



Larry Wolff, Alexander Yanov

## Is Russia a European country?

Correspondence

Larry Wolff from the US and Alexander Yanov from Russia discuss in this exchange of letters Russia's relation to Europe. With regard to its historical legacy, they reflect where Russia bases its political and cultural home. Is Russia maybe marked by a "civilisational instability" and "inability for political modernisation" that fundamentally set it apart from Europe? And if Russia belongs to Europe, as Wolff and Yanov argue, what defines "Europeanism" in the first place?

20<sup>th</sup> of November, 2002

Dear Alex,

In the brilliant and prophetic last paragraph of *The Origins of Autocracy*, published twenty years ago, in 1981, you observed that, just as Russia was "at the crossroads" in the middle of the sixteenth century, "I am sincerely convinced that now, at the end of the twentieth century, it is once again at the crossroads." You then posed the alternative paths at the crossroads. "What awaits Russia: a new 'absolutism saturated with Asiatic barbarism' (in Shmidt's words) or, finally, after four centuries of delay, 'absolutism of European type'?" It seems to me remarkable that you were able to formulate the problem this way in 1981. Your historical modelling, throughout *The Origins of Autocracy*, seems to anticipate the turning point of 1991 – while, as we well know, most "experts" in the West, including our most celebrated Sovietologists, were unable to predict anything accurately from within the upheaval of the 1980s. In particular, what your model seems to have predicted is the inevitable return of an oppositional European alternative to Russian despotism.

My first question to you is about the nature of the "crossroads," and whether it is really a useful metaphor. Were there really two clear paths, crossing one another, in the sixteenth century, in the eighteenth century, in the twentieth century – and, of course, today at the beginning of the twenty first century?

You quote Shmidt<sup>1</sup> on "Asiatic barbarism," and you speak of the responsibility of historiography in the conclusion of *The Origins of Autocracy*, so I would ask you: is it the historians themselves, or more generally the intellectuals, who have laid out the crossroads, and signposted the crossing paths, thus simplifying politics and history with the perhaps illusory sense of clear and radical alternatives? I ask this because the crossroads that you describe – this way to Asiatic barbarism, that way to European civilization – are so remarkably similar to the dilemma of Russia as posed by the *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment, as I interpret them in my book *Inventing Eastern*

*Europe*. The alternatives of Russian despotism and European absolutism that you describe in *The Origins of Autocracy* were also the philosophical alternatives proposed in the Enlightenment as Russia's destiny.

So, as an intellectual historian, I would ask: have these alternatives been constructed by intellectuals, and, if so, how well do they describe the social and political circumstances of Russia? And, in particular: how convincingly can we really define what we mean by "Europe"? Or is that a concept that is constantly being revised and reconceived, through centuries, right up to the present moment, as the European Union decides whom to admit to Europe and whom to keep waiting? In other words, does the question of whether Russia is a European country, or even whether it is partly a European country, really allow for an objective historiographical answer, or is the answer to this question too easily manipulated depending upon how one chooses to define Europe?

In your recent articles on Russian nationalism and on Russia's "window of opportunity" you have written very persuasively about the urgency of finding Russia's European future. I agree with you completely about that, but wonder whether the crossroads can be posted with sufficient clarity. Is there only one European historical legacy, or are there several? And, accordingly, is there only one path to Europe, or are there several? To recognize Russia as European and to include Russia in the Europe of the twenty-first century, do we need to recognize multiple paths and directions – including curves and diagonals – rather than a clear-cut crossroads?

My next question for you would be: who defines Russia's relation to Europe? Is it the Russians themselves, or is it the intellectuals from outside Russia, intellectuals from Western Europe who speak for Europe as a whole, as in the age of Enlightenment? As you know, there are even Americans who, from across the Atlantic, would presume to define Russia's relation to Europe. How do they fit together then, these attempts to understand Russia's relation to Europe, from inside Russia, and from outside Russia?

In 1793 a comedy was performed at carnival in Venice, called *Gli Antichi Slavi*, which translates as "The Ancient Slavs" or, maybe better, "The Old-Fashioned Slavs." This drama was set in Slavic Dalmatia, then ruled by Venice, and described a romantic triangle in which a Dalmatian girl was being wooed by two Slavic suitors. One was an old-fashioned Slav from the mountains, violent and primitive in his manners, with a long moustache and a heavy sword. The other was a new-fashioned Slav from the Adriatic Coast, who wore Italian clothing and exhibited Italian manners, in short, a civilized Slav. The girl had to decide which one she wanted to marry, and they both presented their credentials in defending their respective Slavic identities. I think you can guess which one she chose to marry in the end.

