Foreword

Did Nikolay Novikov foster the Enlightenment or support the anti-Enlightenment in Russia? That question has had no unanimous answer.¹ He was an enlightener, it is claimed, because he criticised his society and upheld the basic truths of the Enlightenment: tolerance, the conviction that an improvement of social organisation would ameliorate human life, that an enlightened group – a natural aristocracy of the intelligent – should develop an influential public opinion. However, it is objected that in his enthusiasm for the past, for religion and especially for historical and ecclesiastic ritual, he seemed to react against progressive ideas. Particularly reactionary was his orthodox Christian view that man was burdened with original sin, and his conviction as a committed freemason that man must seek to perfect his own corrupt state, that social salvation was attained primarily by personal regeneration.

In all these judgements, Novikov is measured by the standards and behaviour of the French philosophes. It is a deceptive measure in his case. His background was very different from that which in France had thrown up a distinct Enlightenment party. In mid-century Russia there was no strong bourgeoisie struggling for economic and political freedom. Among the articulate intellectuals there were no major grievances against the structure of the state. Social grievances were to be largely disarmed by the emancipation of the nobles. The church in Russia formed no oppressive power centre. The lack of a suitable ground meant that the ideal, French form of the Enlightenment could not be transplanted into Russia. As Pushkin wrote in Eugene Onegin:

With us enlightenment did not take
And after it, there was left o’er
Affectation – nothing more.²

The impression is also given that Novikov was a contemporary of the French philosophes. Yet by 1769 when Novikov began to write
Nikolay Novikov

and organise writing in Russia, most of the great works of the Age of Enlightenment had already appeared and made their influence felt. What the next two decades did was to diffuse the radical ideas of the *philosophes* of the previous generation. And this working of the ideas of the Enlightenment into the consciousness of Europeans was as essential a part of the Enlightenment as the composition of the seminal works had been.

It is as a director of this process that we would claim Nikolay Novikov to be ‘Enlightener of Russia’. Journalist, historian, educator, printer, philanthropist, agricultural improver – the variety of interests might have spread the energy and enthusiasm of one man, however naturally gifted, far too thinly in a generally uncaring society. Yet in each field, Novikov became a dominant personality and left a distinct mark on subsequent Russian culture. What above all prevented the dissipation of his endeavours was his constant aim, in all his multifarious activities, to advance the enlightenment of his country. And what makes him more recognisable as a man of the final, diffusing stage of the European Enlightenment was his love of craft and commerce, united in the business of printing, which he shared with contemporaries in other lands, such as Denis Diderot and Benjamin Franklin.

Pushkin, while denying Russia the ideal Enlightenment, was well able in another context to give a vivid description of the society that had sustained Novikov’s activities. This was a portrayal of men anathematised towards the close of the 1780s as followers of the mystic Saint-Martin or ‘martinists’ – a label which they themselves, as freemasons, vehemently rejected.

At that time there existed in Russia men known as *martinists*. We have come across some old men who belonged to that semi-political, semi-religious society. A strange mixture of mystical piety and philosophic free thinking, selfless love for enlightenment and practical philanthropy distinguished them from the generation to which they belonged. Men who profited from malicious libel attempted to present the martinists as plotters and ascribed criminal political views to them. The empress, who had long regarded the strivings of the French *philosophes* as matches between skilful wrestlers and had encouraged them with her regal applause, viewed their triumph with alarm and turned her suspicious attention on the Russian martinists whom she considered preachers of anarchy and followers of the *encyclopédistes*.³

