

# VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA LEONARD

December. The very word falls on the ear with a finality born of lifetime habit, pronouncing those three syllables as though saying, "The End." Even the way our voices drop when reaching the name of this month, while reciting the litany of all twelve, denotes something is finished. And finished it is; the year, of course, when its 31st day is done.

Early one morning while still in the limbo between dreaming and being fully aware, I found my brain struggling with a puzzle. Why do we call our ninth month September? Our tenth, October? And our twelfth, December?

These three words must come from the Latin. And just as we refer to people between the ages of 70 and 79 as septuagenarians, and just as we all know that an eight-sided figure is an octagon, just so do decimal and decade signify ten. Should not September, October, and December refer to our seventh, eighth and tenth months? But they don't. Why?

Discovery came, as it often does, in the dictionary. In the old Roman calendar, upon which ours is based and from which we borrow names of months, the year began on March first. This puts those months in their proper place, including November, with its roots in the Latin syllable *non*. Only a few other English words use this prefix to designate nine: nonagenarian, nonagon, and nonillion. The last refers to a number beginning with 1 and followed by 30 zeros. A large number, indeed.

While solving the mystery of naming months, other similar words caught my eye. The word *Decembrist* was new to me. Research led to a little-published bit of Russian history.

In December 1825, Alexander I had recently died; his successor, Nicholas I, was about to ascend the throne. A group of young nobles from some of Russia's oldest families led an unsuccessful uprising against the government of the Czars. The revolt was put down, the insurgents arrested; five were executed and over a hundred were exiled to Siberia.

This revolt was the first such uprising to be led by members of the aristocracy, and the event has been a constant point of reference for Russian revolutionaries and writers as an example of a courageous bid for freedom, for the Decembrists, as the rebels were called, wanted to institute a constitutional form of government.

The young aristocrats were called Decembrists because their rebellion occurred in that month; the name was a logical outgrowth, for another uprising had occurred hardly more than three decades earlier, in France. There, during the French Revolution, as many as 8,000 Loyalists, who had been confined in the Abbaye and other prisons, were indiscriminately slaughtered in the first week of September 1792. Participants in the massacre of the Loyalists were called Septembrists, so it followed naturally that the Russians who attempted to keep Nicholas I from his throne would be called Decembrists.

Today, we can't help but wonder what a different turn world history might have taken had the Decembrists' numbers been larger, their strength greater, and their efforts to establish a constitutional government successful. Their predecessors in revolution, the Americans and the French, had triumphed; had Decembrists achieved their goal, the present-day superpowers, the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics might be allies instead of adversaries.

Instead, of course, successful rebellion against Nicholas II came nearly a century later, in 1917; by that time, a different political movement had emerged. The revolution, when it came to Russia, was rooted in a philosophy far different from that of the American and the French. Its base was *The Communist Manifesto*, a pamphlet published in 1848 by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels who had met in Paris in 1844. I find astonishing that this small publication could inspire the growth of so powerful a system, one that spreads over vast areas of the world, and one that poses a threat to our own system of government.

Engels, a German socialist, collaborated with Marx, also a German, to write the pamphlet, although he credited Marx with its theoretical formulation. Marx was a student of Hegel, a German philosopher who maintained that reality can be determined by analysis of circumstances to discriminate between truth and error. History, Hegel propounded, is produced by conflicting impulses and interests of men and, at the same time, shows progressive self-realization of human reason and freedom.

Marx and Engels discarded Hegel's idealism and applied his philosophy to a materialistic view of history. Marx maintained that economic structure is the basis of history and determines all the social, political, and intellectual aspects of life. He believed that what he saw as the evils of capitalism cannot be abolished by reform, but only by destruction of the capitalist economy and the establishment of a new classless society.

Because of his revolutionary activities, Marx spent most of his adult life outside his native land. His ideas, in turn, had great influence upon Nikolai Lenin, and through him, upon the development of communism in Russia.

It was Lenin who led the Bolsheviks to power in 1917. Although much of his life following completion of his studies at the Universities of St. Petersburg and Kazan was spent either in exile in Siberia or outside of Russia, he became head

of the Bolsheviks in 1903 and led them to power in the *coup d'etat* of 1917. From then until his death in 1924, Lenin was head of the Soviet state.

Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto* analyzes history in terms of class conflict, predicts the imminent overthrow of the ruling bourgeoisie by the oppressed proletariat, and envisions a resulting classless society in which personal property is abolished.

The classic practice of communism, as extolled by Marx and Engel, and that Lenin attempted to make reality in the U.S.S.R., was never achieved; instead, there evolved a dictatorship as ruthless as the Czarist regime that preceded it.

Hegel's philosophies, on the other hand, may still be valid and worth study. It might be well for Moscow's new administration to review both the philosophy of Hegel and that of Marx and Engels, to determine by analysis of circumstances what truths and errors history has revealed.

And, further application of Hegel's philosophy, to determine whether progressive self-realization of human reason and freedom actually is occurring, might be a valuable study for all modern nations.

While it may seem unlikely that tracing the reasons we name our months as we do could lead to a review of the philosophy behind the development of communism as we know it today, if you've followed this chase to its conclusion, you can appreciate my fascination with words and understand why I set out to unravel the puzzle surrounding September, October, and December.