Marquis Astolphe de Custine's Influence on Russia's Nineteenth Century Intellectuals

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Abstract
The Marquis Astolphe de Custine was a product of the French Revolution and, as a result, disliked much of what was occurring politically in France. He went to Russia in search of the ideals found within the ancient regime, but returned a more staunch believer in democracy. His work influenced a great many Russian intellectuals and spurred many of them to critique their own government at a time when doing so could mean death.

Introduction
The French Revolution of 1789 caused extreme changes in the order of France, which at the time was the largest and most populous country in Western Europe. The revolution also created much concern among the leaders of other nations due to its reach into all areas of legal, economic, and social life. Anxiety also arose from the possibility that, owing to similarities among the governments, this type of rebellion might also occur in their own countries.

The causes of the French Revolution lie within the monarchy itself. Throughout the eighteenth century, the monarchy of France grew increasingly ineffective, while still maintaining its claim to divine-right absolutism. Military defeats and the loss of the French overseas empire undermined the monarchy's prestige, while wars and insufficient revenues brought the country close to bankruptcy. Louis XVI attempted to reform taxation and administration to correct these financial problems, but he could not assert the absolute authority he claimed. The revelation of these weaknesses led to a growing criticism of the government.

Having failed to generate sufficient revenue based on existing laws, Louis XVI decided to institute additional taxing authority. Unfortunately, he sought this from the Estates General, which represented the three major classes of France. The convening of the Estates General created much hope among the people since the Estates General had not met since 1614, and, if Louis XVI wanted new taxes, he would have to offer something in return.

Widespread criticisms of the monarchy surfaced during the session of the Estates General, however, and the king decided to terminate the experiment. But the Third Estate, the bourgeoisie, refused to go before writing a constitution. They declared themselves the National Assembly of France, forcing Louis XVI to choose sides between the nobility and the bourgeoisie. He sided with the nobles and locked the meeting hall, forcing the National Assembly to a new location.

The National Assembly pledged not to dissolve until they had drafted a new constitution for France. When Louis XVI attempted to use force against them, the people of Paris came to the rescue of the National Assembly. A mob stormed the Bastille, killing all within and carrying the murdered heads on spears throughout the city streets. For the time being, the movement was saved.

The National Assembly tried to appease the populace by abolishing all privileges in landed property. The noblemen of the country led the way by giving up their rights to peasant fees and labor, hunting on farmland, tax exemptions and advantages, and special courts for the nobility. The assembly also declared that "feudalism is abolished." All of these reforms took place in a single night session, and became the first of many major reforms by the National Assembly.

Demonstrating their concerns about the National Assembly, crowds marched from Paris to Versailles Palace in October of 1789 and demanded them to convene in the city. Moderates in the assembly, sensing the potential for violence, drew...
back from the revolution, putting power in the hands of radical factions such as members of the Jacobin Society. This group was considered a government within the revolutionary government.

The final constitution of 1791 provided for a unicameral legislature and a suspensive veto for the king. Soon the government foundered, the king was deposed, and a new assembly drafted a new constitution. This new body was called the National Convention. It proclaimed the first French Republic and approved a constitution for the new republic in 1795.

**Emergence of Historiography**

Because of the march on Versailles in 1789, that year has become known as the turning point in France’s history, as well as an historical precedent for other countries throughout the world. It was the first time that absolutism had been overthrown in favor of a liberal constitutional government. It was a time of rapid change and persecution. The only true form of expression precluding punishment surfaced in the form of historiographies or travel journals, which criticized and praised France’s government indirectly through the governments of other countries. “History was the most popular subject, attracting the talents of gifted and mediocre alike, because history was the language of politics” (Mellon, 1958).

Philosophers, political theorists, and writers quickly discovered that these forms of literature were the only method by which to express their ideas without fear of retaliation from the government. Historiography soon channeled political agitation and became a symbol of the romantic outlook. An interest in customs, manners, new and remote scenes, and local color became the means by which political ideas were unraveled. This form and influence was the intellectual environment in which the Marquis Astolphe de Custine was raised, and in which he came to know the world and its people, including the inhabitants of Russia.

