



The history and politics of civilisation: the debate about Russia in French and German historical scholarship from Voltaire to Herder

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Abstract

During the second half of the 18th century, a debate about Russia developed in France and Germany. Spurred on by a preoccupation with Peter I's project to swiftly civilise his country through Europeanisation, and by the evolving idea of a philosophic history with its concern to explain the historical process of civilisation in general, and Europe's historical journey out of a state of barbarism in particular, an array of thinkers turned to the example of Russia with a set of interrelated historiographical and political questions: Does Russia share a history with Europe, and if so, how can its particular history be related to generalised accounts of the development of civilisation? What was the role of Peter I in fostering civilisation in Russia, and what political lessons can be learned from his reign? Can the historical process of civilisation be accelerated through willed, top-down reform and through wholesale importation of ideas and models from without as Peter attempted, or are there unsurpassable limits to such a project?

The present thesis reconstructs this central Enlightenment debate, which has so far only received scant attention in modern scholarship, by providing an in-depth analysis of the relevant works of its main participants: Voltaire, Denis Diderot, Pierre Charles Levesque, August Ludwig Schlözer and Johann Gottfried Herder. By contextualising their Russian writings in terms of wider Enlightenment discourse on philosophic history and political reform, it seeks to recover the rich and conflicting nature of the debate about Russia. In this way, it ultimately contributes to the revision of the customary portrayal of the Enlightenment as a unified 'project' based on a universalising and rationalistic approach to the human sciences, and marked by a concomitant inability either to appreciate the complexities of historical development or to conceive of a reforming politics outside the framework of enlightened despotism.

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Acknowledgements

In preparing this thesis I have greatly benefited from the support of several individuals and institutions.

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Richard Bourke (Queen Mary). I could not have wished for a more inspiring, responsive and generous supervisor. Without his unwavering guidance and counsel this thesis would never have been written. Dr Georgios Varouxakis (Queen Mary) has mentored me throughout my PhD. His suggestions and advice have helped me greatly to improve my work.

Professor Jeremy Jennings (Queen Mary) and Dr John Hope Mason have kindly read parts of this thesis, and I have been fortunate to be able to draw continuously on their expertise in French political thought. I have also been able to discuss aspects of my work with Professor Colin Jones (Queen Mary), Dr Maurizio Isabella (Queen Mary), Dr Michael Schippan (Herzog August Bibliothek) and Dr Gillian Bepler (Herzog August Bibliothek). My warmest thanks goes to all of them.

Jeremy Jennings, Professor John Iverson (Whitman College) and Professor Robert Makin (University Paris-Diderot) have provided me with opportunities to present parts of my work to discerning audiences for which I am very grateful.

My studies were made possible by a three-year studentship awarded by Queen Mary. A fellowship of the Dr Günther Findel-Stiftung allowed me to spend three months at the Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel. Generous travel grants awarded by the Newberry Library Consortium and Queen Mary's Stretton Fund have enabled me to participate at conferences overseas.

Last, but by no means least, I would like to thank my parents Mariette and Arthur, my baby son Thomas, and, especially, my partner Amy Sheehan.

Introduction

During the 18th century, Russia became an increasingly important topic in European scholarly discourse.¹ Even though knowledge about Russia was available in Europe since the early medieval period and a certain exchange of information flowed between the two uninterruptedly throughout the ages, it is nevertheless the case that a quantitative change occurred around 1700 that developed into a qualitative change by around the middle of the century. This first, quantitative, change manifested itself primarily in increased direct contact through travellers, diplomats and merchants, leading in turn to a significant rise in European publications dealing with Russian affairs.² The second, qualitative, change points to a radical shift in interest: whilst previously Russia had been predominantly a subject of travel accounts offering their readers an ever increasing mass of more or less factual information about its geography, culture, society, history, politics and economy that usually stressed the country's backwardness and idiosyncrasies, the trend from about the 1750s onwards was towards interpretation and debate. The crucial interpretative question that was increasingly discussed was whether and to what extent Russia, far from being an

¹ Throughout this thesis the term 'Europe' is used to denote those countries which we would today label 'Western European'. It is, in a sense, an unsatisfactory usage since all the thinkers considered in this thesis were of the opinion that Russia had either joined Europe, or that its European status was open to debate. Restricting the meaning of the term 'Europe' to its Western half thus runs counter to the potentially wider sense imputed to it in 18th-century discourse. However, using 'Europe' in the way suggested as a term of convenience to differentiate between those countries regarded as unambiguously European from Russia, whose status was contested, is preferable to the employment of concepts such as the 'West' or 'Western Europe' as opposed to 'Eastern Europe', simply because such a division was completely foreign to the 18th century. Indeed, if a division of Europe was conceptualised in the 18th century, it was generally between its Northern and Southern half. To my knowledge, no 18th century thinker ever thought that, say, Russia and Poland may have something in common because of their geographic position to the East. On this question, see Hans Lemberg, 'Zur Entstehung des Osteuropabegriffs im 19. Jahrhundert vom "Norden" zum "Osten" Europas', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 33, no. 1 (1985), esp. pp. 48-62. For a different, but as we shall see below, problematic view, see Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994).

² For general accounts on the history of European perceptions of Russia, see Michel Mervaud and Jean-Claude Roberti, *Une infinie brutalité: l'image de la Russie dans la France des XVI^e et XVII^e siècles* (Paris: Institut d'études slaves, 1991); Dimitri S. von Mohrenschildt, *Russia in the Intellectual Life of Eighteenth-Century France* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1936), pp. 4-28; Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: 'the East' in European Identity Formation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

exotic flower in a faraway corner of the globe, might actually be related to, or even be a part of, Europe.

There are a number of interrelated reasons that underlie this radical shift. Undoubtedly the most important one is a belated recognition and consideration of the reign of Peter I (1672-1725). Two features of his reign in particular drove consideration of Russia's relation to Europe. First, Peter's victories over Sweden in the Great Northern War had forcefully integrated Russia diplomatically and militarily into the European system of balancing states. Second, his programme of Europeanisation had seemingly narrowed the gap between Russia and Europe institutionally, socially and culturally.

