

FREEMASONRY IN RUSSIA

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There are many fascinating legends about the beginnings of Freemasonry in Russia. In this article I shall try to separate legend from historical facts. Here, in brief, is what the most widespread stories tell. According to them, Czar Pavel (Paul) I was initiated in Freemasonry as soon as he reached the right age, even, according to some, in the presence of his mother, Catherine the Great. However, when he ascended the throne, Paul I banned Masonry in Russia. His eldest son, Alexander I, born in 1777, who governed between 1801 and 1825, continued the anti-Masonic policy of his father, but after investigating the nature and principles of Freemasonry he completely changed his opinion and asked to be initiated himself.

This is the legend. Unfortunately, it has little to do with reality.

The first reliable document concerning our subject is the record of a session of the Grand Lodge of England - the Premier Grand Lodge, also known as the "Moderns", founded in 1717 - dated 24 June 1731. There it is written that the Grand Master (Lord Lovel) and his Grand Dignitaries signed a document given to Very Worshipful Brother John Phillips, Esq., appointing him Grand Master of Free, Ancient and Accepted Masons in the Empires of Russia and Germany and their colonies and territories, and they raised a toast to the health of Freemasonry in those places.

Truth is, the appointment was as Provincial Grand Master, but the existence of this document does not prove that a Grand Lodge did in fact exist in Russia or Germany, nor even the existence of individual Masonic lodges there. Coming down to it, we have no evidence allowing us to assume that Phillips created even one lodge in the vast territory entrusted to him. There are some references about a lodge in the Free City of Hamburg in 1733, but no document demonstrating a connection between this lodge and Phillips has been found.

On the other hand, we should not be overly fastidious and should remember that lack of proof is not proof to the contrary. In other words, the issue remains undecided until concluding evidence appears to settle it. Masonic life in those times was extremely fluid, Masons moved freely from one country to another, taking with them degrees and ceremonies that are avidly tried by lodges unencumbered by Grand Lodge controls. Grand Lodges then were hardly capable of imposing their discipline over their lodges, and certainly not on individual members.

Nine years later, in the minutes of Grand Lodge of England of 28 March 1740, the presence is recorded of James Keith, a General in the service of the Empress of Russia. That must have been Czarina Anna Ivanovna, who ruled between 1730 and 1740. Keith was a Scotsman, cousin of Grand Master John, Earl of Kintore. In that opportunity, Keith received the appointment as Provincial Grand Master for Russia. There is no mention of what happened to Phillips.

James Keith was a brilliant soldier, but he had supported the wrong side in the wars between Scotland and England. After the defeat of the Stuarts, he fled to Spain and served in the armies of king Philip II. In 1728 he moved to Russia and there he distinguished himself by his leadership. He won many battles, and the same year of his appointment as Provincial Grand Master, the Czarina named him Governor of Ukraine.

The qualities and success of Keith aroused the envy of the Russian generals. In 1747 he was forced to abandon Russia and went to serve under the Emperor of Prussia, Frederick II the Great. In Prussia, Keith continued his military career and reached the rank of Field Marshal. His end came about on 14 October 1758, when at the age of 62 he fell in a battle against the Austrians. It is reported that Keith was Master of a lodge in Saint Petersburg in the years 1732-34, but we have no documents proving this.

The first Russian lodge about which we have documentary evidence is the Lodge of Peace and Fraternity, that received its warrant from the Grand Lodge of England on 1 June 1771. Most of its members were English merchants established in Saint Petersburg, the most "European" city of Russia, founded by Peter the Great in 1703.

At the time many Russian aristocrats were already Masons, having joined the Fraternity during their travels in Europe. The Russian Masons requested from the Grand Lodge of England that Ivan Yelagin be appointed as Provincial Grand Master, and this petition was approved in 1772, Yelagin was an important figure in the imperial Russian court, an aristocrat, colonel in the Czar's army, counselor to the Czars, minister in the government, etc.

It is almost certain that the first Russian lodges were formed by foreigners, mainly Englishmen, Scots and Germans. The first lodges of which we have news are the following, all authorized but the Grand Lodge of England:

Lodge of Peace and Union No. 414, Saint Petersburg, 1 June 1771.

Lodge of the Nine Muses No. 466, Saint Petersburg, 1 June 1881.

Lodge of the Muse Urania No. 467, in the same city and date.

