Preface

The basic research for this book was carried out in Soviet libraries and archives on grants from the International Research and Exchanges Board during the final, dreary years of the Brezhnev era. The period of its gestation and metamorphosis has seen remarkable changes in the Soviet Union. Developments under Mikhail Gorbachev have seemed to parallel in many striking ways the tension-filled yet exhilarating process of liberalization described in these pages, and they lend new immediacy to the issues raised by the unsuccessful "thaw" of 1880.

Just as the challenge for the Great Reforms of Alexander's reign was to overcome the heavy legacy of Nicholaevan absolutism, so Gorbachev's "perestroika" represents a rejection of Stalinist totalitarianism. Iakov Grot, main organizer of the Pushkin-monument fund drive, declared the central axioms of his work to be "glasnost'" (a term that hardly needs translation today) and "strict accountability." The same slogans—glasnost', self-regulation, democracy, freedom of the press—first heard in the 1860s during the period of the Great Reforms, are now heard once again. Furthermore, just as the "thaw" of 1880 looked back to the unfinished agenda of the democratic reforms of the Emancipation, Gorbachev's liberalization is taking up the unfinished program of Krushchev's de-Stalinization, curtailed in the mid-1960s.

At issue is the same basic problem of democratization and power sharing. Today under Gorbachev, as in 1880, the state is taking steps to win a disaffected intelligentsia over to its side by promises to limit
the government’s monopoly over the institutions and production of culture and to grant some measure of political autonomy to “society.” Following the pattern established in the last century, to which the Pushkin Celebration of 1880 greatly contributed, the creative intelligentsia and the press as well as a myriad of amateur and private associations have stepped in to fill a need created by the lack of alternative forums for political life.

As in 1880, many intellectuals, while eager to see changes, are uncertain about the sincerity of the new government policy and skeptical about its prospects for success. They fear being co-opted from above by the state, or being perceived from below as having sold out, and losing what measure of independence and authority they have managed to preserve. Moreover, they do not want to find themselves in a vulnerable position should the regime fall or change course. On a trip to the USSR in the summer of 1987, I heard Russians of all walks of life express their apprehension that Gorbachev’s program, for all its admirable goals and attractive slogans, would be limited to much talk and no action.

Such might be a fitting epitaph for the Pushkin Celebration itself. Indeed any assertion that a “middle ground” of toleration and democratic pluralism truly exists, now as in 1880, remains highly problematic. State-sponsored glasnost’, now as then, represents liberalization but not liberalism as a creed. Censorship is lessened, but the machinery remains intact. As in 1880, circumstances of increased glasnost’ do not necessarily lead to a common ground of toleration, and the new pluralism also gives freedom to sectarian cliques. Traditional battle lines between Western-oriented liberals and conservative Russophiles are being re-formed. Gorbachev appears not only in the role of “loving dictator” who can take back what he gives but in the paradoxical position of mediator and peacemaker among increasingly extremist factions. The ultimate success of the new thaw in terms of establishing a new tolerance and a new space for liberal discourse remains an open question; as in 1880, liberalism remains an assertion and a potential rather than an established, demonstrable fact. Given the lack of a quantifiable, grass-roots public opinion, even assertions of liberalism and democracy emerge as ultimately self-serving and hegemonic. As many contemporaries (such as N. K. Mikhailovsky) argued in 1880, real openness in Russian intellectual life can only follow political “guarantees.”

Despite the legacy of failed thaws of the past and the many cen-
tripodal forces that threaten to undermine peaceful consensus, there are also grounds for optimism. Gorbachev’s “revolution” may reflect—as some commentators have suggested—a basic social realignment of forces within the Soviet Union, the sanctioning of an autonomous “middle class” of technocrats and managers who recognize the necessity of free access to information and the liabilities of bureaucratic control. In this sense, Russia in the post-Stalin era, for the first time in its history predominantly urban and educated, may provide a far more secure social basis for a “middle class” liberal ideology than it did in the later nineteenth century.

The Pushkin Celebration of 1880 may be seen both as an archetypal “thaw,” with dramatic parallels to today’s situation, and as a key moment in modern Russian history when political and literary interests dramatically merged, enthroning not only Pushkin but Russian literature as carriers of both the moral and political interests of the nation. Although in 1987, the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of Pushkin’s death, celebrating the poet may have lost direct political relevance, the undisputed centrality of Russian writers in the nation’s intellectual and political life, as well as Pushkin’s mythic stature as the hero of Russian culture—both of which the celebration of 1880 went far to establish—remains a distinguishing feature of the contemporary Soviet scene. Most important, an examination of this largely forgotten episode challenges long-held assumptions about nineteenth-century Russian history and sensitizes us to the rich range of possibilities that were present but remained unfulfilled. While the new middle ground for open discourse that the celebration promised and the conviction of its observers and participants that things would change for the better may have been fleeting, or even, as Mikhailovskiy held, a self-induced mirage, it was a dream whose legitimacy was publicly acknowledged and celebrated.

Because this book has been in the works so long and gone through so many revisions, the task of acknowledging my manifold debts itself threatens to turn into a ponderous labor of historiographical excavation. My sincerest thanks to my teachers at Columbia University, Robert Belknap and Robert Maguire; to the International Research and Exchanges Board in the United States and the Ministry of Culture in the USSR, which made possible my study in libraries and archives in Leningrad and Moscow in 1980–1982; to the many colleagues who have read and commented on the manuscript at various
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