



**LETTERS FROM
RUSSIA**
ASTOLPHE DE
CUSTINE

EDITED AND WITH
AN INTRODUCTION BY
ANKA MUHLSTEIN

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LETTERS FROM RUSSIA

ASTOLPHE DE CUSTINE (1790–1857) was born at the onset of the French Revolution and died under the Second Empire. His father was guillotined and he and his mother barely survived the Terror. A poet and novelist of slight repute, Custine gained recognition with the publication of the travel books *Spain under Ferdinand VII* and *Letters from Russia*, an enduring analysis of the roots and character of Russian despotism.

ANKA MUHLSTEIN was born in Paris in 1935. She settled in New York in 1974 where she began her career as a writer in French. She was awarded the Goncourt Prize in 1996 for her biography of Custine, and has twice received the History Prize of the French Academy.

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ASTOLPHE DE CUSTINE

The 1843 Translation

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INTRODUCTION

ASTOLPHE DE CUSTINE arrived in St. Petersburg on July 10, 1839. He reached Moscow on the third of August. Ten days later, he headed northeast for about 150 miles. He stopped at Yaroslavl, then spent a few days in Nizhny Novgorod, and returned to Moscow and St. Petersburg. On October 1, he was back in Berlin. His entire stay in Russia lasted less than three months. Custine did not speak a word of Russian, and traveled under the protection and surveillance of a government official. Yet he produced a most explosive and unexpected account of his journey, *Russia in 1839* or, as it is also known, *Letters from Russia*, one of those rare books that refuse to die.

Banned in Russia, Custine's work was an immediate success in Europe when it appeared in 1843, and was read widely during the ten years that followed. It was rediscovered in Russia in 1910, when an abridged version was published, only to be suppressed a second time under Lenin: any reader could perceive the parallels between the Russia of Nicholas I and the Communist State. Then, in 1951, at a time when the cold war turned into bloody combat on the Korean Peninsula, another English version (again abridged) appeared with a preface by Walter Bedell Smith, who had been the United States ambassador to the Soviet Union in the late 1940s. More substantial editions were published in the United States in 1989 and in France in 1990.

In the nineteenth century, the Russian philosopher Alexander Herzen declared Custine's book the most intelligent

work ever written on Russia; in the twentieth, George Kennan, himself a former chargé d'affaires to the Soviet Union, wrote that it was no doubt the best description available of the world that had given rise to Stalin. Because of its historical significance and its ongoing contemporary relevance, *Letters from Russia* has continued to be widely read and studied, and the character and the motivations of the author of this extraordinary work have also become topics of particular interest. Why, one wants to know, did Custine choose to travel to that distant and forbidding country, and why did he, an aristocrat and a dandy, a man of conservative opinions, a flattered guest of the Czar, immediately grasp the timeless cruelty of Russia's despotic regime?

As a writer, Custine's gifts included a keen eye, an avid curiosity, and a fiercely independent intellect—characteristics that explain both the motives and the success of his endeavor. Why go to Russia? The simple answer may be that Custine had a passion for travel. He discovered Italy, Germany, and Switzerland at a young age, and kept going back to those quintessential parts of Europe. He had also visited England and Scotland, and knew Spain quite well. The next step for a Romantic writer would normally have been either Jerusalem and the Middle East or America, which, thanks to Chateaubriand, had marked the new French sensibility. Russia was certainly a surprising choice but not an irrational one.

For years, Custine had published poems, novels, and plays without much success. However, in 1838 his account of a journey in Spain was well received by both the press and the public. Balzac, a much-admired friend, encouraged him to continue in that vein and suggested to him Russia or, as it was called at the time, the North:

There are very few modern books that can be compared to [yours]. . . . If you do the same for every country, you will have a unique collection in the genre and a collec-

tion that will be of the greatest value, believe me. . . . I will do everything in my power to persuade you to also describe . . . the North.

But Custine hardly needed to be spurred on. Russia had in fact been on his mind ever since Tocqueville, in 1835, had published his *Democracy in America* to enormous acclaim. Tocqueville made a point of contrasting Russia and the United States:

There are on earth today two great peoples who, having started from different points, seem to be advancing towards the same end: they are the Russians and the Anglo-Americans. They both grew up in darkness; and whilst Europeans were busy elsewhere, they suddenly placed themselves in the forefront of nations, and the world learned at almost the same time of their births and their greatness.

All other nations seem, more or less, to have reached the limits nature has assigned to them and within which they now need only to remain, but those two are still growing. . . . America is struggling against obstacles of nature; Russia against men. . . . The principal means of action for the one is liberty; for the other servitude.

Tocqueville believed reluctantly in the inevitable victory of the American model; Custine, more skeptical in every way, may well have hoped to discredit such a view through symmetrical comparison. The two men, in any case, had much in common. Their families had both been hounded and ruined by the French Revolution, and they themselves were both conservatives, troubled by the loss of their place in society but convinced of the impossibility of going back to pre-revolutionary principles. When Tocqueville points out that he has an "intellectual taste" for democratic *institutions*,

but that, as an instinctive aristocrat, he despises and fears the crowd, he anticipates Custine's question whether one "ought not to impose a silence on [one's] antipathies" and accept with good grace a wise and moderate representative government. Tocqueville went to the United States to study the effects of democracy in the American republic, and Custine hoped to find in Russia "new arguments against the despot that reigns at home, against disorder baptized with the name of liberty."

