

# Национальный романтизм и бремя истории в русской архитектуре XIX века

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**Аннотация.** В этой статье рассматриваются пути, в которых российский архитектурный комментарий в первой половине девятнадцатого века изучал стиль здания в контексте исторического значения. Историки и стилисты, такие как Николай Гоголь и Федор Достоевский, взяли на себя обязательство интерпретировать архитектурный стиль как выражение национальной сущности. Ключевым моментом в этом процессе был ответ России, в частности, Достоевского на широко читаемую книгу «La Russie en 1839» маркиза де Кюстина. Хотя архитектура является выражением материальной культуры, сторонники национального стиля считали ее уникальной возможностью вызвать дух российского прошлого, архитектура которого считалась более аутентичной, чем западные формы, импортированные Петром Великим. Для Кюстина существенное выражение этого национального духа было воплощено в Московском Кремле.

**Ключевые слова:** архитектура Петербурга, классический стиль в архитектуре, историзм, эклектика, псевдоготика, Алексей Мартынов, Иван Снегирев, Федор Солнцев, Николай Гоголь, Марки де Кюстин, «Россия в 1839 году», Федор Достоевский, Иерусалимский храм, Храм Василия Блаженного (Собор Покрова что на Рву), архитектура Московского Кремля, Иван III, Иван IV, Петр I, Николай I, Константин Тон.

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## National Romanticism and the Burden of History in Nineteenth-century Russian Architecture

**Annotation.** This article examines the ways in which Russian architectural commentary in the first half of the nineteenth century explored building style in the context of historical meaning. Historians

*and writers such as Nikolai Gogol' and Fedor Dostoevskii undertook to interpret architectural style as an expression of national essence. A key moment in this process was the Russian response — particularly by Dostoevskii — to the widely read book La Russie en 1839 by the Marquis de Custine. Although architecture is an expression of material culture, proponents of a national style considered it uniquely able to summon the spirit of the Russian past, whose architecture was considered more authentic than the Western forms imported by Peter the Great. For Custine the essential expression of this national spirit was embodied in the Moscow Kremlin.*

**Keywords:** *St. Petersburg architecture, Neoclassical architecture, historicism, eclecticism, Aleksei Martynov, Ivan Snegirev, Fedor Solntsev, Nikolai Gogol', Marquis de Custine, La Russie en 1839, Fedor Dostoevskii, Gothic Revival, Jerusalem Temple, St. Basil's (Cathedral of the Intercession on the Moat), Moscow Kremlin architecture, Ivan III, Ivan IV, Peter I, Nicholas I, Konstantin Ton.*

The social and political transformation that occurred in Russia during the middle of the nineteenth century had as a complementary phenomenon a quest for new expressions of the national identity. At a time when Russia was acutely aware of its lack of, and dependence upon, the achievements of the Western industrial powers in technology and economic development, certain groups within the Russian intelligentsia advocated the need to reclaim spiritual self-sufficiency as a nation confronted by the more advanced material status of the West. The ramifications of these views are widely known in music, literature, and painting.

This article proposes to examine the ways in which a corollary impulse appeared in Russian architecture, with results that to this day define the character of certain Russian urban areas, particularly central Moscow. Although architecture is an expression of material culture, proponents of the national style considered it uniquely able to summon the spirit of the Russian past by reproducing the structural and ornamental motifs of medieval buildings (either wood or masonry), which were seen as more authentically national than the Western forms imported by Peter the Great. The fact that most structures of any distinction in medieval Russia were churches did not hinder the application of their ornamental motifs to the facades of secular buildings during the urban expansion of the nineteenth century.

The cultural themes of national identity had been formulated

by an intellectual and artistic elite throughout Europe with the rise of Romanticism, and my examination of the varieties of Russian nationalist expression must devote some attention to the wider European context. Indeed, with the publication of a book on Russian ornamental art by the French architect, theorist, and restorer Viollet-le-Duc, the Russians had the approving commentary (not always well-informed) of the leading European proponent of the development of indigenous, national forms in architecture. It must also be noted that from an architectonic point of view the design of buildings in the “pseudo-Russian” style differed little from any of the other historicist styles prevalent in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Our analysis is only secondarily concerned with the architectural details, either historical or technical, that define the Russian revival style. Of broader significance are the motives — political, social, aesthetic — that led building committees, architects, art historians, and critics to support the transformation of building facades into a textual commentary on the nation's history. (The description of one Moscow project competition, the Historical Museum, proposed nothing less than such text.)

A survey of buildings and project competitions suggests that Russian architecture in the post-classical era is to an unusual extent guided by literary thought. Although relations between European architecture and literary culture can be observed since the Renaissance, and although the age of reason and the fashion for Gothic novels had their effect on the development of both neoclassicism and the pseudo Gothic, Russian commentary is unusual during the nineteenth century in its insistence on architectural style as a reflection of cultural and ideological programs. An indication of this tendency is the frequency with which professional literati and writers such as Nikolai Gogol, an amateur of architecture, and Fedor Dostoevskii, a trained engineer, produced significant architectural commentary during the middle third of the nineteenth century. At the base of such literary, ideological interpretations of architecture lay an attempt to define the identity and direction of Russian society in an era of broad transformation. [3, 252-85]

