The Enigma of Degaev-Pell

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Saint Augustine once remarked that he understood time until he began to study it. Biography offers a similar experience. Once the historian's research has penetrated the outward facade, which purports to reflect the inner character of a man, unforeseen facets and qualities begin to emerge. As the biographer's knowledge of his subject expands, at each turn encountering new discoveries and surprises, his understanding begins to falter. Where once there was unity and certainty, now there is complexity and enigma. So it is with Alexander Pell, one time professor of mathematics and first dean of the College of Engineering of the University of South Dakota.*

Alexander Pell came to the Dakota prairies in 1897, the year after the epic Bryan-McKinley electoral struggle. His classes were rigorous and demanding, as befitted a Phi Beta Kappa scholar trained at Johns Hopkins University. He belonged to the

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appropriate scholarly societies, published learned mathematical treatises, and, with his wife, frequently entertained faculty and students in their modest home. A devotee of literature and physical fitness, Pell was particularly proficient at chess, competing in tournaments and playing matches by mail. Summers were reserved for travel, frequently to the east coast to meet his brother and occasionally to Europe. All extant photographs of Pell reveal him as impeccably dressed, even in leisure moments. While precise and systematic in his approach to life, he exuded considerable warmth. His faculty colleagues remembered him as kind and genial, qualities that only enhanced his stature as a scholar. The students, who affectionately dubbed him "Papa Pell," held him in highest esteem. In 1904 the students dedicated their yearbook the Coyote to their beloved Dr. Pell and his wife. His unexpected resignation in 1908, following more than a decade of distinguished service, prompted numerous expressions of gratitude for his many pioneering contributions to the university community.

For the biographer a cursory glance at some dust-covered yearbooks or fading issues of student newspapers reveal Pell as a mirror image of a successful professor at the turn of the century. No one in the university community knew the carefully guarded secret from his past, concealed behind this outward life style. To a very few close friends Pell had explained his sudden departure from Russia in the early 1880s, but those explanations only hinted at what had actually transpired. The events in Russia, which Pell deliberately concealed from his Vermillion friends, are well known to students of Russian history who recognize Pell by another name—Sergei Degaev—and for quite a different career than that of a distinguished Dakota mathematician.

To understand the career of Sergei Degaev, one must abandon the quiet environs of Vermillion academic life and probe the shadowy domain of the Russian revolutionary underground in the late 1870s. Russia was beset with political ferment.¹ Student activism, visionary schemes for change, and

¹ For a fascinating, if biased, treatment of this phenomenon read Fedor Dostoevskii’s famous novel The Possessed.
the first evidence of a coherent revolutionary movement—all broadly labeled Nihilism—reflected this intense political awareness. The deep-seated alienation, so long repressed, sought expression by means of an organized struggle against the autocracy, a phenomenon that would culminate with the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Sergei Degaev played no small role in this unfolding drama, first as a revolutionary terrorist, then as an agent provocateur, and finally as a fugitive from justice. His desperate flight from Russia was necessitated by his complicity in one of the most sensational political crimes of that era, the murder of Colonel George Sudeikin, inspector of the Okhrana, the Russian secret police. The enormity of Degaev’s crime can be measured by the reward offered for his capture—10,000 rubles.

Sergei Degaev’s participation in this scenario of labyrinthine intrigue, plot and counterplot, duplicity and violence, is linked in part to the political liberalism of his family background, an acquired predisposition toward radicalism that made the young Degaev susceptible to the visionary call of revolution. His mother, the wife of a former army doctor, was the daughter of

N.A. Polevoi, a well-known writer and historian. Sergei, born in 1857 and one of four children, was exposed to his mother’s fascination with radical ideas and revolutionary activists. His mother’s “salon” in the 1870s was frequented by itinerant revolutionaries, assorted intellectuals with a radical bent, and, no doubt, by the ubiquitous police spies. The atmosphere was alive with animated discussion and bold posturing toward the hated regime. Such a milieu provided a mere prelude to what Russian historians refer to as the Degaevshchina—“the Degaev Affair.”

Sergei Degaev thirsted for purposeful action and involvement—to leap from the parlor room radicalism of his mother’s salon to actual participation in terrorist activities. Once his ideas were transmitted into action as an operative in the revolutionary movement, he ceased to be merely a disaffected individual isolated on the periphery of Russian political life. The crucible for this change was the agitated environment of university life in nineteenth century Russia. Higher education during the reign of Alexander II (1855-1881) had become the seedbed of revolution. Student life was often synonymous with alienation and not infrequently revolutionary politics. Selecting initially a military career, Degaev enrolled in the Second Military College in Moscow. Further training was pursued at the Artillery School in Saint Petersburg (present day Leningrad) where he was honored as one of the top three cadets. In 1876 he was commissioned a sublieutenant in the Russian army. Three years later he would retire as a captain. His profound interest in mathematics, however, led him to pursue graduate work at the Institute of Civil Engineering. In such a context formal study coincided freely with political concerns.

and it would be here that Degaev made his entree into the revolutionary underground.\(^4\)

