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# The Mystery of Pushkin's Death

by Vadim V. Kozhinov

Much, even too much, has been written about the fateful duel of Jan. 27, 1837 and its prehistory. I say “too much,” because a surfeit of information can sometimes hinder an understanding of the essence of a matter, no less than the lack of information does. Some may say that I myself, by taking up this theme, am adding to the potentially harmful surfeit. But, first of all, the place for calling a halt has already been passed. Moreover, writings on Pushkin's duel during the past twenty or thirty years have been dominated by a tendency that, as I shall try to show, leads away from the truth.

In 1916, the prominent historian and writer P.Ye. Shchegolev published his voluminous (around 400 pages) book, *The Duel and Death of A.S. Pushkin*, which more or less summarized the results of the preceding eighty years of investigation. Later, however, in 1928, a second edition

of this book came out that was larger by half, in the introduction to which P.Ye. Shchegolev stated that “new material, previously inaccessible but uncovered by the revolution in 1917, . . . has prompted me to reevaluate the history of the duel.”

This revision was expressed, in one way or another, in the writings of other prominent Pushkin specialists of that time—M.A. Tsyavlovsky, B.L. Modzalevsky, B.V. Kazansky, and D.D. Blagoy, who much later, incidentally, in 1977, harshly criticized the *first* edition of P.Ye. Shchegolev's book: “Under the pen of this researcher, a national tragedy was transformed into a rather banal family drama: a husband, a beautiful young wife, and a homewrecker—a fashionable, handsome officer of the cavalry.”

There was reason for D.D. Blagoy's harsh tone. In the 1960's and 1970's, some Pushkin specialists “returned,” to

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*The 1815 Congress of Vienna. Tsar Alexander I left Russian diplomacy to a gaggle of foreign-born officials of the Russian Foreign Ministry, including Count Giovanni Capodistria and Count Karl Nesselrode, whose efforts on behalf of the British-Venetian oligarchy yielded for Russia the role of “gendarme of Europe” in the anti-republican reaction known as the Holy Alliance. (Watercolor by Jean Baptiste Isabey.)*

some extent, to the old and seemingly totally superseded understanding of the events of Nov. 4, 1836-Jan. 27, 1837. D.D. Blagoy believed (not without grounds) that A.A. Akhmatova\* had initiated this “return,” because she experienced a sort of “jealousy” of Pushkin’s wife. It was a jealousy that could be understood, and even accepted, as the state of *the soul of Akhmatova as a poet*, but it was hardly appropriate in *research* on the history of Pushkin’s duel. Yet, Anna Andreyevna† worked for a long time precisely on her essay, “The Death of a Poet,” an ostensibly painstaking piece of research. D.D. Blagoy wrote about that essay, at the time: “Anna Akhmatova went to extremes in her condemnation and accusations against Pushkin’s wife . . . .” If the main “guilty party” in the death of the poet were his wife, the entire story of the duel would inevitably become purely an everyday family drama.

Akhmatova was followed by all the Pushkin specialists who worshipped her, above all S.L. Abramovich. The writings of the latter, which were published in huge editions (between 1984 and 1994, nearly half a million copies in all were printed of her four books about the last year of the poet’s life), effectively covered up what had been written about the death of the poet as a result of the above-mentioned “revision.”

Many essential facts, which had been established with a high degree of certainty in P.Ye. Shchegolev’s 1928 book, were either reinterpreted, or simply ignored in the writings of Pushkin specialists of the “Akhmatova” tendency. The cited confession of D.D. Blagoy did not change the situation. The result is that now, as at the beginning of the century, there is a widespread notion that the history of the duel may be reduced to the clash of Pushkin with the dandy d’Anthès. This not only distorts the heart of the matter, but essentially belittles the poet.

The actual clash with the “youth,” as Pushkin called him, who spoke “vacuous things,” which the Dutch Ambassador Heeckeren had “dictated” to him, took place only *at the very beginning*—Nov. 4, 1836. That was the day Pushkin and several of his close associates received the joke “diploma,” which reported the unfaith-

fulness of his wife. Since d’Anthès had been pursuing Natalya Nikolayevna blatantly enough for several preceding months, the poet, in the heat of the moment (as was his habit of acting), sent him a challenge. The next morning, however, at the request of d’Anthès’ “adoptive father” Heeckeren, who came to see Pushkin, the duel was postponed first for twenty-four hours, and then, a day later, for two weeks. On November 17, Pushkin retracted the challenge, stating verbally and in writing that d’Anthès was a “noble” and “honest” person; later, in a December letter to his father, he even called d’Anthès “a fine fellow.”

All of this has been quite precisely known for a long time, but because popular articles have reduced the story of the duel to the notorious love triangle, many people believe that the postponements were, so to speak, accidental; that Pushkin was thirsting to “punish” d’Anthès and therefore, later, on Jan. 25, 1837, sent him a new challenge, with fatal consequences—although, in reality, he sent that extremely offensive letter not to d’Anthès, but to Heeckeren.

On November 4 and the immediately subsequent days, Pushkin was most open with his then young (twenty-three years old) friend, the future outstanding writer Count V.A. Sollogub, who on November 4 brought to Pushkin the envelope he had received (but not unsealed) with a copy of the “diploma.” There are a number of very important reports in the memoirs of Vladimir Aleksandrovich, to which we shall return. At this point, it may be noted that the young man immediately offered Pushkin to be his second, but Pushkin, thanking him warmly, decisively refused: “There will not be any duel . . . .”<sup>1</sup>

The point here, obviously, is that only after sending off his challenge, did Pushkin read the “diploma” carefully and determine its real meaning. It stated that Alexander Pushkin had been “elected” deputy to the Grand Master of the Order of Cuckolds D.L. Naryshkin, and “historiographer of the order.” The “diploma” was signed by the

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\* Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) was a Russian poet, famous for the clarity of her beautiful verses, and for her patriotism, as she refused to leave Russia during the Soviet period, despite the execution of her husband and the imprisonment of her son. A translation of her poem “Creativity” appears on page 61 of this issue.

† In Russian, a person may be called by his first name and patronymic, the middle name derived from the father’s given name. Thus, Anna A. Akhmatova is called “Anna Andreyevna”—Anna, daughter of Andrei. Tsar Nicholas I is also “Nikolai Pavlovich”—Nicholas, son of Paul.