**Custine’s Life**

The Marquis Astolphe de Custine was born in revolutionary France in 1790. He received his title, which had been passed down from the eighteenth century, as an inheritance on his father’s side. His mother was also from a noble family, the Sabrans. Custine grew up near his grandfather’s porcelain factory at Niderville in the Haute-Lorraine. His grandfather had been imprisoned and goliotined by the government, as was his father. Delphine, Custine’s mother, was also arrested but later released to care for her young son. Rumor had it that she was mistress to Chautebriand after her husband’s death. Chautebriand often served as a father to young Custine.

With these influences, Custine matured to manhood surrounded by the effects of the revolution. The development of his personality can almost be considered a direct result of this turmoil. “He grew up handsome, brilliant, sensitive, delicate in health, in many ways talented, but with a latent, at first subconscious and repressed, but ultimately overpowering homosexual orientation” (Kennan, The Marquis de Custine, 1971). His primary interest became literature, especially German literary Romanticism such as that of Heine and Varnhagen von Ense.

In 1820, Custine agreed to a marriage arranged by his mother. He became quite fond of his wife and they even had a child. However, in 1823 she died and his repressed homosexual orientation surfaced. On October 28, 1824, Custine was beaten by soldiers, one of whom supposedly had arranged a rendezvous. True or not, all of Paris believed the rumor, and Custine’s reputation and position in society were entirely destroyed. In 1826 both Custine’s mother and his child died. Custine himself died in 1857.

Custine was acquainted with many great writers like Hugo, Balzac, Stendhal, Baudelaire, Lamartine, and Sophie Gay, but his homosexuality, or the rumor of it, was always a barrier to his social and literary life. As for his creative style, Custine lacked power as a poet, novelist, and dramatist, but excelled in travel accounts. “Travel was as he saw it, a means of changing not only scenes but centuries as well” (Kennan, The Marquis de Custine, 1971). His first sketches were of Switzerland, Italy, England, and Scotland. He completed a work on Spain in 1838, and the culmination of his literary career was La Russie et 1839.

Custine decided to go to Russia to test his ability to judge a non-European country. In some ways he wished to emulate Alexis de Tocqueville and his Democracy in America. Also, the decline of aristocratic institutions, and the advance of social equality in France disgusted Custine. He went east to find a country wherein the values of the ancient regime to which his fathers had been attached might be found intact. Hence, he sought a land where power was centralized and confined to the intentions of the capital city, the court, and the central apparatus of government.

**Nicholas I and His Russia**

The Russia of Nicholas I (1825–1855) was perfect for Custine’s purposes. The ruling classes spoke French, and Russia was a perfect model of enlightened despotism.

Born in 1796, Nicholas grew up during the wars of Napoleon and the reaction. With his limited military education, he saw military behavior and harsh discipline as an ideal for himself and others. His tutor, General Lansdorff, inspired him with a hatred for revolutionary and liberal views. Often compared to Peter the Great, he also had the same determination, iron will, sense of duty, capacity for work, and a passion for engineering. But Nicholas had ascended the throne unprepared in theory or practice, or in the management of state affairs. He also disregarded much that he had inherited from the former regime. He wanted to rule the empire as if under military command. Bent on improving himself morally and spiritually, he allowed moralism and didacticism to pervade his era. His
one goal was to educate right-minded subjects for the Russian empire.

Nicholas I endorsed the formula of "Official Nationality" to maintain political and social order over the country. This policy was proclaimed on April 2, 1833 by the new minister of education, Serge Uvarov (Riasanovsky, 1976). It consisted of three parts: orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality. Orthodoxy meant loyalty to the faith; autocracy meant loyalty to the tsar; and nationality meant loyalty to the fatherland. Autocracy included the absolute nature of imperial power and the link between the tsar and God. "The belief in autocracy was also based on the conviction of the inherent weakness and wickedness of man and his resulting need for a strong, authoritarian rule over him" (Riasanovsky, 1976). The policy was interpreted to mean the past, present, and future of Russia. As an official state ideology, Official Nationality stressed the role of the tsar as the mainstay against subversion and revolution, and as a result the government became the preserver of law and order.