These efforts acquired special resonance in the major cities, where architects were reformulating the urban environment with new functional buildings in eclectic styles. [17, 135-37; 18, 112-15] While most architects may have considered style a matter of taste (their own or the patron's), there were those such as Vladimir Shervud in the late nineteenth century who imposed definite historical and cultural meaning upon the use of style in architecture. Ultimately almost every facet of Russian culture, architecture in-

cluded, could be related to a struggle between competing political ideologies, each of which justified its position by referring to the “people.” Those who commented on the significance of new currents in architecture included apologists for the existing regime; but in the broader sense the duty of socio-aesthetic commentary fell to that peculiarly Russian creation, the intelligentsia, composed in its “classical” sense of literati and political thinkers disposed to critical, antiauthoritarian thought. [20]

The many reasons (including ideological) for the decline of neoclassicism. Although classical models continued to be revered, particularly in educational curricula; competing claims for new tectonic and decorative forms argued for a greater response to function and physical setting, both of which stimulated an eclectic approach based on an appeal to the national character and its cultural heritage. An article published in 1840 in the pioneering *Khudozhestvennaia gazeta* (Arts gazette) proclaimed that “Every climate, every people, every age has its special style, which corresponds to particular needs or satisfies special goals.” [14, 17] Although unsigned, the article may have been written by Nestor Kukolnik, an editor of the paper who frequently commented on architecture. [22, 17]

By a strange inversion of logic, however, the postclassical age by definition lacked a style of its own. While the basic function of architecture remained to provide shelter in so inhospitable a climate, its form became linked to history and to literary interpretations of history. Once again, Gogol provides the significant example in his essay, published in 1835, on contemporary architecture, in which he writes of the fragmentation of social and aesthetic consciousness in the new age: “Our age is so petty, its desires are so dispersed, our knowledge is so encyclopedic, that we cannot concentrate our thoughts on one subject; and against our will we split all our creations into trifles and charming toys. We have the marvelous gift of making everything insignificant.” [11, 51]

Gogol follows with an architectural vision that is dispersed, encyclopedic and perhaps trivialized. In contrast to the universal measure of neoclassicism, he appeals for a visually stimulating urban architecture composed of many styles: “A city should consist of varied masses, if you will, in order to provide pleasure to the eye. Let there be gathered in it more diverse tastes. Let there rise on one and the same street something somber and Gothic; something eastern, burdened under the luxury of ornament; something Egyptian, colossal; and something Greek, suffused with slender proportions.” And so on, for several lines enumerating additional styles. [11, 57] Function is supplanted by the desire to create an aesthetic

cityscape that would educate as well as delight its citizens.

As for the person capable of designing this new environment:

The architect — creator should have a deep knowledge of all forms of architecture. He least of all should neglect the taste of those peoples to whom we usually show disdain in artistic matters. He must be all — embracing, must study and assimilate all their innumerable variations. But most important, he should learn everything as an idea, and not in its petty surface form and parts. But to master the idea, he must be a genius and a poet. [11, 57]

Gogol’s romantic concept of the creative architect lay far from Russian — or any other — reality, but his predilection for Gothic architecture was shared by a number of Russian critics and architects including Aleksandr Briullov, the one contemporary architect whose work Gogol praised. [11, 61] Although an idiosyncratic form of pseudo-Gothic architecture had appeared in Russia during the reign of Catherine the Great, the post-classical Gothic revival not only was more widely applied, but also arose as an antidote to neoclassicism. Indeed, the Gothic ‘revival can be considered the first, if short-lived, stylistic development after neoclassicism to lay claim to both aesthetic and historical significance.

Gogol concludes his essay by proposing the creation of a street of architectural examples (prefiguring eclectic architecture as well as modern theme parks) for a nation that still had only a vague sense of its own architectural history:

I thought that it wouldn’t hurt to have in a city a street that would serve as an architectural chronicle. It ought to begin with ponderous, gloomy gates, from which the viewer would emerge to see on both sides the sublime, magnificent buildings of the primordial savage taste common to all peoples. Then a gradual change through a series of views: the elevated transformation to a colossal Egyptian [architecture], suffused with simplicity; then to that beauty, the Greek; then to the sensuous Alexandrine and Byzantine, with its squat domes; then to the Roman, with arches in several rows... [11, 59]

Once again, the high point would be Gothic architecture, the “crown of art,” and the promenade ends with some undefined new style. “This street would become in a certain sense a history of the development of taste, and anyone too lazy to leaf through weighty tomes would only have to stroll along it in order to find out everything.” [11, 59]

There is no mention in this fantasy of medieval Russian architecture in any of its manifestations; and the article’s references to Russian neoclassicism are not flattering. Gogol praises the ca-

thedrals of Milan and Cologne as well as the Islamic architecture of India; yet the “everything” that Gogol’s cultured but indolent Russian might inspect includes nothing from eleventh-century Kiev or Novgorod, nothing from twelfth-century Vladimir or sixteenth-century Moscow. Gogol’s fascination with architecture and its history (he had at one time studied the architecture of the ancient world) did not extend to Russia. His boulevard of architectural history was a means of imagining that which Russia apparently did not have — a history, not simply an architectural chronicle, but a history of a people as revealed through its architecture.