“permanent secretary” (of the “Order”) Count I. Borkh.

All of these details were, to use the currently fashionable term, highly *semiotical*. First of all, everybody in high society of the day knew that in 1804, the beautiful young wife of D.L. Naryshkin (younger than her husband by as many years as Pushkin’s wife was younger than him) had become the mistress of Emperor Alexander I, and that Naryshkin was compensated for his wife’s “services” by being given the court rank of *Oberjägermeister*.<sup>2</sup> And here was Pushkin, “elected” as the “deputy” of Naryshkin—“elected,” during the reign of Alexander I’s younger brother, Nicholas I!

Moreover, the beautiful wife of “Permanent Secretary of the Order of Cuckolds” Count I.M. Borkh, Lyubov Vikentyevna, was famous for her extremely “light” (even, bluntly speaking, indecent) behavior, about which Pushkin himself spoke. But the main point was that she was of the same age as the poet’s wife, and was her relative. Her grandfather, I.A. Goncharov, was the younger brother of N.A. Goncharov, Natalya Nikolayevna’s great-grandfather. That is, the name of Count Borkh had been added to the “diploma” because his profligate spouse and Natalya Nikolayevna were kin.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, it was highly significant that the poet was “elected” as “historiographer of the Order.” Half a year after Pushkin’s marriage, Nicholas I had appointed him “historiographer,” about which Alexander Sergeyeovich wrote to his bosom friend P.V. Nashchokin, on Sept. 3, 1831, “The Tsar . . . has taken me into service—i.e., has given me a salary . . . to compile a history of Peter I. God grant the Tsar health!”<sup>4</sup>

At this point, a short digression on the theme of “the poet and the Tsar” is in order. For a long time, beginning long before the revolution, Nicholas I was portrayed as a furious hater of the poet, who had no other thought than to humiliate and crush him. This is a gross falsification, although it was inevitable that there were certain contradictions and even incompatibility between the Tsar and the poet. Revealing, in this regard, is the death-bed phrase, which many people believe Zhukovsky composed in Pushkin’s name: “Tell the Sovereign, that I am sorry to die; I would have been all his”—which means, that in



A.S. Pushkin

life, *he was not*. Even if Zhukovsky did compose that phrase, it expresses something nonetheless: Vasili Andreyevich could not fail to acknowledge that the poet belonged to a different spirit and will.<sup>5</sup>

With all due qualifications, the attitude of Nicholas I toward the poet in the last years of his life was, on the whole, favorable, as may readily be demonstrated with numerous facts and eyewitness accounts. Pushkin himself, in his letter to Nashchokin on July 21, 1831, said, “The Tsar is very gracious and amiable with me. The first thing you know, I shall turn into a Tsar’s favorite.” In February 1835, noting in his diary that Minister of Education

Uvarov was “howling” about his *History of the Pugachov Revolt* as a “scandalous piece of writing,” Pushkin summed up: “*Tsar lyubit, da psar ne lyubit*” [“The Tsar likes it, but his huntsman doesn’t”]. (The *History* was published with funds provided by the Tsar.)

In discussing all this, by no means do I intend to idealize the Tsar’s relationship to the poet. As is well known, after their first conversation on Sept. 8, 1826, Nicholas I told State Secretary D.N. Bludov (as the latter did not conceal), that he had spoken with “the most intelligent man in Russia.” But it must be borne in mind that “a most intelligent person” was potentially “dangerous” for the authorities, and Nicholas I, it is clear from a number of his remarks, knew it. Nonetheless, in 1831, the poet received the status of historiographer (albeit somewhat lesser than Karamzin had enjoyed), and the Tsar contributed to and financed his work both on *The History of Pugachov* (being the one to propose, incidentally, the substitution of “the Pugachov revolt” for “Pugachov” in the title), and the monumental, regrettably far from finished *History of Peter*.

Thus Pushkin, reading the “diploma” carefully, saw that it contained, in the accurate words of V.V. Kunin, compiler of the 1988 book *The Last Year of Pushkin’s Life*, “the vile suggestion that his rank of *Kammerjunker*, his loans from the Tsar, and even the title of ‘historiographer’ were all purchased by Pushkin for the same price that Naryshkin had paid for his prosperity. It was impossible to have struck the poet with any greater insult. . . .” (p. 309)

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The “vile suggestion” fell on prepared soil. Natalya Nikolayevna was the foremost beauty of the court, and the Emperor’s attentions to her were scarcely covert (although there is no basis to speak of anything more than a court flirtation). Upon departing Petersburg without his wife, Pushkin often expressed his disquiet, albeit in a joking way. Thus, in his letter to her from Boldino on Oct. 11, 1833, he instructs her, “. . . don’t coquette with Ts.” (that is, the Tsar). On May 6, 1836, just half a year before the appearance of the “diploma,” he writes to her from Moscow: “. . . about you, my darling, some talk is going about. . . . it seems that you have driven a certain person [beyond any doubt, this meant the Emperor–VVK] to such despair with your coquetry and cruelty, that he has acquired himself in solace a harem of theatrical trainees. That is not good, my angel.”

Of course, this may be read as humor, rather than real suspicions, but still . . . P.V. Nashchokin recalls that already then, in May 1836, Pushkin told him that “the Tsar was pursuing his wife like a young officer.” Six months later, on Nov. 4, came the notorious “diploma.”

The poet’s state of mind after reading the “diploma” was clearly expressed in the letter he sent on November 6 to Minister of Finances Count Ye.F. Kankrin: “. . . I stand indebted to the Treasury . . . for 45,000 rubles . . . .” Expressing his desire “to repay my debt *in full and immediately*,” Pushkin states: “I have 200 souls in Nizhny Novgorod Province. . . . As payment of the aforesaid 45,000, I make bold to give over this estate” [my emphasis–VVK].

The partisans of the “Akhmatova” version attempt to explain this act by the poet by “the need to put his affairs in order” (S.L. Abramovich’s phrase) on the eve of the duel with d’Anthès. As has already been mentioned, however, Pushkin then agreed to a two-week postponement, and even affirmed that “there will not be any duel.” Moreover, his proposal to Kankrin was essentially a gesture of despair, not “putting in order” his affairs, since Pushkin had effectively transferred the Kistenevo estate, to which he referred in his letter, to his brother

and sister in 1835 (as P.Ye. Shchegolev already showed). Finally, and most importantly, the letter contained an extremely insolent phrase about Emperor Nicholas I, who, Pushkin wrote, “might even order that my debt be forgiven me,” but “in such a case I would be compelled to refuse the Tsar’s favor, and that might seem an impropriety . . .,” etc.

