

# Tsar Alexander Criticised

[From a novel.]

There is no one in Russian literature now, from schoolboy essayist to learned historian, who does not throw his little stone at Alexander for things he did wrong at this period of his reign. [1]

“He ought to have acted in this way and in that way. In this case he did well and in that case badly. He behaved admirably at the beginning of his reign and during 1812, but acted badly by giving a constitution to Poland, forming the Holy Alliance, entrusting power to Arakcheev, favoring Golitsyn and mysticism, and afterwards Shishkov and Photius. He also acted badly by concerning himself with the active army and disbanding the Semenov regiment.” [2]

It would take a dozen pages to enumerate all the reproaches the historians address to him, based on their knowledge of what is good for humanity. [3]

What do these reproaches mean? [4]

Do not the very actions for which the historians praise Alexander I (the liberal attempts at the beginning of his reign, his struggle with Napoleon, the firmness he displayed in 1812 and the campaign of 1813) flow from the same sources—the circumstances of his birth, education, and life—that made his personality what it was and from which the actions for which they blame him (the Holy Alliance, the restoration of Poland, and the reaction of 1820 and later) also flowed? [5]

In what does the substance of those reproaches lie? [6]

It lies in the fact that an historic character like Alexander I, standing on the highest possible pinnacle of human power with the blinding light of history focused upon him; a character exposed to those strongest of all influences: the intrigues, flattery, and self-deception inseparable from power; a character who at every moment of his life felt a responsibility for all that was happening in Europe; and not a fictitious but a live character who like every man had his personal habits, passions, and impulses toward goodness, beauty, and truth—that this

character— though not lacking in virtue (the historians do not accuse him of that)— had not the same conception of the welfare of humanity fifty years ago as a present-day professor who from his youth upwards has been occupied with learning: that is, with books and lectures and with taking notes from them. [7]

But even if we assume that fifty years ago Alexander I was mistaken in his view of what was good for the people, we must inevitably assume that the historian who judges Alexander will also after the lapse of some time turn out to be mistaken in his view of what is good for humanity. This assumption is all the more natural and inevitable because, watching the movement of history, we see that every year and with each new writer, opinion as to what is good for mankind changes; so that what once seemed good, ten years later seems bad, and vice versa. And what is more, we find at one and the same time quite contradictory views as to what is bad and what is good in history: some people regard giving a constitution to Poland and forming the Holy Alliance as praiseworthy in Alexander, while others regard it as blame-

worthy.

[8]

The activity of Alexander or of Napoleon cannot be called useful or harmful, for it is impossible to say for what it was useful or harmful. If that activity displeases somebody, this is only because it does not agree with his limited understanding of what is good. Whether the preservation of my father's house in Moscow, or the glory of the Russian arms, or the prosperity of the Petersburg and other universities, or the freedom of Poland or the greatness of Russia, or the balance of power in Europe, or a certain kind of European culture called "progress" appear to me to be good or bad, I must admit that besides these things the action of every historic character has other more general purposes inaccessible to me.

[9]