Under this policy, Nicholas I punished all opposition and demanded and received praise from all directions. He feared two revolutions: one from the gentry, and one from the people. Overall, his government achieved very little. He left the fate of the serfs to the discretion of their landlords. What few concessions he was able to give to the peasants were eventually nullified. "Determined to preserve autocracy, afraid to abolish serfdom, and suspicious of all independent initiative and popular participation, the emperor and his government could not introduce in their country the much-needed fundamental reforms" (Riasanovsky, 1976).

**Custine's View of Russia**

The Russia that Custine found upon arrival was virtually stagnant, and oppressive. Before long Custine found his admiration for absolute monarchy waning. Custine believed that man must be led by either fear or persuasion, and, in the case of Russia, he found them led by fear. His view of their history depicted them first as slaves to conquerors, and then to their rulers. Hence, bondage became a constituent principle of Russian society, and all discourse became an expression of religious and political hypocrisy, for all was dictated from above.

Custine concluded that what the Russian political system produced was not good, was dearly bought, and that its ends were generally unimportant. What disturbed Custine the most was the power that the government had over thoughts and words. He felt that everything he heard was a reflection of the ruling ideology. As a result, he noted that individual dignity and freedom had been sacrificed to the goals of the state. He noticed that lies pervaded the governmental system, and, to control the people, these lies were deliberately contrived. As a result, he was constantly confronted with a duality: Russia as she really was, and Russia as depicted by the authorities.

Like other visitors, Custine was astonished by the enormity of the country. "Like everyone else, he was impressed by the barbaric splendor and confusion of the Moscow architecture. He lost himself in speculations about how vast and impressive Russian power would be if the seat of it were ever to be moved from St. Petersburg to Moscow; only then, he thought, would Russia's destiny be finally achieved" (Kennan, Custine, 1971). He thought that the architecture did not reveal the past or present of Russia, but its future. He believed that it would serve some grand design. What could this design be? Conquest in the name of ideological proselytism?

However, Custine felt that Russian conquest would be completely intolerable. He felt that a Russian domination, even one limited to diplomatic demands, would seem to be the deadliest thing to the world. By her own constitutional principles, Russia appeared to represent order, but the character of the people would propagate tyranny under the pretext of ending anarchy. "All that I can say is, that since I have been in Russia, I take a gloomy view of the future reserved for Europe. At the same time, my conscience obliges me to admit that my opinion is combated by wise and very experienced men. These men say that I exaggerate in my own mind the power of Russia; that every community has its prescribed destiny; and that the destiny of this community is to extend its conquests eastward, and then to become divided. Those minds that refuse to believe in the brilliant future of the Slavonians agree with me as regards the amiable and happy disposition of that people; they admit that they are endowed with an instinctive sentiment of the picturesque; they allow them a natural talent for music; and they conclude that these dispositions will enable them to cultivate the fine arts to a certain extent, but that they do not suffice to constitute the capacity for conquering and commanding which I attribute to them" (Custine, 1989).

**Reactions to Custine's Work**
The reviews of Custine's work were just as mixed as his views on Russia. Nicholas I threw the work to the floor and bemoaned that: "I am alone to blame; I encouraged and patronized the visit of this scoundrel" (Kennan, The Marquis de Custine, 1971). Later, his curiosity led him to recite passages to his family on dull evenings. Nicholas also read and re-read the criticisms of Russia obtained in the Decembrist interrogations.