However, the form and structure that the ensuing debate about Russia's relation to Europe was to take was determined by two developments within European scholarship happening roughly simultaneously with the recognition that Russia may have been fundamentally transformed in recent times. The first such development is the rise to prominence of the term 'Europe' itself, and the related emergence of the neologism 'civilisation'.³ Indeed, in the course of the 18th century, usage of the term 'Europe' increased dramatically, coinciding with a shift in the meaning of the term. At its most fundamental level Europe came to signify something much wider and more complex than a purely geographical concept. Instead it came to express the idea that there exists, within a certain geographical space, a community of states and peoples that is defined by cultural, political, and economic inter-connections. The idea of Europe thereby began to replace the older notion of a *Respublica Christiana* as an integrative framework. As a consequence, membership of this new Europe was no longer primarily determined by religious values and Latin Christian solidarity – criteria that had generally led to an exclusion of Russia due to its profession of the Greek faith – but by a

³ On the semantic development of the term 'civilisation' in 18th-century France, see Jean Starobinski, 'Le mot "civilisation"', *Le temps de la réflexion* IV (1983) and Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), chap. 28. In Germany 'Kultur' was often used instead of the neologism 'Zivilisation'. However, during the 18th century the two terms had practically identical meanings, and only started to significantly drift apart in the course of the 19th century. See Jörg Fisch, 'Zivilisation, Kultur', in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, 8 vols. (Stuttgart: E. Klett, 1972-1997), vol. 6, esp. pp. 679-82.

political idea of the existence of a fiercely competitive balance between individual states, and a cultural notion that is close to what by the end of the 18th century came to be termed as civilisation.⁴

Central to the notion of this newly conceptualised entity of Europe was the idea of historical development: what marked Europe in the eyes of many 18th-century thinkers was that it had *become* civilised. As a consequence, attempts to understand this new Europe were invariably bound up with investigations into the historical causes, mechanisms and pathways that underlie, and move forward, the process of becoming civilised. Such investigations themselves were rendered possible by, and interacted with, a profound redefinition of the concept of history itself. Most importantly, as Reinhart Koselleck has shown, the idea of history became increasingly singularised, and thereby generalised and universalised from the mid-18th century onwards. Whilst it had of course always been recognised that there existed countless individual histories, a new regulative idea emerged: that underlying all these histories, history as such existed; a unifying developmental process regulating and explaining all possible histories.⁵ In the first instance this transformation manifested itself in the development of philosophic history - a highly contested concept whose manifold definitions will occupy us throughout this thesis - with its overriding concern to establish what J. G. A. Pocock has called the 'enlightened narrative'.⁶ This narrative attempted to explicate the historical process by which a country develops from a state of savagery and/or barbarism to civilisation. The particular case most often used to illustrate this process was that of Europe itself, leading to a preoccupation with the question of how the continent had left a perceived state of barbarism and superstition after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, and had entered a state of civilisation and enlightenment by the 18th century.⁷

⁴ See Lucien Febvre, *L'Europe: genèse d'une civilisation* (Librairie académique Perrin, 1999), pp. 210-43. Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *L'Idée d'Europe dans l'histoire* (Paris: Denoël, 1965), chaps. 3-5, pp. 59-134.

⁵ Reinhart Koselleck, 'Geschichte, Historie', in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 2, pp. 641-53.

⁶ J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 4 vols. to date (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999-), vol. 2, p. 1.

⁷ For an alternative view on the crafting of the Enlightenment narrative, see Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

The increased recognition of Russia, and especially the soaring interest in Peter's Europeanising project, naturally interacted in complex ways with the development of the ideas of Europe, civilisation and philosophic history sketched above. Just at the time when the historical narrative of European civilisation began to be crafted, Russia burst onto the scene and begged the question about its relation to this narrative. It is this interaction that underlies and drives the debate about Russia and provides it with its subject matter; and it is this debate as it ensued in France and Germany from the 1750s to the end of the century that the present thesis seeks to recover.

It will endeavour to undertake this recovery by means of in-depth analysis of the historical works of three of the best known French and German Enlightenment thinkers - Voltaire, Denis Diderot and Johann Gottfried Herder - as well as of two authors who have gained much less posthumous acclaim and prominence: Pierre Charles Levesque and August Ludwig Schlözer. What unites these five figures, who otherwise professed highly divergent scholarly, religious and political convictions, is a sustained concern with the central question of my thesis: to what extent, by what means and with what historiographical and political consequences can the particular history of Russia be aligned with, and related to, the generalised narrative of European civilisation, or of the development of civilisation *tout court*? Indeed, Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs* and *Siècle de Louis XIV*,⁸ Diderot's contributions to Guillaume Raynal's third edition of the *Histoire des deux Indes*,⁹ Levesque's *L'homme moral* and *L'homme pensant*,¹⁰ Herder's *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* and *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*¹¹ and Schlözer's *Vorstellung seiner Universal-Historie und Weltgeschichte nach ihren Haupttheilen*¹² are all concerned with defining the historical process in general, and, more or less explicitly, with the principal historical features of European civilisation in particular. At the same time, all these thinkers had a significant interest in Russia and Russian history: all (with the notable exception of Voltaire) had lived for

⁸ See ESM and OH, pp. 605-1222.

⁹ HDI.

¹⁰ HM and HP.

¹¹ Hanser, vol. 1, pp. 589-683 and Hanser, vol. 3.

¹² UH and WG.

varying periods of time on Russian territory, and all have left us with historical and/or political works on Russia that were concerned with the country's past, present and future and with its relations to Europe.¹³

In the context of the growing European preoccupation with Russian history during the 18th century, a detailed study of the works of the most prominent French and German historians of Russia naturally possesses an interest and relevance *sui generis*. But the subject matter covered here additionally allows a substantive contribution to two wider fields of enquiry that have recently been established as central to the understanding of the European Enlightenment. The first such field is concerned with a re-evaluation of the status of history and historical scholarship within Enlightenment discourse as a whole; the second one with re-discovering the sophisticated and complex nature of the 18th century debate about the most appropriate means of political reform.

Regarding the status of history, this thesis will argue that for all the thinkers under consideration, history and the study of history were central to their core concern to understand humanity and the human predicament. Thereby, it will feed into a growing literature that suggests that the second half of the 18th century was an age profoundly concerned with history and historical modes of enquiry. Such a position has been most prominently advanced by Peter Hanns Reill in regard to the German *Aufklärung*, and by Pocock for the English and French context.¹⁴ Implicit in their works is a rejection of a persistent characterisation of the Enlightenment as an age unduly preoccupied with natural and rational philosophy; a preoccupation which supposedly prevented the emergence of truly historical modes of consciousness and understanding.

¹³ See the individual chapters and the bibliography for details.

