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**SOME ASPECTS OF RUSSIAN FREEMASONRY DURING THE REIGN OF THE EMPEROR ALEXANDER I**  
by

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The history of Russian Freemasonry during the reign of the Emperor Alexander 1(1) is somewhat obscure. A great number of documents dispersed among public museums and private collections still await impartial investigation. How many of such treasures have perished since the 'Bolshevist revolution' it is impossible to say, but sufficient research has been made in Russia in late years to enable us to take a fairly comprehensive glance at some of the aspects of Russian Freemasonry in the first quarter of the 19th century.

The state of the Russian Masonic Lodges in those days commands our interest not only from a purely historical or local point of view; the enquiry presents some suggestive aspects of a more general nature - in fact, it seems to give a warning to Masons in other countries to avoid the pitfalls and dangerous routes which may turn Masonry from the Royal road of benevolence, self-knowledge and self-improvement, leading to brotherly love, relief and truth.  
12.

During the reign of Catherine 11(2) Russian Freemasonry attained an unexampled brilliance and exercised a high degree of beneficial influence, not only on its own members but also on the general populace of the country. Masonic leaders of Catherine's time were men prominent in every respect, energetic, sincere, talented and united in one great desire of perfecting themselves and spreading around them the light of high morals, knowledge, and charity. The work accomplished by them in the field of Russian literature was considerable, and its traces are felt even in the present day.

As far as can be ascertained, there were 24 lodges in Moscow and Petersburg, working in Russian; Swedish, German and French. Included were a Lodge of the Order of the Rosy Cross, a Scottish Lodge of Sphinx, Lodge of Palestine, Polar Star, and St. John of Jerusalem. Knights Templar names of Craft lodges might seem queer to us, with such names as St. George the Conqueror, Darkness Dispersed, United Slaves, Key of Virtue, Alexander of Triple Salvation, The Three Crowned Swords, The Golden Ring, and Alexander the Bee.

They had a semblance of a Grand Lodge included, with a Grand Master, Acting Deputy Grand Master, Grand Senior Warden, Grand Junior Warden, Grand Secretary, Grand Orator, Grand Treasurer, Grand Director of Ceremonies, and Grand Almoner.

In 1801, a general prohibition of all secret societies was decreed by the government, but in 1803 before it could become completely effective, the Emperor, radically changed his attitude towards Masonry and himself became an initiate. As a result, dormant lodges were revived and many new ones were established.

Needless to say, many in positions of high authority rushed to become a member. But unfortunately politics, self-interest and corruption crept in. Disorder and scandals caused in other countries by the existence of different secret societies, of which some under the name of Masonic Lodges and had at first their object of charity, but later applied themselves to political aims and destruction of the tranquillity of the state, made it imperative in several

countries to prohibit secret societies.

The emperor decreed all secret societies under any denomination, Masonic or otherwise, shall be closed and in the future not be allowed to be established. That sounded the death knell to the body of Freemasonry in Russia, but the spirit lingered. The Grand Master made a heroic attempt in pleading to the emperor for an annulment of the decree but to no avail.

Possibly the church, which was such a dominant force and had no influence on or in Masonry, could have had something to do with the decision.

The open existence of Freemasonry was finished by Emperor Alexander I and was confirmed by his successor, Nicholas I, on August 10, 1822. Total membership at the time was 1,404.

The Grand Master, with a warning to beware, attributed the downfall to three great dangers:

-the introduction into Freemasonry of political aims or objects, no matter how laudable and well-intentioned they might be;

- the admittance into the Craft of persons unworthy to appreciate true Masonic aims and ideals, no matter how slow may otherwise be the increase in membership;

-any attempt to combine various systems, all Masonic in name, but widely divergent in aims and ideals, for this brings not unity, but discord.

Imperceptibly the spirit of brotherly love, that primal Masonic virtue, departs. An empty shell remains. A blast of wind and it is gone.. Such is the picture of Russian Freemasonry during the reign of Emperor Alexander I.

13.

It is interesting to note that in Paris on January 14, 1992, fourteen Russian Masonic brethren met to form the old Harmony Lodge No.1. It's next meeting is to be held in a Moscow hotel. One of the founders is a grandson of Rimski Korsakov.

(1) Born 23 December, 1777; died 1 December, 1825.

(2) Born 2 May, 1729; died Nov. 6, 1796. Her husband, Peter Ill, a well-wisher of Freemasonry, was enthroned in 1762.