Alexander Herzen, who was to become Russia's first socialist, declared it the best work written about Russia by a foreigner, and then fell into despair because it had taken a foreigner to write it. The Grand Duchess Helene, protectress and patroness of Kozlovski, was quoted as saying: "On a number of points he was right, but that instead of improving people he only embittered and shocked them...Certainly, his book would have an effect; but a more calm and less impassioned tableau would have had an even stronger one" (Kennan, The Marquis de Custine, 1971).

Many writers, historians, and
philosophers praised the work for its keen insight, while others dismissed it as a work from one who could never truly understand. No reviews of La Russie et 1839 appeared in Russian journals due to an official prohibition of its importation, sale, and public discussion. Thus, what Russian reaction existed was found within passages of letters and quotations of oral observations by members of the educated public. Though not published in Russia, French editions of the work did leak into the country, and educated society was conversant with the book.

In Western Europe, not many people knew enough about Russia to accurately judge La Russie et 1839. Of those who had visited Russia, many were not intellectual or they had not stayed as long as Custine had. The remainder were jealous of Custine and negated the work entirely. In France, the reviews were affected by a number of factors unrelated to its merit. Oftentimes, the journals were committed to certain positions on Franco-Russian relations and frequently the editors and reviewers reacted to Custine personally rather than to his work. "The combination, furthermore, of his reputed great wealth, his literary ambitions, and his reputation for willingness to finance the favorable reviewing of his own literary works, tended actually to put the editors on their guard against the printing of anything very favorable about things he wrote, lest they be suspected of being in his pay" (Kennan, The Marquis of Custine, 1971). Hence, there existed a slow response to the work due to the delicacy, length, and difficulty of finding qualified reviewers.

In 1843 and 1844, a series of pamphlets criticizing Custine's work did appear in Russia. They were viewed as being inspired and financed by the government. The first was written by Nicholas I. Grech, one of the leading representatives of the "reptile press." Yakov N. Tostoi, a Russian literary figure in exile, and later a correspondent for the secret police, wrote a second denunciation. Finally, a diplomat of Polish origin, Xavier Labenski, wrote a third response ridiculing Custine much in the spirit of the former two authors.

Labenski describes La Russie as "one sweeping tirade against Russia and the Russians" (Labenski, 1844). He further states that the work is anything but an impartial history of that country and its people (which Custine admits in the preface to the book). Labenski points out that Custine bases his opinions on the entire country on the actions of one individual and that he flatters himself with his own superior qualities of vision, which are nothing more than false generalities. "This rage for generalizing or sophisticating from the merest trifles or circumstances, and of drawing results and impressions from accidental incidents not to be forgotten, but seriously to be impressed 'on' the tablet of his memory; never for one moment abandons him during the whole course of his travels" (Labenski, 1844). Labenski characterized Custine's observations as prompt, trite, and ingenuous.

Labenski also stated that Custine gathered much more information than he could manage, and from that created nothing more than a "shapeless chaos of perverted intellect. As a result, Custine really arrives at no conclusions at all." Labenski summarizes Custine and his work: "As a writer of fiction and romances, we admire and respect him; but as a politician he requires a more noble and comprehensive mind; capable of more enlarged views, and which in a glance, when studying the physiognomy or characteristics of a people in one particular, fails not to lose sight of the general whole" (Labenski, 1844).

Rise of Nationalism

However, many Russians were dissatisfied with their system, and they seized the occasion of Custine's visit to show the European public a picture of the state of affairs in Russia which was more in keeping with their own views. Intimidated by strict government censorship, these writers must have been frightened, because Custine's work was more lurid than they had intended. Yet, due to Nicholas' lack of action in abolishing serfdom, these educated men had split with the tsar. They were also critical of Nicholas' self-appointed role as "the gendarme of Europe," the sworn enemy of liberalism and progress in the West. Increasingly, the new generation of educated Russians were abandoning traditional loyalty to the tsar.

Three main features can be found in this generation: 1) idealism and impracticability; 2) emphasis on theory and an unwillingness to compromise; and 3) interest in ethical problems and a desire to serve humanity.