Why then did he return to France with his mind entirely changed? The fact that Custine begins his book by retracing the story of his family during the Terror gives us a clue. He had been born to privilege in an aristocratic family of considerable wealth, but at the wrong time, in 1790 at the onset of the French Revolution. His paternal grandfather, who had fought on the side of the Colonies in the war of American Independence and embraced the new ideals to the point of commanding one of the French revolutionary armies, was for all that imprisoned, tried, and executed in 1792. A few weeks later, his son, Astolphe's father, was also executed. Custine's mother was arrested. The boy, entrusted to the care of a devoted servant, saw her brought back home by armed men, who pushed her around while searching for incriminating papers. They ransacked the apartment, sealing off every room except the kitchen where Astolphe and his nanny had taken refuge. For a child these must have seemed incomprehensible acts, even though the brutal scenes he had already witnessed in the streets of Paris might have prepared him for more violence.

Custine's mother miraculously escaped the guillotine and, once free, went about recovering a part of the family's fortune. But she could not erase the memories of violence and the terror that had marred her son's childhood. The Revolution had robbed Astolphe of his property and his traditional rank in society, shaken his initial confidence in his surroundings,

and destroyed the world from which he sprang. But it gave him, in exchange, the assurance that he had a right to freedom. "I am certainly anything but a revolutionary, still I am revolutionized," he declared, and proved it by developing an absolute independence of spirit—independence that would prove crucial in resisting the Czar's blandishments.

But it is the legacy of fear inherited by Custine, as much as his independent spirit, that explains the insights he was able to take away from his short trip, notwithstanding his lack of Russian. Fear, Custine claimed, was the first emotion of which he had been conscious as a child; his first observations of brutality in a country under the sway of an absolute ruler awakened that memory. When Custine identifies Russia as "the empire of fear," he means it literally. He could not bear physical violence done to men or animals, and the spectacle of the streets in St. Petersburg, where men were punched and hit and hurt without awakening any reaction from passers-by, exacerbated his unease and anguish:

Under the terror which hovers over all heads, submission becomes the general rule of conduct; victims and executioners, all practice the obedience that perpetuates the evil which they inflict or to which they submit.

Custine was uninterested in statistics and industrial progress, but he was fascinated by the social consequences of violence. He may have been particularly attuned to this evil for another reason. Custine was a declared homosexual, ferociously attached to the freedom of his ways and equally conscious of the animosity his tastes could spark in others. His preternatural sensitivity to the tyrannical oppressiveness of orthodoxy and its mechanics made him quick to find means with which to outfox them. A hundred years later, another French writer, equally unconventional in his tastes,

André Gide, had a similar experience when he was invited by Stalin to make a speech at Gorky's funeral. Gide stayed a few days in Moscow, then made a short trip to the countryside, visited one or two collective farms, listened with stupefaction to the theories about art voiced by government officials, and, alone among the group of Communist sympathizers with whom he traveled, returned to write a book devoid of illusions. Men accustomed to being on the outside make clear-eyed observers.

Curiously, the enduring strength of *Letters from Russia* may in the end derive from what was perhaps Custine's greatest weakness: his tendency to trust impressions and emotions more than facts. His book is less a conventional political study than a recording of his personal response to the reality of Russia, leaving ample room for selective reporting as well as for his subjective, but very acute, judgments. Thus it is in some sense the lacunae, the omissions, in Custine's book that have kept it from becoming dated. Had Custine been interested in agrarian reforms and industrial development instead of fear, secrecy, and the arbitrary nature of the czarist system, his book would never have been perceived, when rediscovered more than a century after its initial publication, as a tantalizing beam illuminating in a new way the relation between Russia's past and its present.

Custine took four years to write his book, in which he adopted the epistolary form employed in his previous travel books on Spain and Italy. This flexible technique allowed him to vary his tone, return to a point of interest, ignore whatever bored him, and indulge in personal digressions without worrying about the strict inner logic of a conventional travelogue. The result is a bold, accessible, vivid, and persuasive account of his journey, which, to Custine's surprise and great joy, was an immediate commercial success. In part, the interest built on scandal. "Paris," Custine explained, "was full of Russians who started to screech like

eagles, or rather geese—imagine the noise!! They forced everyone to read it." Foreigners living in Russia or visiting there reported that the book provoked terrible anger. The Czar was outraged, and a courtier confirmed that he had thrown down the volume of the "despicable Custine."

Within two years, three editions were sold in Germany and two in England. Further reprints appeared regularly in France until 1854, a year in which the Crimean War lent the text added topical interest. It would be the last edition of the century. Custine died three years later, in 1857.

—ANKA MUHLSTEIN

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The present edition is based on an anonymous early translation of Custine's *La Russie en 1839*, entitled *The Empire of the Czar; or, Observations on the Social, Political, and Religious State and Prospects of Russia, Made During a Journey Through That Empire* and published by Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans (London, 1843). It has been slightly abridged. The editor has also taken the liberty of replacing some obsolete expressions with modern equivalents.