Having plunged with enthusiasm into the revolutionary movement, Degaev associated himself with the Peoples’ Will, an extremist group that openly committed its energies to one overriding objective—the assassination of the tsar, Alexander II. The young Degaev shared their confident expectation that once this grisly deed was accomplished the way would be opened for a new, more just society. Mixed with these visionary hopes were other motive forces that animated his behavior. He was ambitious and convinced that destiny had singled him out for some special role. He dreamed of becoming a member of the all-powerful Executive Committee, the leadership nucleus of the Peoples’ Will. Although this dream would not be realized, Degaev did participate in some of the most important projects initiated by the Executive Committee. One such project was the scheme to mine the Malaia Sadovaia, a major thoroughfare that the tsar frequently traveled over. Under the cover of a cheese shop, which they had hastily set up early in 1881, the terrorists, including Degaev, attempted to dig a tunnel from the basement of the shop to the road.\(^5\) The conspirators encountered difficulties and failed to achieve their purpose, but the undertaking provided Degaev with meaningful work and an opportunity to associate with key figures in the party. At the threshold of membership in the party’s inner circle Degaev, for reasons unclear and to his bitter disappointment, was excluded from most subsequent projects and was not privy to higher level policy-making discussions.\(^6\)

4. Makletsova-Degaeva, “Sudeikin i Degaev,” pp. 266-67; Pribyleva-Korba, “Sergei Petrovich Degaev,” p. 1; Yarmolinsky, Road to Revolution, p. 305. Curiously, one of the most accurate thumbnail sketches of this phase of the life of Degaev-Pell is found in a student publication of the University of South Dakota, the 1903 Coyote (p. 20).


6. Pribyleva-Korba, “Sergei Petrovich Degaev,” pp. 9-10. A severe critic of Degaev, she argues that he was not an attractive personality and was considered unreliable, though conceding he played a useful role as a binding link between the Peoples’ Will and the students of St. Petersburg. Makletsova-Degaeva in “Sudeikin i Degaev” (p. 267) takes exception, arguing that her brother was always well liked for his cheerfulness, natural wit, and generosity.
After five attempts, including the cheese shop fiasco, the Peoples’ Will achieved its objective. Alexander II was assassinated on 13 March 1881. This event, the anticipated prelude to revolution, became instead the undoing of the Peoples’ Will. Alexander III, the son of the deceased tsar, set into motion a thoroughgoing police repression. The assassins were captured, tried, and executed. The Peoples’ Will disintegrated under this systematic police pressure.

Playing no small part in this repression was another ambitious man with his own set of dreams, Colonel George Sudeikin. He brought to his task consummate skills as a detective and the self-serving morality of an arrogant careerist. Both feared and hated by revolutionaries, the clever and devious Sudeikin looked beyond his immediate responsibility of suppressing revolution and dreamed of political power. Anxious to acquire the portfolio for the Ministry of Internal Affairs, under whose aegis his police operation functioned, Sudeikin plotted his own brand of sedition. If he could accentuate the threat of revolution by the orchestration of several assassinations, including that of his superior, Dimitri Tolstoi, the minister of internal affairs, and simultaneously cultivate his own reputation for effective police work, the tsar might turn to him as the indispensable man to restore law and order. Having catapulted himself to the heights of power, nothing would stand in his way of becoming the “dictator” of all Russia.

While Sudeikin was nurturing his grandiose dream during this period of police repression, Degaev fled south to Odessa where he joined other revolutionaries in operating an illegal printing press. According to his sister Natalie, he was in a state of despair during these desperate months of his life. His old enthusiasm and confidence in the program of the Peoples’ Will had given way to anxiety and disillusionment. The party had lost its sense.

7. Prior to 1918 the Julian calendar was the official calendar in Russia. In the nineteenth century the Julian calendar was twelve days behind the Western calendar, thirteen days in the twentieth century. All dates used in this article have been adjusted to conform to the Western calendar.

of direction and, in the face of police repression, turned inward, dissipating its energies in petty quarrels and mindless projects. To Degaev the Peoples’ Will had lost its motive power and purpose. While in this confused state of mind, he was arrested in Odessa, and by December 1882 he found himself in prison.

What happened next is unclear. Contact was established between Degaev and Sudeikin, but since both men left no account of their actions, it is difficult to reconstruct with precision the events following Degaev’s arrest. Extant information is fragmentary in character, written largely from a revolutionary outlook and decidedly biased against both men. Did Degaev initiate a conversation with Sudeikin, a move dictated by his desperate situation and based on his knowledge of Sudeikin’s earlier efforts to enlist his younger brother Vladimir as an agent provocateur? Implicit in this theory is Degaev’s willingness to bargain for his freedom at the expense of his comrades. Or, did Sudeikin interrogate Degaev in Odessa and propose to his demoralized prisoner a scheme for cooperation whereby he would gain his freedom for certain services, which ostensibly would not compromise his commitment to revolutionary change? According to this account, Sudeikin, sensing Degaev’s despair over the collapse of the Peoples’ Will, argued that a reformed Russia could only be achieved through an alliance between the secret police and cooperative elements of the Peoples’ Will.

Whatever their motives or the exact nature of their agreement, Degaev escaped from his police escort on 26 January 1883, a ruse designed in advance by Sudeikin. Troubled in mind, Degaev next surfaced unexpectedly in Geneva, Switzerland, in May 1883 to visit Lev Tikhomirov, an emigre member of the Executive Committee. With Sudeikin’s approval,

10. “Degaevshchina (Materialy i Dokumenty),” pp. 29-37. This fantastic scheme purportedly called for a diarchy, wherein Sudeikin would control the machinery of government and Degaev would be given sovereignty over the underground. The veracity of this story is a matter of conjecture. Did Sudeikin actually propose such a bizarre scheme? If so, did Degaev respond enthusiastically?
Degaev had been given permission to go abroad to lure Tikhomirov to Germany where the Okhrana planned to seize him. The imperative propelling Degaev to Geneva was not totally related to the stated purpose of his journey. In the months intervening since Degaev's "escape" in January, Sudeikin, supplied with information by his collaborator, had decimated the ranks of the Peoples' Will with extensive arrests. These events had exposed Sudeikin's crass cynicism even as they had revealed to Degaev his own political naivete. He had been used—and rather cleverly. Recognition of this fact prompted remorse and a desire for the expiation of his sins. Degaev confessed the whole sordid affair to an astonished Tikhomirov.