Now this was a comedy composed in Italian, and both of the Slavs, the primitive and the civilized, were performed by Italian actors on the Venetian stage. It's an example I think of the "crossroads" of identity, here formulated as a comic romantic dilemma. To the Venetians the dilemma was self-evident: either the Slavs would choose Italian clothes and manners and thus become civilized, or they would just remain barbarians forever. But could the dilemma possibly have seemed so simple or so clear to real Slavs in the eighteenth century?

I would ask you whether it's possible that Western intellectuals have imposed a similar sort of simplification of alternatives on Russia since the 1990s, and whether Russians also sometimes oversimplify the alternatives. I saw lots of attractive and expensive Italian shoes for sale in Moscow shops when I was there last summer. But surely "Europe" is more complicated than that. So, how can we clarify the crossroads, without simplifying the alternatives?

Larry

22<sup>nd</sup> of November

Dear Larry,

Let me start by telling you a story that happened to me in September–October 2000 (which, in its broad lines, I have already told Russian readers). A year before, I had published, in Novosibirsk, a book called *Russia versus Russia*. Although its topic was different, the alternative that Russia is facing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was formulated, as you may have guessed, in a way quite similar to that in *The Origins of Autocracy*. I decided (a legitimate desire, don't you think?) to talk about it with my Russian colleagues. I discussed it in at least a dozen academic institutes and seminars, as well as on radio and even on television.

To say the least, my colleagues' reaction was anything but trivial. In particular, most of them unflinchingly insisted that Russia is not Europe, and that there is nothing for it to do there – for a host of reasons, from basic to highly sophisticated. The climate, they said, is different, as are the distances and everyday habits. Some stressed how absurd the Russian elephant would look in Europe's cramped china shop, which Konstantin Leontyev <sup>2</sup> had once scornfully called the mere "Atlantic shore of the great Asian continent". Others thought it humiliating that a "God-bearing nation" should strive to enter stuffy, down-to-earth, spiritless Europe.

Others still cited Leontyev, who had bequeathed to us that "Russia should leave the European track completely, choose a wholly new path and take up the leading position in the intellectual and social life of humanity". Or the contemporary Moscow philosopher Vadim Mezhuev, who is certain that "a Russia living according to the rules of economic expediency is no good to anyone in the world, including herself". For she isn't a country at all, but "an enormous cultural and civilisational idea".

I don't know what you would have made of such a reaction to an alternative which, as you say, had already been proposed by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment. To me, it was predictable. And this, I think, is where these *philosophes'* main mistake lay: with rare exceptions (Herder, Rousseau), they treated Russia as just another part of "semi-barbaric" Eastern Europe (or even, like Voltaire, encouraged it to expel the Turks and conquer Constantinople), whereas Russia thought of herself very differently, and in fact, as you see, she still does.

As events of the past decade attest, whatever the Enlightenment may have said of its "barbarity", Eastern Europe has made its choice. It has, *unanimously*, chosen integration into Western Europe. Which in its turn, however much the *philosophes* may have boasted of its unique "civilisation", has agreed to accept these countries into its fold as equals. Only Russia has still not made its choice.

Why? This is what my book *Russia versus Russia* (republished in Moscow in an enlarged version this year, as "Patriotism and Nationalism in Russia") is about.

But you will probably want to know what I replied to my opponents. I will tell you. The more so since I think this will answer your most important question, the one about the nature of the crossroads at which Russia is standing today. Look, I said to my colleagues, we are now sitting together here in Moscow, freely discussing the most important issues – without exaggeration, issues of fateful importance for the future of the country. Now tell me honestly, do we have a guarantee that in, say, five or ten years from now we will still be able to discuss them here as freely? We don't? So isn't it time to understand why? And also to think about how it is that in Europe, such guarantees do exist, whereas here, they don't? Isn't now the long due moment for us, too, to provide ourselves with such guarantees, after four hundred years of roaming across an autocratic, imperial desert? For what, in the final analysis, is Europe, if not a guarantee of liberty?