There is no ambiguity in these words. It is clear, that they meant a rejection of any “favours” from the Tsar, insofar as there existed suspicions about his relations with Natalya Nikolayevna.

As already noted, in the immediate period after the appearance of the “diploma,” Pushkin was the most open with V.A. Sollogub, who later explained the poet’s state of mind by citing the suspicion “of whether she [Natalya Nikolayevna–VVK] had not had relations with the Tsar . . . .”<sup>6</sup>

It was mentioned above that the partisans of the “Akhmatova” version not only artificially reinterpret the meaning of various facts and texts, but maintain silence about documents that are “inconvenient” for their version. Thus, in S.L. Abramovich’s chronicle, *Pushkin, The Last Year*, “there was no room” in approximately 600 pages of the book, for even a reference to the letter to Kankrin, the paramount significance of which is indisputable. The unprecedented boldness of this letter to a minister (!), with the threat “to refuse the Tsar’s favor,” reveals precisely what was the *main* problem for the poet. The question of d’Anthès and even of Heeckeren was relevant *only* in connection with this main problem.

It will most likely be objected, that what Pushkin wrote and said at the time shows that he was concerned not by the behavior of Nicholas I, but by the intrigues of Heeckeren (and, in part, d’Anthès). It was absolutely impossible, however, to *write* or *speak* at all publicly about the Emperor as a seducer of other men’s wives.

There are two texts that diverge in a highly significant way. We have testimony from V.A. Sollogub’s *personal* conversation with the prominent man of letters A.V. Nikitenko in 1846: “. . . in connection with the duel, Pushkin’s wife was the target of



Natalya Nikolayevna Pushkina

accusations that she had relations with d'Anthès. But Sollogub says this is nonsense. . . . Another reason is suspected . . . whether or not she had relations with the Tsar. This would explain, why Pushkin sought death and hurled himself against all comers. There was nothing left for the poet's soul, except death. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

But when we turn to the reminiscences, *written* by Sollogub somewhat later (but, not later than 1854) at the request of the poet's biographer, P.V. Annenkov, which presented essentially the same idea of what had happened, we find this: "God alone knows, what he [Pushkin-VVK] was suffering at that time. . . . In the *person* of d'Anthès [my emphasis-VVK], he sought death. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

Whether or not the poet really "sought death" may be disputed, but the important thing here is something else: Sollogub, setting down in writing what he had communicated verbally before, decided not to mention the Tsar; he only let it be understood, that d'Anthès was *not* the problem.

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Let us now look more closely at the course of events. On the morning of November 4, 1836, Pushkin receives the "cuckold's diploma" and, without reading it thoroughly—owing to his consternation—sends a challenge to d'Anthès, who had been hovering around Natalya Nikolayevna for a long time. The next morning, a frightened Heeckeren comes to see him, and the duel is postponed, first for twenty-four hours, and then, after a second visit on November 6 (the very day of his sending that highly significant letter to Kankrin), for two weeks. At that time, the poet also assures Sollogub that "there will not be any duel."

From November 5 on, Pushkin was working not on preparations for a duel, but on his investigation to determine who had written the "diploma." In particular, he asked his Lycée classmate M.L. Yakovlev for an expert analysis of the "diploma," Yakovlev being a specialist, as the director of the Imperial Typography since 1833. Soon afterwards, no later than mid-November, Pushkin became convinced that Heeckeren had pro-



Georges d'Anthès, "adopted son" of the Dutch Ambassador Baron Louis van Heeckeren

duced the "diploma," although he also believed, and told Sollogub, that the initiator was Countess M.D. Nesselrode, the wife of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. True, Sollogub did not mention her name in his memoirs, which were written no later than 1854, when Nesselrode was still the all-powerful *Chancellor*, but confined himself to the observation that Pushkin "suspected a certain lady, whom he named to me, of having composed . . . the diploma." Many researchers have concluded that this meant Countess Nesselrode, beyond any doubt.

Pushkin believed that Heeckeren was implicated in the "diploma," for the very reason of his close relations with the Nesselrode couple. In 1829, already, D.F. Fikelmon wrote about Heeckeren in her diary: ". . . a tricky person, duplicitous, unsympathetic; here [in Petersburg-VVK] he is considered to be Nesselrode's spy." Evidently, Pushkin also thought so.

It would have been senseless to accuse the Minister's spouse, but since Pushkin was convinced that Heeckeren had actually "produced" (his word was "fabriquée") the "diploma," on November 16 he challenged Heeckeren's "adopted son" (as the memoirs of K.K. Danzas make clear, "Heeckeren could not take part in a duel, because of his official position"), who had to have been party to the "production." This was essentially a *second* challenge, which had a *different* purpose: On November 4, Pushkin had challenged the "suitor" of his wife, but on November 16, he was addressing a party to the production of the "diploma."

In early November, as already noted, Pushkin refused Sollogub's offer to be his second, because "there will not be any duel." When, on November 16, he told Sollogub: "Go and see d'Archiac [d'Anthès' second-VVK]. Arrange with him only the material side of the duel. The bloodier, the better. Do not agree to any negotiations."—Sollogub was thunderstruck, by his own account.

Pushkin's new challenge was indeed in striking contrast to his behavior on November 5-6, when he had readily agreed to a postponement of the duel after

Heeckeren’s “explanations.”<sup>9</sup> According to the well-informed P.A. Vyazemsky, “Pushkin, touched by the distress and tears of the father [i.e., Heeckeren, the “adoptive father” of d’Anthès–VVK], said, “. . . not just a week; I’ll give you two weeks’ postponement, and I pledge on my word of honor not to move the affair forward before the appointed day and, upon meeting your son, to act as if nothing had transpired between us.” On November 16, however, Pushkin categorically stated: “Do not agree to any negotiations.”

