The contributions of N. I. Novikov to Russian social thought have received passing recognition in recent American scholarship, and the significance of freemasonry as a vehicle for both social criticism and public activity has likewise been acknowledged. However, no systematic study has yet been made in English of the values which Novikov, the leading figure in eighteenth Russian freemasonry, derived from the tenets of the masonic order. It is the purpose of the present article to examine the role of masonic ideas in the evolution of Novikov's thinking, a necessary prelude to the appraisal of his contribution to the values of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia.

Nikolai Ivanovich Novikov (1744-1818) was born into a noble family owning some seven hundred serfs. His father, Ivan Vasil’evich, had risen in the Petrine Table of Ranks, initially in the naval branch and subsequently in the civil service, from which he had retired with the rank of State Counselor. The third of four sons, Nikolai Ivanovich grew up on the family estate at Tikhvinskoe-Avdot’ino, some fifty versts from Moscow. In later life Novikov was reticent about his youthful experiences and our direct knowledge of this period derives largely from his testimony after his arrest in 1792. His early education appears to have been rather meager, being obtained at home at the hands of the village sexton. By 1756 or 1757, however, he had entered the noble gimnaziia attached to the University of Moscow, for in 1758 he was commended for his accomplishments in second-year French. In 1760, nevertheless, Novikov's name was among those listed as having been dismissed from the gimnaziia “for laziness and non-attendance.” It is possible that the youth had, in fact, returned home because of the illness of his father.

1. The Table of Ranks, introduced by Peter I in January, 1722, was an attempt to systematize the service which the emperor required of his subjects. Those who had passed through the eight lower grades could pass on their rank to their heirs. State Counselor was the fifth highest grade.

2. The two elder brothers died prematurely, one in infancy, the other at the age of thirty-three in 1769. Aleksei, the younger brother, lived from 1747 to 1799. A verst was a pre-1917 measure of length equivalent to .66 miles or 1.067 km.

3. G. P. Makogonenko, Nikolai Novikov i russkoe prosveshchenie XVIII veka (Moscow-Leningrad: Gos. izd-vo khudozh. lit-ry, 1951), pp. 30 ff., provides a fuller reconstruction of Novikov's youth than was previously available, but the period remains scantily documented. Makogonenko suggests that Novikov left the gimnaziia because of the illness and death of his father in 1760. However, G. V. Vernadskii, Nikolai Ivanovich Novikov (Petrograd: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka i shkola," 1918), p. 1, lists the year of the father's death as 1763.
In January, 1762, Novikov, then eighteen years of age, entered the elite Izmailovskii Guards’ Regiment. Later in the same year, in recognition of the assistance which the regiment had given her in securing the throne, Catherine II granted a number of promotions, among them the raising of Novikov to the rank of sublieutenant. Service obligations were light in this period and in the leisure time at his disposal Novikov began to display an interest in book-publishing. In 1766 two works were published in the capital by the young officer, one of them including a translation of Fenelon’s Les aventures d’Aristonous. This evidence of literary abilities may have played a part in the appointment of Novikov, in the following year, to the staff of the Commission on the New Law Code as recording-clerk to the Special Commission “o srednem rode liudei.” The sessions of the Commission, meeting initially in Moscow and subsequently in the capital, may indeed have constituted a “civic education” for the twenty-three year old Novikov, as the Soviet scholar G. P. Makogonenko has suggested. Although serfs were not present at the Commission’s hearings, representatives of the state peasants did attend, and their grievances were aired. On occasion Novikov was called upon to record for the Commission’s General Session, further broadening his awareness of the darker side of Russian reality. His colleagues on the Commission’s staff included former classmates from the gymnaziia and fellow guardsmen and it seems fair to assume that these impressionable youths discussed among themselves the implications of the testimony to which they were being exposed, although no direct evidence of this exists.

In 1768 Novikov left the Commission and retired from military service with the rank of lieutenant. Thereafter he held the position of translator at the College of Foreign Affairs, perhaps until 1774. His responsibilities in this position were, however, nominal and took second place to the literary activity, which Novikov now resumed. In May, 1769, Truten’, the first in a series of

4. Before the abolition of compulsory state service in 1762 only the more prominent or wealthy families were able to enroll their sons in the prestigious Guards’ Regiments—others were posted to line regiments. Although a recruit was required to serve in the ranks before obtaining a commission the lure of the Guards’ Regiments was such that families sought to have their sons enrolled in them in infancy, with the pretext that they were on leave until the time that they formally entered the service. Cf. Vernadskii, p. 4; M. Raeff, Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia: The Eighteenth Century Nobility (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), pp.111 ff.


6. Makogonenko, pp. 90-91, notes that two major topics dominated the sessions—the question of the rights and privileges of the nobility, and the question, never openly stated, since this had been forbidden, but implicit in numerous other topics—of the problem of serfdom.