Lodge of Ballona No. 468, in the same city and date.

Lodge of Mars No. 469, Yassay, 1774.

Lodge of the Muse Clio No. 470, Moscow, 1774.

Lodge Phoenix No. 451, Helsingfors (Finland), 1777.

Lodge Astrea No. 504, Riga, 21 August 1787.

Furthermore, a military lodge (Lodge of Integrity) operated under direct obedience to the Grand Lodge of England.

An important detail is that five lodges, three in Saint Petersburg, one in Moscow and one in Yassay, obtained their warrants simultaneously in 1774. The logical explanation is that these lodges were already in existence, and that they decided at a certain point to become "regular" by requesting a warrant from the Grand Lodge of England.

The rituals used by the Russian lodges were not in the English model, but rather "European", that is according to the Scottish, Schroeder and Swedish rites, whose ceremonies are much more theatrical and rich in symbolism than the English ones.

Yelagin added various "higher degrees" to the three symbolic degrees of Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master. Also, a Chapter of the Strict Observance Rite operated in Saint Petersburg. This was a strictly Christian rite based on the legends of a Templar origin of

Freemasonry, established by Baron von Hund in Germany about 1755. From there, the rite spread rapidly in Central and Eastern Europe, where it enjoyed great popularity.

The situation in Russia became even more complicated in 1771, with the arrival of the Zinnendorf Rite, also a knightly rite with a Christian character.

Finally, in 1776 a Grand Lodge of Russia came into existence, working a system of seven degrees. As we can see, there was no uniformity in Russian Freemasonry, and most of these lodges and Grand Lodge were not recognized by the Grand Lodge of England.

A new division occurred in 1779, when a District Grand Lodge of the Swedish Rite was established, headed by Prince Gagarin. A great number of Russian aristocrats and intellectuals then joined the Masonic lodges. An author stresses the popularity of Freemasonry in the aristocratic circles of Russia with these words: "so many prominent Russians were Freemasons in the second half of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries that it would be easier to number those who were not than those who were." ¹¹

This did not find favour in the eyes of the Empress Catherine II, the Great (governed between 1762 and 1796), who distrusted the "secret" nature of the lodges and feared they could be used for political purposes. Her natural aversion to all forms of mysticism was exacerbated after the revolt of Yemelian Pugachov, that took place between 1773-75, and which threatened the stability of the regime. In 1782 Catherine outlawed all secret organizations, but exempting Freemasonry for the time being.

The main domestic enemy of Catherine was her own son, Grand Duke Paul, who had become a Mason. On the foreign front, her principal foe was Emperor Frederick II of Prussia, also an active Mason (the Grand Constitutions of 1786 which form the foundation of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite are attributed to him). It is not surprising, then, that Catherine could consider Freemasonry as a permanent danger. In 1794 the Empress took a final decision and banned all Masonic activities in her realm.

When Catherine's son, Paul, ascended the throne in 1796, many expected that the ban on Freemasonry would be lifted, but he did nothing of the sort, although he did not persecute the fraternity either, and it began to organize again in a clandestine fashion. Paul's successor, Alexander, held a more favorable opinion of Freemasonry and he lifted the ban officially in 1810. The fraternity then experienced its "golden age", and the Grand Lodge of Russia was created the same year.

Internal divisions, however, continued and developed. While some lodges wished to become "regular", that is, establish fraternal relations with the Grand Lodge of England, most had no interest in this and preferred to delve into mystical, rosicrucian and knightly traditions.

Despite their division, Russian Masons fought valiantly against Napoleon. Marshall Kutusov, the military hero who defeated the French army, was a Mason, as were many of his officers. An irony of history is that many of the French officers were also Freemasons.

A further division took place in 1815, with the creation of two rival Grand Lodges: a District Grand Lodge of the Swedish Rite, and Grand Lodge Astrea, which claimed jurisdiction over the three symbolic degrees only, leaving its members freedom to join any "higher degrees".

In a few years, the Masonic situation became chaotic; unsuitable persons entered the lodges and turned them into political or religious cells.

In 1820, Igor Andrevich Kusheleov was elected Grand Master. He was an honest Mason, who witnessed with horror the multiplication of subversive movements under the mantle of Freemasonry. In an attempt to correct this situation, Kusheleov sent a report to the Czar, explaining what was happening, and suggesting that the fraternity be put under police supervision, to prevent their misuse for political purposes. The result was unexpected. On 1 August 1822 the Czar prohibited Freemasonry throughout the Russian empire.

