

Letters from Russia
Marquis de Custine

Amazingly prescient take on the Russians 175 years ago. Governments change, peoples not so quickly.

Governments come and go, but the nature of a people is far more enduring. Custine, on the basis of an amazingly brief trip to Russia, and without knowledge of the language, was able to capture the character of the Russian people with remarkable accuracy. And prescience.

This book is especially worth reading today, in 2014, as Western Europe appears to be weakening due to excesses in the individual freedom championed by the Enlightenment. Although Custine does not identify a "Eurasia" in the same way as Putin and Putin's Rasputin, Dugin, he definitely sees Russia as a creature apart.

A historical context is useful for understanding Custine. Slavery still prevailed in both Russia and the United States. Russia had expanded eastward as far as Alaska and even Northern California (viz, the Russian River). Poland had been unwillingly and unhappily divided between Prussia and Russia some decades earlier. Russia clearly showed imperial ambitions, constantly threatening her neighbors, and conquering and incorporating them into its empire when they could. The tsars who proved best at this, Peter and Catherine, earned the sobriquet "The Great."

Among Custine's observations about the Russians are that:

- 1) It is a provincial society. The distances are so great, and communications so poor, that it is difficult for people to be well informed. The physical structure of the country calls for the kind of autocratic government Russia has always had.
- 2) Russians are plagued with a superiority/inferiority complex vis-à-vis Europe. They feel morally superior to the libertine Europeans, but also feel a gnawing inadequacy when confronted with the accomplishments of European science, business, and writers.
- 3) Deceit is built into every stratum of Russian society. One must not present the truth to one's superiors, lest it cost one's life. Conversely, those in charge cannot afford to recognize that they are being lied to. This led to great contradictions within communism, well captured by Alexander Zinoviev in *Homo Sovieticus*. The inability to see reality led to Putin's mis-assessment of the consequences of his invasion of Ukraine, summed up by Angela Merkel: he "lost touch with reality."
- 4) There is a lack of creativity, of innovation among the Russians, which dooms them to be perpetual imitators. Entrepreneurship is feared and suppressed, and with it the evolution of business.
- 5) Russians prize order and predictably over freedom. In fact, they do not know how to exercise freedom, and are happy to submit to a strong master. Custine goes on at length about how willingly they submitted to one of history's cruelest and most arbitrary despots, Ivan the Terrible. This is a consequence of the point that...
- 6) Russian tsars enjoy more unlimited power than rulers anywhere else on earth.

Enlightenment enthusiasm has led us of the West to believe that all men are brothers under the skin. Rationalism and technology, it is believed, are not merely products of western thought, but universals the application of which will lead to Fukayama's "End of History."

It has not worked out that way. The French have been as deeply committed to this philosophy as any, and have been equally profound in analyzing why it is not true. Custine's contemporary, Alexis de Tocqueville, is still renowned for his analysis of the then 50-year-old experiment called America. He saw its much strength. He also saw the limitations one would face in attempting to replicate American institutions elsewhere, and bravely identified the seeds of America's destruction, the lack of a brake on the liberal impulse to extend the franchise to people who do not contribute to the wealth and well-being of the country.

Frenchmen of this era are writing incisive criticisms of contemporary France. Alain de Benoist, Guillaume Faye and Laurent Obertone have defined the shortcomings of democracy in the French setting quite well.

Here are some quotes from the book that especially appealed to me:

"There is not a single man on earth today who enjoys and exercises such power: not in Turkey, not even in China. Imagine the craft of Western governments, tested in lengthy exercise, put to the service of a society that is still young and savage; the departments of our civil service assisting an Oriental despotism with all the experience of modern times; European discipline supporting Asiatic tyranny; the police dedicated to concealing barbarism in order to perpetuate, instead of eradicating it; disciplined brutality and cruelty, and European military tactics serving to fortify the policies of Oriental courts. Imagine a half-savage people who have been regimented, without being civilized: then you will understand the moral and social state of the Russians. "

"If there are better diplomats among the Russians than among peoples more advanced in civilization, it is because our newspapers warn them of all that happens and is planned in our country; and that instead of prudently disguising our weaknesses, we are ardent to reveal them every morning; while their Byzantine policies, on the other hand, working in the shadows, carefully conceal from us what is thought, done or anticipated in their country. We step forward in daylight, they advance in the dark: the match is unequal. They leave us blinded by ignorance, while our sincerity enlightens them; we have the weakness of ready speaking, they the strength of secrecy: it is this, above all, that explains their craft. [...]"

"An immense and inordinate ambition, one of those that can take seed only in the souls of the oppressed and be nourished by the misfortune of a whole nation, seethes in the breast of the Russian people. Essentially a nation of conquerors, made greedy by privation, its debasing submission expiates, in advance and at home, the hope of exercising dominion over others. The glory and riches it expects are

compensation for the shame it endures and, to cleanse himself from the impious sacrifice of all public and individual liberty, the slave dreams, on his knees, that he will dominate the world."

"Russia sees in Europe a prey which will sooner or later be delivered to it by our dissensions. It foments anarchy among us, in the hope that it may take advantage of the corruption it has furthered, in the furtherance of its own ends: this is the history of Poland replayed on a larger scale. For many years Paris has been reading revolutionary newspapers – revolutionary in every sense – financed by Russia. 'Europe,' they say in Petersburg, 'is following the same path as Poland. It is agitated by empty ideas of liberalism, while we remain powerful, precisely because we have no liberty. Let us be patient in our chains, for we will make others pay the price of our humiliation.'"

"However, this overweening power damages itself. Russia will not put up with it for ever; a spirit of rebellion is simmering in the army. I agree with the Tsar: the Russians have travelled too much, the nation is hungry for instruction, the customs house cannot control minds and armies do not exterminate thought or ramparts hinder its advance; it travels underground. Ideas are in the air, they are everywhere, and ideas change the world. The outcome of all this is that the future, the brilliant future of which the Russians dream, does not depend on them; that they have no ideas of their own; and that the fate of this nation of imitators will be decided among nations with ideas of their own. If passions are calmed in the West and unity created between governments and their subjects, the avid desires of the conquering Slavs will become a chimera. Hence the danger of allowing them to intervene in our politics and those of our neighbours."