Tikhomirov faced an agonizing dilemma. Extensive questioning of Degaev had revealed that Sudeikin had in his possession names of other revolutionaries who had not yet been arrested. To move against the informer or to attempt to alert the potential victims would only set into motion Sudeikin's effective dragnet. After consultation with a trusted comrade, Tikhomirov ordered Degaev to return to Russia to murder Sudeikin with his own hands.

Sudeikin was not easy quarry. Moving deliberately from one residence to another in Saint Petersburg, he was most elusive to contact, even for Degaev, who had earned his confidence. Degaev's lack of enthusiasm for this counterplot, suggested by his procrastination and temporizing, made the situation even more difficult. Called back to Geneva by Tikhomirov in August to be reminded of his responsibility to carry out the "execution" and provided with other, more ardent conspirators, Degaev would not effect the dark plot until mid-December 1883—and then only after three attempts.


14. "Degaevshchina (Materialy i Dokumenty)," p. 22; "The Nihilist Version of the Soudaikin [sic] Murder," Times (London), 25 Jan. 1884, p. 6. Unless otherwise indicated, the description of the murder that follows is based largely on these two sources. The former includes the official autopsy report.
The locale for the assassination was Degaev’s apartment in Saint Petersburg near the old Nicholas Railway Station, number 93 Nevsky Prospect (with a separate entrance at number 12 Goncharnaia). Here the unpredictable Sudeikin had previously visited on several occasions. By appointment, Degaev prepared to meet Sudeikin again. For the task of dispatching the elusive police inspector, Degaev was joined by two accomplices, Vasilii Konashevich and Nikolai Starodvorskii. Presumably their more hardened and indelicate character was deemed essential for the success of the execution.

Degaev and his two coconspirators anxiously awaited Sudeikin’s arrival. Twice their plans had been aborted, a consequence of Sudeikin’s tendency to arrive at unforeseen times. Finally, at five o’clock on the afternoon of 28 December Degaev, peering from the window of the watercloset, saw Sudeikin mount the stairs to his apartment (see Figure 1, a diagram of the apartment). Accompanying Sudeikin was his relative Nikolai Sudovskii. Degaev, living under the assumed name of Pavel A. Jablonskii, opened the door. The unsuspecting Sudeikin walked through the antechamber into the drawing room, throwing his fur coat on the sofa. As was his custom, Sudeikin carried a small revolver in the pocket of his fur coat, and as an additional line of defense the walking stick, which he habitually kept at his side, contained a hidden stiletto. These weapons were Sudeikin’s constant companions and reflected the somber reality that the notorious police detective, the hunter of Nihilists, was in fact the hunted. Yet, on this cold December afternoon, Sudeikin was relaxed and unsuspecting, unaware that Degaev was armed with a pistol and that Degaev’s unseen accomplices, Konashevich in the kitchen and Starodvorskii in the bedroom, were armed with heavy crowbars.

The events that followed were violent and swift. Degaev joined Sudeikin, who was seated in the drawing room, and after a moment’s hesitation took out his revolver and fired from behind. Hearing the shot, Konashevich moved to attack Sudovskii, who for reasons unclear had remained in the antechamber. Sudeikin, wounded and desperate, rushed through the study toward the bedroom where his final executioner, Starodvorskii, awaited him. A flurry of blows followed as
FIG. 1. PLAN OF THE APARTMENT WHERE COLONEL SÜDEIKIN WAS KILLED

A. Entrance door  F. Antechamber
B. Staircase  G. Drawing room
C. Landing  H. Study
D. Watercloset  I. Corridor
E. Kitchen  J. Bedroom

“Old Nicholas” Railway Station at Number 93, Nevsky Prospect in Leningrad in 1972.

Entrance to the courtyard at Number 12, Goncharnaia in Leningrad in 1972.
Starodvorskii attempted to dispatch his victim. The screaming Sudeikin, clutching his side, moved frantically under these incessant blows through the drawing room, over the unconscious body of Sudovskii in the antechamber, and to the watercloset where he attempted to barricade himself as a last resort. This provided only a brief respite as the persistent Starodvorskii broke through the door and administered the coup de grace by repeatedly beating his head until no signs of life remained. In their haste to depart, the assassins left the unconscious Sudovskii for dead. Sudovskii would ultimately recover—a fact that the police deliberately concealed from public knowledge for a period of time—and would pinpoint Degaev’s involvement.