Still, the duel did not take place, since, as is well known, d’Anthès announced on November 17 that he was seeking the hand of Natalya Nikolayevna’s sister Yekaterina in marriage. Pushkin took this as total capitulation by d’Anthès, and agreed to withdraw his challenge. He had no intention, however, of dropping the fight against those he believed to have produced the “diploma” (in d’Anthès, he saw only a puppet in Heeckeren’s hands). On November 21, Pushkin told Sollogub: “. . . I do not want to do anything without your knowledge. . . . I shall read you my letter to old man Heeckeren.<sup>10</sup> I’m through with the son. Now give me the old man.”

This letter said, in particular, that Heeckeren had composed the “diploma.” The very same day, Pushkin wrote another letter—to Minister of Foreign Affairs Count Nesselrode. Strangely enough, this letter (it begins with the salutation “Count,” with no name) is considered to have been addressed to Count Benkendorf, despite its acknowledged fundamental difference in tone and style from Pushkin’s fifty-eight known letters to Benkendorf.<sup>11</sup>

P.Ye. Shchegolev, with good grounds, initially identified it as a letter to Nesselrode, but he later learned that one day later, on November 23, Benkendorf and Pushkin called on the Emperor, and he began to have doubts about the addressee. The question naturally arose, of whether the chief of the Third Section, having received this letter, had not arranged for the poet to meet with Nicholas Pavlovich.

It subsequently was established, in any event, that Pushkin did not even send

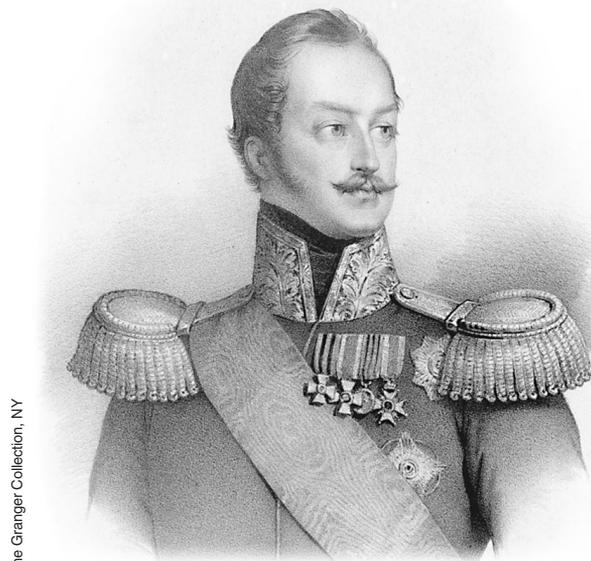
this letter to its addressee. Nonetheless, in defiance of all logic, it continues to be published as a letter to Benkendorf. The fact of the matter is, however, that a letter accusing a citizen of a foreign country, never mind an ambassador, of composing the “diploma,” would have been addressed precisely to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. An even more important feature is that Pushkin’s letter expressed overtly hostile scorn for the addressee (for example: “I neither can nor will provide anyone whatever with the proofs for what I assert . . .”), such as is never found in any of Pushkin’s letters to Benkendorf, and could not be in this instance, because the chief of the Third Section, unlike Nesselrode, had nothing to do with the “diploma.”

The Nesselrode-Heeckeren connection will be further discussed below. On November 21, Pushkin read to Sollogub his extremely offensive letter to Heeckeren. Sollogub immediately sought out V.A. Zhukovsky, who straight away went to Pushkin and convinced him not to send the letter. The next day, Zhukovsky asked Nicholas I to receive Pushkin, and the poet’s conversation with the Tsar took place on November 23.

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Unfortunately, the content of this conversation of theirs, as well as the next one, which took place three days before the duel, can only be guessed. It appears to be accurate to suppose, that on November 23 Pushkin promised the Emperor not to allow matters to reach the point of a duel, since otherwise there would be no reason for the phrase in

the note Nicholas sent to the dying poet around midnight on January 27: “. . . accept my forgiveness.” More important, is *why* this promise was given, and why for exactly two months, until January 23, the facts show that Pushkin had no intention of breaking it. True, he categorically refused to have any contact with Heeckeren and d’Anthès, who on Jan. 10, 1837 married Natalya Nikolayevna’s sister and thereby became a relative. This refusal, while expressing hostility, also served as protection against clashes (the adversaries were constantly in each other’s company at balls and receptions).



*Tsar Nicholas I*

The Granger Collection, NY

The partisans of the “family” version of the duel maintain that d’Anthès and Heeckeren, supposedly having learned of Pushkin’s promise to the Tsar not to resort to a duel (and this is, it must be said, a lightweight supposition), acted ever more blatantly because they thought they could do so with impunity, thus driving the poet into a state of extreme agitation, in which he sent his insulting letter to Heeckeren.

It is known, that a sharp change in the poet’s mind took place between January 22 and 25. On January 16, Pushkin’s dear friend Ye.N. Brevskaya, his neighbor at Mikhailovskoye, whom he had known since she was a little girl, arrived in Petersburg. They met on January 18 and January 22 and had calm conversations, but on January 25, Pushkin stunned her by telling her of the impending duel.

Thus, the shift took place on January 23-24. Brevskaya’s reminiscences also provide the key to understanding the causes of the shift. Pushkin told her, that the Emperor “knows all *my* business.” From Nicholas I himself, we hear that he talked with Pushkin three days before the duel—that is, the 23rd or 24th—and that Pushkin made the striking admission, that he suspected him of “paying suit” to Natalya Nikolayevna (from which it follows, that Pushkin to some extent *believed* the “diploma” that he had received).

There is no doubt, that this last conversation took place at the ball at Count I.I. Vorontsov-Dashkov’s, which took place from 10:00 p.m. on January 23 until 3:00 a.m. on the 24th. The earlier occasion on which Pushkin could have met with the Emperor was January 19, at the opera in Bolshoy Kamenny Theater, but Nicholas I mentioned “three days,” not a period of more than a week, and it is known that he had an excellent memory.

This conversation between the poet and the Tsar is, it appears, the main mystery. It may be surmised that, in the course of their conversation, he was convinced of the absolute falsehood of his suspicions and, consequently, of the slanderous nature of the “diploma,” which, he believed, Heeckeren had put together; and that, as a result, Pushkin wrote and sent to Heeckeren the well-known letter of January 25. It has long been noted, that the poet’s state of mind at that time was expressed in the letter he wrote the next day, January 27, to Gen. K.F. Tol, in which he cited the case of a slandered military officer, generalizing with great meaning: “No matter how strong the prejudice of ignorance may be, no matter how avidly slander may be accepted, one word . . . destroys them forever. . . . *The truth is mightier than the Tsar. . . .*”

It is highly probable that this phrase is connected

with the conversation with Nicholas on the night of January 23-24. But that, of course, is only a surmise. What is indisputable, is that it was precisely the conversation with the Emperor (whatever its nature may have been) that *determined* the shift in the poet’s mind and conduct.

