
BOOK REVIEWS

MARCHIZUL DE CUSTINE

Scrisori din Rusia: Rusia în 1839

(Letters from Russia: Russia in 1839)

Edited, foreword and dossier by PIERRE

NORA

Translated from the French by IRINA NEGREA

Bucharest: Humanitas, 2022

ASTOLPHE-LOUIS-Léonor, Marquis de Custine (1790–1857), a French aristocrat and writer, entertaining friendly relations with Chateaubriand, Stendhal and Balzac, had the idea to go to Russia and spend some time there in 1839. He was in search of a political system which would confirm his disappointment with the performance of the democratic European governments. The Marquis spent some time there, saw everything, understood all he had seen, and wrote a comprehensive and penetrating analysis of a society very different to that of Europe.

His book *La Russie en 1839* (1843) remained a permanent bestseller for almost three centuries, except in Russia, where it has been banned until nowadays. The letters of the Marquis de Custine could help Western European society and the world understand what Russia and the Russians were. And, nevertheless, the European societies and governments, the political milieus, did not understand what Russia really is. Thus, to our great misfortune, the civilized world is again faced with Russian brutality and aggressiveness.

Why did the Marquis de Custine go to Russia, precisely at a time when this immense state represented a danger to Eu-

rope and particularly to the international prestige of France, which Russia had vanquished at the end of Napoleon's reign?

The Marquis de Custine was not an aristocrat like the others. He was a curious, investigative nonconformist. Perhaps some nagging unpleasant happening in his life had to be left behind. He was the subject of a homosexuality scandal at the age of 34 years, which destroyed his personal prestige in a world dominated by the aristocracy and the great names of the literary milieu. This extremely intelligent, cultured, sensible man, who was also rich, would remain for the rest of his life an outcast, and his literary merits were to be recognized only later.

Having been accustomed since his youth to long journeys to Northern Europe and Italy, accompanying his family—his mother (his father had been executed during the Revolution), his elder brother, and his mother's lover (Chateaubriand)—the Marquis found an antidote to his overwhelming sadness and romantic sensibility in a long and dangerous voyage to Russia. He was perhaps attracted by the charm of this half-savage Asian empire, which was to the Europeans another world, as he had heard many comments about in France. He had heard a lot of things about Russia in his country without having the basic factual information about this huge country which represented a real danger to European civilization, beginning in the 18th century and until our times. The Marquis wanted to understand why this was the case.

The journey of the Marquis began in 1839, when he was 49 years old. The voyage

was full of risks, in such an underdeveloped and primitive country, reputed for its most reactionary regime under Tsar Nicholas I, with different social relations, another way of life, other religions, mentalities and practices, other relations with God.

However, what really shocked him was the complete lack of freedom. Russia was a country where peasants were still sold, with or without the land, the tsar was regarded like a God and the people like slaves. The penetrating spirit of de Custine cuts deep into the different strata of a backward and primitive society, which took pride in its anti-Catholicism, anti-Europeanism, in its ambition to “reorganize” and “civilize” the world.

His analysis highlights the omnipresence of lies, of a terror that governed everything. That is why Russia is a danger for all its neighbors and not only for them. The individual is not free in Russia. Not being free, but a slave in his country, he seeks to conquer the world by way of compensation. Russia cannot be without aggressiveness, without violence. In Russia, deeply embedded in everything, you will find violence and oppression, whatever the outward appearance.

The Marquis de Custine put all his findings on paper and published his book in 1843, under the title *Russia in 1839*. In Romania it has been translated in 2007 and 2022, under the title *Scrisori din Rusia: Rusia în 1839*. In fact, *Letters from Russia* are not letters. They are not addressed to anybody, as at the Russian postal offices everything was censored. They are personal notes taken during his travels throughout Russia and brought to France in his luggage.

The Marquis de Custine had travelled throughout Europe but he had never found so much lying as in Russia, where

the people enthusiastically praised the foreigners, only to say the contrary in their absence. In Russia this seemed to be an omnipresent social sickness. Was this the explanation for the ever present lying in the Russian political milieu and governments?

Russian politicians were always lying, to foreign governments and to their own people, they were never true to their word, never respected their promises, never respected their signatures on international documents, treaties, conventions. On the occasion of the joint war against Turkey, the Russian government concluded with the Romanian United Principalities a convention promising to respect their frontiers, but after the war they reoccupied several Romanian counties (Cahul, Bolgrad, and Ismail), “justifying” this fact as follows: “We take what is not ours (the three counties) and give you what is not ours either (Dobruja).” In 1917, the gold of the Romanian National Bank was deposited in Russia on the basis of a written guarantee that after the war it would be given back to Romania. It never came back.

When the Ukrainians accepted to give Russia their atomic weapons and their strategic aviation, which had remained on their territory after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia signed a memorandum guaranteeing the integrity of the Ukrainian state. Then, Putin attacked Ukraine and tried to destroy it. That strategic aviation is the very one used these days against Ukrainian cities and civil infrastructure.

Writing about the mentality of the Russians, whom he had seen living like slaves in their own country, the Marquis considered that by way of compensation they wanted to conquer the world.

This is the philosophy of the slave conqueror! Nowadays, another deranged

conqueror, Putin, wants to conquer, reorganize and “civilize” the world! It is amazing how this madness continues to obsess the minds of the Russian rulers and of the population. This shows that the analysis of de Custine was accurate and helps us understand why his book, an international bestseller, has been perpetually banned in Russia, because it puts before the Russians’ eyes a mirror which shows what they do not like to see.

The best epilogue to all this would be Gabriel Liiceanu’s blurb featured on the front cover of the 2022 edition of the Marquis de Custine’s book, *Letters from Russia*: “the best description of a centuries-old historical nightmare, ghastly confirmed by posterity.”



GEORGE CIPĂIANU

IOAN BOLOVAN

**Asociația Națională Arădeană pentru
Cultura Poporului Român: Între local,
regional și național (1863–1918)**

(Arad National Association for the Culture of the Romanian People: Between local, regional, and national, 1863–1918)
3rd edition, revised and enlarged

Introductory word by NICOLAE BOCȘAN

Foreword by LIVIU MAIOR

Cluj-Napoca: Academia Română, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2023

THE HISTORY of the modern Romanian nation has generated lively historiographical controversies over the last century. Its reception has benefited from public interest in the past and the resurgence of identity introspection in the past decade. Analyses dedicated to key moments in

the assertion of the national agenda of the Romanians from the Principalities or from territories incorporated by neighboring empires, such as the 1848 Revolution, the unification of the Principalities, and the Great War followed by the series of unions decided in 1918, have generated interpretations inspired by the enthusiasm of the participating historian or the skepticism of those disappointed by later developments in interwar and contemporary Romania. These oxymoronic approaches represent a challenging obstacle for authors concerned with the objective knowledge of the Romanian past from a perspective compatible with the critical demands of contemporary historical writing. In the same vein, the disappearance of interpretative constraints generated by nationalistic militancy and the totalitarian experiments of the last century has been succeeded by the placement of the nation at the periphery of historiographical interest, or by its juxtaposition with the issues proposed by the so-called *longue durée* history. Adapting these research directions to the specifics of Romanian history has also generated a series of opportunities, such as the interest in the history of civil society and the institutions established by it. The social commitment of the elite trained in the educational institutions of the Habsburg Monarchy in service to their community of origin led to the evolution of national affinities from concepts familiar to the educated public to a form of solidarity capable of successfully competing with dynastic loyalty and integrating the entire population, regardless of confessional affiliations.

The reprinting of Professor Ioan Bolovan’s work, resulting from the author’s long-standing interest in the history