Indeed, the early students of Russian architecture during this period knew little more about their native building traditions that did Gogol, to judge from a public lecture delivered in 1837 by Aleksei Martynov (1820-1895), a student at the Moscow Court School of Architecture. Martynov was to become a leading proponent of the Russian revival movement in architecture during the 1840s and 1850s, but his description of pre-Petrine architectural evolution displays an inventiveness worthy of Gogol:

The first trace in Russia of architecture as a fine art is considered to begin with the time of Vladimir the Enlightener [Grand Prince of Kiev who instituted Christianity in his domains in 988]. From this time until the eighteenth century, the history of our architecture consists of three epochs in its ancient buildings: in the first we see the style of Syrian architecture; in the second, Asian or Mongolian; and in the third, Lombard-Venetian. [21; 19, 57-58]

The periods of this scheme overlap: according to Martynov, St. Basil’s (Cathedral of the Intercession on the Moat) is a mixture of Mongol and Indian, although it belongs chronologically to the Lombard epoch (Fig. 1). This early attempt at periodization was accepted as valid well into the nineteenth century [23, 66-77]. The process, it seems, was not only of borrowing, but of imposition — of Russian “culture” as a pliable undefined material on which any stronger or more highly developed culture placed its stamp. With the rarest of exceptions, there were no “Lives” of Russian artists and architects, no schools of painting (Russian had yet to discover the aesthetic value of icons), no Renaissance, no enlightened patrons, no sense of continuity. Russia borrowed at will, but remained both outside of and dependent upon other, more complex cultural traditions, whether Eastern or Western.

The surmises and inaccuracies in accounts by Martynov and others are of less significance than the impulse to resurrect a cultural heritage that had for so long seemed invisible. In 1838 a Petersburg

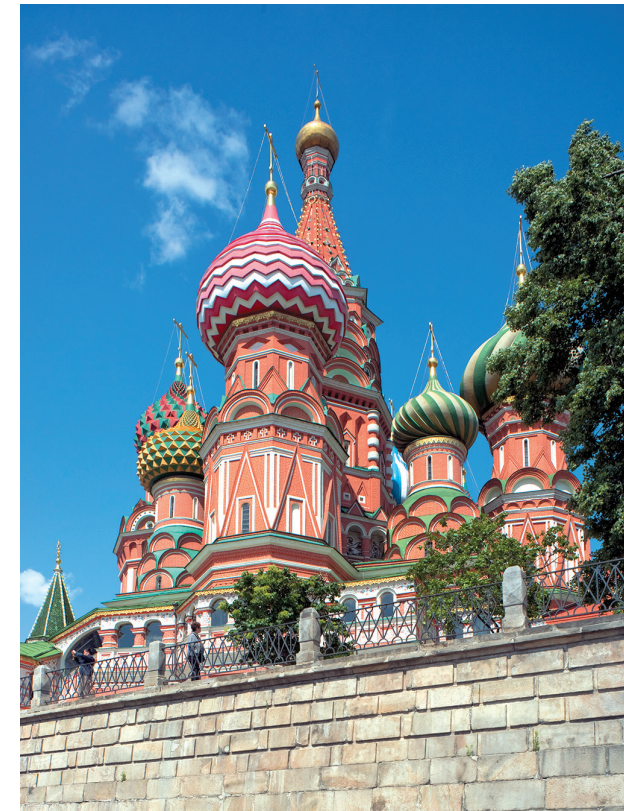


Fig. 1. Moscow. St. Basil’s (Cathedral of the Intercession on the Moat).  
Photo: W. Brumfield. 2/6/2012

newspaper complained that Russian academicians were still preoccupied with the monuments of the ancient world to the detriment of an understanding of Russian architecture and its relation to the architectures of other cultures: “It would be desirable if our architects also turned their attention to the monuments of various times and tastes scattered throughout our provinces.” [15, 393-94; 4, 92] In fact, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, architectural expeditions to the countryside were doing just that, and by the 1830s the venerable Imperial Academy of Arts had commissioned a survey of pre-Petrine monuments to be compiled by the artist Fedor Solntsev (1801-1892), whose work played an important role in publicizing early Russian architecture. [23, 42-44]

In the following decade Aleksei Martynov's interest in re-discovering the Russian architectural heritage — however diverse its sources — received significant support from Ivan Snegirev (1793-1868), a professor of Classics at Moscow University but also an amateur of medieval Russian history. In 1848 Martynov and Snegirev began to publish their influential series *Russian Antiquity* (*Russkaia starina*), which contained detailed descriptions of many dozens of medieval monuments. (The first volume of *Russkaia starina* appeared in 1848, the last (№ 6) appeared in 1860. Thereafter Martynov and Snegirev continued to collaborate on similar publications until the end of the 1880s.) [23, 70] Indeed, for most educated Russians of the nineteenth century, Old Russian architecture probably meant a relatively simple, if highly decorated, church built during the seventeenth century in the long reign of Peter the Great's father, Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich.

Paradoxically, in Russia the idea of history as related to native cultural traditions was a concept often derived from and influenced by Western writers, including dramatists such as Friedrich Schiller and critics such as Friedrich Schlegel, who promoted the study of Gothic architecture. To their works, inspired by the concept of German nationhood, can be added the phenomenon of Ossian, which encouraged the study of the Russian and Finnish medieval epos at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These national strivings reflect not just the general currents of romanticism but appear more specifically in the works of Russian writers who contemplated the urban environment.