I expect the objection, that a whole array of witnesses attributed this shift to the unrestrained pranks of d’Anthès—in particular, during that same ball at Vorontsov-Dashkov’s. This argument is bolstered, by Pushkin’s saying in his letter to Heeckeren: “I cannot permit your son . . . to dare to speak a word to my wife, nor still less to recite guardhouse puns to her. . . .” (This referred to a crude witticism of d’Anthès at that ball.)

It has to be taken into account, however, that, first of all, nobody at the time knew about Pushkin’s conversation with the Tsar, and, secondly, that the poet could not, of course, mention it in his letter to Heeckeren. Strangely enough, no concentrated attention has ever been given to one very significant opinion of P.A. Vyazemsky, who investigated the reasons for Pushkin’s death more than anybody else. In February-April 1837, he wrote dozens of lengthy letters about it to various people, in which he essentially reduced everything to a family drama. It appears, however, that he continued the investigation, and ten years after the duel, in 1847, he published an article in which he said the following:

“The time has not yet come for a detailed investigation and clear exposition of the mystery, surrounding Pushkin’s unfortunate demise. But in any event, *knowing the course of events* [my emphasis—VVK], we can state positively that malignant joy and malicious gossip will have little to gain from a dispassionate investigation and exposure of the essential circumstances of this sad event.”<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to explain this impossibility of “exposing” the circumstances, other than by the implication of the Tsar himself in the matter. The long-lived Vyazemsky, however, returned once again to this article of his, nearly *thirty* years later, when he substantially edited it for the publication of his collected works, which began in 1878. He left the just-cited phrase unchanged. Thus, even more than forty years after the duel, it was impermissible to “expose the essential circumstances”; they were clearly a matter of interests of State, not private interests.

As has been said, Pushkin was convinced that Heeckeren had produced the “diploma” (although he saw that someone behind him had commissioned it). There is no hard proof of this. The supposition of a number of authors, that Heeckeren had intended for the “diploma,” by making a target of the Emperor, to

divert Pushkin from d'Anthès, will scarcely hold up, since such a shifting of the blame to Nicholas I was too risky for d'Anthès, who was paying suit to Natalya Nikolayevna.

We shall return to the question of how the “diploma” was prepared. Ultimately, what is important for an understanding of the course of events, is the fact that Pushkin was *certain* of Heeckeren’s guilt, but that his overriding *main* concern was—as is evident from Nicholas I’s report of the main point of their last conversation: “I suspected you of paying suit to my wife”—the question of the accuracy of the information contained in the “diploma.” Having made sure, so I think, in the course of his conversation with Nicholas I, that it was absolutely false,<sup>13</sup> the poet could not restrain himself from sending the letter to Heeckeren (as he had been able to do in November 1836).

It is important (although hitherto insufficiently considered so) that, upon acquaintance after the poet’s death with his letter to Heeckeren and the text of the notorious “diploma,” the Tsar reacted to them essentially as Pushkin had. Heeckeren immediately became “a vile rascal” in his eyes, whom he ordered to be expelled from Russia in a humiliating fashion; Nicholas was especially incensed, no doubt, by the intrigues against himself, more than by those against Pushkin (the “diploma” contained a fairly transparent hint about his imagined relations with Natalya Nikolayevna). Some researchers have speculated about how the Tsar came to know that Heeckeren had produced the “diploma,” but the natural presumption is the simple solution—that he believed what was stated in Pushkin’s letter, which became known to him.

It should be added that, in expelling the Ambassador (who had, incidentally, the rank of Minister Plenipotentiary), the Emperor made no allowances for the deliberate offensiveness of this act to The Netherlands. He did offer a written explanation to the Prince of Orange, who was married to his sister Anna, but the Russian Ambassador to The Netherlands nonetheless reported to Nesselrode: “I cannot but remark upon the heavy feelings, which this entire affair has evoked here, and I do not conceal from Your Excellency, that the circumstances, surrounding the departure of Baron Heeckeren from St. Petersburg, evidently caused some offense here.”

Finally, of considerable importance is the sharp shift in Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna’s attitude to the conflict between Pushkin and Heeckeren. It is known that her sympathies had lain with “the father and son.” On January 28, the day after the duel, she wrote in her diary:

“Pushkin behaved unforgivably; he wrote impudent letters to Heeckeren, leaving him no possibility to avoid a duel.” A week later, however, on February 4, Alexandra Fyodorovna notes: “I wish they would go away, the father and son.—I know now the *whole* of the anonymous letter, which was *foul*, and, at the same time, partially *true*” (that is, she had noticed her spouse’s interest in Natalya Nikolayevna). The Pushkin researchers of the “Akhmatova” tendency ignore this highly significant diary entry.

\* \* \*

**L**ike many other people, I doubt that Heeckeren was party to producing the “diploma”—if only because it would have been extremely risky for him to undertake such a forgery (being already implicated in d'Anthès’ lady-killing antics). It might seem to speak in favor of his involvement, that Nicholas I, who, of course, had great possibilities for obtaining information, believed in Heeckeren’s guilt. The court personage Prince A.M. Golitsyn, however, reports that Nicholas’ son, Alexander II, heard a different story: “The Sovereign Alexander Nikolayevich . . . said quite loudly, in a small group of people, ‘Well, now they know the author of the anonymous letters [i.e., the copies of the “diploma”—VVK], which were the cause of Pushkin’s death; it was Nesselrode’.”<sup>14</sup> The text does not make clear whether this meant the Count, or the Countess; P.Ye. Shchegolev believed it was the latter.

It is unlikely, also, that the “semiotical” names in the “diploma,” discussed above—D.L. Naryshkin and, especially, I.M. Borkh—were introduced into the text by Heeckeren. Although he was well informed about many things in the life of Petersburg high society, he would unlikely have known, for example, that Borkh’s profligate wife was Natalya Nikolayevna’s second cousin once removed.