I don't know whether my answer will satisfy you. In any case, as you see, it radically differs from the answer given by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment. What is at the heart of European civilisation are not manners, customs, clothes (your "Italian shoes"), or everyday habits, as they thought, but guarantees of liberty. This, at least, is what my generation of "Russian Europeans" thinks, as Sergei Witte<sup>3</sup> had called those who were of the same mind as him on this issue. "Barbarity", correspondingly, meant to him the absence of such guarantees.

My answer to your other question, about whether Western intellectuals determine the alternatives for Russia, is in essence contained in the story I have just told. No, unlike in the Enlightenment era, not only are they not determining them, but in fact aren't helping the "Russian Europeans" at all. Even the most radical among them have, so far, not gone beyond the slogan "Europe starts in Sarajevo". That Europe in fact starts in Moscow hasn't so far crossed their mind, it seems.

Finally, quite frankly, I did not understand your question about the "curves and diagonals" which might lead Russia into Europe more quickly than a clear-cut alternative. In any case, as long as you don't explain what "curves", exactly, you mean, it seems to me that they only confuse things.

But it's time to say a few words about your book, which I have read with great attention and pleasure. It has made a great impression on me – most of all, by its author's frightening erudition. Although, of course, I knew about, say, Voltaire's argument with Rousseau, or Kant's with Herder, I admit I had never heard about the Saint-Petersburg misadventures of a Lemercier.

But what readers, especially Russian readers, will not, I fear, gather from your work is an idea of the "courage and genius" of your heroes, the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, which you mention in your foreword to the American edition. Rather he will carry away an impression of their haughtiness and vanity as well as, in your own words, of their "arrogant and conscious distortion of the image of Russia".

Quite probably, this is no accident. For the whole enormous critical work of these people, to whom Europe owes to have become what it has become, was, unfortunately, left out of your research. I understand, of course, that yours was

a different topic. But after all you do write that your book is "not so much about Eastern Europe as about Western Europe". And yet, readers will not gather from it why they should esteem Europe and the heroes of its Enlightenment. Why is that?

Perhaps you asked more questions in your first letter than I have been able to answer. But, as they say in Russia, the evening has not come yet, or, in English, the night is still young. Our correspondence isn't over yet.

*Yours, Alex.*

28<sup>th</sup> of November

Dear Alex,

Catherine the Great, in the *Nakaz*<sup>4</sup> declared that "Russia is a European state." I think that you and I would both agree with her on this point, though many of your fellow Russians and many of my fellow Americans might disagree. I wonder, however, whether Catherine was stating something that she considered to be a fact of geography, politics, history, and culture, or whether she was, rather, issuing a programmatic statement of policy, insisting that she was determined to make Russia into a European state. I am inclined to think the latter, because – and here perhaps you and I do disagree with each other – I think that "Europe" is not a concretely definable entity. It seems to me that "Europe" (as we would say in English about "beauty") is very often in the eyes of the beholder, subjectively determined, both from within and from without. By which I mean that both perspectives matter: whether Russians regard Russia as European, and whether non-Russians regard Russia as European. Russia's ambivalent status reflects precisely, I would say, the controversy among our colleagues, yours and mine.

Catherine must have understood this very well, since she was, after all, German by origin and, at the same time, Russian by adoption. Diderot, of all the famous *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, was the one who could best appreciate the European nature of Russia, for he made the voyage himself and travelled to Saint-Petersburg to visit Catherine and see Russia with his own eyes. Yet Diderot was also sceptical by intellectual temperament, and when he commented on Catherine's *Nakaz*, he remarked that it didn't really matter at all whether Russia was European or Asiatic: the crucial thing was whether its qualities and manners were good or bad, and that was quite irrelevant to whether they could be attributed to one continent or another. In spite of my conviction that Russia is European – and I have felt this with deep sentimental certainty when I was in Saint-Petersburg (or Moscow) in the 1990s (and the 1970s) – I am also rather sympathetic to Diderot's scepticism, to his recognition that the labelling of good or bad qualities according to this or that continent is a kind of semantic and sentimental artifice. That's why I believe that "Eastern Europe" is something invented.

When you suggest to me that a crucially European factor in Russia today is the guarantee of the freedom of speech, of course I have to agree that freedom of speech is a far weightier criterion than Italian fashion, but then I have to wonder: is freedom of speech really distinctively European? To be honest, many of my compatriots would consider it to be rather more characteristically American. And, considered historically, can freedom of speech give us a useful criterion for European status in past centuries? Certainly it is not what

Catherine had in mind when she declared Russia to be a European state, but Diderot surely also had reason to doubt whether he enjoyed that freedom in France.