The bold murder sparked an immense reaction, both in Russia and Western Europe. Fearing incipient anarchy, the authorities doubled their vigilance, increasing security escorts for high officials, taking special pains to protect the person of the tsar, and making arbitrary arrests. Farce followed tragedy. Caught up in this indiscriminate dragnet was one hapless Petersburg worker who innocently purchased a crowbar to break ice only to lose it embarrassingly at the time of the murder. Having identified the mysterious “Jablonskii” as Degaev and under great pressure to arrest him, the Okhrana, for the first time in its history, distributed throughout the empire a wanted poster. The tempting reward offered was 10,000 rubles. Responding to the cause celebre, the Executive Committee of the Peoples’ Will threatened death to anyone

15. A fanciful, if not implausible, account of the postmurder activities of Degaev reached the West in a dispatch that emanated from Berlin. Degaev, it was reported, appeared unexpectedly at Madame Sudeikin’s home shortly after the murder, informing her of the death of her husband. As soon as the hysterical wife had left for the scene of the crime, he uncovered and carried off important documents. “Russia,” Times (London), 7 Jan. 1884, p. 6; Graphic (London), 12 Jan. 1884, p. 34.


aiding the police in capturing the fugitive. In their minds Degaev and his accomplices had carried out an “execution” ordered by the Peoples’ Will and any interference with their aims was to be considered a subversion of revolutionary justice. Moreover, the Peoples’ Will was most anxious to pass judgment on Degaev’s fate themselves. The “execution” had not eliminated his guilt as a police collaborator. If the refugee Degaev escaped his police pursuers, a trial before the much feared Executive Committee awaited him in Paris.

Degaev’s wife Emma had left for Paris several weeks prior to the murder, ironically with a passport supplied by Sudeikin, who expected her to spy on emigre revolutionaries. Once in Paris she ignored Sudeikin’s orders and anxiously awaited her husband’s arrival. In a short time Degaev managed to join her, a fact that was no doubt as much a surprise to the Executive Committee as it ultimately would be to the police. The circumstances surrounding Degaev’s escape remain a mystery, although there is evidence that he was accompanied to Paris by a revolutionary named G.A. Lopatin, who subsequently served with Tikhomirov on the tribunal that passed judgment on Degaev’s fate. Their decision was to expel Degaev from the party and ban him on pain of death from any further revolutionary activity.20

Pursued by tsarist police and now exiled by his revolutionary comrades, it was only natural that Degaev endeavored to conceal his subsequent activities. For the next decade he faded into relative obscurity and his movements can only be partially reconstructed. He and his wife sailed for North America shortly after the trial, having been escorted to London by Lev Tikhomirov. The Degaevs apparently went first to Canada where Sergei’s fluency in French enabled him to secure varied employment, including work as a stevedore and in a

19. For a reprint of the proclamation see “Russia,” Times (London), 19 Mar. 1884, p. 5. With bravado, it was reported, the Executive Committee sent a letter to the chief of police of St. Petersurg requesting that their threat be communicated to any informer who might be tempted to claim the reward for divulging information about Degaev (“Russia,” Times [London], 19 Mar. 1884, p. 5).

printing shop in a small Canadian village. Additional income was provided by his wife who found work as a cook and laundress.  

While engaged in these menial endeavors, Degaev pored painstakingly over a French-English dictionary he had acquired, and by 1886 he turned up in Saint Louis, where he found work as a superintendent of a chemical plant. By now he was reasonably fluent in English but retained a conspicuous Russian accent. At some point in this period he adopted the pseudonym of Alexander Pell, the name he was naturalized under on 4 September 1891 in Saint Louis. During his nine years with the chemical concern, Pell resumed his study of mathematics, an enduring interest dating back to his Russian years. In 1891 he and several friends began informal study at Washington University in Saint Louis with Professor C.M. Woodward. Pell threw himself enthusiastically into this independent but disciplined study for the next three years.  

On 30 September 1895 Pell applied for admission to Johns Hopkins University, providing a supporting letter from his Saint Louis tutor, Professor Woodward. Pell indicated that he intended “to pursue a scientific career and become a teacher of Mathematics and Physics.” He began his graduate studies in October of 1895, held a fellowship in mathematics for a portion of his two years in Baltimore, and received his doctorate in June  


22. Hoagland to authors, 24 Oct. 1971; Lewis E. Akeley, “Dr. Alexander Pell,” South Dakota Alumni Quarterly 17 (Apr. 1921): 27. Pell never lost his distinct Russian accent. Professor Lewis Akeley, Pell’s colleague and good friend at the University of South Dakota, recalled some years later that the South Dakota legislators “would have nothing to do with our mathematician who spoke with a Russian brogue” and that he had to regularly represent Pell at Pierre (Lewis E. Akeley, This Is What We Had In Mind: Early Memories of the University of South Dakota [Vermillion: University of South Dakota, 1959], p. 67).  

1897. His dissertation was titled "On the Focal Surfaces of the Congruences of Tangents to a Given Surface," the essence of which he published the following year in the prestigious *American Journal of Mathematics*.

Following his graduation, Pell endeavored to secure a teaching position on the eastern seaboard but found his Russian brogue a stumbling block, even though his professors recommended him highly. Thus, he was receptive to the invitation from the University of South Dakota and arrived in Vermillion in the fall of 1897 to begin the teaching career he had anticipated for so long.

Pell plunged into his duties with exuberance, attracting almost immediate, favorable mention in the *Volante*, the student newspaper, for his "ability as a teacher." That early judgment proved eminently accurate, for by all accounts Pell was a model teacher, an able administrator, and a kind, generous, outgoing friend to students and faculty colleagues. Since the University of South Dakota enrolled only 410 students during Pell’s first year on the faculty, he quickly realized that at Vermillion there would never be large numbers of students devoted to the study of pure mathematics. Accordingly, he shifted his principal emphasis to applied science and began boosting an engineering department for the university. The 1903 announcement of the formation of a Department of Engineering was a clear consequence of Pell’s effective proselytizing.

