leading Decembrists than is commonly acknowledged in traditional historiography.

The Formation of the Russian-American Company in a Broader Context

To better understand the position of the Russian-American Company in the early nineteenth century, it is necessary to situate its activities within a broader foreign-policy context, extending beyond the reign of Alexander I of Russia to the preceding period. The formation and early development of the Company took place under conditions of intensified geopolitical rivalry among the leading European powers of the time—Great Britain, France, Spain, and Russia—for control over trade routes and colonial territories.

The establishment of the Russian-American Company in 1799 belongs to the reign of Paul I of Russia, whose foreign policy was marked by a pronounced anti-British orientation and a rapprochement with Napoleonic France. In this context, the Company's activities extended beyond those of a purely commercial enterprise and acquired the characteristics of a geo-economic instrument aimed at strengthening Russia's position in North America and limiting British expansion in the Pacific region.

A significant role in the institutional formation of the Company was played by Nikolai Rezanov—a chamberlain of the imperial court, diplomat, and, in many respects, one of the most remarkable figures in the history of Russian America. Some scholars have suggested that, had it not been for his untimely death on his return journey to St. Petersburg from New Archangelsk (Novo-Arkhangelsk) in Russian America (present-day Sitka, Alaska), the geopolitical map of the modern world might have developed differently. This line of interpretation was articulated, among others, by Richard A. Pierce, who emphasized that Rezanov's efforts extended far beyond the organization of trade operations.

Indeed, Rezanov was deeply engaged in the creation of a sustainable system of governance for Russia's vast colonial territories. His vision included ambitious infrastructural projects—most notably the idea of establishing a transcontinental connection between European Russia and its Pacific and American possessions. Although such plans would not materialize until many decades later, they testify to the strategic scope of his thinking.

It therefore becomes clear that, from its inception, the Russian-American Company combined economic, administrative, and strategic functions, making it an important instrument of imperial policy despite its formally commercial status.

The abrupt shift in foreign policy following the “sudden” death of Paul I of Russia, as well as the broader consequences of the Napoleonic Wars, led to a gradual weakening of state support for the Company. Under Alexander I, Russia increasingly reoriented itself toward rapprochement with Great Britain—an alignment that objectively conflicted with the interests of the Russian-American Company, which was engaged in direct competition with British commercial and colonial structures, such as the Hudson's Bay Company in North America.

As a result, the Company found itself in a position of dual vulnerability: while formally retaining its monopoly status, it was simultaneously losing the level of political patronage it had previously enjoyed, particularly during the period associated with Rezanov's leadership.

An additional factor contributing to the Company's growing difficulties was the internal situation in Russian America. Its economic model was critically dependent on the availability of labor, yet the system of serfdom in the metropole significantly restricted the possibilities for labor mobility. Under these conditions, the question of peasant emancipation acquired not only a moral and political dimension, but also a distinctly pragmatic economic one.

In this context, proposals circulating within Decembrist circles—particularly the idea of emancipation without land—can be reinterpreted as potentially linked to the need for a mobile labor force. Such a workforce could, in theory, be directed toward the development of distant colonial territories, including those administered by the Russian-American Company.

Thus, by the early 1820s, the Russian-American Company found itself at the intersection of economic interests, foreign-policy contradictions, and internal social constraints. Within this complex configuration, the involvement of certain representatives of the Company in oppositional political projects no longer appears as purely ideological radicalism, but instead invites interpretation within a broader structural and institutional context.

Shareholders and the Economic Structure of the Russian-American Company

An important aspect of the functioning of the Russian-American Company was the composition of its shareholders, which included not only representatives of the merchant class but also members of the imperial elite. Among them were high-ranking officials, courtiers, and individuals closely connected to the imperial court. This structure ensured the Company privileged access to state resources and administrative support, while simultaneously embedding it within the broader system of imperial governance.

At the same time, this composition of shareholders created a distinctive configuration of interests. The Company was not merely a commercial enterprise seeking profit, but a hybrid institution in which economic, political, and personal interests intersected. For many of its shareholders, participation in the Company represented not only an investment opportunity but also a mechanism of influence within imperial policy-making processes.

This dual nature of the Company is particularly important for understanding the motivations of individuals later associated with oppositional movements. Their involvement in political projects cannot be reduced to abstract ideological commitments alone; rather, it should also be interpreted in light of their economic interests and institutional affiliations.

Kondraty Ryleev and the Russian-American Company

A central figure in this context is Kondraty Ryleev, who served as a senior administrator (“upravlyayushchiy delami”) in the St. Petersburg office of the Russian-American Company. His position placed him at the

intersection of commercial operations, administrative coordination, and information flows linking the imperial center with the colonial periphery.

In Russian cultural memory, however, Ryleev is almost exclusively remembered as a poet of the so-called Golden Age of Russian literature, a contemporary of Alexander Pushkin. More specialized accounts may also mention his role as the founder and publisher of the political almanac *Polar Star* (*Polyarnaya Zvezda*). Yet his official position within the Russian-American Company remains largely absent from both popular and, to a significant extent, scholarly narratives.

This selective remembrance is not accidental. Following the accession of Nicholas I of Russia, considerable effort was made to suppress intellectual and institutional sources associated with reformist or oppositional thought. Within this context, the Russian-American Company—by virtue of its economic structure and its association with figures later involved in the Decembrist movement—occupied an ambiguous and, at times, politically uncomfortable position.