¹⁴ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*; Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1975). For the increasing concern with uncovering the principles of Enlightenment historiography in Germany, see also Hans Erich Bödeker et al., eds., *Aufklärung und Geschichte*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992); Wolfgang Küttler, Jörn Rüsen, and Ernst Schulien, eds., *Anfänge modernen historischen Denkens*, 5 vols., vol. 2, *Geschichtsdiskurs* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994).

Arguably the most important source for this idea of the unhistorical Enlightenment is provided by the 19th century, mainly German, tradition of historicism, which set itself up as standing in irrevocable opposition to the preceding conception of history.¹⁵ In its most general terms, the historicist critique of the Enlightenment makes two interrelated claims. First, it asserts that the Enlightenment tried to reduce the complex, dynamic process of historical development or *Entwicklung* to static, mechanical and universal laws similar to the ones established in the Newtonian mechanical-mathematical account of the working of the universe. Second, hand-in-hand with this reduction of history to a static account of nature, so the critique goes, went ahistorical evaluations of historical events and periods according to similarly static and trans-historical moral absolutes derived from a rationalistic natural law philosophy; absolutes, moreover, which the enlightened historians saw increasingly realised in their own times and places. Hence, a complete inability on the part of 18th century historians to appreciate, or to judge fairly, the irreducible individuality or *Individualität* of any culture not conforming to their inflexible moral yardstick.¹⁶ This second part of the historicist objection has gained further impetus by more recent post-modernist criticisms of the Enlightenment project in general, and its mode of history in particular. For postmodernists, the Enlightenment marks above all the beginning of modernity with its triple commitment to universalism, rationalism and historical progress, and thereby to highly reductionist modes of historical evaluation, against which the post-modernist project is directed.¹⁷

¹⁵ The classic account of historicism's relation to the Enlightenment, written from within the former tradition, is Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, 2nd ed. (München: Leibniz Verlag München, 1946). For a good, general overview of the historical development of historicism, see Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus* (München: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1992), esp. chaps. 1-3. For an analysis of historicists' criticism of the Enlightenment, see Jonathan B. Knudsen, 'The Historicist Enlightenment', in *What's left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question*, ed. Keith Michael Baker and Peter H. Reill (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ See especially Meinecke's evaluation of Voltaire and the early works of Herder. According to Meinecke, Voltaire is the first, and most typical, representative of Enlightenment historiography; the historical works of Herder – and especially his *Auch eine Philosophie zur Geschichte der Menschheit* – the earliest sustained attempt to break free from this paradigm. Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, chaps. 2, 9.

¹⁷ On the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment, see Robert Wokler, 'The Enlightenment Project and its Critics', in *The Postmodernist Critique of the Project of Enlightenment*, ed. Sven-Eric Liedman (Amsterdam - Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997).

I will of course not attempt to show here that Voltaire's, Diderot's, Levesque's, Schlözer's or Herder's conception of history are compatible with the kind of historical sensibility that would satisfy historicists or post-modernists. My objective is to investigate their respective conceptions on their own terms, rather than studying them through the lenses provided by a subsequent theoretical position. Nevertheless, a case will be made that the most general and dramatic objection, namely that the Enlightenment was at its roots a profoundly unhistorical current of thought, bent on reducing historical particularity and diversity to naturalistic or philosophical universality and unity, is untenable.

In the first instance it will be shown that whilst philosophic history could entail a radical integration of the study of history and the study of nature, this was not necessarily the case. There is simply little evidence to suggest that, say, Voltaire's Newtonian conception of the universe impinged significantly on his conception of history. More importantly, in the cases where history became naturalised, as it undoubtedly did in the works of Diderot and Herder, no reduction of the complex, dynamic laws of historical development to static, mechanical laws of nature occurred. On the contrary, Diderot's and Herder's respective accounts of nature were not of the static Newtonian kind, but inherently dynamic, and their attempts to combine history and nature involved as much a historicisation of nature as a naturalisation of history.¹⁸

Even though it is certainly the case that philosophic history valued the general above the particular and unity above diversity, this did not imply that Enlightenment historians as a whole solved the problem of particularity and diversity by means of a straight-forward imposition of a universal standard. The relation of the particular history of Russia to generalised accounts of the development of (European) civilisation was a serious problem and subject to sophisticated debate. Crucially, to the extent that reductionist moves were made within this debate – most notably Voltaire's and Diderot's claims that the

¹⁸ Reill has shown that a good deal of Enlightenment historiography was influenced by a dynamic, vitalist conception of nature, rather than a static, mechanical one. See Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 2005), esp. pp. 187-8, 249-50; Peter Hanns Reill, 'Science and the science of history in the Spätaufklärung', in *Aufklärung und Geschichte*.

particularities of Russia's pre-Petrine history do not matter much at all to the general question of its civilisation – they were vigorously challenged from within the Enlightenment tradition. This challenge was most prominently launched by scholars such as Levesque and Schlözer, who attempted to reconfigure the relation between a traditional erudite mode of historical scholarship, with its focus on the unique and particular, and the newfangled approach of the philosophers with their characteristic generalising attitude.¹⁹ We shall further see that Herder, often considered as one of the first thinkers to have transcended the apparent limitations of the Enlightenment's conception of history, was still responding to the problem of how to combine philosophy and erudition, or the general and particular, and that his solution is best conceived as an attempt at a synthesis of competing strands of thought operating at the time he was writing, rather than a radical rupture or departure.

If philosophic history is therefore a great deal more complex and marked by much more tension and internal conflict than stereotypical accounts might suggest, its practitioners nevertheless substantially concurred about its political function. Indeed, despite all their considerable disagreements, Voltaire, Diderot, Levesque, Schlözer and Herder all agreed that history, or more particularly, philosophic history, is not to be studied or written as an end in itself, but that its importance is constituted by its ability to inform and guide political reform in the present. Philosophic history is, above all else, an investigation into the general drivers and stumbling blocks of civilisation, and, as such, an essential source of knowledge for attempts consciously to improve the human condition in the present by political means.

Since the 1950s, the concern of 18th century thinkers with the practical and pragmatic matter of political reform has increasingly been recognised and studied by historians of the Enlightenment. Reacting against a tendency to characterise the Enlightenment as an age of abstract reason, predominately concerned with philosophy – a tendency maybe best illustrated in Cassirer's *Die Philosophie der*

¹⁹ On the complex relationship between erudite and philosophical modes of historical scholarship during the 18th century, see Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 1, chaps. 6-8.

