

Russia in a Western mirror

A presentation of Denis Diderot,
Mme de Staël and André Gide

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Abstract

The essay discusses three travel books about Russia written by important French authors in three different centuries. The authors, and the years in which they made their journeys, are as follows: Denis Diderot 1773, Mme de Staël 1812 and André Gide 1936. The main object of this essay is to analyse similarities and differences in their observations of Russian, and later Soviet, society. It is in a way an attempt to compare systems of ideas in West and East in a historical perspective in order to define an image of Russia as it appears in a Western mirror.

Introduction

The relation between Russia and the West is essential in the Russian cultural history which is also reflected in Russian politics. This particular aspect of Russian cultural life is interesting and important for the understanding and of defining what is Russian. Larry Wolff, in his book *Inventing Eastern Europe* (1994), gives an interesting historical overview of the way in which the notion of an “Eastern Europe” developed in the West during the Enlightenment. After reading this book my question was whether this image of another Europe, eastern and uncivilized, still was valid. To be able to give an answer, further questions must be asked. Why and how did this image of Russia, depicted in Larry Wolff’s book, appear in the era of the Enlightenment? Has subsequent history confirmed it or rejected it? Who were those people who went to Russia to tell? Quite a lot of people travelled there and wrote about their experiences. However, three of these travellers were particularly interesting, since they had something important in common: they were all politically interested, writers and French. And, they happened to travel in different centuries which gave me the opportunity to study Western images of Russia over three centuries, starting with the era of Enlightenment. The travellers chosen are Denis Diderot, Mme de Staël and André Gide.

According to Larry Wolff, Voltaire was the inventor of the concept of an Eastern Europe. However, Voltaire never went to Russia other than in his imagination when describing Charles XII’s military campaigns in Russia (Ukraine). His book, *Histoire de Charles XII*, was published in 1731 and described this other Europe as an Oriental Europe between the West and Asia.

The following study of Western images of Russia starts at the “beginning” in the era of Enlightenment with the travel book by the *encyclopédiste* who really went there: Denis Diderot. The second book of travel was written by Mme de Staël in 1812 and the third, finally, was written by

André Gide in 1936 when visiting the Soviet Union. In the image of Russia given by these three travellers I have chosen to study two aspects of it: Russian autocracy and serfdom. The following lines will end this introduction:

Initially launched in foreign traveller's accounts of Russia of the sixteenth century, they were repeated, with little variation, throughout several centuries of travel impressions and geography text books. [...] A short catalogue of these characteristic features, based on Western traveller's accounts geography text books, might look something like this: 1. Russians are strong and have stamina, 2. Russians are ignorant and backward, 3. Russians are superstitious and religious in a superficial way, 4. Russians are rude and unmannered, 5. Russians are submissive and fawning, 6. Russians are corrupt and cheat, 7. Russians are unclean and smell bad, 8. Russians drink to excess. (Peter Ulf Møller 1997, p. 72)

Quotations are mostly given in French, in English when only such editions have been available.

Diderot—a meeting with 18th-century Russia

It has often been observed that the function of eighteenth-century philosophy was not to search for abstract truth but to study man in his relation to society. The chief preoccupation was, in other words, the analysis of social, political, and economic problems, the solution of which engaged the attention of many of the important writers of the century, especially those of France. (Dmitri S. von Mohrenschildt 1936, p. 236)

The first part of the study will focus on the meeting between the steadfastly enlightened Diderot (1713—1784) and Catherine II (1729—1796), the empress of Russia. This is also a meeting between two different worlds. The North- and South axis is turned through Europe in an Eastern and Western direction by Voltaire in his novel *Histoire de Charles XII*. An invisible but sharply defined frontier is drawn between the civilized West and uncivilized East. These two notions interact and Diderot observes and defines them clearly when reflecting, in his texts, upon what he had seen in Russia. As Larry Wolff (1994) points out, the notion of civilization appears analogous to the discovery of an Eastern Europe. Russian culture with its heritage from orthodox Byzantium had at the time of Diderot's visit in 1773 been separated from the rest of Europe for more than 700 years. During these centuries the West, formed by the ideals from Antiquity and the Renaissance, had developed a distinct idea of man and his individual sovereignty. Without this Renaissance idea of man the Enlightenment would probably have looked rather different in its native land France. This idea about man, so evident to Diderot, is crucial for his perception of Russia. Could these two cultural spheres really meet? Was Russia at this moment to join the rest of Europe? The era of Enlightenment was an important time for both cultures, but the results of its political ideas turned out so differently. The reaction to the idea of democracy resulted in revolution in France in 1789, while in Russia it was followed by an absolute autocracy.

Why was this? Can Diderot tell us something in his texts? The answer is yes.

Diderot wrote three political - philosophical texts about his experience in Russia. These texts are not really travelogues but rather books of reflection. These texts, and some correspondence, are used in the study of Diderot's meeting with Russia. The first text *Mémoires pour Catherine II* Diderot wrote during his stay in St. Petersburg. The others which followed he wrote after returning to the West, "Les observations sur le Nakaz" and "La Russie". The second text "Les observations sur le Nakaz" is included in Diderot's *Oeuvres politiques*. For this study I've used an edition edited by Paul Vernière. The third text, "La Russie", was a contribution by Diderot in Raynal's *l'Histoire des deux Indes*, 1774. The text, with commentaries, is to be found in Herbert Dieckmann's article in *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* (1951).

When Diderot went to St. Petersburg in the autumn of 1773 he had at least two reasons for going. One was gratitude—Catherine II had shown great generosity when purchasing Diderot's library, which was for sale. He was, among other things, paid to take care of the same library. In Paris some people called this generosity good foreign politics, something that the Empress needed badly. His other reason for going, which was probably the proper one, was to persuade Catherine II to again set in motion the Legislative Commission that started work in 1767 but was halted again in 1768 due to the war between Russia and Turkey. Of course there were probably other reasons as well, and we must not forget that Diderot and the other *encyclopédistes* were pursued in France at that time.

During his stay in St. Petersburg the Pugachev-uprising took place. Catherine II was frightened and it was not a good time for introducing liberal reforms in Russia. The uprising shocked the aristocracy, and there seemed to be good arguments in favour of autocracy. Later on, in 1789, the French revolution broke out. The Empress was horrified by the treatment that Louis XVI received and turned away from the ideas of the Enlightenment. The Legislative Commission never resumed its work and censorship became harsher. Paul Vernière says in the introduction to *Mémoires pour Catherine II* that Diderot never hoped to influence Catherine II in any significant way, and that he saw clearly her ambitions to maintain the status quo regarding autocracy and serfdom. The Empress was not prepared to go the whole road with political reforms.