Due to the increasing inequality among the classes in Russia resulting from Nicholas' censorship and repression, these men began to feel a new closeness to their nation, their people. This growth of nationalism, however, brought forth a feeling of greater responsibility for the troubles in the land, which affected all, whether nobleman or peasant. With this rise of nationalism came the rise of the Romanticist movement within Russia. One of the doctrines of Romanticism is that everything is where it is in the world because it participates in a single universal purpose. In other words, all individuals, groups, and systems are possessed of a "spirit," awareness of which is true enlightenment. This idea greatly impressed these young Russians. The enlightenment desired by the Russians came from Germany, for the tsar had forbidden any travel to France for fear of a French-inspired revolution.

This method of thinking led to the wave of social idealism previously described and to the reactionary and progressive direction these men took. One could either believe that modern history was dangerous or alien, or one might feel a new world waiting to be born. One knew the old institutions would fall away under the struggling of the "spirit." These two visions of history and the world eventually divided the Russian intellectuals into two camps: the Slavophiles and the Westernizers. However, both camps deplored serfdom and the lack of education that pervaded the coun-
They believed that Russia had her own unique spirit and ought to go its own historical way: one quite different from that of the West. They believed that the character of Russia lay in "old" Russia, and that anything after Peter I constituted deviation from this path. They also believed that Greek Orthodoxy contributed to Russia's unique character. "In their conception, the Orthodox faith and the Russian people had preserved the ancient principle of spiritual Christianity in all its purity, while in the prevalence of material culture over spiritual. The consequent development of these circumstances had brought, in their opinion, at first Protestantation, and later modern Materialism, and the denial of the Revelation and all the truths of the Christian faith. The Slavophiles asserted that, in Russia, the state and society developed on principles of freedom, and the domination of democratic, communal elements, while in the West the state and society developed in principles of violence of enslaving one class or nation by other classes or nations, which resulted in the Feudal, aristocratic form of personal ownership of land, and the landlessness of the masses" (Kornilov, 1966). It might seem that the ideas of the Slavophiles are similar to the tsar's views of Official Nationality, but the Slavophiles demanded complete freedom of speech and full independence for personal, communal, and church life. This group included such philosophers as Khomiakov, Aksakov, and Kireevsky.

The Westernizers, on the other hand, included writers like Belinsky, Herzen, and Chaadaev. The Westernizer's views did not form an integrated whole and they often switched positions quickly. However, certain general positions held this loose-knit group of intellectuals together. Like the Slavophiles, these men were influenced by German idealistic philosophy, but they arrived at different conclusions. They argued that Russia should follow the West's historical path. Thus, the Westernizers took a positive view of development of the West and criticized the Russian system. Whereas the Slavophiles closely followed orthodoxy, the Westernizers placed little importance on religion. "To be more exact, the moderate Westernizers retained religious faith and an essentially idealistic cast of mind, while their political and social program did not go beyond mild liberalism with an emphasis on gradualism and popular enlightenment" (Riasanovsky, A History, 1984). The more radical of these men eventually began to call for revolution.

In contrast, the Slavophiles disliked the criticism of the Russian system from the West, and all suggestions of "revolution." It was these men that harshly criticized Cusine's work as invalid and written by an ignorant foreigner who could never truly know Russia. On the other hand, Westernizers were greatly inspired by Cusine's insight into the problems of Russia, as well as by his form of writing, which many began to follow in their criticisms of the Russian system. Belinsky, Herzen, and Chaadaev, for example, sought by this method to elude censorship.

Praise for Cusine

Belinsky was born in 1811 to a poor military surgeon. After three years at the University of Moscow, he was dismissed and never received a degree. His education was achieved through reading and contact with other students. When he left the university he engaged in journalism. In 1834 he published Literary Musings, which may be regarded as "the beginning of Russian intelligentsia journalism." Intelligentsia is a Russian word invented in the 19th century that has since acquired world-wide significance. Its members thought of themselves as united by something more than mere interest in ideas; they conceived themselves as being a dedicated order, almost a secular priesthood, devoted to the spreading of a specific attitude of life.