Clearly, there are a set of precise criteria that define membership in Europe today, that is, membership in the European Union, but can we formulate Europe clearly before 1945, let alone before 1789? When I read your "Origins of Autocracy" I admire your attempt to distinguish between Russian despotism and European absolutism, but I am nevertheless somewhat dubious. I might accept that Russian despotism is distinctive in the age of Ivan the Terrible, but is there really a single form of European absolutism that describes everyone else?

When I was in Saint–Petersburg in 1993, I took a walk in the Summer Garden with a Russian colleague on a beautiful summer day – sunny sky, live music, ice cream, high spirits – and I asked my colleague: "Can you tell me: how exactly would this scene have been different ten years ago? What precisely has changed?" He replied: "Well, ten years ago, I wouldn't have been walking here talking to you."

This observation certainly confirms your own sense that freedom of speech represents a fundamental difference in Russia today, but I would ask you: is that freedom in itself characteristically European, or is it rather the achievement of that freedom that reflects European development in the twentieth century? After all, it's not as though Russia alone in Europe lacked such freedom in the twentieth century. That conversation between me and my Russian colleague in Saint–Petersburg in 1993: couldn't I have had a similar exchange with a Spanish colleague in Madrid in 1980 or a German colleague in Munich in 1950? Those are the zig–zags that I had in mind in my last letter: the convoluted courses by which Germany and Spain, or Italy and Greece, or Hungary and Poland, arrived at their "European" status in the twentieth century.

The British historian Mark Mazower has recently published a book *Dark Continent*, which suggests that the history of Europe in the twentieth century should be read not as the simple progress of democracy, but rather as an ongoing struggle between liberalism and democracy on the one hand and fascism, authoritarianism, and communism on the other hand. In this sense, the Russian experience, though extreme, was also consistent with historical embattlement elsewhere in Europe in the twentieth century. (The wit of the title is that, in English, when we say "the dark continent," we usually mean Africa, not Europe.)

Yes, it is a serious problem that some of your Russian colleagues reject the idea of Russia as part of Europe, and likewise that some of my American colleagues reject that idea. I would propose that part of the problem might be, not just a wrongheaded Slavophile or Orientalist view of Russia, but also perhaps an oversimplified view of Europe itself.

*Yours, Larry*

*29<sup>th</sup> of November*

Dear Larry,

I think that an attentive reading of Catherine's *Nakaz*, as well as of her *Antidote*<sup>5</sup> and similar writings by those Russians who were of the same mind as their empress, makes the meaning of her proud statement that "Russia is a European state" rather clear. For, after Montesquieu, to pass for a "non-European" country could only mean one thing: Asiatic despotism, i.e. dead statehood, "a living corpse", in the words of Vissarion Belinsky. Of course, Catherine, who had, in her own expression, "robbed" Montesquieu, didn't want her Russia to be considered a living corpse, in the company of "Persians, Chinese, and Turks".

As soon as we understand this, we would hardly doubt that for Catherine, Europe was not so much an aggregate of real states, each with its own history and fortunes, as a symbol of respectability. And even more importantly, to use a learned term, as an "ideal type" of statehood capable of political modernisation. And, frankly, I do not see any simplification of the problem in this. One only needs to look at contemporary Arab statehood in order to agree with Catherine, rather than Diderot (and yourself).

Let me draw your attention to the fact that, in *The Origins of Autocracy*, not only do I not call Russian statehood despotic, but I devoted practically the entire theoretical part of the book to a dispute with those who do (Karl Wittfogel, Arnold Toynbee, Richard Pipes etc.). Catherine was right: Russia is capable of political modernisation. And, in this sense, she indeed belongs to Europe. Apart from Catherine's own period of rule, the experience of Ivan III, Peter I and Gorbachev, whatever the defects of their policies, do not leave a shadow of doubt about this.

It is another question that political modernisation varies in each European country as well as in both of Europe's great offshoots, America and Russia. This is what the examples of Germany, Spain or Greece confirm, not to speak of Eastern Europe, all of which, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have suffered a terrible setback, a "Counter-Reformation", if you will. Russia's distinctive characteristic, in particular, lies in what I call her civilisational instability. Or, in other words, in the fact that she nearly lost her capacity for political modernisation several times, both in the late Middle Ages and in modern history, sometimes for entire centuries. The most striking example of this loss of European identity was her Muscovite century, which started after Ivan the Terrible's first autocratic revolution (and lasted from 1584 to 1689), when Russia contrasted herself with Europe as the only country of "true" Christianity, acquiring in the process even a "Russian God" of her own. It is from this stagnant Muscovite *Sonderweg* that Peter tore it with an iron hand.