*Aufklärung*²⁰ – historians such as Peter Gay, Franco Venturi, and, more recently, John Robertson, have drawn attention to the profoundly political and practical aspects of 18th century thought.²¹ Indeed, Venturi and Robertson have found in the commitment to political reform and in a complex discussion about both its ends and most appropriate means, rather than in adherence to any philosophical system, unifying features that makes it possible to group together an otherwise highly heterogeneous collection of thinkers, and thereby conceive of the phenomenon labelled the European Enlightenment.²²

There are of course problems with the idea, advanced above all by Robertson, that the Enlightenment is somehow reducible to an exclusive preoccupation with secular reform, or ‘betterment in this world’.²³ Nonetheless, the analysis undertaken here will show that a concern with the prospects of improvement within civilising polities was a pivotal concern of Enlightenment thinkers, and that historical analysis provided them with their tools of investigation. Indeed, the various 18th century attempts to establish the relation between the history of Russian and European civilisation are invariably bound up with investigations into the nature of the relation between history and reforming politics; and, throughout this thesis, the resulting political debate will be investigated alongside the historiographical one. This political debate is principally centred around the question of enlightened despotism or absolutism, or, more precisely, its point of departure is an assessment of the historical importance of the reign of the reforming absolute monarchs, Peter I, and later, Catherine II, in the civilisation of Russia. In grappling with this particular question, all the thinkers considered here addressed a set of wider, interrelated problems, which, as Gay, Venturi and

²⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Verlag von J. C. B Mohr, 1932).

²¹ For the affirmation of the practical, political character of the Enlightenment, see Peter Gay, *The Party of Humanity: Studies in the French Enlightenment* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1954), esp. preface and chaps. 4, 7, 9; Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), introduction, chap. 5; Franco Venturi, *Italy and the Enlightenment. Studies in a Cosmopolitan Century* (London: Longman, 1972), chap. 1; John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), introduction. For the relationship between the Enlightenment’s interest in history and its commitment to political reform, see Franco Venturi, ‘History and Reform in the Middle of the Eighteenth Century’, in *The Diversity of History: Essays in Honour of Sir Herbert Butterfield*, ed. John Huxtable Elliott and Helmut George Koenigsberger (1970).

²² See especially Robertson’s review of Venturi’s work - John Robertson, ‘Franco Venturi’s Enlightenment’, *Past and Present* 137, no. 1 (1992), esp. 204-6.

²³ Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, p. 8.

Robertson have shown, are central to the Enlightenment discourse about reform in general.

The first and most general problem concerns the extent to which willed acts as manifested in the grand reform projects of Peter and Catherine can influence the historical process; or, to put it negatively, the extent to which the complex, impersonal, social, economic and cultural forces underlying this process impose unsurpassable limits to any conscious attempt to rapidly re-direct and speed up the march of history. Closely related to the delineation of the importance of the will in history are two further questions regarding both the content and direction of political reform: first, to what extent, and, crucially, for how long, can reform flow exclusively from the top, that is to say, from the enlightened ruler?²⁴ This naturally leads to a consideration of whether society at large is merely a passive mass to be moulded from the top, or whether it possesses historical agency that deserves both respect and nurturing; a consideration which is itself bound up with the central question of the respective roles and importance of legislation and education as means of reform.²⁵ Secondly, discussion of Peter's project of civilisation through Europeanisation brought to the forefront a tension between autochthonous and allochthonous modes of development and reform,²⁶ expressed in an uninterrupted debate from Voltaire to Herder in regard to the question of whether Peter's wholesale importation, and imposition, of aspects of European culture can ever form the basis of a viable Russian civilisation, or, whether such imports need to be rejected *tout court*, or, at the very least, be moulded to, and made compatible with, specifically Russian circumstances.

²⁴ On the problem of the will in history see *ibid.*, esp. pp. 30, 37.

²⁵ This question lies for instance at the root of Gay's discussion of the *philosophes'* ambivalent attitude towards the reforming activities of absolutist rulers, and their interest in educational reform as an alternative to the politics of enlightened absolutism. See Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1966-69), vol. 2, pp. 483-516.

²⁶ This tension is in many ways an instance of Venturi's definition of the Enlightenment as an attempt to combine the cosmopolitan – an awareness of the existence of a common stock of universal ideas – with the patriotic – a realisation that the universal ideals need adaptation to flourish in any particular context. See Venturi, *Italy and the Enlightenment. Studies in a Cosmopolitan Century*, pp. 18-20. For such an interpretation of Venturi's project, see also Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment*, pp. 38, 357.

Given the enormous range of contemporary scholarship on the Enlightenment, it is surprising how little research has been undertaken in the rich field of historical writing on Russia during the 18th century. No substantive work devoted to the study of historians of Russia exists in the extensive academic literature on the Enlightenment.²⁷ Most investigations into the wider field of European scholarly engagement with Russia in the 18th century have typically concentrated on the work of one singularly prominent thinker such as Voltaire, Diderot, and Herder,²⁸ or have focused on the European perception of particular aspects of Russian history; most prominently its most celebrated rulers Peter I and Catherine II.²⁹ This thesis, analysing the works of a cross-national group of historians, and focusing on their project of integrating Russia's history into general conceptions of the historical process of civilisation, thus sets itself clearly apart from existing studies.

Studies that are more limited in scope do, however, exist: Dimitri von Mohrenschildt's *Russia in the Intellectual Life of Eighteenth Century France* (1936), Albert Lortholary's *Le Mirage Russe en France au XVIII^e siècle* (1951) and Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe: the Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994).³⁰ Chronologically the first is von Mohrenschildt's study. It comprehensively outlines the place of Russia across 18th-century French thought by considering almost every publication that had something to say about Russia. The work is both comprehensive and pioneering yet in the end it is more

²⁷ The only monograph I am aware of that particularly investigates the place of Russia in European historical writings is *Russland und das Selbstverständnis Europas* by Groh. However, Groh's focus is on 19th century philosophies of histories and specifically on the question of how a fundamental difference in historical development in regard to Russia and Europe was conceptualised. He only summarily deals with 18th-century historical conceptions of Russia, in order to emphasise the novelty of the ones developed during the next century. Dieter Groh, *Russland und das Selbstverständnis Europas: Ein Beitrag zur Europäischen Geistesgeschichte* (Neuwied: Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1961).

²⁸ References to such studies can be found in the respective introductions to the chapters on Voltaire, Diderot and Herder.