Mémoires pour Catherine II

“Je l’ai trouvée telle que vous me l’aviez peinte à Paris: l’âme de Brutus vec les charmes de Cléopâtre. (Diderot about Catherine II in a letter to Princesse Dashkoff, 24 dec. 1773, in Denis Diderot Correspondance, ed. Georges Roth 1966)

Mémoires pour Catherine II has the form of a dialogue between Diderot and the Empress. The text records the discussions they had when meeting one another. It also gives the topics, as prepared by Diderot. But, according to Jacques Proust (1976) this text is imaginary, a staging of the Truth meeting with its ideal Empress.

Diderot, like Rousseau, was a democrat: the government should be appointed by an elected National Assembly. But what happens if there is no body of opinion in favour of democracy? Some of the answers to this question can also be found in Russian literature: Catherine II, the enlightened despot, was not a democrat, nor was “the Grand Inquisitor” in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879—80), and even less so was Stalin. In the character of the Grand Inquisitor, Dostoyevsky wishes to problematize the idea of a general will, a concept which Rousseau elaborated, almost a century earlier, in his philosophy about the social contract. The problem with this idea is, what does this will consist of? Someone needs to have a notion about it. Determinism and the totalitarian state lie around the corner (Hamlyn 1990). Diderot also discusses this issue in his texts and foresees the future problems in Russia resulting from the absence of a notion about individual integrity.

Mémoires pour Catherine II contains several texts with disparate themes. All of them suggest reforms, mainly concerning education (1/3 of the content), economy and social matters. (The texts that Diderot once handed over to Catherine II were not known to the general public in France until 1899).

Diderot made important discoveries during his stay in St. Petersburg, where he arrived in October 1773 and left in March 1774. (He didn’t see much of Russia though, which he complained about in a letter to Mme Necker the 6th of September 1774. (Diderot, *Correspondance* 1966). He observed that there was no foundation for any implementation of liberal

ideas in Russia. The main obstacles were autocracy and serfdom. A re-launching of the Legislative Commission was absolutely necessary, according to Diderot, to make Russia a more liberal society. That is the central message to Catherine II that Diderot gives in his book. He also focuses on other important aspects of a liberal society. Diderot finds that the lack of a middle-class in Russia is a problem. Its development would require guarantees about the ownership of private property. Diderot also discusses the importance of the doctrine of separation of powers (the doctrine that Montesquieu is most known for).

Diderot could see that Western reforms already made in Russia by Peter I were superficial as was Russia's ambition to become more Western-like. In Russia surface had only met surface. What Diderot is saying in his book (and which is repeated in all his writings about Russia) is that Peter the Great started at the wrong end. His reforms from above are meaningless, according to Diderot, unless basic social, economic and political grounds are developed. Diderot can see that the profound structures of Russian society, developed over the centuries, are not easily changed. He argues that Russia should try to develop in accordance with its own conditions, otherwise society will be divided. Diderot was right about this, because in the mid 19th - century this conflict became a reality. Two literary and political groups, opposed to each other, then appeared and became known as *Slavophiles* and *Westernisers*. These groupings and the ideas behind them, so important in Russian cultural history, were already identified by Diderot as a consequence of the superficial way in which Russia had implemented Western ideas. The division between these groups was about precisely this question: Should Russia turn to the West or should the country stay purely Russian? Also, this political division between *Slavophiles* and the *Westernisers* gave birth to another later conflict between generations. This particular conflict was very well described by Turgenev in his novel *Fathers and Sons*, published in 1862. (For this discussion see Wilberger 1976, p. 246). Diderot, the "pre-marxist" (Helldén 1994) stands closer in 1773 to the radical intelligentsia of the *Sons* than to the *Fathers* of the 19th-century. Diderot writes:

Il me semble qu'en general vos sujets pèchent par l'un ou l'autre des ces excès, ou de croire la nation trop avancée, ou de la croire trop réculée, [...] Tous n'ont vu que deux surfaces, les uns de loin, les autres de près, la surface de Paris et la surface de Pétersburg. (Diderot 1966, p. 66—67)

In this passage Diderot points to the Russian inclination towards excess: Russia or the West, never Russia and the West. This is the problem so interestingly discussed by Lotman and Uspenskii two hundred years later in their text “Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (to the end of the eighteenth century)”, published in 1985. Diderot continues—what is the use of sending Russian students to Europe? It may even be harmful since these students run the risk of being influenced by things in the West that are bad. On those grounds he advises Catherine II against sending students to Europe. Instead he suggests that development within Russia should be stimulated. Diderot therefore urged Catherine to break with Peter I’s ambition to make Russia a modern society according to a Western model. Diderot writes:

C’est donc la population qu’il faut encourager, et la population, comment s’encourage-t-elle? Par l’aisance, par la liberté, par tous les moyens dont un souverain (dispose), pour rendre ses sujets heureux. (Diderot 1966, p. 208)

In *Mémoires pour Catherine II*, Diderot is still careful in his criticism of Russian autocratic society, but in his following text about Russia, “Observations sur le Nakaz”, his message to the Russian empress becomes clearer. In an answer to a letter from Diderot where he puts questions about social and trade matters, Catherine II speaks with another voice. Diderot asks: “La servitude des cultivateurs n’influe-t-elle pas sur la culture? Ce défaut de propriété dans les paysans ne produit-il point de mauvais effet?” (Diderot Correspondance 1966, p. 179—176) Catherine II answers: “Je ne sais s’il y a un pays où le cultivateur aime plus la terre et son foyer qu’en Russie. Nos provinces libres n’ont guère plus de grains que celles qui ne le sont pas; chaque État a ses défauts, ses vices et ses inconvénients.” (Diderot Correspondance 1966, p. 170—176).

