

CHAPTER 1

Prelude

The last years of the reign of Alexander I were a troubled, uncertain, and gloomy time in Russian history. Alexander had come to the throne as the result of a palace revolution against his father, Paul I, whose increasingly erratic and insensate rule led his entourage to suspect madness. The coup was carried out with at least the implicit consent of Alexander, whose accession to power, after his father's murder, at first aroused great hopes of liberal reform in the small, enlightened segment of Russian society. Alexander's tutor, selected by his grandmother Catherine the Great, had been a Swiss of advanced liberal views named La Harpe. This partisan of the Enlightenment imbued his royal pupil with republican and even democratic ideas; and during the first years of his reign, Alexander surrounded himself with a band of young aristocrats sharing his progressive persuasions. A good deal of work was done preparing plans for major social reforms, such as the abolition of serfdom and the granting of personal civil rights to all members of the population. Alexander's attention, however, was soon diverted from internal affairs by the great drama then proceeding on the European stage—the rise of Napoleon as a world-conqueror. Allied at first with Napoleon, and then becoming his implacable foe, Alexander I led his people in the great national upsurge that resulted in the defeat of the Grand Army and its hitherto invincible leader.

The triumph over Napoleon brought Russian armies to the shores of the Atlantic and exposed both officers and men (the majority of the troops were peasant serfs) to prolonged contact with the relative freedom and amenities of life in Western Europe. It was expected that, in reward for the loyalty of his people, Alexander would make some spectacular gesture consonant with his earlier intentions and institute the social reforms that had been put aside to meet the menace of Napoleon. But the passage of time, and the epochal events he had lived through, had not left Alexander unchanged. More and more he had come under the influence of the religious mysticism and irrationalism so prevalent in the immediate post-Napoleonic era. Instead of reforms, the period between 1820 and 1825 saw an intensification of reaction and the repression of any overt manifestation of liberal ideas and tendencies in Russia.

Meanwhile, secret societies—some moderate in their aims, others more radical—had begun to form among the most brilliant and cultivated cadres of the

Russian officers' corps. These societies, grouping the scions of some of the most important aristocratic families, sprang from impatience with Alexander's dilatoriness and a desire to transform Russia on the model of Western liberal and democratic ideas. Alexander died unexpectedly in November 1825, and the societies seized the opportunity a month later, at the time of the coronation of Nicholas I, to launch a pitifully abortive eight-hour uprising known to history as the Decembrist insurrection. An apocryphal story about this event has it that the mutinous troops, told to shout for "Constantine and *konstitutsiya*" (Constantine, the older brother of Nicholas, had renounced the throne and had a reputation as a liberal), believed that the second noun, whose gender in Russian is feminine, referred to Constantine's wife. Whether true or only a witticism, the story highlights the isolation of the aristocratic rebels; and their revolution was crushed with a few whiffs of grapeshot by the new tsar, who condemned five of the ring-leaders to be hanged and thirty-one to be exiled to Siberia for life. Nicholas thus provided the nascent Russian intelligentsia with its first candidates for the new martyrology that would soon replace the saints of the Orthodox Church.

Feodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born in Moscow on October 3, 1821, just a few years before this crucial event in Russian history, and these events were destined to be interwoven with his life in the most intimate fashion. The world in which Dostoevsky grew up lived in the shadow of the Decembrist insurrection and suffered from the harsh police-state atmosphere instituted by Nicholas I to ensure that nothing similar could occur again. The Decembrist insurrection marked the opening skirmish in the long and deadly duel between the Russian intelligentsia and the supreme aristocratic power that shaped the course of Russian history and culture in Dostoevsky's lifetime. And it was out of the inner moral and spiritual crises of this intelligentsia—out of its self-alienation and its desperate search for new values on which to found its life—that the child born in Moscow at the conclusion of the reign of Alexander I would one day produce his great novels.