And yet, one may say that the Muscovite *Sonderweg* was reborn as a result of the routing of the country's Decembrist<sup>6</sup> political elite, which intended to bring the Petrine reform to its logical conclusion, and of Nicholas' I next autocratic revolution (1825–1855). This is why, as Nicholas Riazanovsky, one of the best American historians, noted, "Russia has never made up for the thirty years she lost under Nicholas".

The format of a letter does not allow me to continue this historical digression. Let me just say that today's Russian elites, including the academic one, exactly like in the post-Nicholas era, continue, as I see it, to waver between the *Sonderweg* temptation and Europe.

This is why, in relating the conversations I had with my colleagues in 2000, I didn't talk just about freedom of speech, as you interpreted it, but about

*guarantees* of this freedom. For if, like in Catherine's times, Europe is still a symbol of political modernisation, then, in our time, such modernisation is impossible without guarantees of liberty. And, as goes without saying, it is incompatible with another digression into a *Sonderweg*.

In conclusion, I'd like to remind you, if I may, that I am still hoping to hear a reply to my question about why it is that from your book, Russian readers can hardly learn why they really should esteem Europe and the heroes of its Enlightenment.

*Yours, Alex*

*2<sup>nd</sup> of December*

Dear Alex,

The *philosophes* of the Enlightenment are indeed the intellectual heroes of modernity, and, though it would be difficult to identify a set of political and philosophical issues on which they all agreed, their most precious contribution to our modern world is their fierce critical spirit. So I hope I do not need to apologize for looking at them critically in my book "Inventing Eastern Europe," since any spirit of uncritical appreciation would be contrary to their own intellectual legacy.

Catherine spoke well when she saluted Voltaire for having fought against the enemies of mankind: superstition, fanaticism, and ignorance, among others. And yet, I would really hesitate to regard the eighteenth-century *philosophes* as model intellectuals representing "European" values in our own times. Voltaire, with his lifelong hatred of religion, and Rousseau, with his emphasis on the general will of the social community, even the national community: are we so sure that in the twentieth century they would not have been partisans of the country that pioneered the demolition of religion and celebrated the triumph of the community over the individual? After all, there were many French intellectuals, the self-proclaimed descendants of Voltaire and Rousseau, who, through the Stalinist period and well into the 1960s, remained fervently supportive of the Soviet Union and its path to utopian socialism.

Because I most especially admire the critical spirit of the *philosophes*, I have, in "Inventing Eastern Europe," tried to illuminate some of their exceptionally uncritical attitudes towards Russia. It is impossible to read Voltaire's correspondence with Catherine without feeling that he was utterly uncritical, even slavish, in his adulation – and I think that this was not just flattery on his part but rather derived from an uncritical conviction that civilization – European civilization – had arrived in Russia with Catherine. "I would never have guessed in 1700," wrote Voltaire, "that one day Reason would come to Moscow at the voice of a princess born in Germany." Voltaire was the leading spokesman for a whole phalanx of *philosophes* who believed devoutly in the future of Russia under the aegis of Reason. They did not doubt that Russia's future was with Europe, but at the same time it was they themselves who presumptuously defined, according to the values of the Enlightenment, the terms of achieving civilization in Russia.

This seems to me still a controversial point today: whether the West can presume to define the terms on which Russia should be considered either civilized or European. I heard Gorbachev speak at Harvard a few weeks ago,

and though he was generally phlegmatic and somewhat defensive, the one subject that roused his most emphatic outrage and indignation was the course of economic shock therapy, proposed for Russia in the 1990s from within the Harvard economics department. I agree with you that insisting on a Russian *Sonderweg* can only be disastrous, but I would hesitate to embrace the opposite position: that all states must pursue the same path to Europe, starting out from the same crossroads.