Pell’s ability, enthusiasm, and popularity with students resulted in such a rapid increase in enrollment that in less than two years the governor of South Dakota complained in his annual message that there was "too much mechanical engineering [taught] at Vermillion." Despite the

24. Stanley E. Blumberg, director of alumni relations at Johns Hopkins University, has kindly supplied us with information concerning Pell’s activities at Johns Hopkins, including a photocopy of Pell’s letter of application on which Pell gave his “present address” as 12 Russell Place, Brooklyn, New York, which may have been the residence of his brother Vladimir. His mathematical paper was published in the *American Journal of Mathematics* 20 (1898): 101-34.

25. Akeley, *This Is What We Had In Mind*, p. 59.

legislature’s initial reluctance to underwrite similar engineering programs at the two principal state schools, Pell nurtured his dream to fruition. His 1907 appointment as the first dean of the College of Engineering was widely heralded in the university community.27

Pell’s increasing involvement in the affairs of the engineering college by no means implied that he had deserted higher mathematics and his special research interest, differential geometry. While on the faculty of the University of South Dakota, he published four mathematical treatises in leading journals; a final article would appear several years after his departure from Vermillion. Two of these articles were initially read by Pell as papers before major meetings of mathematical societies—at Chicago in 1899 and Columbus, Ohio, in 1900.28

Moreover, Pell and his close friend Lewis Akeley, professor of physics, frequently dreamed aloud about uncovering some student prodigy who would rise to the heights of scientific brilliance, earning the plaudits that it appeared they would never receive. Akeley recalled that during one of those conversations Pell asserted that “a girl would never become a mathematician. But if she did, someone would marry her and spoil it all.” Whatever the obstacles, even the most hypothetical, Pell, as with his dream of establishing the engineering department, pursued his vision with persistence—cajoling, challenging, tutoring his students. One day after assigning an original geometry problem Pell walked around his classroom to see how the students were responding, and the insight of one

27. The governor’s quotation and a capsule account of Pell’s effort to develop an engineering department is found in Akeley’s “Dr. Alexander Pell,” pp. 29-31. See also “Regents Hold Annual Meeting,” Volante, 28 May 1907.

Degaev-Pell

Anna Johnson Pell about 1904

student—a young lady—excited him. He had found his prodigy.29

She was Anna Johnson of Akron, Iowa, and Pell left no stone unturned to insure that she received the finest training. He uncovered fellowships for Anna who, after graduating from the university in 1903, went on to graduate study at Iowa, Radcliffe, Harvard, Chicago, and Gottingen, Germany. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1910, the first woman and only the second University of South Dakota graduate to earn a Ph.D., as the University Alumni Office proudly informed the readers of its Quarterly.

Anna Johnson eventually held teaching positions in mathematics at Mount Holyoke and Bryn Mawr, where for many years she chaired the mathematics department and was widely recognized as one of the nation’s foremost mathematicians. During her distinguished career, she published highly regarded mathematical papers, participated in mathematical groups in the Philadelphia area and at Princeton’s

29. Akeley, *This Is What We Had In Mind*, p. 60; Mrs. C.C. Hoagland, telephone interview with authors on 12 Nov. 1971.
Institute for Advanced Study, and received several honorary degrees. In 1927 she was invited to deliver the colloquium lectures for the American Mathematical Society, the first woman so honored.  

Pell was naturally proud of his best student and he and Emma followed Anna’s graduate successes with interest. The void in Pell’s life left by Emma’s unexpected death in 1904, following twenty-three years of marriage, reinforced this friendship, which in time developed into a romantic attachment. In the summer of 1907 Pell traveled to Gottingen, Germany—a dangerous venture since his true identity was always subject to exposure, especially abroad—where on 9 July he and his former student were married. Anna was twenty-four and Pell was fifty. Emma had shared the dark secrets of the Russian years, having even been arrested once herself. When and how much Pell told Anna of his Russian experiences is uncertain, but from the recollections of her niece it is evident that Anna eventually came to know more than she wished to repeat of Pell’s early life. Pell’s second marriage was obviously a happy one, even though from 1911 on he was in failing health. When he died in 1921 in Bryn Mawr, Anna was besieged with notes from sympathetic well wishers, many remarking on how constant his devotion and pride in her achievements had been.

Pell’s impact on the university community ranged far beyond the teaching of mathematics and the development of an engineering school. Although he served on the Schedule and


the Entrance and College Credit committees, the Athletic Committee, which he chaired during the latter part of his South Dakota sojourn, must have been among his favorite nonmathematical diversions, for Pell was an athletic enthusiast. According to Akeley, Pell was virtually a one man university cheering committee, who not only always congratulated the winners of athletic competition but also never forgot to commend the losers for their valiant, if unsuccessful, efforts. Already in his second year at Vermillion he was supervising two different gymnasium classes, one which met twice a week, the other three times, and five years later he was still overseeing gymnasium instruction. University records offer brief glimpses of some of Pell's additional leisure time pursuits—chopping wood in fall, ice skating in winter. And always there was football. If the Volante was not noting that the Pell's "royally entertained" the entire football team one evening, it was reporting that Pell led a Coyote pep rally before the Morningside game or that Pell had accompanied the team to any number of away games. At one of those heated contests Pell flashed some of his earlier proclivity for violence. When following the game some local Mitchell lads tore away the university colors from a young girl, a savage fight ensued. Seeing that the university students were being soundly thrashed, Pell leaped into the fray, sending one tough after another to the ground. Professor Alexander Pell, in his forties at the time, emerged from the skirmish with his shirt torn, his face bloodied, and a secure position in the esteem of the students.