”Observations sur le Nakaz”

J’ai relu l’Instruction que vous avez adressé aux commissaires assemblés pour la confection des loix; et j’ai eu l’insolence de la relire la plume à la main. (Diderot in a letter to Catherine II in his *Correspondance* 1966, vol. XIV. p. 84—85)

”Observations sur le Nakaz” is Diderot’s comment on Catherine II’s Instruction (instruction in Russian is nakaz) that she once issued in connection with the opening of the Legislative Commission. The empress had no intention of publishing her Instruction in Russia, it was only meant for a European reader. And in Europe it was well received. Voltaire, among others, praised it. Diderot’s voice was not heard though and Paul Vernière gives the explanation for this by assuming that Diderot had probably not read it at this time (Diderot 1963, p. 332). However, in Hague after Diderot’s departure from St. Petersburg in March 1774 he examines her Instruction carefully with “a pen in the hand” and his criticism of what he observes becomes more concrete—he senses the despotism hidden behind the empress’ words. The fact that ”Observations sur le Nakaz” is written in Hague, after Diderot left St. Petersburg in March 1774, may be of some significance to him when formulating his critique. (Diderot’s text was not published in France in its entirety until 1921). However, Catherine II received Diderot’s manuscript after his death in 1784 when his library, according to the purchase - contract, was sent to her in St. Petersburg.

Diderot’s criticism in “Observations sur le Nakaz” about the way in which Russia was governed was more severe than earlier, and his political philosophy had become more radical. Jacques Proust is of the view that Diderot for the first time deals with the people as a subject instead of as an object, as earlier in *Mémoires pour Catherine II*. Proust also argues that Diderot’s political philosophy is about to change: the philosopher’s main task, to enlighten monarchs, later also came to include the people. Proust shows that before Diderot’s arrival in St. Petersburg his politics were reformist to their nature, but after his visit they took a more revolutionary turn. Proust also discusses the concept of enlightening as a mission and considers that it leads to Diderot placing the *philosophe* somewhere outside the group to be enlightened. This particular relation was a result of the vast cultural differ-

ence between the *philosophe* and the people. In this way, Proust continues, the *philosophe* turns into some sort of a censor *for* the people. (Proust 1976). The political ideas of the Enlightenment, and in this case of Diderot, make it relevant to speak of him as a “pre-marxist (Helldén 1994). This idea of turning to the people is important in the Russian context. The missionary idea became very important for the Russian intelligentsia when it took shape in the mid 19th-century. It was this double task of enlightening the people as well as expressing the general will that was typical of the radical Russian intelligentsia when it developed.

The basic ideas of “Observations sur le Nakaz” are a frontal attack on serfdom—there is nothing that can justify it, not even the size of Russia. At this point Diderot is arguing against Voltaire:

Si donc l’étendue de la Russie exige un despote, la Russie est condamnée à être vingt fois mal pour une fois bien gouvernée. Si par un de ces prodiges qui n’est pas dans l’ordre commun de la nature, elle avait trois bon despots de suite, ce serait encore un grand malheur pour elle et pour toute autre nation où la soumission à la tyrannie ne serait pas l’état habituel [...]. (Diderot 1963, p. 354)

If, therefore, the size of Russia demands a despot, Russia is condemned to be twenty times badly governed for each time she is well governed. If, by one of those rare prodigies of nature, she had three good despots in a row, that would be an even greater misfortune for her, and for every other nation where submission to tyranny was not habitual. (Diderot 1992, p. 89)

Catherine II writes in her Instruction, article 20, that fundamental laws in a nation presuppose courts of law but adds: “Par où découle la puissance du souverain” (Diderot 1963, p. 360). And Diderot’s answer to this is:

Je n’aime pas cette façon de voir: elle a une odeur de despotisme qui me déplaît. (Diderot 1963, p. 360)

I do not like this way of looking at things; it has a whiff of despotism which displeases me. (Diderot 1992, p. 93)

Diderot argues in *Mémoires pour Catherine II* that he does not find it relevant to send Russian students to Europe since they lack the ability to understand

what is good and what is bad in the Western culture, and therefore they run the risk of being influenced by the wrong things. He writes:

Il est sûr que ceux des Russes qui ont voyagé ont apporté dans leur patrie la folie des nations qu'ils ont parcourus, rien de leur sagesse, tout leur vices, aucune de leurs vertus; et je crois que les voyages, comme les font aujourd'hui nos jeunes gens qu'ils n'en instruisent. (Diderot 1963, p. 376)

Certainly those Russians who have been abroad have brought back to their country the follies of the nations they visited, and none of the wisdom, all their vices and none of their virtues. And I think that travel, as undertaken nowadays by young lords, leads to more corruption than instruction. (Diderot 1992, p. 101)

And to the question concerning serfdom Diderot gives a clear answer:

Il y a un excellent moyen de prévenir le revolte des serfs contre les maîtres; c'est qu'il n'y ait point de serfs. (Diderot 1963, p. 407)

There is an excellent way of preventing the revolt of serfs against masters: there should be no serfs. (Diderot 1992, p. 127)

At the end of his text Diderot discusses art: it can never be art that corrupts habits in a society but other things (those Diderot does not define). But those habits have an indirect influence on art that ruins taste from behind. The same forces also create a contempt for science. Ignorance and barbarism will finally reign:

[...], non celle dont la nation était sortie, mais une barbarie dont elle ne sort plus. La première est d'un peuple qui n'a pas encore les yeux ouverts; la seconde est d'un peuple qui a les yeux crevés.

[...]—Not that out of which the nation originally emerged, but that from which it will now never escape. The first kind of barbarism is that of people who do not yet have their eyes open; the second is that of people who have had their eyes put out. (Diderot 1992, p. 156)

To conclude his text "Observations sur le Nakaz" Diderot writes:

Je vois dans l'instruction de sa majesté Imperatrice un projet d'un code excellent; mais pas un mot sur le moyen d'assurer la stabilité de ce code. J'y vois le nom de despote abdiqué; mais la chose conservée, mais le despotisme appelé monarchie. (Diderot 1963, p. 457)

I see in Her Imperial Majesty's Instruction a plan for an excellent Code, but not a word on the means of ensuring its stability. I see in it the name of the despot abdicated, but the thing itself preserved, and despotism called monarchy. (Diderot 1992, p. 164)

The copy of Diderot's manuscript that was sent to Catherine II in St. Petersburg was not to be found in the archives. It was probably destroyed—the empress reaction to what Diderot had written was harsh according to what she says in a letter to Grimm (pointed out by Miller 1971). Miller argues that Catherine II probably feared the criticism made by Diderot and therefore had to dismiss it in her letter to Grimm (dated 25 Oct. 1785) as "babble" (my trans. of "babíl" Katarina II 1878). Miller discusses an earlier letter as well, one which she sent on the 5th of March 1785, also to Grimm, where she asks to have sent to her all of Diderot's works for the reason that they were harmful and should be kept safe, where people might not read them:

[...] faites-moi avoir les oeuvres de Diderot; vous les paierez ce qu'on demandera; assurément elles ne sortiront pas de mes mains et ne feront tort à personne; envoyez-moi cela avec la bibliotethèque de Diderot. (Katarina II 1878).