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RUSSIAN INITIATION INTO A MASONIC LODGE IN 1815

On the 14th June, 1815, after dinner at 6 o'clock Divov, a courtier, drove me to a Lodge of Freemasons. I was shown into a chamber where I had to wait over one hour, until the conclusion of the ceremony of initiation of another profane, Prince G.M. Odoyevsky. Then a man entered, attired in ordinary evening dress. He bandaged my eyes and conducted me through a number of rooms; suddenly he stopped. I heard a great noise of bolts, creaking of gates, and we stepped over the threshold of a door. The conductor put me on a chair and said: "When I have left, take off the bandages, and give yourself up to the study of the book which lies open before you." The creak of a door and the noise of bolts informed me that he had left. I took off the bandage. Black walls of a gloomy cavern surrounded me; by the dim light of a lamp which hung over my head, my eyes met a skull and near it an open Bible on a blue cushion of velvet, trimmed with gold. Above me, the shimmering light also showed a skull with two crossed bones and the inscription: Memento mori. I took the book of Faith and read silently..(2) At these words the door opened and a man holding a drawn sword appeared; round his neck was a broad blue ribbon from which a golden triangle was suspended; a

similar triangle, but much smaller, on a red ribbon trimmed with silver adorned the left side of his breast; he gravely asked me in French, "What is your intention in entering the Fraternity of Freemasons?" I replied, 'To discover the secret path to the knowledge of truth.'" "What is truth?" "An attribute of that original cause which gives movement to the whole of the Universe." "As far as our powers and possibilities go, an understanding of such paths will be given to you; but now you must know that obedience, patience and reserve, are the chief objects first demanded from you by the Society which you have the intention to join. Do you feel yourself capable of investing yourself with these primal virtues?"

"I shall use all my strength to obtain these purposes; but know that it is not curiosity concerning exterior ceremonies of the Society which attracts me; I want to have the assurance of that which my soul longs for but cannot attain; I want means to be confirmed in virtue and to perfect such as I may already possess; I want to know if my soul is immortal?" "Can one doubt this? Nothing disappears in the universe." "But if it is a part of the ever existing soul of this world, how can a human soul, polluted by vices, unite with its purest sources?" "Seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you," replied the unknown orator; "but begin by being obedient." And, having called a serving brother, he commanded me to take off some of the things I had on: my jacket, waistcoat and my left boot; to tie up strongly with a kerchief my leg above the knee; to bandage my eyes, and having pulled down my shirt from my left shoulder, to open my breast, to which he applied a drawn sword; then he conducted me out of the gloomy refuge.

So attired, for quite a long time he made me go round and round in their chambers; at last he stopped and said, "Knock with this ring three times," putting my hand on a ring. In a minute or so a voice was heard behind the doors: "Who is disturbing the peace of brotherly converse?" My conductor replied: "A profane; he desires to become a member of the sacred Fraternity." "Perhaps a vain curiosity attracts him here?" "What is his name, rank, place of birth? How old is he?"... After several questions of a similar nature and respective answers, the doors were opened, and I was admitted.

Still having a tight bandage over my eyes, I heard from far off a grave soft voice asking me:

"Do you, O profane, firmly desire to enter into the sacred Guild of Brotherhood?" I replied, "Yes." "Have you sufficient courage to pass through the trials now awaiting you?" "Yes." When all such questions were finished, the same voice called: "Brother Conductor of Ceremonies, begin the trials, accompany him on

14.

the path continuous and strenuous." After that, the brother Conductor of Ceremonies, having applied the sword to my breast and taking me by the hand, began the execution of the command just given. He started together with me a journey from the East to the West, and conducted me slowly with small steps, talking in a loud and clear voice of life and death; then he stopped, patted me on the shoulder, and exclaimed: "Worshipful, the profane has passed the first trial; his firmness gives hope for his success during the next trials." This speech was repeated by two other voices, and the commanding voice said: "Begin the second journey" ... When the second journey was finished, and the succeeding third journey, the brother Conductor of Ceremonies stopped me, patted me on the shoulder, and made a report; this was repeated by two voices, and then a voice soft and compassionate spoke: "Most beloved brethren: the profane has terminated in a praiseworthy manner his trials; he is worthy to enter our Society. Will you agree to enter into communion with him?" (or something to this effect). A