Chess is far more sedentary and cerebral, but Pell excelled there as well. He was a mainstay of the university chess club, which traveled to Sioux City for vacation matches and participated by mail in tournaments with other universities.


When the Pells were entertained in other faculty homes, it was not unusual for some aspiring colleague to challenge him. His local image as “redoubtable” indicates the outcome of most of those challenges.34

Meanwhile, through his Athletic Committee, Pell was instrumental in the drafting of a uniform eligibility code for all area schools participating in intercollegiate athletics. He not only represented the university at the conference, which recommended the proposed rule, but he was elected chairman of the conference as well.35

During his tenure at the university, Pell’s energies found expression in other school activities. For example, when in the spring of 1902 the faculty produced what amounted to a concert for students, Pell entertained with a Russian reading of Alexander Pushkin’s “The Captain’s Daughter.” Although a student reporter for the Volante was impressed by the mysterious sounds of spoken Russian, he reported that the program had been only “sparsely attended,” an obvious display of student indifference toward faculty erudition. And Pell also took what seems to have been a regular turn in conducting chapel exercises for the student body—usually for a week at a time—even though neither he nor his first wife was remembered as a church goer or a communicant of any specific religious faith.36

The measure of Alexander Pell’s compassionate character is perhaps best discerned in the informal encounters of college life where the degree of his concern for the welfare of those about him so obviously corroborates Lewis Akeley’s approbation that Pell was “one of the most human men I have ever known.” He financed the American medical education and served as guardian for a Russian relative, Nina Polevoi, and possibly for a


second young Russian medical student. Pell traveled to Omaha in the spring of 1905 to attend Nina’s graduation from the University of Nebraska Medical School.\(^{37}\)

While this sponsorship of a relative may have represented an attempt to partially atone for the inconveniences his earlier escapades had caused his relatives in Russia, there seems to be no way to explain his varied acts of charity other than as humanitarian compassion.\(^{38}\) Thus, when an accident incapacitated a Vermillion friend, Pell provided funds to hire a replacement until his friend could resume work. He and his wife partially supported at least three needy students at the university, taking some, including Anna and her sister Esther, into their own home. The Pells apparently even permitted the \emph{Volante} business manager to maintain his office in their home. Students often came to Pell to discuss their personal problems, finding in him a trusted friend and counselor.\(^{39}\) Pell and his first wife also regularly entertained students in their home.

\(^{37}\) Akeley, “Dr. Alexander Pell,” p. 31; Genkin, “Predatel’ S. P. Degaev v Amerike,” pp. 132-33; “Personal Mention,” \emph{Volante}, 30 May 1905; Hoagland to authors, 24 Oct. 1971; Hoagland interview, 12 Nov. 1971; “Engineers Organize,” \emph{Volante}, 11 Apr. 1905. Although both Genkin and Hoagland refer to a second Russian medical student aided by Pell (whose name Hoagland recalls as Olga Averkieff and who lived in the Pell home), the records of the University of Nebraska Medical School indicate that only Nina Polevoi graduated at that time. On her personal card Nina listed Vermillion as her home and Dr. Pell as her guardian (Cheryl A. Sloan, Assistant Librarian, University of Nebraska Medical Center, to authors, 4 Jan. 1972; and Joseph G. Svoboda, University Archivist, University of Nebraska, to authors, 17 Jan. 1972.)

\(^{38}\) It is apparent that the Degaev family in Russia did suffer as a consequence of Sergei’s complicity in Sudeikin’s murder. The press reported that one of his sisters was arrested in the aftermath of the crime and over two decades later Natalie P. Makletsova-Degaeva still harbored a degree of ill feeling over those misfortunes occasioned by the \emph{Degaevshchina}. “Russia,” \emph{Times} (London), 18 Mar. 1884, p. 5; Makletsova-Degaeva, “Sudeikin i Degaev,” p. 265.

\(^{39}\) “Items of Local Interest,” \emph{Volante}, 26 May 1903; \emph{Volante}, 27 Sept. 1902; Hoagland to authors, 24 Oct. 1971; Hoagland interview, 12 Nov. 1971; Genkin, “Predatel’ S. P. Degaev v Amerike,” pp. 132-33; Akeley, “Dr. Alexander Pell,” p. 31. Pell’s philanthropic largess did not suddenly emerge in Vermillion but obviously marked his entire life. He had been helpful to those in need in Russia, and while in St. Louis his charitable actions, particularly to students, were so extensive that they apparently postponed his enrollment at Johns Hopkins for several years. See Makletsova-Degaeva, “Sudeikin i Degaev,” p. 267, and Charlotte A. Scott, “Dr. Alexander Pell,” \emph{College News} (Bryn Mawr), 9 Feb. 1921.
Sometimes it was the engineering club or the football team, on other occasions it was the senior class for an evening of “progressive flinch” or the junior class to whom Pell served as "class father." On these occasions Pell was always the life of the party, displaying his typical wit and skill as a conversationalist. He enjoyed clever practical jokes. When Esther Johnson, Anna’s sister, asked him for a letter of recommendation, Pell wrote two: the first, mischievously headed to “Whom it may disconcerte,” contained good natured but flippant commentary on Esther’s skills as a prospective language teacher; the second, more sober and accurate, was the one he actually sent.⁴⁰