Voltaire, unlike Diderot, never travelled to Russia, indeed persistently declined invitations to visit Russia, and so he never had the opportunity to check his fantasies about Peter, Catherine, and the civilization of Russia against the reality of eighteenth-century Russian experience. In 1951 a French scholar, Albert Lortholary, published a brilliant book about the *philosophes* and Russia, called *Le Mirage russe, The Russian Mirage*," arguing that the uncritical and unrealistic vision of Russia among the *philosophes*, especially Voltaire, should be understood as something like an illusionary mirage in the desert. Lortholary published the book at the commencement of the Cold War and was influenced by a sense of the parallels between the eighteenth-century enlightened *philosophes* and the twentieth-century French left-wing intellectuals, who both seemed to view Russia, whether Catherine's or Stalin's, in a spirit of uncritical fantasy.

When I was in Russia last year, I was told that there is now a younger generation that has, in part, given up vodka for beer. Among the many implications of such a sociological change would be an increasing resemblance to the younger generations elsewhere in Europe. Can we imagine, you and I, the dilemma of Russia identity being gradually resolved with the emergence of a new post-communist generation whose European resemblances (I say "resemblances" because I do not really believe in characteristically European "qualities") will constitute the social reality of European Russia? Can we imagine, you and I, the emergence of a new generation of professors, intellectuals, and policy experts outside Russia, a post-Cold War generation that will embrace their own relation to Russia without fantasy, without presumption, without uncritical acceptance or rejection?

I read with great interest, and largely with agreement, your excellent response to Václav Havel with his overeager readiness to relegate Russia to the realm of non-Europe<sup>7</sup>. Like you, I would like to imagine a future in which Russia might belong to the European Union.

There is some irony in the fact that, although the new members may be the ones least willing to endorse Russian membership, like Havel's Czech Republic, those same new members will also change everyone's sense of what Europe actually is. The European Union of 2004, if it includes the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland will be, for the first time, a partly Slavic Europe. The European Union of 2007, if it includes Romania and Bulgaria, as well as Greece, will become a more notably Orthodox Europe. The advent of Russia – may we hope? – will begin to seem much more plausible, both inside and outside Russia.

Some years ago I had dinner with a charming Danish colleague who told me that neither Russians nor Americans could ever be mistaken for Europeans; they were too obviously different. How so? I asked. Well first of all, she said to me, Americans and Russians don't have European table manners. And second, she added, looking into my eyes, they don't know how to seduce a woman.

I mean to emphasize that the determination of what is essentially "European" can be very individual, subjective, arbitrary, and strategic. Alex, I have written the last of my letters, and I leave the conclusion of our debate to you. For me it has been both a pleasure and a challenge to address these issues in discussion with you.

*Sincerely, Larry*

*4<sup>th</sup> of December*

Dear Larry,

I have also enjoyed discussing the question of Russia and Europe with a sympathetic opponent – all the more so since the three–volume edition of my work to be published in Moscow in 2004 will bear a title which almost literally matches the topic of our correspondence: *Russia and Europe: A New Outline*, and just now I am working on its third volume. Our initial positions in this argument were so different that it would have been a miracle if this brief correspondence had brought them even slightly closer to each other. Nevertheless it has been useful to me (and, I hope, to our readers) – if only because after this correspondence your point of view has become clearer to me than it was before. I like to believe that you have also gained a better understanding of my position.

In particular, I hope you understand why, decidedly, I cannot agree with your opinion about Albert Lortholary's *Russian Mirage*. The comparison between left–wing French intellectuals defending Stalin's regime and the Enlightenment *philosophes* concerned about bringing Russia into Europe more quickly does not appear legitimate to me. I think that neither these left–wing intellectuals nor their critics (such as Lortholary) have understood much about Russia and Europe.

There is no doubt that the Enlightenment *philosophes* (except Rousseau) were outrageously uncritical of Peter and Catherine, and that their advice was fanciful if not preposterous, and sometimes, as in the case of Constantinople, even dangerous. Voltaire's slavish flattery is downright indecent, for flattery is revolting in any age. But despite all this, these people intuitively – and brilliantly – *guessed* that the path upon which Peter had set Russia, having torn it (at a terrible price) from the deadly sleep of ("dead end" omitted) Muscovite *Sonderweg*, the path, which Catherine continued to follow, was the only one allowing Russia to escape the fate of the Ottoman Empire, expiring slowly at Europe's doorstep.