²⁹ See, for instance, Carolyn H. Wilberger, *Peter the Great: An Eighteenth-Century Hero of our Times?*, ed. Theodore Besterman, vol. XCVI, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1972); Isabel de Madariaga, 'Catherine and the Philosophes', in *Russia and the West in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. A. G. Cross (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1983); Inna Gorbato, *Catherine the Great and the French Philosophers of the Enlightenment: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot and Grimm* (Bethesda: Academica Press, 2006).

³⁰ von Mohrenschildt, *Russia in the Intellectual Life of Eighteenth-Century France*; Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*.

descriptive than analytical, and does not present any detailed examination of the thinkers considered.

Much closer to the analytical scope of the present study are the works by Lortholary and Wolff. They both examine how a set of thinkers - exclusively French in Lortholary's case, broadly European in Wolff's - drew up a distinct Enlightenment conception of Russia (Lortholary) or of Eastern Europe more widely (Wolff). Both authors, moreover, see this conception as being deeply flawed, and as a particular instance of a general intellectual failure of the Enlightenment. According to Lortholary, this flaw is located in the political sphere. Indeed, he argues that the *philosophes* drew up an image of Russia that was essentially a mirage, marked by almost non-existent knowledge about the complex realities of Russia's past and present, a concomitant massive exaggeration of the efficacy of the reforms undertaken by Peter I and Catherine II, and a deafening silence in regard to the violence that accompanied the reform work both inside Russia and externally. By constructing such a mirage, Lortholary concludes, its authors could historically verify their most cherished, but hopelessly abstract and rationalistic, political thesis: the thesis of enlightened despotism, according to which a ruler invested with unlimited power, but guided by the principles of Enlightenment philosophy, could quickly build a perfect civilisation from scratch.³¹

According to Wolff, conversely, the underlying reasons for the Enlightenment's failure to deal adequately with Russia must be located in the cultural sphere. Taking his cues from Edward Said's *Orientalism*,³² he contends that 18th-century thinkers constructed a textual image of Russia in particular, and Eastern Europe in general, from a position of cultural arrogance. They thus created an idea of 'Eastern Europe' as a semi-Oriental entity, ambivalently occupying a middling position on a highly normative developmental scale, whose points of extreme were provided by the Orient, marked by unmitigated barbarism and backwardness, and the West, the locus of civilisation and progress. Blinded by a

³¹ Lortholary, *Le mirage russe*, esp. chap. 2.5.

³² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

desire for cultural self-promotion and assertion, and caught in a prison of binary oppositions, Wolff argues, Western Enlightenment thinkers were never able to deal with the realities of a culture fundamentally different from their own.³³

Whatever the merits of Wolff's and Lortholary's appraisals of individual thinkers, it will be shown here that their general contention of a considerable unity in the 18th-century discourse about Russia, based on either cultural arrogance or undue political abstractness and inflexibility, is unwarranted. Even though they investigate the right kind of questions - the relation of Russia to European civilisation (Wolff) and the efficacy of enlightened absolutism as a civilising means (Lortholary) are indeed the central problems underlying the Russian writings of the thinkers considered here - their respective arguments that the Enlightenment produced hegemonic, or even monolithic, answers to these questions is simply not tenable.

The following chapters will develop the argument that it is impossible to do justice to the richness and complexity of the Enlightenment if we conceive it as a movement united by shared philosophical, cultural or political theories. Instead, a case will be made here that it is more fruitful to consider the Enlightenment as a series of debates, unified solely by the range of questions posed and by a number of flexible intellectual frameworks that allow discussion of those questions, but not by the specific answers given. In the case of the Enlightenment debate about the history of Russia, the unifying framework to assess the questions of Russia's relation to European civilisation and the efficacy of enlightened despotism as a means of civilising reform, is provided by the contested and evolving idea of a philosophic history. The present attempt to trace Voltaire's, Diderot's, Levesque's, Schlözer's and Herder's contribution to the resolution of both questions as well as to the concept of philosophic history itself, will hopefully furnish a story characterised by richness, contestation and complexity, rather than by failure and allegedly almost hard-wired intellectual flaws.

³³ Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, introduction.

To arrive at a sense of the rich and complex nature of this debate, it is essential to ground our protagonists' writings on Russia in their proper context in order to avoid the pitfalls of teleology and anachronism. Indeed, one key problem with Lortholary's and Wolff's respective accounts is their projection of what they perceived as pressing contemporary problems back into the 18th century. Lortholary's study, written in the early 1950s, outlining the *philosophes'* ostensibly facile and uninformed praise for the despots Peter I and Catherine II, takes, at least implicitly, as much aim at Voltaire, Diderot and d'Alembert, as it does at sections of the French intelligentsia of his own time and their lack of criticism of the new Russian despot Stalin.³⁴ Wolff, finishing his account shortly after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, explicitly conceives his work as a contribution to the tearing down of a mental and cultural wall between Eastern and Western Europe, whose influence has allegedly persisted after the fall of the political one, by tracing back its foundations to the Enlightenment.³⁵ The dangers inherent in either approach seem clear, for by at least implicitly conceiving, say, Voltaire's and Rousseau's profound disagreement over Peter I as a test run or a pre-history to Sartre's and Camus' clash over Stalin, or by treating the whole of the European Enlightenment's engagement with Eastern Europe as a prequel to Churchill's Iron Curtain speech, we are highly unlikely ever to approach an understanding of, to give but one example, Voltaire's project in penning the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand*.

There are at least two levels of contextualisation required to arrive at a proper historical account of the Enlightenment debate about Russia. First, the Russian writings of Voltaire, Diderot, Levesque, Schlözer and Herder must be considered within the context of their own wider bodies of thought. This is particularly germane in the case of Diderot, Herder, and, to a lesser extent, Voltaire, simply because Russia and Russian history, even though subjects of considerable interest, stood not at the centre of their respective intellectual concerns. Therefore, in order to understand the full import and meaning of these writings, and to prevent significant misreading and misinterpretation, they must be fully integrated within

³⁴ Wolff has drawn attention to the presentist starting point of Lortholary's work. See Larry Wolff and Serguei Karp, eds., *Le mirage russe au XVIII^e siècle* (Ferney: Centre international d'étude d XVIII^e siècle, 2001), pp. 239-41.