Eventually a whole period of Russian cultural history, the ten years from 1779–89, was to be declared by Klyuchevsky as
‘Novikov’s decade’. Yet, despite this claim, Nikolay Novikov has never been firmly established, as were his successors Karamzin and Pushkin, as representative of a distinct literary ‘age’. As a result of the ‘malicious rumours’ to which Pushkin referred, Novikov disappeared into the prison limbo of the Schlüsselfburg Fortress for the last four years of Catherine’s reign, to emerge not wholly rehabilitated, so that even for his immediate posterity he remained a shadowy and dubious figure. Significantly, Pushkin in discussing the ‘martinists’ did not single out Novikov as their leader, nor remind his readers that Novikov alone suffered personally for their activities. It is ironic that most of what we know of Novikov’s life comes from his depositions in reply to questions put to him by Sheshkovsky, Catherine’s most trusted prosecutor, at Novikov’s final interrogation which ended with his imprisonment; and that our knowledge of the private attitudes of the Moscow freemasons is determined by their letters, assiduously collected by police authorities as evidence against them. The state evidence has survived: but with Novikov condemned to a ‘civic death’ papers associated with him seem to have been consciously destroyed by his contemporaries out of prudence.

The private Novikov speaks to us directly in two portraits: one by his staunch friend Levitsky and the second, painted after Novikov’s fall from favour, by Levitsky’s pupil Borovikovsky. Levitsky, whose sitters included Catherine II and Diderot, portrayed Novikov at the height of his powers, full face and confident, with large eyes slightly hooded by heavy lids but ready to spark with humour, a prominent nose and full lips puckered in self-satisfaction. The challenge of the face is matched by the energy of his powerful half-open hand which seems ready to reach out from the restraining left corner of the frame. Borovikovsky had moved away from the general statements of official eighteenth-century portraiture to the personal concerns of sentimentalism and it was a more frail, fallible Novikov that emerged from his brush: the same eyes, slightly dimmed and strained, are now averted from us, the powerful nose only reinforces the cleft of worry on the brow and a certain sourness has crept into the tauter set of the mouth. The good humour remains in this private Novikov, but we fail to catch the gaze of a man now more circumspect in his approach to strangers.
1

Noble beginnings

(1744–69)

If you ask me ‘who is he?’ then I . . . will not tell you. ‘The name is not the man’, Russians used to say in olden days.

Karamzin

A family home

The surname of Novikov is a common one in present-day Russia, and most of its bearers would probably assume that it came from novyy, the Russian for ‘new’. But, as so often with popular etymology, they would be wrong in thinking of it as a Russian equivalent of Newman. It is derived from novik, a term used in Muscovy to describe a young nobleman who had recently entered service at court, an apprentice courtier or pageboy, a ‘new man’ of a particular sort. Doubtless one of Nikolay Novikov’s forbears had been given the name as a son of a novik, although it is not known when this happened, for the most distant-known ancestor in his family tree, Merkuley Mikhaylovich, already had the family name of Novikov at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

By the name that he bore, therefore, Nikolay Ivanovich Novikov was conscious of himself as a nobleman, born into a class of the Russian nation which accounted for some 1 per cent of the population. Within this sliver of Russia even, Nikolay Novikov had a special position. Even if Russians knew the genealogy of their clan which ensured their noble status, unlike the nobility of Western Europe they rarely had roots in an ancestral home. Chaadayev, who gave voice to the Russian nobility’s sense of alienation at the beginning of the nineteenth century, stressed the rootlessness of the Russians as one of the reasons for their social unease:

the carelessness of a life without experience and conjecture, one which is unrelated to anything more than the ephemeral existence of the individual detached from the species and which adheres neither to honour nor to the advancement of any community of ideas or interests whatever – not even to the family inheritances and to this fund of prescriptions and perspectives
which regulate both public and private life in an order of things founded
upon the recollection of the past and the probable outcome of the
future.\textsuperscript{4}

In an illuminating aside, Marc Raeff has compared with the
American experience the ease with which Russians could adjust
to existence in any region throughout European Russia, but on a
superficial level: `the American, too, is at home everywhere in
the United States and yet rooted almost nowhere'.\textsuperscript{5}