Although some lodges continued operating for some time in a clandestine way, this was the end of Freemasonry in Russia during almost a century. In the famous Rymantzev Library of Moscow are many documents relating to Masonry, and Leo Tolstoy made use of them when writing *War and Peace*, where he describes the initiation of its hero, Pierre Bezujov. The ceremony was described by Tolstoy in a negative light.

A revolutionary movement took place in 1825, attempting to introduce democratic reforms in the autocratic imperial regime. The revolutionaries, known as "Decembrists" were young men, inspired by the ideals of the "century of lights" (that was also the time of the wars of independence in South America). As one historian notes, most of the Decembrists were Freemasons, members of lodges belonging to the Grand Lodge Astrea of Saint Petersburg. The Decembrist activities were stamped with the Masonic ideals of social progress, philanthropy, intellectual perfectibility and the use of secret means to achieve moral ends.^[2]

A brief revival took place in 1908, when two irregular lodges, belonging to the Grand Orient of France, were established in Saint Petersburg and Moscow. The Grand Lodge of France also established several lodges in the two capitals mentioned and also in Kiev and Nizhni-Novgorod.

At the break of the first World War there were some 40 lodges dependent from the Grand Orient of France. Many disappeared during the war, but others survived, and some of their members took active part in the Marxist revolution of October 1917. The White Russian Masons, opposed to communism, fled to exile in France, where they established a Russian-speaking lodge.

After the Bolsheviks had gained power, Masonic lodges were tolerated for a time. This situation, however, did not last long. In 1922 the Fourth Communist International formally declared that Masonry was contrary to communist ideology. Some lodges immediately closed doors, while others continued a precarious existence.

Four years later, a strange request from the Mason Astromov to the dictator Stalin, to allow Masonry to operate under official sanction, resulted in the arrest, torture and imprisonment of known Masons. Freemasonry disappeared totally during the remaining years of soviet rule. Astromov himself was detained, interrogated, revealed all he knew to the secret police, and died soon after his release.

In 1937, during the infamous public trials organized by the Stalinist regime to liquidate its real or imaginary opponents, an agent in the service of the secret police was used to "disclose" the secrets of Freemasonry. The agent, a certain V.V. Arnold, was instructed by the prosecutor Vishinsky, who presented him as an expert Mason, but his answers revealed complete ignorance of Masonic procedures, making it clear that he had never been initiated in a Masonic lodge.

Thus remained matters until the collapse of the Soviet regime, which allowed the rebirth of Freemasonry in Russia and the other countries comprising the former Soviet Union.

A first step was taken by the French National Grand Lodge, the only recognized Grand Lodge in France, which on 14 January 1992 consecrated in Paris Lodge "Harmony: No. 698, with George Dergachov as its first Master. The Senior Warden was Brother Alexander Rimsky-

Korsakov. In September of the same year the lodge moved to Moscow and there it initiated 14 new members. These were the first initiations in Russia in modern times.

Three other lodges were created in the following years: "Gamayon" in Voronezh, "Zotos" in Moscow and "New Astrea/Sphinx" in Saint Petersburg. The first Chapters of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite were also organized.

The efforts of the French National Grand Lodge to reestablish regular Freemasonry in Russia culminated on 24 June 1995, when Grand Master Claude Charbonniaud, accompanied by a large delegation of dignitaries and officers, formally consecrated in Moscow the Grand Lodge of Russia and installed George Dergachov as Grand Master.

The author of this lines also had the privilege of being present on that occasion, while leading a delegation of Israeli Masons who were visiting Eastern Europe.

On 6 July 1996. The Supreme Council of the 33o. Degree of the Ancient and Accepted Rite was created in Moscow by the Supreme Council for France, headed by its Sovereign Grand Commander, Henri L. Baranger. The first Sovereign Commander of the new body was Victor Kouznetsov.^[3]

The historical study of Russian Freemasonry is only beginning, since only after the collapse of the communist regime have Russian archives and libraries been open to researchers. Leighton's book is the first to make use of these new opportunities, consulting the Masonic material in the archives of the Russian Literature Institute (Pushkin House) in Saint Petersburg and the Lenin State Library in Moscow.

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