³⁵ Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p. 3.

wider fields of which they form an integral part: the construction of a new kind of historical narrative of European civilisation as outlined in the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV* in the case of Voltaire; the attempts to integrate history with natural philosophy and anthropology in the case of Diderot and Herder as most prominently attempted in the *Histoire des deux Indes* and the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, respectively. Secondly, the evolving and fluid debate about Russian history and the politics of its two most prominent rulers, which is, in itself, part of a wider debate about history and its relation to politics in general, forms a further layer of context. Only by considering the Russian writings of the thinkers under consideration as interventions in these specific late 18th-century debates, can we hope to arrive at a reading of those writings that enhances our understanding of the Enlightenment rather than merely illuminate or reflect problems and concerns of the present.

This thesis is structured in a way that facilitates such a contextualised reading. Each of its five chapters provides an in-depth analysis of the Russian writings of one individual thinker, whereby close attention is paid to the status and relevance of these writings within each respective *oeuvre* as a whole. I will thus provide an account of five highly original solutions to the historiographical and political problem posed by the emergence of Russia. The chapters themselves are arranged in approximate chronological order, starting with Voltaire whose most relevant writings for our present concerns were published in the 1750s and 1760s, proceeding via Diderot (1770s), Levesque (1780s), Schlözer (late 1760s to 1770s and 1790s to 1800s) to Herder, who grappled with the double commitment of establishing a philosophic history, and of highlighting the significance of newly civilised Russia in the context of such a history across his career, from the early *Journal meiner Reise* (1769) to the late *Adrastea* (1801-1803). Such a diachronic reading of the evolution of the debate about Russia's civilisation will reveal its coherence and unity in terms of the questions addressed, if not in terms of the answers given. We shall see that each thinker engages in some depth with the legacy left by his predecessors, and that their respective arguments about the interrelated problems of integrating Russian history into generalised accounts of the development of civilisation, and the efficacy of enlightened despotism as a

means of political reform, despite their often conflicting conclusions, emerge from a common ground of shared theoretical and practical concerns.

1. Voltaire: The slow emergence of Europe versus the swift civilisation of Russia

Introduction

A consideration of Voltaire's historical works is in several respects a fitting starting point for the present thesis. On the one hand, his *oeuvre* contains the first sustained attempt at writing a new kind of history, explicitly termed philosophical; a history whose main subject matter is the process of Europe's transition from a state of barbarism to one of civilisation.³⁶ The impact of Voltaire's ideal of philosophic history on Enlightenment historiography has been widely stressed in modern scholarship. Even though there exists considerable debate about the quality and merit of his historical works, his status as a highly innovative and prominent figure within the history of historiography is almost universally acknowledged.³⁷ Throughout this thesis we will have occasion to note the influence Voltaire exerted on contemporary historical thought. Indeed, he was an important point of departure for the historical reflections of all the thinkers covered here. Not necessarily, or even primarily, as a purveyor of a fixed paradigm, but as the author of a conception of the historical project against which rivaling ones could be defined.

Moreover, Voltaire wrote arguably the most influential history of Russia of the 18th century: the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand* of 1761/63.³⁸ The stated reason for writing this work was to increase knowledge about an empire of immense extent that had so far been almost entirely neglected

³⁶ It should be noted that Voltaire did not use the noun 'civilisation', an 18th-century neologism whose French roots have been traced to physiocratic writings. Instead, he employed the verbs 'se civiliser' and 'policer' to denote the historical process by which a country may become civilised, and the adjectives 'civilisé' and 'policé' to denote a civilised state of being. On the semantic development of the word 'civilisation' in 18th-century France, see Starobinski, 'Le mot "civilisation"' and also Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, chap. 28.

³⁷ See, for instance, John Henry Brumfitt, *Voltaire Historian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958); O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, chap. 2; Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, chaps. 5-10; Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, chap. 2; Donald R. Kelley, ed., *Versions of History from Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), chap. 9.

³⁸ OC, vols. 46-47

in Europe.³⁹ Crucially, however, Voltaire's aim was not merely to disseminate disparate facts about Russia's past and its most illustrious czar, but to highlight the world historical importance of the transformation the country underwent during the reign of Peter I. As Voltaire himself expressed it in the preface to the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*:

L'empire de Russie est devenue de notre temps si considérable pour l'Europe que Pierre, son vrai fondateur, en est encore plus intéressant. C'est lui qui a donné au Nord une nouvelle face; et, après lui, sa nation a été sur le point de changer le sort de l'Allemagne, et son influence s'est étendue sur la France et sur l'Espagne, malgré l'immense distance des lieux. L'établissement de cet empire est peut-être la plus grande époque pour l'Europe, après la découverte du Nouveau Monde.⁴⁰

The aim of this chapter is to explore the implications of Voltaire's contention that Peter's reign must be considered epochal because he had managed to close the gap between the states of development of Russia and Europe. Its key argument is that the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* can only be meaningfully understood when considered within the context of Voltaire's conception of philosophic history, and the practical application of this conception to European history as outlined in the *Essai sur les mœurs*⁴¹ and *Siècle de Louis XIV.*⁴² As will become clear throughout this thesis, Voltaire's work on Peter I is highly original, and kick starts the Enlightenment debate about Russia, precisely because he systematically considered Peter's Russia as a particular instance of the much more general historical narrative of the emergence of European civilisation. It is the multifaceted nexus between Europe, Russia and civilisation first broached by Voltaire that stands at the very heart of this debate, and his attempt at defining the nature of the relationship between the three concepts became subject to continuous discussion over the next four decades.

³⁹ See, for instance, Voltaire's letter to Charles Augustin Ferriol, comte d'Argental, in which he described his project of writing a history of Peter in the following manner: 'Il ne s'agit pas icy de redire ce qui s'est passé aux batailles de Narva et de Pultava. Il s'agit de faire connaître un empire de deux mille lieues d'étendue dont à peine on avait entendu parler il y a cinquante ans.' OC, vol. 102, 19 August 1757, D7349, pp. 133-4.

⁴⁰ OC, vol. 47, p. 983.

⁴¹ ESM.

⁴² OH, pp. 605-1267.