It is, therefore, curious that in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, Petersburg — not medieval Muscovy — served more readily to validate Russia's position as a nation with a significant history. This paradox is illuminated in Dostoevskii's "Petersburg Chronicle" for June 1, 1847. In commenting on the advent of spring to the northern capital, the *flaneur* (the roving observer that is Dostoevskii's narrative persona) describes a city in the throes of growth: "Crowds of workers with plaster, with shovels, with hammers, axes, and other instruments dispose themselves along Nevskii Prospekt as though at home, as though they had bought it out; and woe to the pedestrian, flaneur, or observer who does not have a serious desire to resemble Pierrot spattered with flour in a Roman carnival". [9, 23]

Similar motifs of rapid expansion and change in the urban environment reappear in the novelist's post-exile work, most notably *Crime and Punishment*. Yet this passage, reflecting a tacit awareness of the rise of a new secular order, veers into a discourse

on the built environment as history, a text whose decoding leads to the past as an expression of native identity. With summer approaching and cultured society leaving the town:

What remains for those citizens whose captivity forces them to pass their summer in the capital? To study the architecture of buildings, to how the city is being renewed and built? Of course, this is an important occupation and indeed even edifying. Your Petersburger is so distracted in the winter, and has so many pleasures, business, work, card-playing, gossip and various other amusements—besides which there is so much dirt — that he would hardly have the time to look around, to peer into Petersburg more attentively, to study its physiognomy and *read the history of the city and all our epoch in this mass of stones, in these magnificent edifices, palaces, monuments* [emphasis added — W.B.]. After all, it would hardly come into anyone's head to kill valuable time with such an absolutely innocent and unprofitable exercise. [9, 24]

The irony here is delicate, since Dostoevskii's subsequent work uses architecture as an extension and reflection of the contemporary mental state of individual characters as well as entire collectives — hence the "Petersburg theme." By the time of Dostoevskii's early work, the city's architecture reflected only slightly more than a century of history, and that largely in deliberate contrast to the cultural traditions of the pre-Petrine period. Although extraordinarily sensitive to the psychological impact of urban architecture, Dostoevskii showed little interest in architectural historicism as a means of reclaiming a sense of Russianness that presumably resided in pre-modern (i.e., pre-Petrine) history.

Dostoevskii's ambivalent—or selective—attitude toward history is developed in the subsequent passage of his June 1 entry in the *Petersburg Chronicle*. At this point Dostoevskii presents the historical approach to architecture through the comments on Russian monuments contained in *La Russie en 1839*, by Astolphe-Louis-Léonore, Marquis de Custine. Although it had been banned in Russia, the book was nonetheless widely known in intellectual circles and is the unmistakable source of Dostoevskii's references:

Incidentally, a study of the city is not such a useless thing. We don't exactly remember, but sometime ago we happened to read a certain French book, which consisted entirely of views on the contemporary condition of Russia. Of course it is already known just what foreigners' views on the contemporary condition of Russia are; somehow up to now we stubbornly do not submit to being measured by a foreign yardstick. But despite that, the renowned tourist's book was eagerly read by all Europe. Among other things, it stated that

there is nothing more lacking in character than Petersburg architecture; that there is nothing especially striking about it, *nothing national*, and that the entire city is a hybrid caricature of several European capitals. And finally, that Petersburg, if only in an architectural sense, represents such a strange mixture, that one cannot cease to exclaim with amazement at every step. [9, 24]

In Dostoevskii's paraphrase, Custine portrays St. Petersburg as an architectural hybridization similar to the one Gogol had envisioned but not found in St. Petersburg: "Greek architecture, Roman architecture, Byzantine architecture, Dutch architecture, Gothic architecture, architecture of the rococo, the latest Italian architecture, our Orthodox architecture — all this, according to the traveler, whipped up and shaped into a most entertaining form, and in conclusion not one genuinely beautiful building!" [9, 24] Dostoevskii probably refers to the opening passage of Custine's eighth letter, in which he presents his initial impressions of Petersburg. Similar views are presented in a description of the palaces and buildings of the central squares in the eleventh letter. Dostoevskii would likely have known the second, "corrected and expanded" edition of Custine's work, which appeared in 1843 and was rapidly smuggled into Russia. [9, 226, n24; 1, 256-57] It should be noted that Dostoevskii was by no means the only writer to respond to Custine's view of Russia. Vissarion Belinskii and Alexander Herzen also provided significant commentary [16], as did contemporary French writers. [7, 223-78]

Dostoevskii would subsequently publish similar views on the hybrid nature of St. Petersburg architecture as a barometer of social confusion in his *Diary of a Writer*. Of more immediate interest, however, is his reaction to Custine's claim that the architecture of Petersburg lacks an authentic, appropriate style. Despite his defensive maneuver ("we know what foreigners' views of Russia are worth"), Dostoevskii seems to revel in Custine's description of the city's architectural palette. Although Custine criticized the aesthetics of Petersburg, he was deeply moved by the city's appearance, which combined stylistic variety with monumental uniformity (Fig. 2) [8, 1:225-28, 344-49].

Custine saw the process of building Petersburg as both validated by history and anticipating it:

Ailleurs on a fait de grandes villes en mémoire des grands faits du passé: ou bien le cités se sont faites d'elles-mêmes à l'aide des circonstances et de l'histoire, sans le concours du moins apparent des calculs humains, Saint-Petersbourg avec sa magnificence et son immensité est un trophée élevé par les Russes à leur puissance à venir; l'espérance qui produit de tels efforts me paraît sublime! Depuis



Fig. 2. St. Petersburg. View east from dome of St. Isaac Cathedral. From left: Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul, Admiralty, Winter Palace. Brumfield. 1/4/1994

le temple des Juifs, jamais la foi d'un peuple en ses destinées n'a rien arraché à la terre de plus merveilleux que Saint-Petersbourg. Et ce qui rend vraiment admirable ce legs fait par un homme à son ambitieux pays, c'est qu'il a été accepté par l'histoire. [8, 1:267-68]

The reference to the Temple in Jerusalem reminds of the Zion motif in medieval Russian culture and architecture [5, 127-29, 139, 265-66, 554 n66] as well as in Dostoevskii's subsequent work. Yet the more peculiar aspect of the preceding passage is its comment on Petersburg as a city both preparing for history and having been accepted by it. In this scheme there are two levels of history: a universal history of established civilization and culture, and the history of Russia, existing in tenuous relation to the former (Fig. 3). Custine, like Dostoevskii sees meaning in the stones of Petersburg.