Novikov, however, had his roots. Although his family had
estates scattered over Russia – in Meshchersk, Suzdal', Dmitrov
and Beloozero – from the time when the Novikovs had moved to
the Moscow region over two centuries previously their family
home had been at the village of Avdot'ino, some forty miles to
the east of Moscow. Here Nikolay Novikov was born on 27 April
1744,\textsuperscript{6} and here he died at four o'clock in the morning of 31 July
1818. It was not only the name that he bore, but the place which
he recognised as home, where he spent his childhood and youth,
the best years of his maturity and the last years of his life, which
would have given Novikov a sense of belonging in a generally
rootless society. Having an ancestral home in the Russian
heartland around Moscow set one apart within the shifting, ill-
defined ranks of the eighteenth-century Russian nobility; it is not
surprising that in the debates in the Legislative Commission of
1767 on the status of the nobility it was, on the whole, the depu-
ties representing the old-established noble families of central
Russia, particularly those with family estates around Moscow,
who pressed for a closed caste to be established, and for the
paramount importance of heredity and birthright to be
recognised.\textsuperscript{7}

This conservative argument had been pleaded with the greatest
clarity in the Commission by Prince Mikhaylo Shcherbatov, and
on a sentimental journey to Avdot'ino in 1858, Longinov, an
antiquarian who was one of the first to rekindle a serious interest
in Novikov, noted that one passed the settlements of Prince
Shcherbatov on the country track which led him twelve rutted
miles off the high road from Bronnitsy to Kolomna.\textsuperscript{8} Two miles
beyond the Shcherbatov property, three churches grouped
together in a dale where the river Severka ran to join the river
Moscow made a picturesque sight. Three sprawling villages – the
Russian village does not have the neat coherence of the English
Nikolay Novikov

hamlet – were given their sense of identity by these churches and, in one of them, the Church of the Tikhvin Mother of God, lay Novikov’s tomb at the foot of the icon of the Saviour to the left of the altar, while to its right was the icon of the Madonna in its rich silver setting which gave the alternative, official name of Tikhvinskoye to the village commonly known as Avdot’ino. There the church still stands. Longinov noted the richness of the church silver donated by Novikov, dwelt in particular on the 1791 folio bible with its heavy, jewel-studded silver casing and regretted that the frescoes, executed to Novikov’s designs, had been painted over in 1843. The stone church, some 200 yards from the Novikov house, although renovated by his sons and consecrated in its new form on 25 June 1776, had been built by Novikov’s father, Ivan Vasil’yevich Novikov, in the reign of Empress Elizabeth.

Ivan Vasil’yevich was one of the many bearers of old Muscovite noble names who identified themselves closely with the reforms of Peter the Great. To the status derived from birthright and lineage was added the demonstration of eminence in arduous service to the Tsar and state. Ivan Vasil’yevich had served in Peter’s navy and attained the rank of captain before retiring temporarily in Anna Ivanovna’s reign only to re-enter state service, this time as voyevoda, or governor, of the town of Alatyr’, where he married Anna Ivanovna Pavlova. There he remained for ten years before returning to his estate at Avdot’ino as a retired state counsellor, the lowest of the four senior ranks of the Civil Service. He had five children: three boys, Andrey, Nikolay and Aleksey, and two girls whose names are not known. Nikolay Ivanovich was the middle son, Andrey being seven years his senior and Aleksey four years younger.

The young Nikolay’s childhood was remarkable in one respect; his impressionable years would have passed in the presence of his father, and one who, moreover, was endowed with the full authority of a naval officer and high government official. Although the Russian family was still predominantly patriarchal, paradoxically the father would be usually, for reasons of state service, an absentee from home. The sons of the nobility, as memoirs show, would grow up in permissive anarchy, punctuated by the sharp spells of strict discipline from returning fathers. The confident energy which distinguished Novikov in later life might have owed
much to the stability of his relationship with a father settled in an ancestral home.