Pell's wife Emma, though a gracious host and generous friend to students, was quiet and retiring. She was not active in Vermillion social life and obviously never fully adapted to the American scene as did her husband.\textsuperscript{41} Perhaps it was for her sake that they chanced discovery by traveling abroad periodically, or perhaps it was because this was the only way in which Pell could make contact with his immediate family still in Russia, although there is evidence that exchanges of correspondence did occur. In any case, Pell did rendezvous with one of his sisters in Brittany on at least one occasion, perhaps during the summer of 1900 when the Pells attended the Paris exposition. There were also occasional trips to Brooklyn, where Pell met with his younger brother Vladimir and, of course, the voyage to Germany in 1907 for his marriage to Anna Johnson.\textsuperscript{42}

All this philanthropy, frequent entertaining, and expensive travel, when coupled with the spartan salaries paid by the university at that time, insured that Pell never accumulated much wealth. At the time of his resignation the annual salary of a full professor was $1,650, which the editor of the \textit{Alumni Quarterly} ruefully acknowledged as the lowest salary paid by any American state university.\textsuperscript{43} Doubtless it was the financial pinch, coupled with his clear desire not to impede his second wife's developing career, that led Pell to surprise his friends and colleagues in August 1908 by announcing his resignation. Pell's unexpected departure genuinely saddened the university community. Given Pell's consistent beneficence toward students, the panegyric in the \textit{Alumni Quarterly} that Pell "knew..."
the students in closer good comradeship than any other member of the faculty” was perhaps his most appropriate tribute.\(^\text{44}\)

Students and faculty colleagues, however, never suspected that Pell was constantly haunted by the specter of revolutionary justice, the secret police, and the 10,000 ruble reward that they held out for his capture. At this distance Pell appears to have been rather inconsistent in his attempts to cover his tracks and insure the safe anonymity of his professorial identity. On the one hand there was the apparent recklessness of the trips abroad, and even those to New York City, which teemed with Russian emigres and revolutionaries, many of whom knew of the Degaevshchina. Pell apparently escaped unmasking on all of these journeys, and these risks were partially counterbalanced by his guarded silence about his Russian background, a policy to which both of his wives were uncompromisingly faithful and which may have even been extended to a complete ban on spoken Russian in the Vermillion home. What facts Pell did confide, even to his second wife’s family and such close Vermillion friends as Professor Akeley, were often prudently altered. Thus Pell told Akeley that he was the grandson of Nikolai Polevoi, the great Russian scholar, which was true enough, but he gave his Russian name as Alexander Polevoi, which it was not. He confessed to having been a Nihilist in Russia and mentioned that he had been next to the first would-be assassin of Alexander II until fifteen minutes before the unsuccessful attempt, but he apparently said nothing about tunneling under thoroughfares and obviously never mentioned Colonel Sudeikin.\(^\text{45}\)

Preserved by way of oral tradition in his second wife’s family, however, are some of his rare comments about his extraordinary years in Russia. Pell is remembered, for example, to have explained the necessity of his flight from Russia because


\(^\text{45}\) Genkin, “Predatel’ S. P. Degaev v Amerike,” p. 134; Akeley, *This Is What We Had In Mind*, pp. 60-61. It is highly probable, of course, that one of the major reasons for Pell’s reticence about his past was his concern for the great injury to his reputation, which would have accompanied a disclosure of his involvement in the Sudeikin murder.
of his general revolutionary outlook and the discovery of his picture in the dresser of an arrested revolutionary. Further, he justified his refusal to disclose his real Russian name due to fears that the possible accompanying publicity might result in renewed reprisals to his family and friends still in Russia.\(^{46}\)

There is no question that Pell’s thoughts returned frequently to his homeland. There was the correspondence with his sister, the assistance to the two Russian girls, and his frequent comments about Russian history and politics in the classroom. Akeley recalled that Pell’s views on the Russian government were critical and intelligent and that his love for Russia and her people was abundantly evident. Presumably some of those critical views included his reputed wishes that Japan win the

\(^{46}\) Hoagland interview, 12 Nov. 1971; Owens to authors, 17 Jan. 1972.
Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 and that the Bolsheviks be thwarted in their quest for power.  

Given Pell’s continuing interest in developments in Russia, it is not surprising that he harbored fears that some foreign agent might seek him out and kill him, as had occurred with other former agents provocateurs. Therefore, he and his brother Vladimir concocted an elaborate plot to throw all potential pursuers off his trail once and for all. Writing under the pseudonym Fields, Vladimir, who had adopted the name of Polevoi, prepared a communication datelined New York in which the death in New Zealand of Professor Sergei Degaev was announced. Vladimir’s account appeared in 1909, one year

47. Pell’s anti-Bolshevik attitudes were revealed in a 1918 letter written at the onset of the Russian Civil War (1918-1921). Pell wrote, in Russian (and according to Genkin he invariably used English for all his correspondence), “Cursed Russia, even being free, she does not let men live” (Genkin, “Predatel’ S. P. Degaev v Amerike,” pp.132-35); 1905 Coyote, p. 140; Akeley, “Dr. Alexander Pell,” p. 27; Hoagland interview, 12 Nov. 1971. Genkin, relying largely on information supplied by a female physician, who had lived with the Pells in Vermillion but was identified only as “A” (and who quite possibly was Olga Averkieff), contends that Pell evidenced very little interest in his “fatherland” or in American politics, although he did support the “ultra-bourgeois” Republican party. In the oral tradition of Pell’s second wife’s family, however, there is a belief that Pell was too much a free thinker to have been a Republican stalwart.