In commenting on the gloomy, impressive mass of the Mikhailovskii Castle (Fig. 4), in which the Emperor Paul was assassinated in 1801 (forty days after he and his family had settled there), Custine notes in his ninth letter: "Si les hommes se taisent en Russi, les pierres parlent et parlent d'une voix lamentable. Je ne m'étonne pas que les Russes craignent et négligent leurs vieux monuments: ce sont des témoins de leur histoire, que le plus souvent ils voudraient oublier." [8, 1:259] Yet there were, in fact, no "vieux monuments" in Petersburg (the Mikhailovskii Castle was completed not quite four decades before Custine's journey).



*Fig. 3. St. Petersburg. English Quay, St. Isaac Cathedral. View southeast across Neva River. Brumfield. 9/9/1971*

In other parts of his narrative it will be clear that much had indeed survived from Russia's distant architectural past despite frequent wars and a harsh climate.

Throughout Custine's account the specific meaning of "histoire" can only be determined by context — in the preceding case, the recent political history of the imperial regime. In the same sense, no doubt, Dostoevskii advised his readers in 1847 to ponder the history of their city through its architecture, which despite its recent provenance, bore witness to the dense historical subtext of Petersburg. For Custine, however, this subtext is in danger of erasure by a central authority, as he notes in his further comments on the forbidding appearance on the Mikhailovskii Castle (Fig. 5): «Je m'étonne qu'on n'ait pas rasé le palais aux souvenirs incommodes: mais pour le voyageur, c'est une bonne fortune que de rencontrer un monument remarquable par son air de vétusté dans un pays où le despotisme rend tout uniforme, tout neuf; où l'idée dominante efface chaque jour les traces du passé». [8, 1:261] In Custine's interpretation, the autocratic state annihilates history through a uniformity of regulated design, unconcerned with the national past. Yet a great autocrat also creates, even projects history as the master of his nation's destiny. For Custine, like other French commentators since the time of Voltaire, Peter the Great was such an autocrat. In his meditation on the Peter's early log hut



*Fig. 4. St. Petersburg. Mikhailovskii Castle. Park Façade. Brumfield. 10/4/1984*

in Petersburg, now preserved in the city as a shrine and historical artifact, Custine notes: "Je le vois avec la simplicité d'un vrai grand seigneur, même d'un grand homme, assis sur le seuil de cette cabane d'où il prépare en même temps contre l'Europe une ville, une nation et une histoire. La grandeur de Pétersbourg n'est pas vide et cette puissante ville, dominant ses glaces et ses marais pour dominer le monde, est superbe, moins superbe encore aux yeux qu'à la pensée!" [8, 1:269]. If Custine tempers his admiration of Peter with criticism, his politely sceptical view of the present emperor, Nicholas I, suggests that Peter has no rivals in Russia as a maker of history. As Dostoevskii would later suggest, the imperial architecture of Petersburg can be defined as a historical text begun by Peter and decipherable by the contemporary resident or visitor (Fig. 6).

Yet Custine also describes Peter's vision, whose tangible form derived from so many foreign sources, as an aggression against the West ("contre l'Europe une ville ... pour dominer le monde"). Even in its approach toward integration with Europe, even in its new western-style capital, Russia is potentially hostile, alien, and separate.



Fig. 5. Mikhailovskii Castle. Main Façade. Brumfield. 10/4/1984

In his fourteenth letter, Custine returns to his criticism of Petersburg as a city beyond history, inhuman in scale, and mindless in its reproduction of Western forms:

Je vous ai décrit une ville sans caractère, plutôt pompeuse qu'imposante, plus vaste que belle, remplie d'édifices sans style, sans goût, sans signification historique. ... Il y a évidemment scission ici entre l'architecte et l'habitant. Les ingénieurs européens sont venus dire aux Moscovites comment ils devaient construire et orner une capitale digne de l'admiration de l'Europe, et ceux-ci, avec leur soumission militaire, ont cédé à la force du commandement. [8, 2:90-91]

Yet for Custine — as for certain Russian intellectuals of his time — Russian separateness acquires in Moscow the virtues of national authenticity. Here too, the first astonishment at the city's distant splendor gives way on closer inspection (in letter twenty-four) to a distaste for the awkwardness of its architecture:

...le désenchantement va toujours croissant, tellement qu'en entrant dans Moscou on finit par ne plus croire à ce qu'on avait aperçu de loin: on rêvait, et au réveil on se retrouve dans ce qu'il y a