"La Russie"

"La Russie" is an article that was published in Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes* in 1774. Raynal's anthology was known to be hostile towards Russia, and Diderot's contribution was indeed critical of Russian society, just as he

had been previously. The ideas presented were not new, only more articulated. The text is important because it was the only one that Diderot wrote on Russia that was published during his life-time, although it was not signed. This could point to the conclusion already reached by other researchers that Diderot and the ideas of the Enlightenment were subversive not only to Catherine II. As Miller brings out, these ideas led to the French revolution, and later to the Russian in 1917. Miller writes (p. 36): “The French Revolution in short, was the necessary prelude to the October revolution. Soviet Marxists thus view Diderot as an intellectual ancestor in this very general sense.” It was above all the materialism, atheism and universalism to which attention was paid. This interest was due to the fact that both Marx and Engels had a high opinion of Diderot. So did Lenin later on. (For this discussion see Miller, p. 240—243).

But Diderot would probably have regarded the Soviet Union as far from being the enlightened society that Catherine II’s Russia once was. Diderot did not believe in reforming Russia from above into a Western society. According to him, serfdom was the main obstacle to success in such an attempt. André Gide will reinforce these observations by Diderot in his travel book which will be discussed later in this study.

Mme de Staël—a meeting with 19th-century Russia

Mme de Staël's (1766—1817) journey to Russia was prompted by her banishment by Napoléon because of a book that she wrote about Germany, *De l'Allemagne.*, published in 1810. The book was immediately withdrawn by Napoléon who considered it too pro-German in its views on literature, music and philosophy. In 1812 she left France and travelled through Austria and Poland on her way to Russia. Three weeks after her arrival Russia was attacked by Napoléon's forces, which created a hatred towards all that was French all over the country. She was already at that time well known as a writer, with two important novels already published: *Déiphine* (1803) and *Corinne* (1807). She was also a known opponent of Napoléon.

Her travel book is an extract of her work *Dix années d'exil* (1821). Her way of describing what she sees in Russia shows that she really cannot decide whether she is in Asia or in Europe. This is typical of her view of Russia. Also, her comments show that she stumbles back and forth between the ideas of the Enlightenment and those of Romanticism.

Mme de Staël's mother, Mme Necker, opened their home to prominent contemporary philosophers, and Diderot was one among them. The Neckers were interested in politics and Mme de Staël's father was an important minister, had liberal political ideas and spoke in support of the revolution. In 1786 Mme de Staël married the Swedish Ambassador to France, Baron Staël-Holstein. In 1803 she was exiled for her novel *Déiphine* which was regarded as having too strong feminist and liberal overtones. Such ideas were not appreciated by the central administration and she was forced to leave Paris and chose to go abroad.

Her father's castle, Coppet, was her base between the journeys. There she gathered a group of important authors and philosophers, among others Benjamin Constant (1767—1830). One of his best known works is the

novel *Adolphe* (1816) in which he in a disguised fashion chiefly describes his ardent love-affair with Mme de Staël.

At Coppet, Mme de Staël developed her own theory about how feelings and ideas interact and nourish each other in a continuous movement. She put the question whether one could silence one's feelings without losing the ideas that might arise from them. The idea of democracy that her group held was a reaction against the machiavellianism of Napoléon. Within the circle there was a left wing and a right wing. The latter was inclined to mysticism and nationalism and held philosophical views opposed to the ideas that Diderot once spoke for. (Larousse).

In her account of her travels she does not react against autocracy and serfdom as clearly as Diderot did forty years earlier. Her way of looking at those things is not evident—which is significant in a general sense in her depiction of Russia. Is this due to the fact that she was travelling during the era of Romanticism? Yes; to some extent it is—the oriental atmosphere that she so willingly catches and depicts sometimes overwhelms her. Mme de Staël's personal disgust of Napoléon made her regard tsar Alexander (who reigned 1801—1825) as an ally; they were both at war with Napoléon—the tsar of course through Russia. This may explain why Mme de Staël believed so much in the tsar's intention to reform Russian society, which in the end turned out not to be genuine. Even if Alexander I did introduce some reforms in the field of education and administration he did not abolish serfdom. When Russia in 1812 was attacked by Napoléon, foreign politics overshadowed everything else. Alexander I, like Catherine II before him, ceased his reforms and, finally, turned to personal mysticism, consistently, one could say, with the ideas of Romanticism of that time. However, Mme de Staël was not the only one to believe in Alexander I. Karamzin wrote in 1810:

Who will estimate the years which lie ahead of Russia? I hear the prophets of imminent disaster, but my heart thank God, refuses to believe them. I see danger, but not as yet destruction!

Russia is still million strong, and the autocrat is a sovereign inspired with zeal for the public good. If being human, he commits errors, he undoubtedly does so with good intentions—this itself is an indication that they will probably be corrected in the future. (Karamzin's memoir on ancient and modern Russia, p. 204, trans. Pipes 1959)

Mme de Staël's son asks for indulgence in the introduction to *Dix années d'exil* with his mother's inability to foresee that politics in Russia would change in a direction towards oppression "pour la malheureuse Europe" within a couple of years.

Mme de Staël does not really connect serfdom with autocracy, but rather with the nobility's tradition of power which she never reflects upon in her account of her travels. When faced with serfdom she finds it repulsive of course and very Russian. She met it under the surface in the magnificent palaces in St. Petersburg. A surface that was at first sight familiar to her but proved to have cracks in which serfdom was shown, like a Russia from beneath. Mme de Staël writes:

Cet échantillon de l'espèce humaine avilie était pénible à regarder; il me sembloit voir, au milieu de toutes les pompes du luxe, une image de ce que l'homme peut devenir quand il n'a de dignité ni par la religion ni par les lois, et ce spectacle rabaissoit l'orgueil que peuvent inspirer les jouissances de le splendeur. (Mme de Staël, p. 323)

It seems to be difficult for her to define this contradictory state of things. Mme de Staël doesn't relate this phenomenon to Peter I's ambition to make Russia more Western with superficial reforms from above. When describing the Russian Mme de Staël gives him characteristics reminiscent of Dostoyevsky's novel-figure Dmitri in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1872). She depicts the Russian man as passionate, fond of pleasures and unreflective but relatively good. The object of her observations is mainly the nobleman and his family. But her attitude towards the Russian character is ambiguous. She is positive about its originality but rejects what she finds barbarous, for example serfdom.