Belinsky's articles were filled with irreverence for all that was old and respected in Russia. Finally, in 1839, he was invited to be the principal critic of Notes of the Fatherland. He went to St. Petersburg and settled there (Mirsy, 1949).

It was in St. Petersburg that Belinsky was inspired by romantic idealism, and by 1841 his ideas assumed their final form, historically the most important. He believed "that literature should be true to life and, at the same time, inspired by socially significant ideas" (Mirsy, 1949). For this reason, he approved of Cusine's work. Belinsky had a knack for presenting his ideas in a simple and easily comprehensible manner to his readers. He thought that the struggle against the current reality had to resemble that of France between 1789 and 1830. Russians had to eliminate the dynasty, abolish the monarchy, and put an end to serfdom. He criticized the government indirectly through his literary criticism. "Belinsky set a pattern for future Russian writers. First, as a literary critic, he advanced the influential theory that one must evaluate literary works in part on the basis of their political message. Second, Belinsky used his literary essays to get around the system of censorship. Comments on literature became a means to criticize aspects of Russian life" (Heyman, 1993).

Another leader of this period was Alexander Herzen. Herzen came from an established gentry family but was an illegitimate child. He received the usual French and impractical education. He became an opponent of the Slavophile, Khomiakov, and a progressive Westernizer. He eventually abandoned idealistic philosophy and became increasingly radical in stressing the dignity and freedom of the individual. In 1847 he left Russia for France, never to return. Finally, Herzen settled in England in 1852 and began the Russian free press abroad. His greatest accomplishment, however, was the Kolokol, a weekly journal that acquired an enormous influence in Russia, even though it was officially banned (Mirsy, 1949). It was read by everyone, including those in power. In the years from 1857 until 1861, Kolokol was the principle political publication in Russia.
However, Herzen was more remembered for what he wrote between his departure from Russia and the beginning of the Kolokol. These works included Letters From France and Italy, From the Other Shore, and his autobiography, My Past and Thoughts. He wrote with the aim of influencing other men’s actions and opinions. There existed little introspection in Herzen’s writings, which also greatly added to their attraction. He spoke of himself in a manner applicable to every educated Russian, as if he was Russia, hence producing a great portrait of Russian society. As a result of his own style, he greatly appreciated Custine’s form and used it in some of his later, more political writings.

Peter Chaadaev also praised Custine’s work and followed his style of writing. In his earlier years, Chaadaev had been a Hussar of the Guards, and a liberal. In the twenties, he underwent a conversion to mystical Christianity, leaning to Rome. About 1830 he wrote his Philosophical Letters on the meaning of history, containing a criticism of Russia from the point of view of Catholicism. He was declared a lunatic and put under medical supervision, although he continued to live in Moscow.

Chaadaev felt that “Russia was retarded as a result of separation from the universal trend of European history” (Hans, 1955). Russia’s history was about the development of serfdom and autocracy, not emancipation. Although he was not entirely a Westernizer, due to his dedication to tradition, he was like a Westernizer for he agreed that Russia needed ordered liberty and a respect for individual rights, which could only be found in the West. He was not primarily concerned with political questions, but was more a philosopher of history and religion.

Belinsky, Herzen and Chaadaev definitely praised Custine’s work as an accurate picture of Russia under Nicholas I, and took on his style of historiography to criticize their government without serious consequence. Through Custine’s work, these intellectuals were able to present Europe with a view of Russia as they saw it, with its faults, even though Custine’s views and opinions were faulty.

**Conclusions**

Custine’s description of Russia is still in print and is a classic of its genre: travel literature. Yet, it is more. It is an indictment of absolute monarchy from one who supported that system until he saw its actual effects on Russia. It is a work which, however imperfectly, said what educated Russians could not say about their own country. Paradoxically, it seems to have had the greatest impact, not on its intended French audience, but on the very people it set out to describe.

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