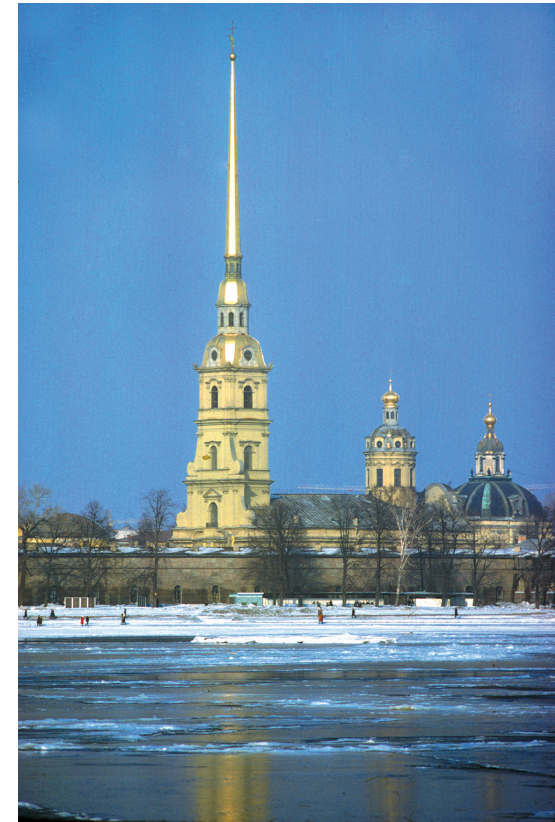


Fig. 6. Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul, Peter-Paul Fortress. Southwest view across Neva River. Brumfield. 9/3/1980

de plus prosaïque et de plus ennuyeux au monde; dans une grande ville sans monuments, c'est-à-dire sans un seul objet d'art qui soit digne d'une admiration réfléchie; devant cette lourde et maladroite copie de l'Europe, vous vous demandez ce qu'est devenue l'Asie qui vous était apparue un instant. Moscou vu du dehors et dans son ensemble, est une création des sylphes, c'est le monde des chimères; de près et en détail, c'est une vaste cité marchande, inégale, poudreuse, mal pavée, mal bâtie, peu peuplée, qui dénote sans doute l'oeuvre d'une main puissante, mais en même temps la pensée d'une tête à qui l'idée du beau a manqué pour produire un chef-d'oeuvre. [8, 3:137]

The architecture of Moscow, no less than that of Petersburg, is dismissed as an awkward copy--although Custine might have been



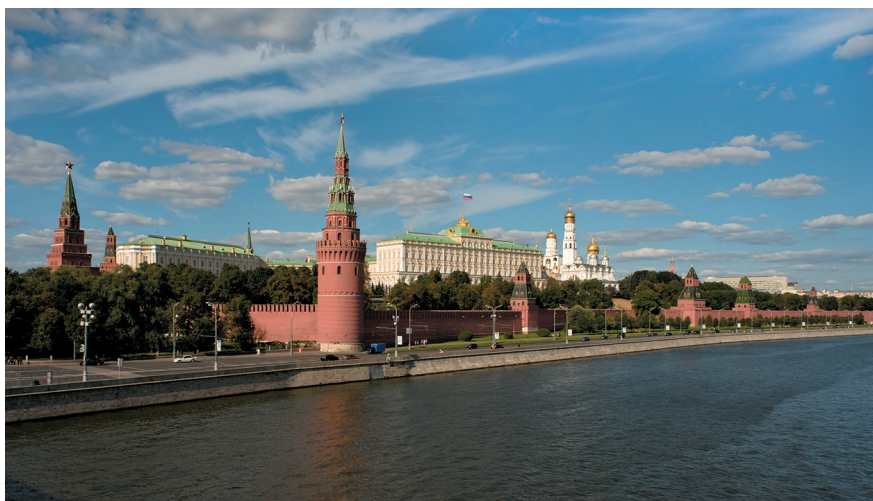


Fig. 7. Moscow. Kremlin. Southwest view across Moscow River. Brumfield  
21/8/2010

more scrupulous in considering the devastating effect of the Napoleonic invasion on neoclassical Moscow. But Custine's critical response diminishes as he moves to the heart of the city, where his praise derives from an emotional reaction to the towers and cathedrals of the Kremlin (Fig. 7) as well as to the monuments surrounding it above all, St. Basil's (Fig. 8). As he beholds these monuments in the fading light of an unusually hot summer evening, Custine proclaims the sacrifice of Moscow in 1812 to have been an event comparable to the exploits of ancient history, an event that inspired Europe to rise against Napoleon's megalomania, an event unique in this otherwise most prosaic of times ("siècle prosaïque entre tous ceux que le monde a vus s'écouler"). In recompense for the destruction caused by this epic moment in the Moscow's history, «l'Empereur de Russie aurait dû rétablir sa résidence dans cette ville deux fois sainte.» [8, 3:144]

Custine thus introduces the audacious suggestion that he will repeat throughout his Moscow chapters: Moscow, not Petersburg, is the natural capital of Russian and ought to be so recognized by the imperial autocrat. One must, however, consider this statement doubleedged, possibly even a ploy to isolate Russia and relieve the

threat posed by the forward, western position of Petersburg ("contre l'Europe une ville ... pour dominer le monde"). This ambiguity would in fact color the debate over Russian history and Russian destiny in the nineteenth century.

In Custine's description the Kremlin, a city between two continental destinies, acquires mythological dimensions: « Le Kremlin n'est pas un palais comme un autre, c'est une cité tout entière, et cette cité est la souche de Moscou; elle sert de frontière à deux parties du monde, l'Orient et l'Occident: le monde ancien et le monde moderne sont là en présence.» [8, 3:144-45] For Custine architecture of the Kremlin and its museums — above all, the Armory with its precious artifacts and regalia (Fig. 9) — are capable of replacing the word as an expression of history: «La trésor du Kremlin fait à juste titre l'orgueil de la Russie; il pourrait tenir lieu de chronique à ce pays, c'est une histoire en pierres précieuses, comme le *Forum romanum* était une histoire en pierres de taille.» [8, 3:243]