Mme de Staël is inconsistent regarding Russian autocracy. To civilize Russia is the right thing to do and autocracy can then be justified, but at the same time she defends what she regards as an expression of Russia's exotic originality. When she reflects upon art she comes to same conclusion as Diderot: Russia should develop an art of its own—not imitate the Western. However Mme de Staël observes a Russian literature in development. Ten years after her visit to Russia Pushkin initiated the golden age in Russian literature.

When Mme de Staël arrived in Russia in 1812, Alexander I appeared as a reformist ruler, and she was charmed by him personally. In this aspect her meeting with the tsar is reminiscent of that between Catherine II and Diderot who was also seduced by the empress' personality. When reading Mme de Staël's travel book it may be useful to keep in mind though that she did not have an explicit political mission when going to Russia, she was travelling because exile was forced upon her.

Mme de Staël's meeting with Russia

On ne sauroit trop le répéter, cette nation est composé des contrastes les plus frappans. Peut-être le mélange de la civilisation européenne et du caractère asiatique en est-il la cause. (Mme de Staël, p. 273)

The question she asks, after observing the amazing contrasts of which Russia seem to be built, is how these can be explained. Perhaps, Mme de Staël continues, by the Russian mix of European civilization and Asian character. This problem of defining what Russians really are is a main interest that Mme de Staël keeps throughout the book. Her ability and desire to really observe the Russian nature never fails.

When meeting the Russians she has difficulties in deciding whether they are Europeans or Easterners, but concludes that they have a European appearance but are oriental beneath:

Les russes ont, selon moi, beaucoup plus de rapports avec les peuples du midi, ou plutôt de l'orient, qu'avec ceux du nord. Ce qu'ils ont d'euro péen tient aux manières de la cour, les mêmes dans tous les pays; mais leur nature est orientale. (Mme de Staël, p. 260)

Also the Russian religion seems to her to be closer to the oriental one:

On se sent, en Russie, à la porte d'une autre terre, près de cet orient d'ou sont sorties tant de croyances religieuses, et qui renferme encore dans son sein d'incroyables trésors de persévérance et de réflexion. (Mme de Staël, p. 261)

Mme de Staël expected to meet barbarism in Russia, but when depicting the Russian people she finds that her prejudices proved to be wrong—barbarism was something that she would meet later on in the palaces of St. Petersburg. This made her connect the Russian barbaric character with the nobility and not with the Russian people. Even when arriving at St. Petersburg her account of her journey tells us that she still feels that she is somewhere in between Europe and Asia.

Viewing St. Petersburg she admires Russian persistence in the fight against nature which once made the building of the city possible. When writing about this she does not seem to know that St. Petersburg was build by serfs. Mme de Staël lived close to the statue of Peter I by her compatriot and the friend of Diderot, Falconet. When looking at it through the window she makes following remark:

On voit écrit sur le piédestal de la statue; *A Pierre premier, Catherine seconde.*
 Cette inscription simple, et néanmoins orgueilleuse, a le mérite de la vérité.
 Ces deus grands hommes ont élevée très-haut la fierté russe. (Mme de Staël, p. 298)

In St. Petersburg Mme de Staël senses something unnatural, artificial. She sees inhabitants that appear to come from the South but are doomed to live in the North, and therefore are forced to fight against nature. However, people that she discerns as *people* seem not to be bothered by the cold sleeping in the snow under their wagons. Mme de Staël is in fact linking the noblemen, with their sophisticated manners, to the South, and the people with their simple habits to the North. She reflects on the surroundings of St. Petersburg:

La nature, aux environs de Pétersburg, a l'air d'un ennemi qui se ressait de ses droits dès que l'homme cesse un moment de lutter contre lui. (Mme de Staël, p. 298)

In the portrait of the climate of St. Petersburg as an enemy trying to fight off civilization, she reminds us of Pushkin—or rather Pushkin reminds us of her when, in 1833, twenty years after her visit he published the poem “The Bronze Horseman”. Mme de Staël observes another battle specific for St Petersburg—the one against time. This she describes in her text after

she visited the Kazan cathedral, built as a model of St. Peter's church in Rome:

On ne fait pas en deux ans ce qui a coûté un siècle aux premiers artistes de l'univers. Les Russes voudroient, par la rapidité, échapper au temps comme à l'espace; mais le temps ne conserve que ce qu'il a fondé, et les beaux-arts, dont l'inspiration semble la première source, ne peuvent cependant se passer de la réflexion. (Mme de Staël, p. 301)

Mme de Staël depicts the magnificent interior of the cathedral but she also notes that the exterior is quite the opposite. The significant contrast is, according to her, due to poor imitation which underlines the difference between the Kazan cathedral and its model in Rome. What has been allowed to take a century to build in the West the Russians only gave two years, this is what Mme de Staël so sharply distinguishes when trying, in her travel book, to explain what she discovers in Russia. This discussion about Russian impatience is analogous to Diderot's about the superficiality of Peter I's reforms. What is not allowed to take time can't be guaranteed any durability.

When meeting the Russian nobility of St. Petersburg she discerns a third struggle: the one against all mankind. She explains this by writing that the despotism rules people makes them fearful, therefore Russians are unable to develop civilized and honest relations to each other—the relations take on a character of extreme carefulness. She writes:

mais quand le souverain a le pouvoir illimité d'exiler, d'emprisonner, d'envoyer en Sibérie, etc. etc. , sa puissance est quelque chose de trop fort pour la nature humaine. (Mme de Staël, p. 327)

But she does not really connect the despotism that she so clearly sees with the tsar to whom she pays the following tribute:

Aucune de ces reflexions, on le sait, ne s'applique au gouvernement actuel, puisque son chef est parfaitement juste comme empereur, et singulièrement généreux comme homme. (Mme de Staël, p. 327)

Mme de Staël left Russia for Sweden later the same year 1812.

André Gide—a meeting with 20th-century Soviet Union

André Gide's (1869—1951) conversion to Communism at the beginning of the 1930's brought it increased prestige among the general public. In 1936 he was invited by the Soviet government to visit the country. In June that year he was received by the Union of Soviet writers which functioned as his host during his stay. According to Gide's diary his visit to the Soviet Union lasted for about two and a half months. The first note in his diary of his visit to Soviet is made in Moscow the 18th of June 1936 and his return to Paris is dated to the 3rd of September same year.

