

Decembrists in Zabaikalye



The history of our town is inseparable from the uprising on Senate Square in St. Petersburg of December 14, 1825.

The participants of the uprising, who could not reconcile themselves to the existing order, denounced it and challenged the Tsar in an armed revolt. This event went down in history as the Decembrists Uprising and became a landmark in the history of the country. The Decembrists' Uprising failed. More than a hundred officers were sentenced to different terms of exile. Many of the Decembrists were exiled to Chita. The first group of twelve convicts arrived in Chita in July 1827.



Decembrists in the Cell of the Chita Stockade.

From paintings by the Decembrist Nicolai Repin

Sometimes the authorities made them do senseless work. A small bridge near the Puppet Theatre in Chita has a gloomy history. The Decembrists lived in Chita for only three years, but they made a great contribution to the cultural development of the region in 1827, only 300 people inhabited Chita; three streets, three churches, two shops, five inns, a candle factory and a few coal mines. The Decembrists were the first to construct roads and erect two-storied houses in Chita. They distributed newspapers and magazines which were sent to them from St. Petersburg. The inhabitants of Chita were not used to growing vegetables.

Kyuchelbecker and Bobritschew - Pushkin took to growing vegetables, and their efforts were rewarded; the harvests were rich enough to supply both the Decembrists and the native population with potatoes, cucumbers, onions and tomatoes. It is essential to mention that there was not a single school in Chita at that time. Dmitry Zavalishin appealed to the authorities for permission to teach. The schools for cossacks' and peasants' children were opened. Children were taught in them, irrespective of their nationality and sex. Corporal punishment was prohibited. The curriculum included arithmetic, geography, handicrafts.

The Decembrists themselves supplied their pupils with books and pencils. These schools provided both primary and secondary education establishments in Central Russia. Such were the Decembrists, whose love for their suffering country was a lodestar during their penal servitude in Siberia.

Nicolai Alexandrovich Bestuzhev

Nicolai Alexandrovich Bestuzhev was an outstanding personality. He was a writer, painter, naval officer and inventor. Nicolai's father Alexandr Bestuzhev was an artillery officer of encyclopedic knowledge and the house in which his children were brought up was a veritable museum. Nicolai was sent to the Naval College. After graduating he remained at the college as a teacher and a tutor. In addition to other talents Nicolai Bestuzhev had outstanding technical abilities. (Later these abilities flourished when he found himself in harsh Siberian exile.) After being transferred to the Department of the Admiralty, Bestuzhev participated in compiling a history of the Russian Navy. He also wrote essays on episodes from naval history and other literary exercises. He was a brilliant story-teller and interlocutor, recited poems and was generally life and soul of the party in high society.

The fate of the Bestuzhev brothers took an abrupt turn due to their involvement in the movement which culminated on December 14, 1825. Bestuzhev together with Ryleev and other Decembrists was a member of the North Society. After the uprising he was interrogated in prison by a commission headed by Nicolas I. Nicolai Bestuzhev was given a harsh sentence and sent to Siberia together with other Decembrists. In Siberia he showed himself as a person with a variety of interests and abilities. Without any tools he made a clock which showed exact time without being rewound for four years. He also repaired watermills, laid out gardens and built hothouses, founded a tannery, made boots and hats, designed jewelry and meteorological devices.

He painted portraits of many Decembrists who shared with him the difficulties of the exile in Siberia. In his pictures he also depicted the scenes from the Decembrists' life in Chita and Petrovsky-Zavod and the landscape around the settlements. Thanks to his works we can see what Chita was like in the XIX century.

His paintings included watercolors and icons. Maria Volkonskaya wrote that he had made the whole collection of the Decembrists' portraits and the portraits of their wives.



The view of the commandant's garden

His friend said that he *“was a wizard with his hands and had a unique mind.”* He translated Byron’s works and those of Thomas Moore and Walter Scott.

His best essays and stories were published after his death in a volume entitled “Stories of an Old Mariner”. They included “Notes on Holland 1815” and “Russians in Paris 1814”. His style was simple and one could read his works with great interest.

Despite being well-educated persons with many abilities the Decembrists had to do senseless work because the local authorities didn’t allow doing serious and useful work. Once when they lived in Petrovsky-Zavod, one of the machines at the Metal Working Plant got broken and stopped. N. Bestuzhev and K. Torson were allowed to the workshops of the plant and repaired the machine very quickly to the great surprise and joy of the workers.



The view of the church.

It is anyone's guess how Bestuzhev's talents would have developed and realized if he had spent most of his life free instead of being sent to exile in Siberia.



In his self-portrait we see the face of a prominent many-sided person with outstanding abilities which helped him to keep a very high level of morality and physical appearance during his exile in Siberia.

“I love Russia.

My misfortunes didn't stop me from desiring happiness to my country”

N.A. Bestuzhev

Vocabulary:

Abrupt - крутой, внезапный

Exile [eksail] - изгнание, ссылка

Interrogate - допрашивать

Tannery - кожевенный завод

Uprising - восстание

Sentence - приговор; осуждать, приговаривать.

Harsh-строгий, суровый

... wizard with his hands - у него золотые руки

Naval –морской, флотский

Choose the correct verb for each blank.

Remained, was brought up, was sent, was, participated, painted, made, repaired, translated, depicted, shared, showed.

1 Nicolai Bestuzhev (...) in a family of an artillery officer.

2 Young Nicolai (...) to the Naval College.

3 After graduating from the college he (...) there as a teacher.

4 Being a member of the Department of Admiralty he (...) in compiling a history of the Russian Navy.

5 He was a good inventor and (...) a clock which (...) the exact time without being rewound for four years.

6 He (...) water mills and the machine at the Petrovsky Zavod Metal Factory.

7 In his pictures he (...) the scenes from the Decembrists' life in Siberia.

8 Bestuzhev (...) the portraits of his friends who (...)the difficulties of the exile life.

9 He knew foreign languages and (...) Byron's works and those of Walter Scott.

10 Bestuzhev (...) a prominent many-sided person.

Tick the correct statements

	True	False
1 Nicolai Bestuzhev was brought up in an intelligent family.		
2 Nicolai studied at Moscow University.		
3 He worked as a teacher at the Naval College.		
4 He was a talented painter and inventor.		
5 He wrote essays on aircraft history.		
6 Bestuzhev went to Siberia to investigate the unknown lands.		
7 He was sentenced to the exile in Siberia after the Decembrists uprising.		
8 In Petrovsky Zavod his greatest desire was to do useful work instead of senseless one.		
9 In his works he painted battle-scenes.		
10 The portraits of the Decembrists painted by Bestuzhev can be seen nowadays.		