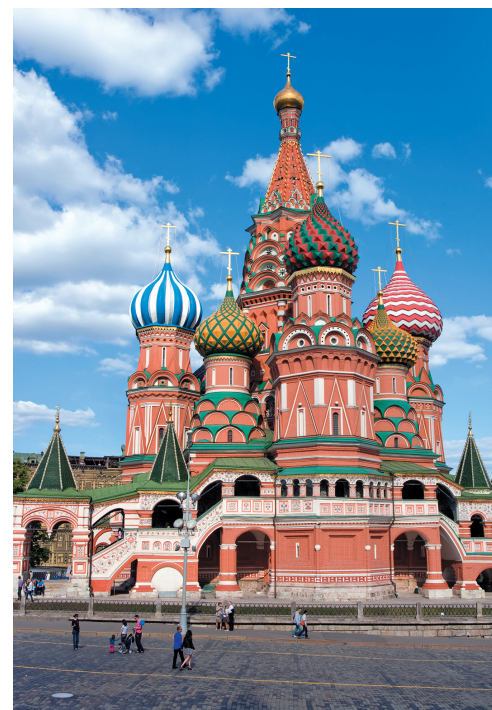


Fig. 8. St. Basil's.  
West view from Kremlin wall.  
Brumfield. 26/5/2012

Despite effusive expressions of wonder before these landmarks of history, Custine insistently sees the magnificence of Mos-

cow's center as a symbol of tyranny and a relic of Asian despotism. In support of his pronouncements on Moscow's Asian base, Custine relies upon the historical and linguistic information present in Nikolai Karamzin's epochal *History of the Russian State*, which itself played a profound, if often contradictory, role in the rising national consciousness within nineteenth-century Russia. [13; 12]



Fig. 9. Kremlin. Armory. Brumfield. 15/7/1994

Yet Custine also notes that contemporary Muscovites seem freer in spirit: “On respire ici un air de liberté inconnu dans le reste de l’Empire; c’est ce qui m’explique la secrète aversion des souverains pour cette ville qu’ils flattent, qu’ils redoutent et qu’ils fuient. “ [8, 3:150] Indeed, this curious freedom creates an anomalous impression within the very shadow of the Kremlin, as the fashionable Muscovites flaunt imported fashions in outdoor cafes:

...et voir des messieurs et des dames vêtus à la parisienne, se promener au pied de ce palais fabuleux, c’est à croire qu’on rêve! ... Je rêvais. Qu’aurait dit Ivan III, le restaurateur, on peut bien dire le fondateur du Kremlin, s’il eût pu apercevoir au pied de la forteresse sacrée se vieux Moscovites rasés, frisés, en fracs, en pantalons blancs, en gants jaunes, nonchalamment assis au son des instruments et prenant des glaces bien sucrées devant un café bien illuminé! il aurait dit comme moi: c’est impossible! [8, 3:153-54]

The humor of this passage--particularly Custine’s comparison of his thoughts with those of Ivan III (the Great), “le fondateur du Kremlin” — is delightful. Custine juxtaposes the Kremlin, with its grand monuments from the late fifteenth century (Fig.10), with a



Fig. 10. Kremlin. Cathedral of the Dormition (1475-79). Southeast view. Brumfield. 17/6/2012

supercilious, fashion-conscious crowd subservient to the lowest denominator of imported taste. His description suggests comparison with Gogolian embodiments of *posblost'* such as Chichikov (*Dead Souls*). These denizens of Moscow are, by their dress, creatures of Peter the Great and even seem to exorcise the brooding spirit mutely represented by the Kremlin. Yet in Custine’s impressionistic vision, they also represent sacrilege, a denial of history and of a serious concern with national consciousness. Custine has fashioned another paradox in which the monstrosity of Russian history, symbolized by the Kremlin, harbors the country’s true meaning and worth. All else in Russian culture is pale and insipid imitation.

Custine’s suggestion that the autocrat should return the capital to Moscow is, therefore, both a calculated effrontery and a logical contradiction of the sort that makes his account so entertaining and provoking. How do its citizens appear more free, when in

Letter Twenty-five Custine repeatedly describes the Kremlin as a citadel of fear:

Ce tyrannique château, cet orgueilleux monceau de pierres domine le séjour du commun des hommes de toute la hauteur de ses rochers, de ses murs et de ses campaniles... C'est le rêve d'un tyran, mais c'est puissant, c'est effrayant comme la pensée d'un homme qui commande à la pensée d'un peuple; il y a là quelque chose de disproportionné: je vois des moyens de défense qui supposent des guerres comme il ne s'en fait plus; cette architecture n'est pas en rapport avec les besoins de la civilisation moderne. [8, 3:161]

By this reasoning the Kremlin is unfit to be the center of the modern, centralized Russian state launched by Peter the Great and borrowing at least some of its institutions from the West. Custine is torn between opposing impulses: on the one hand to despise the unfounded imitation of Western forms (so clearly represented by architecture), even while admiring the audacity of Peter's attempt to master the future history of his country; and on the other a romantic admiration for the exotic and medieval, mixed with a frisson of terror and disgust for the barbarism of Muscovy symbolized by the walls and turrets of the Kremlin: "Le Kremlin est sans contredit l'oeuvre d'un être surhumain, mais d'un être malfaisant. La gloire dans l'esclavage, telle est l'allégorie figurée par ce monument satanique, aussi extraordinaire en architecture que les visions de saint Jean sont extraordinaire en poésie: c'est l'habitation qui convient aux personnages de l'Apocalypse.» [8, 3:163]