Gide had, at the time of his visit, published some of his most important fictional works. (Later, in 1947, he received the Nobel Prize for literature). As an author he was regarded as controversial, attacking the bourgeois way of life and advocating a more individual freedom, and in 1952 his works were banned by the Catholic church. Jean-Paul Sartre was one of his admirers. (Gide 1992, p. 7—13). Gide was also an influential literary critic at *Nouvelle Revue Française*. As an author and person he was contradictory: as a writer, he condemned the bourgeois order but he had himself had such an upbringing. He held on to a Christian concept of individual integrity which ran parallel to the ideal of altruism. Gide could bring those two ideals with him when turning to Communism. Perhaps they were even essential in this? In this context individualism served the collective. (Larousse).

The French way of looking at Russia was different in 1936 from what it had been at the time of Mme de Staël or of Diderot. Hélèn Carrière d'Encausse gives a historical overview of how the image of Russia in France developed in the introduction of *Russie 1837—1937* (1997). This image changed significantly in 1861, when tsar Alexander II abolished serfdom. Still, the image of a barbaric Russia that General Custine previously gave in the 19th-century was still the most common one. In 1843 Custine published in France the book *Russie en 1839*. The book was very well re-

ceived. The next book on Russia with the same significance as regards the image of Russia in France, was the first volume of *l'Empire de tsars*, written by Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu (the other two volumes were published in 1882 and 1889). In this book a new, much more attractive, image of Russia is depicted. It is an image of a Slavic Christian Russia belonging to Europe, as it always returned after having been separated from it by numerous invasions. Leroy-Beaulieu does not connect barbarism with Russia. In 1886 an important book about Russian literature was published by d'Eugène Melchior de Vogüé. In this book—*Roman Russe*—the author describes a sophisticated Russian culture. This book was important in French-Russian relations. So, at the end of the 19th-century the Russian soul and literature were loved in France. Carrère d'Encausse concludes this historical guidance by emphasising the total change in the way France looked at Russia. We may also add that in the period of 1890 and 1917 the cultural interchange between the two countries was momentous. Thanks to the two Russian patrons of the arts, Morozov and Shchutkin, French art could be shown in Russia and Russian art for the first time in Paris, where it attracted much attention.

Why was it that Gide in France in 1936 had such a confident outlook regarding the Soviet Union? I think that some of the answers are to be found in the situation in which Europe found itself at that time. The European tradition of viewing the individual as inviolable was, in the political climate of 1936, in a state of disintegration. This was to a great extent a result of the first world war's disastrous consequences. Out of this catastrophe two totalitarian ideologies grew which would lead mankind into an abyss never yet known in history: Nazism with its unprecedented atrocity, and Stalinism. In 1936 the Spanish civil war broke out; Fascism met Communism on Spanish soil. With Europe in such a state, the Soviet Union, with its building of a new socialist society, may have seemed to be an attractive political alternative. For Gide too, perhaps? Because in 1936, after reading Gide's travel book and the diary he kept during his stay, we are able to say that Gide—as so many others—did not know of Stalinism before his visit in the country. This may also explain why Gide expresses such expectations of the Soviet Union in his travel book. In this book he also on some occasions gives expression to his disillusionment with a Europe which he thinks had grown inflexible. The scene has changed since

the 18th-century. The Soviet Union in 1936 appeared as a vision, as a projection of a new, utopian, Europe.

How does the western Communist idea meet the Russian reality? Is the Soviet Union a synthesis of both or only a new designation of an old country? Has the proletarian dictatorship wiped out the century-old autocracy and “serfdom” (which had officially been abolished in Russia in 1861)? What answers has Gide to give on these issues? That is what I aim to find out in the following pages.

We must keep in mind that Gide could not make himself understood in any language in the Soviet Union, and was dependent on an interpreter. It was different at the time when Diderot and Mme de Staël visited Russia. They could communicate easily in French with the powerful élite in Russia. I think, too, that Gide’s remarkable ability to see the russianess in the socialist society of the Soviet Union may be explained by his familiarity with Dostoyevsky and his works. (Gide had written a biography of Dostoyevsky: *Dostoïevsky* published in 1923).

His travel book under the title *Retour de l’U.R.S.S.* was to be followed by another, *Retouches à mon retour de l’U.R.S.S.*, which was a reply to the French left-wing intellectuals. Here Gide reinforces his criticisms about the unsatisfactory state of things that he discovered during his visit.

Retour de l’U.R.S.S.

Aussitôt la porte franchise on se sent tout dépaysé. Dans cette foule de jeunes gens, hommes et femmes, partout le sérieux, le décence; pas le moindre soupçon de rigolade bête ou vulgaire, de gaudriole, de grivoiserie, ni même de flirt. (Gide 1936, p. 22)

At the time of Gide’s visit to the Soviet Union in 1936 he was very hopeful about what he was going to find—he travelled to learn not to teach. The mirror still stands at the frontier between East and West, but this time it is the West’s turn to be reflected in the East to find its way into the future. It is a journey not only to a foreign country but also into the future. This is

clearly shown early in his travel book when Gide visits The Moscow Park of Culture and describes it as if he had caught a glimpse of paradise: “There was, though, a country where the dream had come true” (Gide 1992, p. 19, my trans.) A perfect society is depicted, a verdant oasis filled by well organized activities such as sport and theatre. Along the way, however, Gide becomes increasingly critical in his travel notes.