Subsequent historiographical traditions, including Soviet interpretations, further contributed to the marginalization of the Company's role by privileging narratives centered on ideological struggle while downplaying the significance of economic institutions and proto-capitalist relations in imperial Russia. As a result, the dominant image of the Decembrists as young officers inspired by European liberal ideas became firmly established, often at the expense of alternative explanatory frameworks.

For the purposes of the present study, it is important to restore this missing dimension. Ryleev's role within the Company provided him with firsthand insight into the structural limitations of Russia's colonial project. He was directly confronted with administrative inefficiencies, chronic labor shortages, and the contradictions between the Company's economic objectives and the broader trajectory of imperial policy.

Contemporary Company correspondence and administrative records demonstrate that the St. Petersburg office was occupied not merely with commercial bookkeeping but with constant reports concerning labor shortages, supply failures, shipping logistics, colonial administration, and negotiations with imperial ministries. As managing administrator, Ryleev stood at the center of these information flows. Although no surviving document directly links his political activity to the interests of the Company, his daily professional experience exposed him to structural weaknesses of Russia's colonial administration that were unlikely to remain without influence on his broader political outlook.

Traditionally, Ryleev has been interpreted primarily as a poet and a revolutionary, one of the leading figures of the Decembrist uprising. However, his position within the Russian-American Company adds an important institutional dimension to this familiar portrait. From this perspective, Ryleev's participation in oppositional movements can be reinterpreted as partially rooted in his awareness of the structural incompatibilities between Russia's socio-economic system and its imperial ambitions. The problem of serfdom, in particular, appears not only as a moral issue, but as a concrete obstacle to the effective development of overseas territories.

Toward a Reinterpretation of the Decembrists

The Decembrists have traditionally been viewed as representatives of a noble intelligentsia driven by ideals of political liberty and constitutional reform. While this interpretation remains valid, it may benefit from being supplemented by an analysis of the economic and institutional contexts in which these individuals operated.

In this regard, the Russian-American Company emerges as a potentially significant, yet underexplored, factor. It functioned as a space where imperial policy, economic interests, and practical administrative challenges intersected. For individuals such as Ryleev, this environment may have contributed to the formation of a political outlook that combined ideological aspirations with an acute awareness of structural limitations.

Thus, the Decembrist movement can be reconsidered not only as a manifestation of intellectual and moral dissent, but also as a response to concrete economic and institutional contradictions within the Russian Empire.

This perspective does not negate the ideological dimension of the movement; rather, it situates it within a broader analytical framework that allows for a more nuanced understanding of its origins.

Economic Constraints and the Question of Labor

One of the most significant structural challenges faced by the Russian-American Company was the issue of labor. The development of colonial territories required a stable and sufficiently skilled workforce, capable of operating in harsh climatic conditions and maintaining the infrastructure necessary for trade and extraction.

However, the socio-economic system of the Russian Empire, based on serfdom, proved ill-suited to these demands. Serfs, bound to landowners and deprived of personal autonomy, could not be easily mobilized for overseas labor. Even when relocation was possible, the lack of incentives and the rigid structure of serfdom limited both productivity and initiative.

In contrast, other colonial powers relied on more flexible labor systems, including wage labor and various forms of contractual service. This allowed for greater mobility and adaptability, which in turn contributed to more efficient colonial administration and economic exploitation.

For administrators and officials associated with the Russian-American Company, these limitations were not abstract theoretical concerns but everyday operational realities. The inability to secure a reliable labor force directly affected the Company's profitability and its capacity to sustain long-term colonial projects.

Serfdom as a Structural Obstacle

From this perspective, serfdom emerges not merely as a social institution but as a structural constraint on imperial expansion. It limited the state's ability to project power beyond its continental borders and undermined the economic viability of overseas enterprises.

This observation is crucial for understanding the broader implications of reformist thinking in early nineteenth-century Russia. The critique of serfdom, often framed in moral or philosophical terms, can also be interpreted as a response to concrete economic inefficiencies and geopolitical limitations.

For individuals like Kondraty Ryleev, who operated within both administrative and intellectual spheres, this dual awareness may have been particularly acute. Their exposure to the practical failures of imperial policy could have reinforced their commitment to systemic reform.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between the Russian-American Company and the Decembrist uprising invites a reassessment of the latter's origins and underlying motivations. Rather than interpreting the Decembrists exclusively as idealistic reformers shaped by European political thought, it appears more analytically productive to situate them within a complex constellation of economic, institutional, and experiential factors.

As a hybrid entity combining commercial enterprise with instruments of imperial governance, the Russian-American Company constituted a distinctive environment in which these factors converged. For certain individuals associated with it—including Kondraty Ryleev—participation in this structure provided not only insight into the operational mechanisms of the empire, but also a privileged vantage point from which its structural limitations became increasingly visible.

This article has argued that the economic and administrative challenges faced by the Company—particularly those related to labor supply and the systemic constraints imposed by serfdom—may have played a formative role in shaping a reform-oriented agenda among segments of the imperial elite. In this sense, the critique of existing socio-political arrangements can be interpreted not solely as an abstract ideological position, but also as a response grounded in practical institutional experience.

While this perspective does not diminish the ideological significance of the Decembrist movement, it introduces an additional analytical dimension that helps bridge the gap between political thought and material conditions. By integrating economic and institutional analysis into the study of the Decembrists, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the forces that contributed to one of the earliest organized challenges to autocratic rule in Russia.

Further research into the institutional networks, economic affiliations, and administrative experiences of the Decembrists may yield new insights into the dynamic interplay between empire, economy, and political transformation in early nineteenth-century Russia.

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