48. Genkin, “Predatel’ S. P. Degaev v Amerike,” pp. 133-34. In the early 1880s Vladimir too had been invited by Sudeikin to become a police informer. With the consent of his revolutionary comrades he accepted but proved totally inept as a double agent, as both sides lamented, and soon departed Russia. His subsequent careers were many—successful Paris stock speculator, New York correspondent for a Russian newspaper, clerk for the Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States, and employee of the Russian Consulate in New York. Always he defended Sergei. In 1885, shortly after Sergei had been exiled by the revolutionary tribunal of the Executive Committee, Vladimir wrote Tikhomirov in an attempt to refurbish Sergei’s reputation. Sergei and Emma had visited Vladimir in New York, presumably there were exchanges of correspondence, and it was not surprising that when Pell’s fears of exposure mounted he would again solicit Vladimir’s assistance. Deiateli revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia v Rossii—Bio-bibliograficheskii slovar’, ot predshstvennikov dekabristov do padeniia tsarisma (Moskva, 1934), pp. 1098-99; Dorothea L. Havighorst, Archivist, Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States, to authors, 8 Dec. 1971.

49. This fake announcement of Degaev’s demise was not the only instance when his name appeared in print since the world press had publicized the details of Sudeikin’s murder. Inexplicably, London and New York newspapers on at least five separate occasions between 1884 and 1891 had reported the rumored arrest of Sergei
after Pell left his position at the University of South Dakota. This fabrication was initially printed in an emigre newspaper and then widely reprinted.

For a time the ruse seemed successful, even though two years later in New York Leonid Men’shchikov, a former Okhrana agent, discovered that Fields was in actuality Sergei’s own brother. But in 1915 Lev Deich, an often imprisoned former Russian revolutionary, now also in New York, learned quite by accident that Sergei was still alive. By his own account Deich puzzled long over his next course of action. No great admirer of Degaev, his visceral inclination was to publish Degaev’s present name and address thereby exposing the man he viewed as a traitor to all who would wish to know his whereabouts. Yet Deich’s research also made him aware of Pell’s exemplary life in America, of his professorship and family status, and he hesitated to disrupt the last days of the former agent provocateur, considering such a disclosure “superfluous.” In the end Deich compromised his dilemma, publishing an article in 1917 in a Russian language publication that discussed Degaev’s past career and present situation but stopped short of providing his assumed name and current address, although Deich could not resist dropping tantalizing hints to the effect that Degaev was a professor in a girls’ school near New York City.\(^5\) If Deich’s article had appeared earlier, perhaps some sleuths would have accepted the challenge to fit the remaining pieces into the incomplete mosaic, but in 1917 most Russians, whether revolutionary or tsarist in perspective, were momentarily more interested in their epochal revolution than in rejoining the battle over Degaev’s controversial past.

So it was that Alexander Pell was permitted to live out his remaining years in peace. The last decade of his life, however,
was spent in semiretirement, the debilitating consequence of the stroke he suffered in 1911. Prior to his stroke, he had received an offer from the Armour Institute of Technology in Chicago. Beginning as an assistant professor he was advanced to associate professor the second year, teaching courses in algebra, geometry, calculus, and analytical and theoretical mechanics. Armour's enrollment was above twelve hundred and with from four to five men in the mathematics department during his tenure, Pell enjoyed this wider fellowship of kindred minds. It was in a classroom session at the Armour Institute in January of 1911 that Pell suffered his minor paralytic stroke. Anna filled in for him until he could resume his duties but by 1913 his health forced him to resign and join Anna at Mount Holyoke, where she had begun teaching the previous year.  

Until 1918 when Anna accepted a position at Bryn Mawr College, the Pells lived in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Although Pell desired to continue teaching, his health did not permit a full scale return to the classroom, although he did do some tutoring in mathematics and Russian. Then, very unexpectedly, on the morning of 26 January 1921, Alexander Pell died at his Yarrow West home in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. Funeral services were held two days later in a church near the college with the Bryn Mawr chaplain in charge. Pell was buried in a nearby cemetery.

While his last years were difficult ones healthwise, Pell retained his selfless attitude toward others. He found time for tutoring and counseling, enabling at least one young Bryn Mawr student to accelerate her schooling. His great pride in Anna and her accomplishments was obvious to all their acquaintances and Anna wrote her relatives on the evening of the funeral that "Rozia," as she called him, "did love Bryn Mawr so much, was so happy these last years." From friends and acquaintances there arrived touching notes of condolence, notes which

revealed that all who had known the Pells had been impressed by their mutual love and devotion. 52

This was the Alexander Pell that Americans knew—outstanding scholar, beloved teacher, warm friend and counselor to students, loving husband. But he was also known to Russians as Sergei Degaev—informant, murderer, agent provocateur. The historical images evoked by the Degaev-Pell dichotomy appear to be mutually exclusive, as if they represent two distinct personalities. Yet both careers, separated by time and geography, are contained in the lifetime of one man. The enigmatic character of this Janus-like figure is further enhanced by the fact that he left no memoirs, no diary, no justification for his actions.

Sergei Degaev’s brief appearance on the historical scene in the early 1880s constitutes an important chapter in the history of the Russian revolutionary movement. The resulting Degaevshchina has become a term of opprobrium. Hidden in obscurity is his American career, spanning his mature years and focused on science, his first love. This exemplary life is not retroactive, it does not erase the indiscretions of his youth, but it does provide an imperative to examine the totality of his life as a prerequisite to understanding any portion of it.

Retired Congressman Berry (center) and BHSC President Freeman (left) check the library building during early stages of construction.
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