However, lineage itself and a father’s devoted service to the state were not sufficient to endow Ivan Vasil’yevich’s sons with the qualities necessary for success in Russian society. Schooling for nobles had been made mandatory by Peter the Great and, despite resistance from backwoodsmen which continued well into Catherine’s reign, institutional education became a routine stage in the young nobleman’s life. It retained its utilitarian Petrine purpose of giving a rudimentary grounding to those destined to serve in a modernised army and bureaucracy but, increasingly, schooling was seen as a means of imparting a veneer of sophistication which would be an outward badge of nobility. Lacking a legal definition of their noble status, the Russian gentry looked to the schools for social justification: the inner unease of the class was masked by an outward display of a sophisticated life style learnt at school.

The Moscow University gymnasium

Novikov was ten years old when on 12 January 1755 the ukase was signed in St Petersburg establishing Moscow University, a project elaborated by Mikhail Lomonosov, poet and scientist, a towering figure in Russian intellectual and academic life, and supported by Ivan Shuvalov, the Empress Elizabeth’s favourite. More important, a gymnasium was to be established to prepare candidates for the university since, as Lomonosov explained to Shuvalov, without a preparatory gymnasium the University would be ‘ploughed land without seeds’. In the event, two separate but parallel gymnasia were established – one for nobles and one for non-nobles – and in each there were four streams, called ‘schools’; a Russian school, a Latin school, a school of basic science and a school of modern languages, French and German. Science and languages were for boys destined eventually for military service if they were nobles, and for commerce and industry if they were not; the young Nikolay, after completing the obligatory year in the Russian class, accordingly moved to the French class.

The building converted by Shuvalov into Moscow University was an old government building which before the 1737 fire of Moscow had housed the Main Apothecary and Medical Chancellory, and later served as administrative chambers. It stood at the
Voskresenskiy gates to Kitay-town, the old merchant quarter of Moscow, on the site of the present Historical Museum. Its main façade, three storeys high with classical columns, faced the Kremlin. As well as classrooms it housed the means by which Novikov would make his future impact on Russian culture, a University Press. However imposing this building, it was insufficient to cope adequately with the initial enrolment, and so in the October of the University’s first year, a property owned by the Repnin family was purchased, a little further down the hill in Mokhovaya Street where Moscow University still stands today.  

It was three of Lomonosov’s pupils and protégés from St Petersburg who were appointed to head the teaching staff at Moscow: Barsov, Yaremsky and Nikolay Nikitich Popovsky, who became the first rector of the new University in his mid-twenties. Popovsky was later to be treated as one of the paragons of Russian intellectual life by Novikov in his St Petersburg Academic News of 1777. He was renowned for his translations, via the French, of Locke’s On Education and Alexander Pope’s Essay on Man (Russians were eager to point to the suitability of the name ‘Popovsky’ for their ‘Russian Pope’!) which was published by the fledgling Moscow University Press in 1757 at the same time as Lomonosov’s works. It was Popovsky who on 26 April 1755 gave the inaugural address which launched Europe’s newest University; and classes began, not as yet in the University itself, but in the preparatory gymnasium.

It is difficult to judge the quality of the formal education dispensed in the new gymnasium. Denis Fonvizin, one of the first pupils, looked back in his memoirs with smiling disdain on his schooling, which suffered from the laziness of the pupils and the drunkenness of the teachers. Novikov’s own teacher in charge of the French class, Nikolay Bilon, was once retrieved from a debtors’ prison only on the exercise by the University of the right of its jurisdiction over its members. Shuvalov himself soon became aware that all was not well at the University and, as one of the two visitors, suggested that the matriculation certificates should note the extent of the pupil’s knowledge and not merely note, ‘studied diligently’. ‘It is possible’, explained Shuvalov caustically, ‘to be diligent, yet through lack of understanding, know nothing.’ In theory, the pedagogical programme was heavy, with classes from 7.0 a.m. to 11.0 a.m. and then, following dinner, from 2.0 p.m. to 6.0 p.m., the only respite being two short periods of annual holidays – from 18 December to
Noble beginnings (1744–69)

6 January and 10 June to 1 July. However, in practice this timetable was ignored by many of the pupils and their teachers estimated that, thanks to the round of family celebrations, church festivals and country holidays, the majority of the school-boys did not attend classes for more than thirty or forty days in the year.