This importance of Voltaire in defining the terms of the late 18th-century debate about Russia has been recognised in modern scholarship, but has often been assessed in wholly negative terms. In both Lortholary's and Wolff's accounts of Europe's engagement with Russia in the 18th century, Voltaire emerges as the central figure. According to the former, the portrayal of Peter in the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* marks the formal elaboration of the myth of enlightened despotism that allegedly became hegemonic in 18th century France.⁴³ According to Wolff, by contrast, Voltaire's history of the czar provides the most important point of origin for the Enlightened idea of Eastern Europe as a semi-Oriental and semi-barbarian domain standing in sharp opposition to Western, civilised Europe.⁴⁴

The reading of the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* provided here will reveal that both lines of criticism are misconceived. Contrary to Wolff's assertion, we will see that far from Orientalising Russia, Voltaire in fact does the opposite. Indeed, if there is a legitimate criticism of the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* to be made, it is that Voltaire unduly Europeanises Russia, and specifically underestimates the particularities of its pre-Petrine state by uncompromisingly regarding it through the lenses provided by his own conception of medieval, feudal Europe. It is on the basis of this questionable alignment between the historical states of late 17th century Russia and early medieval Europe that Voltaire is able to tell the story of the great reforming czar who swiftly civilised his country by means of Europeanisation: Peter, according to Voltaire, effectively concentrated approximately 450 years of European history into his reign by learning the lessons of the continent's past; lessons seemingly directly applicable because of the similarity of the two territories' respective historical situations.

Even though Voltaire undoubtedly panders towards an ideal of enlightened despotism by reducing the process of civilisation in Russia to the swift and ruthless imposition of Peter's historically informed will, Lortholary's argument nevertheless needs revision in at least two respects. The analysis provided here will show that the apparent advocacy of enlightened despotism in the *Histoire de*

⁴³ Lortholary, *Le mirage russe*, chap. 1.4.

⁴⁴ Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, chap. 5.

l'empire de Russie stands in sharp contrast to the much more complex political lessons that Voltaire derived from the *Essai sur les mœurs* and *Siècle de Louis XIV*. Therefore, rather than simply regarding Voltaire's portrayal of Peter I as indicative of a general flaw in his political thought, this chapter will conclude with an investigation into the particular causes that may have led Voltaire to such a portrayal. Moreover, the subsequent chapters on Diderot and Levesque will reveal that Voltaire's interpretation of Peter I as the perfect enlightened despot, far from ever becoming hegemonic in the French Enlightenment, was fundamentally challenged from within that tradition.

The genesis of European civilisation: The *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV*

Voltaire had already explored one aspect of the tripartite relationship between Europe, Russia and civilisation that interests us here in his very first major historical work: the *Histoire de Charles XII roi de Suède* of 1731.⁴⁵ Whilst the work is principally concerned with the deeds of Charles XII during the Great Northern War (1700-1721), in the course of the narrative Peter I emerges as the principal, and increasingly successful, rival of the Swedish king, who ultimately manages to substitute his own country for Sweden as the dominant power around the Baltic Sea. Russia, which had hardly been known in Europe at the turn of the century, Voltaire contended, had in the course of two decades become a military and political force to be reckoned with.⁴⁶ But in this early work Voltaire showed as yet little concern with the third ingredient that was to mark his later conception of Russia and its relationship to Europe: civilisation. It is only through the interaction of all three concepts that the Enlightenment debate about Russia took off, and the scheme of history underlying the *Histoire de Charles XII* did not yet allow Voltaire to conceive of such an interaction. Indeed, it is in several respects a highly traditional kind of history, firmly centred around the particular deeds of a particular king, and, as such, conceptually far removed from what Voltaire would later term *histoire en philosophe*.⁴⁷

It was while preparing his next two histories – the *Siècle de Louis XIV* (first published in 1751, but later considerably augmented and from 1756 integrated into the *Essai sur les mœurs*) and the *Essai sur les mœurs* itself (first complete version published in 1756, and major revised editions appeared in 1761, 1769 and 1775) – that Voltaire elaborated upon philosophic history and turned his focus

⁴⁵ OC, vol. 4, pp. 149-556.

⁴⁶ For Voltaire's conception of the shift of power occurring in Northern Europe during the reign of Charles XII, see *ibid.*, bk. 5, pp. 388-94.

⁴⁷ This conceptual gap between the *Histoire de Charles XII* and Voltaire's later conception of *histoire en philosophe* has also been stressed by Brumfitt, *Voltaire*, chap. 1.

sharply towards a history of civilisation.⁴⁸ Crucially, as we shall see in detail in the next section of this chapter, it was also during this time that he rekindled his earlier interest in Russian history, and specifically began to formulate the project of writing a history of Peter I. This project finally came to fruition in 1760/63 through the two volume *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*⁴⁹ - a history that focuses primarily on the question of how the historical gap between Russia's and Europe's civilisation was closed during the reign of czar Peter I.

Before we can investigate the history of the czar, we must, however, turn our attention to the wider context from which it emerged. This context is provided by the works on philosophic history in the 1740s and 1750s, and especially the *Siècle de Louis XIV* and *Essai sur les mœurs*. It is in these works, as well as in a number of closely related shorter essays,⁵⁰ that Voltaire defined his new approach of a philosophic history, and, crucially, it is in these works that he provides us with a comprehensive account of how civilisation developed in Europe. As will become clear in the course of this chapter, this account strongly determines, and arguably over-determines, Voltaire's conception of Russia's entry into Europe, and, therefore, must be considered in some detail if we are to make sense of his *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*.

Voltaire most prominently defined his ideal of a philosophic history in negative terms, by juxtaposing it to older historical conceptions that were deemed unsatisfactory.⁵¹ The most prominent target of his criticism is the tradition of

⁴⁸ On the complicated history of the composition of the *Essai sur les mœurs*, see Pomeau's introduction to his edition, ESM, vol. 1, pp. II-XVIII.

⁴⁹ OC, vols. 46-7.

⁵⁰ These essays are: *Remarques sur l'histoire* (1742), OH, pp. 41-5; *Nouvelles Considérations sur l'histoire* (1744), OH, pp. 46-9; *Nouveau plan d'une histoire de l'esprit homme* (1745), ESM, vol. 2, pp. 815-17; *Remarques pour servir de supplément à l'Essai sur les mœurs* (1763), ESM, vol. 2, pp. 900-49; article *Histoire* (composed 1755-56) written for *l'Encyclopédie*, OC, vol. 33, pp. 164-86.