When he discovered the material deficiencies he also saw the first cracks in the Soviet utopian society: those between illusion and reality. After Gide returned to Moscow, from where he started his journey, he visited some factories and was astonished by the orderliness in the workmen’s dwellings and among the machines as well as by the striking inefficiency that he noticed in the production process. Gide writes:

Il est parvenu, me dit-on, à faire en cinq heures, le travail de huit jours. (à moins que ce ne soit en huit heures, le travail de cinq jours; je ne sais plus). Je me hasarde à demander si cela ne revient pas à dire que, d’abord, il mettait huit jours à faire le travail de cinq heures? Mais ma question est assez mal prise et l’on préfère ne pas y répondre. (Gide 1936, p. 44)

Later in the book Gide describes visits to some kolkhozes. There he made new discoveries of depersonifying conformity. The uniformity was shown in the lack of personal belongings in the farmer’s dwellings. Gide could only see ugly, badly made pieces of furniture and identical portraits of Stalin. The farmers’ dwellings seemed to him to be interchangeable, as well as the farmer himself. Gide writes:

Le bonheur de tous ne s’obtient qu’en désindividualisant chacun. Le bonheur de tous ne s’obtient qu’aux dépens de chacun. Pour être heureux, soyez conformes. (Gide 1936, p. 48)

Above Gide is describing what is usually perceived as the good thing about depersonifying and the statement quoted is at first sight similar to the idea of the social contract that was discussed during the Enlightenment. This idea built upon the notion of a free will that says that when people give up their own will to the advantage of a general will then happiness will be given to all. When examining this concept in the Soviet context, as Gide so sharply does in his text, there is, however, an important difference to be

found: the question about the free will in its most concrete form. In a footnote Gide becomes more sceptical about the benefits of depersonifying and asks an additional question. He asks himself, whether the systematic depersonifying in Soviet can, at all, be called evolution. In his diary his opinion is more clearly expressed and he states that in Russia the happiness of all is obtained at the cost of individual freedom (Gide 1997, p. 535).

The next discovery Gide expresses in his travel notes is that the classless society in the Soviet Union does not exist in reality, he sees only the old tsarist order inverted. Leo Trotsky discusses the same problem in *The revolution betrayed*, written in 1936 during his exile in Mexico (published 1937). In his text Gide points to the difficulties arising the system of differentiated salaries, that was initiated to increase efficiency in production—this must in the end, Gide argues, lead to a new class formation. This new class, he continues, will appear as a type of proletarian bourgeoisie of conservative workmen, not unlike the French petite-bourgeoisie. Even though Gide declares in his travel account that there are as yet no classes in Soviet society, he states, at the same time, that there are poor people, and too many of them. Gide is shocked by the indifference that people on the “right side” show their “inferiors” and in his travel book he calls this problem *complexe de supériorité*.

Gide concludes in his travel book that the need for philanthropy is abolished when the state takes control of all parts of society. This phenomenon is shown in two ways: in the relation between people and in the relation between the Soviet Union and other countries. This, he argues, and other things done in a true revolutionary spirit have in the Soviet Union become counter-revolutionary. Gide writes:

Et je doute qu'en aucun autre pays aujourd'hui fût-ce dans l'Allemagne de Hitler, l'esprit soit moins libre, plus combé, plus craintif (terrorisé). (Gide 1936, p. 67)

It was during his stay in Georgia that Gide made the connection between the icon and the portraits of Stalin. When visiting Georgian homes he observed that where an icon used to hang there was instead a portrait of Stalin. When describing this in the travel book he does not reflect upon why, perhaps because Gide was only just in the process of discovering

Stalinism and its mechanisms, which were generally still quite unknown outside the Soviet Union. However, this interesting observation that Gide made has been further analysed by later researchers, such as for example Ulf Abel in his article “Icon and Soviet art” (1987). It was also in Georgia that Gide became personally familiar with Soviet censorship. Gide now asks himself in his travel notes: Was it Stalin who was responsible for all the shortages he had seen so far? Was it possible to reach for the future, and how much should it be allowed to cost? Gide writes:

Faut-il attendre encore, résigner, ou reporter à plus loin ses espoirs? Voilà ce que'en U.R.S.S. on se demande avec angoisse. Et que cette question vous effleure, c'est déjà trop. (Gide 1936, p. 74)

Gide started to have doubts.

When Gide discusses his view of the artist he underlines that the artist cannot be conformist and he gives Gogol as an example. Could authors in the Soviet Union be anything else than conformist? What happens if the writer is deprived of “all reasons to protest?” (Gide 1992, p. 59—60, my trans.). Later, when Gide discovered the full effect of Soviet censorship, his view of it presumably changed. He decided that it was not the successes of the socialist state that made protest superfluous but censorship that made it impossible. Who demanded censorship and why? What answers could Gide obtain to the questions that he wrote down in his travel book? We know from his diary (Gide 1997) that he met, among others, Eisenstein and Pasternak. These two figures, one a moviemaker and one a writer, both had difficulties in producing work of art in the Soviet Union after a decree in 1932 which demanded socialist realism in all artistic works. Gide writes:

Que cela fût politiquement utile, il se peut; mais ne parlez plus ici de culture. Celle-ci se trouve en péril dès que la critique n'est plus librement exercée. (Gide 1936, p. 84)

During his visit, Gide came to understand that culture was in danger in the Soviet Union. At the beginning of his journey he had another view—which he showed in a speech in Red Square in Moscow of Maxim Gorky's funeral. Gide then wrote:

Aujourd'hui, en U.R.S.S., pour la première fois, la question se pose d'une façon très différente: en étant révolutionnaire l'écrivain n'est plus un opposant [...]. (Gide 1936, p. 98)

Afterwards Gide put a footnote just here where he admits to having been wrong. He writes: "C'est ici que je me blousais; je dus bientôt, hélas! le reconnaître." (Gide 1936, p. 98).

When Gide was about to leave the Soviet Union he was worried: what would they say in Paris about what he had to tell? He decided to be honest in order to save his political conviction. In Paris he was violently criticized, by some intellectuals, for his report on the conditions that he had found in the Soviet Union. He felt forced to answer this criticism and wrote a second book, *Retouches à mon retour de l'U.R.S.S.* In this book he reinforces his criticism towards both the Soviet Union and his French antagonists among the intellectuals.

Retouches à mon retour de l'U.R.S.S.

The book *Retouches à mon retour de l'U.R.S.S.* was published in 1937, the year after Gide returned from his visit. This book was addressed to the French leftists who criticized Gide as having been superficial in his observations, or even as having been altogether wrong. In this book the central question that Gide puts is, how people in France were able to remain uncritical towards the Soviet Union, despite the knowledge of the Moscow trials. (A question which is still discussed, for instance recently in the important book *Le livre noir du communisme* published in 1997). The surface was exactly what seduced Gide in the Soviet Union and in *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.* he describes how Soviet society, at first sight well functioning, on closer examination turns out to be an illusion. Gide turns to the French intellectuals:

C'est au profond du fruit que le ver se cache. Mais quand je vous ai dit: cette pomme est véreuse, vous m'avez accusé de pas y voir clair—ou de ne pas aimer les pommes. (Gide 1937, p. 9)

Gide discovers the bluff at the heart of the Soviet system. The two Russian institutions autocracy and serfdom still exist in a new form: Stalin and the “fettered proletariat” (Gide 1992, my trans.). In *Retouches à mon retour de l’U.R.S.S.* he analyses the situation of the Soviet worker in a clearer and more far reaching way. Gide came to the conclusion that the system itself was nothing other than exploitation. He remarks that not until he returned to Paris was he really able to see the Soviet reality and how it worked. So it was also for Diderot—a reunion with the West was required to see Russia properly.