Nesselrode and his wife, by contrast, knew Borkh personally. The latter had served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 1827. As for Naryshkin, the Nesselrodes knew him and his wife very well, as well as his wife’s daughter, Sofia, whose natural father was Alexander I: Yet another Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, A.P. Shuvalov, sought Sofia’s hand in marriage, and Nesselrode had intervened on behalf of his promotion to the rank of *Kammerherr*.<sup>15</sup>

It is well known, that the Nesselrodes really hated Pushkin, who had been assigned to Ministry of Foreign Affairs service in his early years, beginning June 1817. On July 8, 1824, it was under pressure from Nesselrode, that Alexander I dismissed the poet from the service and

exiled him to the village of Mikhailovskoye.

On Aug. 27, 1826, however, Nicholas I lifted the exile and ordered Pushkin's return to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is revealing that Nesselrode, at the risk of incurring the Tsar's displeasure, refused for more than three months to pay Pushkin his allotted annual salary of 5,000 rubles.

P.P. Vyazemsky, the poet's son, testifies to the existence of acute animosity between Pushkin and Countess Nesselrode. It should also be mentioned, that the Nesselrodes were very well disposed toward Heeckeren and, for special reasons, d'Anthès; the latter was a relative or, more precisely, an in-law of Count Nesselrode. His mother, Maria-Anna-Luisa (1784-1832), was the daughter of Count Gatsfeldt, whose sister married Count Franz Nesselrode (1752-1816), of the same family as Count Wilhelm Nesselrode (1724-1810), the Russian foreign minister's father. (These connections were traced by P.Ye. Shchegolev.) There was nothing unnatural, therefore, in the minister's wife serving as the sponsoring "mother" (the "father" was Heeckeren) at the wedding of d'Anthès with Yekaterina Goncharova on Jan. 10, 1837.

This picture would seem to establish some grounds for attributing the involvement of Countess M.D. Nesselrode and, ultimately, the Count himself, in composing the "diploma," to their *personal* hostility towards Pushkin. The essential point, however, seems to lie elsewhere.

The well-informed P.P. Vyazemsky wrote that Countess Nesselrode was "a powerful representative of the international areopagus, which held its sessions in the Paris suburb of St. Germain, at the salon of Princess Metternich in Vienna, and at Countess Nesselrode's salon in Petersburg." It is quite understandable, Pavel Petrovich wrote, "that this representative of the cosmopolite oligarchical areopagus hated Pushkin. . . . Pushkin missed no opportunity to lampoon his stubborn antagonist, who could scarcely speak Russian, with epigrams and anecdotes."

The clash between Pushkin and the Nesselrode couple was other than "personal" in nature, as D.D. Blagoy wrote convincingly in his above-mentioned research. It was the most profound sort of confrontation—political, ideological, and moral. It may be mentioned that,



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after Pushkin's death, Tyutchev (who wrote about that death as "regicide"), in a sense, took the baton from him in opposing Nesselrode.<sup>16</sup>

In the somewhat pretentious, but essentially true words of D.D. Blagoy, Nesselrode and his circle were "an anti-popular, anti-national elite of courtiers, . . . who had long harbored malice against the Russian national genius who opposed them."

This conflict grew more acute, D.D. Blagoy showed, as Nicholas I increasingly extended his patronage to Pushkin. From the standpoint of the "courtiers' elite," there was a growing "danger that the Tsar . . . might listen to the voice of the poet." The facts are eloquent enough: At the end of 1834, the *History of the Pugachov Revolt* appears in print, for the publication of which the Emperor gave 20,000 rubles and which he intended to take into account during elaboration of his policy on the peasant question; in the summer of 1835, Nicholas I lends 30,000 rubles to Pushkin, who is then working on the history of Peter I; in January 1836, he permits publication of Pushkin's journal, *Sovremennik*, the first three issues of which come out in April, July, and early October of 1836 (i.e., one month before the appearance of the "diploma"), and, despite being called a "literary" journal, its pages contain no small amount of "political" writing.

N.N. Skatov, one of our leading Pushkin scholars, recently published a comprehensive study of the multifaceted "rapprochement" of the poet with the Tsar during the 1830's.<sup>17</sup> In another article, Nikolai Nikolayevich rightly wrote that antagonism between Pushkin and the Nesselrode camp was *inevitable*: "If we look at the anti-Russian policy (and all the subsequent events demon-



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Congress of Vienna diplomats:  
Austria's Prince Klemens  
Metternich (left), Britain's  
Viscount Castlereagh (above).

strate that this is what it was) of the 'Austrian Minister of Russian Foreign Affairs' [the going ironical title of Nesselrode-VVK], then it is clear that it had to be aimed, sooner or later, against *the fulcrum of Russian national life*—Pushkin."<sup>18</sup>

Taking all of this into account, there is a basis for agreement with D.D. Blagoy's conclusion that the notorious "diploma," which he believed was conceived in the salon of Countess Nesselrode, was

designed to lure Pushkin “into direct collision with the Tsar, which could lead to the gravest consequences for him, in light of the poet’s well-known passionate, ‘African’ disposition,” and it did. M.A. Korf (Pushkin’s Lycée classmate), who observed Countess Nesselrode at close quarters for many years, remarked, “Her enmity was terrible and dangerous.”

A conflict with the Emperor, regardless of its ostensible pretext, in no way fits the framework of a “family drama” (unlike a conflict with d’Anthès).

Although there is scant supporting evidence for a decisive role of the Nesselrode salon in the appearance of the “diploma,” a number of well known, and quite diverse, researchers were convinced of that role; D.D. Blagoy was not the first. In 1928, P.Ye. Shchegolev remarked, that “the involvement of the wife of the Minister of Foreign Affairs was a bit too close.” In 1938, G.I. Chulkov, author of a book about Pushkin and one about the Russian emperors, wrote: “In M.D. Nesselrode’s salon . . . the idea of the Russian people’s right to an independent political role was excluded. . . . They hated Pushkin, because they discerned in him a national force, which was entirely alien to them in spirit. . . .” In 1956, I.L. Andronnikov asserted: “Countess Nesselrode’s hatred for Pushkin was boundless. . . . Contemporaries suspected her of having composed the anonymous ‘diploma’. . . . There is almost no doubt, that she inspired that base document.”