One might dismiss this as the idle fantasizing ridiculed in Dostoevskii's commentary: "Our tourist pays profuse respect to Moscow for its Kremlin, says several rhetorical, flowery phrases concerning the Kremlin, takes pride in Moscow's sense of nationality, but curses our *drozhki* [a type of primitive Russian carriage] because it has deviated from their ancient, patriarchal form, and thus, he says, there disappears in Russia all that is native and national." [9, 24] The target of the preceding sentence is Custine's critical comparison of Petersburg architecture to the design of the drozhki--an uncomfortable and peculiarly Russian means of conveyance. [8, 1:151] Dostoevskii attacks Custine's observations by sarcastically noting his idiosyncratic style, which is indeed rhetorical, by turns breathless and flowery. But with characteristic foresight, Custine has already attempted to disarm stylistic criticism by admitting to the reader: "Pardon, je suis né du temps des phrases." [8, 3:155]

Nonetheless, the persistence of eschatological themes in Russian culture, as well as the potent symbolism exerted by the Kremlin's architecture over widely disparate cultures — Russian

and foreign, suggests that Custine's emotional reaction was both shrewd and accurate even in many of its contradictions. Just as the apocalypse would figure complexly in Dostoevskii's own work [2], his contemporaries' appreciation of the architecture of the Kremlin and related medieval monuments would figure in the exaltation of national character that underlay the Russian search for a native architectural style during the nineteenth century.

Not only does architecture become a text commenting on the identity of a people, but even the perception of historically significant ensembles such as the Kremlin is couched in a romantic, painterly sensibility such as that used to depict great natural wonders and the sensations that they stimulate — a combination of fright and awe:

Tout a un sens symbolique, volontaire ou non, dans l'architecture du Kremlin; mais ce qui reste de réel quand vous avez surmonté votre première épouvante pour pénétrer au sein de ces sauvages magnificences, c'est un amas de cachots pompeusement surnommés palais et cathédrales. ... Des merveilles de cette effrayante architecture il faut dire ce que les voyageurs disent de l'intérieur des Alpes: ce sont de belles horreurs. [8, 3:164-65]

In Custine's decidedly European interpretation the heart of Russia becomes an elemental force beyond human reason. At the same time Russia, embodied in the Kremlin, cannot escape its other text:

Si de l'arrangement d'une maison nous déduisons le caractère de la personne qui l'habite, ne pouvons-nous pas, par une opération d'esprit analogue, nous figurer l'aspect des édifices d'après les hommes pour lesquels ils furent construits? Nos passions, nos habitudes, notre génie sont bien assez puissants pour se graver ineffaçablement jusque sur les pierres de nos demeures.

Certes, s'il existe un monument auquel puisse s'appliquer ce procédé de l'imagination, c'est le Kremlin... [8, 3:166]

The Russian character reflected in the architecture of the Kremlin is epitomized by Ivan the Terrible, to whom Custine devotes his entire, lengthy twenty-sixth letter. Although most of the medieval masterpieces of the Kremlin were constructed before the reign of Ivan IV, his surpassing presence in Russian history — a mixture of terror and grandeur — envelopes the physical and psychological image of the Kremlin: «A tout prendre, soit que l'on considère cette forteresse sous le rapport purement historique, soit qu'on la contemple du point de vue poétique et pittoresque, c'est le monument le plus national de la Russie, et, par conséquent, le plus intéressant pour les Russes comme pour les étrangers». [8, 3:167]

Custine's summation contains a mixture of awe and fear: «Il me semble voir une procession de vices sortir par toutes les portes du Kremlin pour inonder la Russie.» [8, 3:168] Although the people



Fig. 11. Great Kremlin Palace. Brumfield. 21/8/2010

approach the walls in a spirit of freedom [8, 3:155], there is also a negative aura projected by the bureaucracy of the modern state. Custine often seems to contradict himself, as in his suggestion that the capital should be returned to the Kremlin. Yet he had already attempted to disarm criticisms of his contradictory statements: «Ne me reprochez pas mes contradictions, je les ai aperçues avant vous sans vouloir les éviter, car elles sont dans les choses; ceci soit dit une fois pour toutes. Comment vous donner l'idée réelle de ce que je vous dépeins si ce n'est en me contradisant à chaque mot?» [8, 2:94]

In parsing Custine's disingenuous praise of Moscow, Dostoevskii realized that Russia's existence as a great nation — and therefore its identity, culturally or politically — depended precisely on the Peter's turn to the West. Perhaps it is for this reason that he paid little attention to medieval Russian architecture, so picturesque for foreign travelers, but of little relevance — so it seemed — to the necessary development of the country. Whatever the objective significance

of Custine's ruminations on history as reflected in architecture, his work gains significance from the fact that Dostoevskii — along with many of his contemporaries — read it, and with good reason. He had formulated engaging, thoughtful, and at times prophetic comments on the nature of Russian society, which was engaged in intensive self-examination during the nineteenth century.

This examination involved not only writers such as Vissarion Belinskii, Alexander Herzen and Dostoevskii but also leading figures in the arts, such as Aleksandr Olenin, president of the Imperial Academy of Arts [10], and the architect Konstantin Ton. [24] Indeed, by a telling confluence of historicist thought, Custine's book was published just as Konstantin Ton (Constantine Thon) had begun work on the Great Kremlin Palace (Fig. 11), intended to reassert Russia's historical identity in the modern age through its architecture and its placement — verlooking the Moscow River — within the sacred territory of the Kremlin. Directly or indirectly, the Great Kremlin Palace, with its historicist program supervised by Nicholas I, embodied a response to Custine's ambivalent judgement on the historical significance of the Kremlin's architecture.

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