How then could these philosophers be compared to those left–wing French intellectuals who, precisely, sang the praises of the new *Sonderweg* Muscovy which Stalin was implanting in Russia? Like Ivan the Terrible and Nicholas I before him, he was leading the country into an anti–European cul–de–sac, which it could leave only at the price of another gigantic cataclysm similar to the one it experienced under Peter (which, by the way, is something that Gorbachev has still not understood).

You probably know Alexander Herzen's<sup>8</sup> classic aphorism that "Peter set Russia a challenge which it answered with the colossal phenomenon of Pushkin." Not only Pushkin, I would add, but his whole glorious Decembrist generation which put its ('utterly' omitted) comfortable life at stake in order to

abolish autocracy and serfdom. In other words, in order to reunite with Europe.

How this was achieved by the cruel autocrat Peter, in whose reign, just like in Catherine's, serfdom turned into outright slavery, is a separate topic. Vladimir Veidle<sup>9</sup>, one of the finest *émigré* writers, was probably right when he noted that "Peter's cause outgrew his intentions, and the Russia he transformed started living a life that was richer and more complex than that which he had been forcing upon it so fiercely. He wanted to train apprentices, but in the event he educated Derzhavin and Pushkin." Undoubtedly, Pushkin himself was also right when he said that "the new generation educated under European influence was getting used to the advantages of enlightenment by the hour." Herzen, too, was right in saying that in the 19th century, "autocracy and civilisation could no longer walk hand in hand. Their union is surprising even in the 18th century." Or perhaps simply, as Nathan Eidelman commented, "two or three generations that hadn't been thrashed were enough for the Decembrists and Pushkin to appear."

However that may be, we are forced to conclude that "Peter's challenge" bore the seeds of Decembrism from the outset. Precisely because, in Veidle's expression, "he cut open a window not to some Mecca or Lhasa, but to Europe". This is what Europe is to Russia, however subjective anybody's idea of it may be, including your Danish lady's. For objectively, only reunification with Europe can guarantee for Russia not to slip into another *Sonderweg* Muscovy. In other words, what is needed *now* is not another Petrine "window to Europe", which, as history shows, does not provide such a guarantee, but the total destruction of the ancient Muscovite wall between Russia and Europe.

Now you will understand, I think, why I cannot share your enthusiasm about Lortholary's "Russian Mirage" or accept *the* analogy of Europe with a "beauty in the eye of the beholder". For I am convinced that Russia simply has no hope for a life in dignity except reunification with Europe *such as it is*.

I do not hope to convince you, but I do have hope that the Western intellect will ultimately wake up from its current dangerous slumber, get rid of its all-embracing passion for the deconstruction of other people's texts and help Russia concretely while she is still open for such help. And, God willing, our correspondence may contribute to this just a little.

*Sincerely yours, A.Y.*

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<sup>1</sup> Sigurd Schmidt (born 1922) is a well-known Russian historian whose research interests include the political organization of Russian society in the 16th century. [Editor's note]

<sup>2</sup> Konstantin Leontyev (1831–1891) – a conservative and radically anti-Western thinker sometimes seen as the spiritual godfather of Russian facism. [Editor's note]

<sup>3</sup> Sergei Witte (1849–1915) – Russian entrepreneur and finance minister (1892–1903), father of the Trans-Siberian railway and other great railway construction projects. Usually seen as one of the foremost liberals and modernisers in the era of Nicholas II. [Editor's note]

<sup>4</sup> A philosophical and legal treatise written by Catherine the Great under the influence of the Enlightenment. It was published in 1767 in Russian, French, German and Latin and was modified several times thereafter. [Editor's note]

<sup>5</sup> Catherine the Great's polemical reply (published anonymously in 1770) to the French abbot's Jean Chappé d'Autroche's *Journey to Siberia*. [Editor's note]

<sup>6</sup> Collective name for the members of a number of secret unions of aristocrats during the time of Alexander I. Most of them were exiled or executed after a failed coup on the 14th of December 1825, after Alexander I's death. [Editor's note]

<sup>7</sup> See Alexander Yanov, "Liegt Moskau in Europa?", in *die tageszeitung*, 28.5.2001, p. 11

- <sup>8</sup> Alexander Herzen (1812–1870) – one of the foremost Russian political thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mostly remembered as editor of the émigré journal *Kolokol* (The Bell) and for his memoirs *My Past and Thoughts*. [Editor's note]
- <sup>9</sup> Vladimir Veidle (1895–1979) – a historian of art and Christianity and essayist who left Russia in 1924 and taught in Paris. [Editor's note]

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