The location of Moscow University had proved to be a mixed blessing. Its rationale, as the ukase establishing it had indicated, was to save the Muscovite nobility the expense of maintaining domestic foreign tutors who were often ill qualified to teach. However, while rescuing the young gentlemen from foreign mountebanks by sending them to a well-run day school, it was unable to isolate them from their own families. The Novikovs had a house on the outskirts of Moscow, near the Serpukhov gate in the parish of Catherine the Martyr, where a number of Moscow’s principal families had houses. The adjoining property was Brigadier Glebov’s large park which was a favourite resort for fashionable Muscovites. The accessibility of his family and the nearness of the home estate of Avdot’ino perhaps account for the sorry end to the young Novikov’s school career. Only the bald facts about it are known: in his second year he was awarded a prize, as the 12 May 1758 issue of the Moscow News announced, but on 28 April 1760, the same official gazette listed Nikolay Novikov’s name as one of those expelled ‘for laziness and absence from classes’. The University disciplinary committee expressed the reason for expulsion in kinder terms, ‘for absence of which nobody was informed’; but, however it was, Novikov appeared in good company. Among those expelled for the same reason was Grigoriy Potemkin, destined to be Catherine the Great’s most powerful favourite.

By the age of seventeen, therefore, Novikov’s formal education seems to have been desultory. But judging by the reverence shown to him later in Novikov’s publications, the influence of Nikolay Popovsky must have been great. Moscow University at its inception created not only a society literate in Russian – for all the gymnasium pupils were obliged to spend their first year in the Russian school and Popovsky as a matter of deliberate new policy gave his philosophy lectures in Russian rather than the customary Latin – but a consciously literary society. During Novikov’s time, the Press and Library were run by Mikhail Kheraskov who gathered around him a
group of young men distinguished not only by birth but also by literary taste. He himself was a half-brother of Yuriy and Nikolay Trubetskoy and, in 1760, after Popovsky’s death, he took over the editorship of a literary journal at the University called Beneficial Amusement (Poleznoye uveselenye) whose pages were filled by the tentative compositions of the Naryshkin brothers, Aleksey and Semen, the Fonvizin brothers, Denis and Pavel, Ippolit Bogdanovich, Aleksey Rzhevsky, Sergey Domashnev and others. Literary accomplishments were considered to be one of the clearest indications of nobility: the same adjective, chisty – pure, or refined – was to be applied by Novikov later both to correct Western-style dress which set the minority of Russians apart from the mass of their fellow countrymen, and the language itself, which was suitably ‘refined’ only amongst the literary elite. Although leaving the gymnasium without apparently contributing to the journal, Novikov subsequently made a point of noting in his Essay at an Historical Dictionary of Russian Writers if a writer’s literary interest had been awakened at Moscow University; the benefits of the infectious literary atmosphere were noted too by Denis Fonvizin who, however much he might criticise the University’s formal education, admitted that he had ‘received there a taste for literary science’. Little is known directly of Novikov’s friendships at this time, but many of his future literary collaborators were fellow pupils in the gymnasium’s first, enthusiastic years which produced so many literary figures who filled the pages of his Historical Dictionary. Nor did Novikov ever lose touch with his Alma Mater, having his first business dealings with the university bookseller Christian-Ludvig Vever in 1766, becoming one of the first members of the University learned society, the Free Russian Assembly, in 1771 at the invitation of its secretary Professor Anton Barsov and finally returning, as if to his spiritual home, to take charge of the University Press in 1779, to renew social links and eventually a relationship through marriage with Kheraskov and the Trubetskoy brothers.

All this seems a strange sequel to Novikov’s expulsion from the gymnasium but, presumably, with the formal classes counting for so little, he could have continued to benefit from the extra-curricular camaraderie of his contemporaries, for Novikov remained at home for a further two years until 1762 when he moved to St Petersburg to begin his military service.