It may be objected, that these are statements by representatives of post-revolutionary, Soviet literary scholarship, which was typically politicized and ideologized. But, in 1925, one of the most profound Pushkin scholars, the poet Vladislav Khodasevich (who was no “Soviet”), published a short article in an emigré newspaper, titled “Countess Nesselrode and Pushkin.”<sup>19</sup> He wrote with great conviction that the Countess had commissioned the “diploma.”

\* \* \*

As stated above, Heeckeren’s participation in making the “diploma” seems quite dubious, despite his closeness



Count Karl Robert Nesselrode,  
Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs

to the Nesselrodes. More likely to be accurate is the version suggested by G.V. Chicherin, although his relevant letter to P.Ye. Shchegolev, which was published in 1976,<sup>20</sup> more than two decades ago, has not been duly noted by Pushkin scholars (evidently, because of the hegemony of the “family” interpretation of events).

It should be borne in mind that G.V. Chicherin, best known as the People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs from 1918 to 1930, belonged, first of all, to a family that produced several prominent diplomats, who were well informed about what was going on in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Nes-

selrode, and, secondly, that his grandfather<sup>21</sup> and other relatives knew Pushkin personally. G.V. Chicherin, one would think, was relying on his rich family traditions.<sup>22</sup> G.V. Chicherin’s letter of Oct. 18, 1926, takes it as a given, that Countess Nesselrode was the initiator of the “diploma,” but says that it was executed for her not by Heeckeren, but by F.I. Brunov (or Brunnov), an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This person, it may be noted, had served with Pushkin in Odessa in 1823-24, and had annoyed the poet with his subservience to superiors. In the 1830’s, Brunov became a “special assignments officer” for Nesselrode, and in 1840 he received the prestigious post of ambassador to London, for his performance of his duties or, rather, his services. In any event, on the eve of the Crimean War, which was so fatal for Russia, Brunov (as shown in Ye.V. Tarle’s outstanding study, *The Crimean War*) repeatedly sent dispatches to Petersburg that were full of disinformation, assuring that Great Britain had no intention of launching war against Russia.

Of course, the question of Brunov’s role requires special research, but it is strange, to say the least, that, for many years, nobody has undertaken such a study.

The above interpretation of the events of Nov. 4, 1836-Jan. 27, 1837 may, of course, be disputed. But it seems inarguable that there was a *historical* background to the poet’s death, not only a “family” one, despite the fact that most recent writing on the matter ignores this.

The above-cited testimony of V.A. Sollogub, Ye.N.

Brevskaya, Nicholas I himself, Pushkin's letter to Kankrin, hints in the writings of P.A. Vyazemsky, etc., show clearly enough that the heart of the matter was a collision between the poet and the Tsar. Its point of departure was the "diploma," which fell onto the prepared soil of Pushkin's suspicions.

The "diploma," once again, was composed not for somebody's "personal" interests, but for the purpose of setting the poet at odds with the Emperor, since there was well-founded concern, that Pushkin might come to exert significant influence on his policy. This does not mean, of course, that the duel of January 27 was "pre-planned" in the Nesselrode salon; rather, the "diploma" was the "launch mechanism" of the agonizing tribulations and later events, which ultimately led to the duel.

Finally, there is the testimony of Emperor Alexander II, P.P. Vyazemsky, and, in later years, G.V. Chicherin, relying on family traditions, as well as Pushkin's sharply worded letter to Nesselrode (absolutely groundlessly published as a letter to Benkendorf)—all of which indicate, with no ambiguity, that the "diploma" came out of the Nesselrode salon. In M.A. Korf's words, that salon was, during the second half of the 1830's, "unquestionably the foremost in St. Petersburg," playing an influential, directly *political role*. Thus, it is inappropriate to reduce the production of the "diploma" to a matter of settling *personal* accounts. This was a struggle on the historical stage, and Pushkin's death was a genuine historical tragedy. I recall his lines:

It is, for certain, on the great road  
That I shall die, God has ordained . . .

It cannot be denied that this historical tragedy had the *superficial* appearance of a family one, and so it was seen, and continues to be, by the great majority of people. The "triangle" of Natalya Nikolayevna-Pushkin-d'Anthès (together with his so-called "father") masks a different triangle, to take the same geometrical figure: Nicholas I-Pushkin-the influential Nesselrode salon (ultimately, the Minister himself). The poet's death in that collision was a *historical* tragedy, in the full sense of the word.

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There is one other aspect of the matter, which provides additional arguments in favor of the idea of these events presented above. As is well known, a number of people close to the poet—the Vyazemskys, the Karamzins, the Rossets, and others—harshly criticized his behavior on the eve of the duel, since they supposed that it was motivated by excessive and unfounded *jealousy* of d'Anthès.

Many people will find it difficult to agree with me, but it should be stated that these people were, from their standpoint, more or less *right*. Insofar as it appeared to them that the poet was moved chiefly, or even exclusively, by jealousy of d'Anthès, their reproaches are understandable and, in a sense, fair.

On the evening of January 24, that is, after his conversation with the Emperor and two days before the duel, Pushkin spent the evening at the home of Prince P.I. Meshchersky, who was married to Karamzin's daughter Yekaterina Nikolayevna. Vyazemsky was present, as was the historian's other daughter, Sofia, and others—including d'Anthès and his wife. Sofia Karamzina wrote to her brother Andrei about that evening: "Pushkin grinds his teeth and puts on his tiger expression. . . . Overall, it is very strange, and Uncle Vyazemsky says he is going to stay out of this and not see the Pushkins any more."

Sofia Nikolayevna considered what was happening to be "very strange," that is, it could not be explained by the facts known to her. It was as if she guessed that there was something else involved, besides the infamous jealousy, although ultimately the people around Pushkin thought that was the main factor.

Even more significant is that the next day, the poet tried to convince his friends that he was not jealous. On the evening of January 25, he was at the Vyazemskys, again in the presence of d'Anthès and his wife. The host was not there: Vyazemsky had gone to a ball at the Myatlevs, perhaps carrying out his promise not to see the Pushkins. Later on, however, the wife and son of Vyazemsky both recalled what the poet had said to them about d'Anthès: ". . . my accounts with that young man are settled"—that is, it was a matter not of jealousy of the vulgar young man, but of something else.