muffled sound of applause announced the general consent of brethren; I was then instructed to come nearer. I had to move straight before me, and my steps were directed so that I should place my feet in a certain peculiar way; I ascended an elevation, knelt down on a cushion, and my hand was placed on the Bible and a sword. Somebody (the Grand Master) placed his hand on mine and instructed me to swear that I shall conceal the secret; then I was directed back to my former position. Somebody standing nearby told me: "Put out your Tongue," and an iron instrument was applied to it. At the same time a voice was heard; "May the bandages fall from his eyes so that he may see the light illuminating." The bandage fell. A light flashed before my eyes; it suddenly disappeared, and I saw before me in an illuminated round hall about forty persons, surrounding me in a semicircle with swords pointed at me. Behind them on an elevated throne under a green canopy covered with stars, the Grand Master stood. At a sign from him, all brethren took their seats. They all wore hats and had leather aprons on; but some of the latter were of plain white, some trimmed with rose and blue ribbons, according to their respective degrees or ranks. To show further the rank attained, they were adorned with different jewels, hanging from blue or gold ribbons trimmed with silver, either from their necks or buttonholes. The Grand Master had his hat on and jewels similar to other brethren, but was distinguished from them by the triangle and a square suspended from a blue ribbon. Before him stood a table covered right down to the floor. On this table were placed: three candlesticks, each in a corner, a Bible, a sword, compasses, a square and a white gavel, all lying on cushions.

When all had occupied their respective seats, the Grand Master commanded to bring me to his throne. In the middle of the floor a representation of King Solomon's Temple was lying, which I had passed when blindfolded. Now I could see that my previous steps were so directed that I should walk over this representation gradually ascending the staircase leading to the sanctuary. Having ascended the steps, I was standing near the table or rather an altar, I knelt down. The Grand Master took the compasses, applied them to my naked breast and struck with his gavel three times. I saw that a cup moistened with blood was taken from under my breast. Each of these actions was accompanied by corresponding words. When this was ended, the Grand Master bade me be dressed; I was conducted into another room; when my proper dressing was restored, I re-entered the Lodge. After that, the Worshipful commanded me and another initiate (accepted together with me) to approach the throne and began the following discourse:-

"Dear brethren. Everything you have felt and seen, is but symbolic of the secret essence: the bandage over your eyes, the dark temple, the mental contemplation, the knocks, the journey from the East to the West, your passing over the representation of King Solomon's Temple, all these are nothing but noteworthy features of that which can generate in your soul an idea of nothingness of the world, raising a desire to search for truth; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you. We are confident that your word of honor as to the concealment of our secrets would be sufficient, but also knowing the weakness of the human heart, to be safe, we receive your oath on the Sacred Book of law, in this manner inflaming all our hearts with ardour and binding us with you; the reason for asking this oath is that otherwise profanes who do not understand the aim of this brotherhood might mock it or use it for evil. Liberty and equality are supreme among us; under the name of Freemasons we together endeavor to reconstruct the building established on the Corner Stone, depicted in this Holy Book(3) Therefore, dear brother, you are invested as a Mason with an apron, and receive this gavel.<sup>4</sup> Also accept this small token, a sign of our brotherly union, and wear it on your breast every time when visiting our Society.<sup>5</sup> Receive

15.

these gloves in token of purity of your actions, receive these ladies' gloves for the companion of your life; the better sex does not belong to our Society but we do not break the Constitutions of the Creator and of Nature. A good wife is a comfort in the dreadful trials of this world; but let your chosen one be of pure and innocent actions.<sup>6</sup> Now receive this sword which should serve to cut off our passions, and know that the Society of United Brethren, in which you enter, is nothing by itself if you yourself do not direct your will towards the quest of truth; it serves as an entrance to the path which the awakened conscience of a fallen soul thirsts to discover.

After this speech, the Grand Master bade the Director of Ceremonies to entrust us with the signs of Freemasons, and to give us a preliminary instruction in hieroglyphics.

As there are brethren of different degrees and we have received only the first one (that of the Apprentice), the particular sign of apprentices was shown to us which is.. .<sup>7</sup>

The author concludes:-After we had learnt all these signs, our aprons were put on, gavels were hung to one of the buttons and triangles in our respective buttonholes, naked swords were put into our hands; we were bidden to cover ourselves, and shown our seats.

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The term for remaining an Entered Apprentice was five months; a Fellow Craft , seven months; and a Master Mason (without further advancement), one year and three months.

1. The original says "Adam's head."
2. A few words are omitted in the original
3. "Saying this, the Worshipful Master points at the Bible."
4. "He gives to each of the initiates a leather apron and a small silver gavel."
5. He gives to each of the initiates an opened gold triangle on a scarlet ribbon lined with silver; on the sides of the triangle are the words, Les amis reunis (The United Friends, name of the Lodge, and in the middle, two United hands."
6. "Both pairs of gloves handed to the initiates are of cambric."
7. Words are omitted in the original

Reference: Transactions of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge.

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