Gide continues the discussion from his travel book and expresses his astonishment at the vast gap between the privileged and the unprivileged and he noticed that his fellow writers were well rewarded according to this system initiated by the Party. And, as Katerina Clark brings up in her book *The Soviet Novel-history as Ritual* (1981), the main purpose of socialist literature was to legitimize the Party. Gide describes how disturbed he was by the luxurious reception he got in the Soviet Union, because he had expected equality. Gide describes how he bit by bit became more and more disappointed by what he met. He found it increasingly difficult to understand “Russia”, as had Diderot and Mme de Staël before him, and he finally started to reflect upon the origin of the Russians. Gide writes:

cette générosité inconsidérée qui disposait aussitôt de ma sympathie, ainsi que les défauts flagrants qui compromettent les réussites, sont imputables au tempérament semi-orientale de Russes et non point au nouveau régime; que j’eusse rencontré les mêmes à bien peu près, défauts ou qualités, du temps des Tzars. (Gide 1937, p. 60—61)

Later on in the text Gide seems to be clear about the Soviet communist illusion and the old Russian reality of tsarist autocracy. Gide writes:

c’est qu’il est extrêmement dangereux d’être triste, ou du moins laisser paraître sa tristesse. La Russie n’est pas un bien pour la plainte; mais la Sibérie. (Gide 1937, p. 64)

It is noteworthy that Gide in the above uses *La Russie* instead of, as one would expect, *l’U.R.S.S.* .

Gide is pointing to the fact that his criticism of the Soviet Union is made from a communist point of view. According to him it is the Soviet Union that betrayed the ideals with Stalinism and despotism. He writes:

C'est là le propre de despotisme: s'entourer non de valeurs, mais de serviabilités. (Gide 1936, p. 65)

However, Gide continues to replace l'U.R.S.S. with La Russie. Was it done on purpose, or was it unconsciously done after discovering that nothing really had changed in Russia? In *Retour de l'U.R.S.S.*, when Gide describes his first meeting with the country he does it in a way that makes you think of Utopia. In the beginning, he depicts a new European order, and nothing tells us that he ever expected to meet what he later in fact faced. To conclude, we may say that his books about his visit to the Soviet Union express a continuous wish to describe honestly, and to explain, a country that finally turned out to be incomprehensible.

Conclusions

Denis Diderot, Mme de Staël and André Gide did observe the same thing when discovering the Russian. In this they have something in common: in Russia they first believe they have discovered another Europe but they finally end up with the conclusion that they have not. What was familiar to them at first sight turned out to be only superficial, and beneath there was this incomprehensible country—which they explained by its orientalism. What then characterised this orientalism? Mainly the treatment of the individual, and the idea of individual integrity, by the privileged. They all observed the inexplicable despotism and its specific consequence “serfdom”. Although serfdom was abolished in 1861, Gide met it in the “fettered proletariat” and found it as repulsive as Diderot and Mme de Staël once did. Why did they react to this in the same way?

Diderot and Mme de Staël went to Russia and Gide to the USSR. but they all travelled with the expectations of meeting another Europe, better and utopian. This may be explained by the fact that Europe at the time of their journeys was a culture about to implode. In Diderot’s France a revolution lay ahead as an answer to a despotic monarchy, in Mme de Staël’s France despotism fought back and Napoléon frightened Europe, and finally in Gide’s France people had to relate to the dark forces of power that reigned in a Europe on its way to World War II. They sought happiness in the East and they would all be disappointed: the specific Russian autocracy with its serfdom were persistent atrocities unacceptable in a European humanistic tradition which they all were part of. The price of Utopia was shown to be too high for them—they could never accept the way the dignity of the individual was sacrificed in Russia / U.R.S.S.

This despotic way regarding the people explained, Diderot argued, all those reforms from above that were introduced by Peter the Great and that were doomed to fail since there was no foundation for them to succeed in Russian society. The same observation was made by Gide in the U.R.S.S. almost two hundred years later. Neither the ideas of the Enlightenment or

those of Communism were applied in a way comprehensible for a European intellectual. Peter I and Stalin both tried to reform and modernize Russian society, using ideas originally worked out by Western intellectuals, and, as history tells us, both eventually failed. Mme de Staël is of course also, in her travel book, observing the oppression of the individual which upset her a great deal. This European notion of the individual's right to his own happiness is a central, implicit question in common for all three of them. This question is perhaps the key to understanding why the western ideas that Diderot, Mme de Staël and Gide were a part of were so misunderstood, or perhaps sometimes even improperly used, by the Russian élite in power.

When the idea of a general will as the way to general happiness, so important to the philosophers of the Enlightenment, was adopted much later by the Russian intelligentsia in the mid 19th-century (as for example in Chernyshevsky's *What to do?* 1862—64, and later by Lenin) the content of it changed. A notion of elitism was introduced by this intelligentsia that said that one group of initiated people should govern the society and lead the people in the right direction—only in such a way could true happiness be achieved they all argued. The problem was, however, that this group had little knowledge about what people needed, and perhaps did not care too much about it either. The result was that a small group decided what the majority of people needed. Diderot could foresee this coming conflict in 1774 when he observed the absence of an ability in Russia to understand what was good and what was bad about the ideas coming from Europe. Diderot saw that the seed of the political philosophy of the Enlightenment could never come to grow on Russian soil since the natural conditions were not right. In the West, Enlightenment was a link in the European tradition going back to Antiquity, Scholasticism and the Renaissance. Figuratively speaking, one could say that threads of western ideas hang loose on the fabric of Russian Byzantine heritage and are from time to time picked up, but without an understanding of how to use them.

After absorbing the impressions that they received during their travels in Russia the reactions of Diderot, Mme de Staël and Gide towards the Russian society are all strikingly similar. They all found the Russian autocracy and its lack of respect for individual integrity to be repulsive and utterly unacceptable. What could a French traveller tell us today about Russia at the beginning of the 21st-century? What has changed and what has not?

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