It is clear that Pushkin could not talk about the Emperor's role; he alluded to it the same day (and there are no other known instances of his) in conversation with the *provincial* landowner Ye.N. Brevskaya (*vide supra*), who did not have ties with Petersburg high society.

I repeat: Pushkin's friends, convinced that the reason for his behavior was jealousy of d'Anthès, were essentially correct in their reproaches. From that standpoint, too, the position of S.L. Abramovich, the above-mentioned contemporary Pushkin researcher, is illogical; she proposes essentially the same interpretation of the pre-duel situation as Pushkin's friends did at the time, but then she angrily accuses them for their reproaches against the poet!

Since the notion of the duel as the result of a purely family conflict dominated so thoroughly, a number of prominent people also "reproached" the poet, even *after his death!*

Thus, Pushkin's contemporary, the poet Yevgeni Boratynsky, wrote: "... I am deeply shaken, and with tears, protests, and *bewilderment* [my emphasis—VVK] I keep asking myself: why this, and not some other way? Is it natural, that a great man in the prime of life, perish in a duel like some careless youth? How much of the guilt is his own . . . ?"

A.S. Khomyakov condemned the poet even more harshly: "Pushkin had a shoot-out with some d'Anthès. . . . What a pitiful repetition of Onegin and Lensky—a sorry and premature end. There were no good reasons for the duel. . . . Pushkin failed to be steadfast in his character. . . ."23

There are also "reproaches," in effect, even in Lermontov's famous verses: "... slave of honor . . . the poet's soul could not withstand the shame of *trivial* offense . . . and why to petty slanderers did he extend his hand? . . ." etc. And we may acknowledge, that if it were a question of conflict with d'Anthès, these reproaches would have been to some extent justified. The facts and testimony cited above, however, show convincingly that the poet's death stemmed from something different and immeasurably more substantial.

Last, but not least: Lermontov was bewildered, and even "accused" Pushkin:

And why, from comfort calm and simple-hearted  
friendship  
Stepped he into that close and jealous world . . .

It would seem that Alexander Sergeyevich himself could agree, since in 1834 he wrote the opening lines of the poem,

It's time, my friend, it's time, the heart asks for  
repose,—

for which he sketched the conclusion in prose as follows: "Oh, will it be soon that I carry my penates<sup>24</sup> to the countryside—the fields, the orchard, the peasants, and books; poetic labors—a family of loves. . . ."

The poet continued to have this longing in his heart, quite strongly, in his mature years. Yet, being aware of his lofty calling (as clearly expressed in his "Monument"<sup>25</sup>), Pushkin experienced an even stronger longing to be at the center of the *life* of Russia. It is sometimes asserted, especially by authors of the Akhmatova tendency, that Alexander Sergeyevich was at the imperial court, due solely to Natalya Nikolayevna's wish to shine at the balls.<sup>26</sup> The poet, however, valued the opportunity to influence the highest authorities in the country; after one "long conversation" with the Tsar's brother, Grand Prince Mikhail Pavlovich, he wrote in his diary:

"I was able to tell him many things. God grant that my words did even a drop of good."

The mature Pushkin would scarcely be the Pushkin we know, if he had acted on the longing expressed in the poem, "It's time, my friend, it's time . . . ." His contemporary Yevgeni Boratynsky did so, incidentally, and lived his mature years chiefly in the countryside. But Boratynsky, for all his virtues, was not Pushkin.

1. *A.S. Pushkin in the Recollections of His Contemporaries* ("Recollections") (Moscow: 1974), vol. 2, p. 300.
2. Pushkin put Naryshkin's wife in his juvenile joke poem, "The Monk" (1813). In 1834, he wrote to his wife: 'Yesterday I went to a concert . . . in Naryshkin's splendid hall, really splendid.'
3. See P.S. Shchegolev, *The Duel and Death of A.S. Pushkin* (Moscow: 1987), p. 374.
4. Quotations from Pushkin's letters are from *The Letters of Alexander Pushkin*, trans. by J. Thomas Shaw (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967).
5. Vasili A. Zhukovsky (1783-1852), Russian poet and translator of Schiller, was a tutor to the royal family, and Pushkin's friend.
6. *Recollections*, vol. 2, p. 482.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 482.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 302.
9. Thus, on November 6, Pushkin did not yet consider Heeckeren to have produced the "diploma."
10. There was a different notion of "old age" at the time; Heeckeren was 45.
11. Count Benkendorf, chief of the Third Section of His Majesty's Chancellery (the political police), was Pushkin's intermediary with Tsar Nicholas, after the latter made himself personal censor for the poet upon his return from exile in 1826.
12. Cited in P.A. Vyazemsky, *Aesthetics and Literary Criticism* (Moscow: 1984), p. 325.
13. Cf. the letter to Gen. Tol: "one word" destroys slander.
14. Quoted by P.Ye. Shchegolev, *op. cit.*, p. 392.
15. Cf. P.Ye. Shchegolev, *ibid.*, p. 389.
16. See details in my book, *Tyutchev* (1988, 2nd ed.; 1994, 3rd ed.).
17. *Nash Sovremennik*, No. 11-12, 1998, p. 251-261.
18. *Trud*, Aug. 21, 1998, p. 5; N.N. Skatov's emphasis.
19. See the reprint in *Nedelya*, No. 49, 1987, pp. 22-23.
20. *Neva*, No. 12.
21. It should be noted that Pushkin attended a ball, held by that maternal grandfather of Chicherin, Ye.F. Meyendorf (1792-1879), on Dec. 17, 1836, a month and a half before his death.
22. It is noteworthy that his father's sister was the wife of E.D. Naryshkin (b. 1815), the son of the D.L. Naryshkin whose "deputy" the "diploma" declared Pushkin to be.
23. Yevgeni Onegin, the title character in Pushkin's novel in verse, kills the poet Lensky in a carelessly entered duel.
24. Household gods.
25. The poem "*Ya pamyatnik vozdvig . . .*" ("I have built a monument . . .") is translated on p. 60.
26. It should be noted that her life at the balls was rather limited, since every autumn after her marriage in 1831, she was pregnant. Almost all of her deliveries took place in May, that is, soon after the height of the ball season at the end of winter (at Mardi Gras); on March 4, 1834, she had a miscarriage right after a ball, and in 1835 and 1836 (she gave birth in May in each of those years) she was not dancing, as Pushkin put it.

—translated from the Russian by Rachel Douglas