⁵¹ Voltaire undoubtedly significantly overstated the contrast between traditional historiography and his new ideal of *histoire en philosophe*. Indeed, several of the key characteristics of this ideal had been anticipated by the late 17th- and early 18th-century tradition of *histoire raisonnée*. This was a genre of historical writing professed by a widely diverse group of thinkers that encompassed the Jesuit and *historiographe de France* Gabriel Daniel, the noble *parlementaire* and *érudit* Henri le comte de Boulainvilliers, and the Huguenot exiles Henri Philippe de Limiers and Isaac de Larrey. Aspects of this historical conception silently taken over by Voltaire include: the elevation of the nation vis-à-vis the king, the associated widening of history's subject matter beyond political and diplomatic history, and the focus on systemic changes in the manners and the spirit of a given

historical erudition which developed out of Renaissance humanism.⁵² According to Voltaire, the research into the past undertaken by erudites and antiquarians only ever produces a more or less random accumulation of unimportant facts relating to unimportant events. Voltaire made this point most succinctly in the preface of the 1754 edition of the *Essai sur les mœurs*, where he expressed his own displeasure with erudite historiography through the mouth of his mistress – Madame du Châtelet – a lady with a profound mind and an unsurpassed knowledge of metaphysics and the natural sciences, but who, Voltaire alleged, could so far find no pleasure in history:

“Que m’importe, disait-elle, à moi Française vivant dans ma terre, de savoir qu’Égil succéda au roi Haquin en Suède? et qu’Ottoman était fils d’Ortogrul? ... [J]e n’ai pu achever aucune grande histoire moderne; je n’y vois guère que de la confusion, une foule de petits événements sans liaison et sans suite, mille batailles qui n’ont décidé de rien, et dans lesquelles je n’apprenais pas seulement de quelles armes on servait pour se détruire. J’ai renoncé à une étude aussi sèche qu’immense, qui accable l’esprit sans l’éclairer.”⁵³

Erudite historiography weighs down, rather than enlightens, the mind because by merely narrating fact after fact without connection or plan, it only speaks to the faculty of memory and not the one of reason.⁵⁴ It is because of its overbearing emphasis on factual detail and because of its underlying idea that everything that happened in the past is worth recovering for its own sake, that purely erudite historiography was unpalatable to both Voltaire and du Châtelet:

Les détails qui ne mènent à rien sont dans l’histoire ce que sont les bagages dans une armée, *impedimenta*. Il faut voir les choses en grand par cela même que l’esprit humain est petit, et qu’il s’affaisse sous les poids des minuties ...⁵⁵

nation over time. On the tradition of *histoire raisonnée*, see Phyllis K. Leffler, ‘French Historians and the Challenge to Louis XIV’s Absolutism’, *French Historical Studies* 14, no. 1 (1985).

⁵² On Voltaire’s troubled relationship with erudition, see also Brumfitt, *Voltaire*, pp. 129-47. On the tense relation between *érudits* and *philosophes* in 18th-century historiography more generally, see Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 1, chaps. 6-8 and Arnaldo Momigliano, ‘Gibbon’s Contribution to Historical Method’, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 2, no. 4 (1954), esp. pp. 450-3.

⁵³ ESM, vol. 2, p. 883.

⁵⁴ See also *Remarques sur l’histoire*, OH, p. 43.

⁵⁵ *Préface de l’édition Walther* (1754), ESM, vol. 2, pp. 889-90.

To write *histoire en philosophe* we must regard history *en grand*, and to achieve such a widening of perspective, a radical exclusion of those facts that are unimportant and not worth remembering, and a foregrounding of the ones that are, is required. However, Voltaire claimed, in so far as traditional historiography has selected from the mass of available data at all, it has selected badly, predominantly taking the deeds of kings as history's subject matter. In what is undoubtedly partially a self-criticism of his own *Histoire de Charles XII*, Voltaire moved decisively against traditional histories of kings and their battles, and urged a wholesale reconsideration of what really matters in the past:

Il [i.e. the philosophical historian] recherchera quel a été le vice radical et la vertu dominante d'une nation; pourquoi elle a été puissante ou faible sur la mer; comment et jusqu'à quel point elle s'est enrichie depuis un siècle ... Il voudra savoir comment les arts, les manufactures se sont établis; il suivra leur passage et leur retour d'un pays dans un autre. Les changements dans les mœurs et dans les lois seront enfin son grand objet. On saurait ainsi l'histoire des hommes, au lieu de savoir une faible partie de l'histoire des rois et des cours.

En vain je lis les annales de France: nos historiens se taisent tous sur ces détails. Aucun n'a eu pour devise: *Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto*. Il faudrait donc, me semble, incorporer avec art ces connaissances utiles dans le tissu des événements. Je crois que c'est la seule manière d'écrire l'histoire moderne en vrai politique et en vrai philosophe.⁵⁶

Mankind in general, and not kings and their deeds, is the subject of philosophic history. In order to understand the human predicament at various points in the past, historians must be interested in much more than diplomatic treatises, court intrigues and accounts of battles. Instead, they must turn their attention to the various compartments of civilisation - political institutions, laws, industry, trade, the arts and sciences, social mores and customs - and trace their interrelated development over time.

It is the developmental aspect of civilisation that gives philosophic history coherence, and sets it apart from mere compilations of random facts that overload their readers' memories. In the *Essai sur les mœurs*, for instance, Voltaire

⁵⁶ In *Nouvelles considerations sur l'histoire*, OH, pp. 48-9. For a very similar argument, see also *Plan d'une histoire de l'esprit humain*, ESM, vol. 2, p. 816.

presented his aim as that of tracing ‘par quels degrés on est parvenu de la rusticité barbare de ces temps là [i.e. the early medieval period] à la politesse du nôtre’.⁵⁷ It is the present that determines which historical facts are important, and should be related by the historian, and which ones are not.⁵⁸ Events and deeds of the past are only worthy of historical excavation, Voltaire implied, to the extent that they can illuminate how we arrived at a stage of present *politesse*, juxtaposed to a previous one of a *rusticité barbare* - only a history that can tell us something about our present condition, in other words, is instructive or enlightening.

Such a philosophic history is particularly instructive in the domain of politics. By redefining history’s subject matter, and by rigorously subjecting the past to present concerns, Voltaire gave history a new political significance: the prime political function of historiography is no longer to establish whether a given action by a king is morally good or bad, or appropriate in terms of statecraft, as had been the case in much humanist historiography.⁵⁹ Instead, the focus is now one of endeavouring to understand how a given civilisation works by means of

⁵⁷ *Remarques pour servir de supplément à l’Essai sur les mœurs*, ESM, vol. 2, p. 904.

⁵⁸ On Voltaire’s radical presentism, see also Pierre Force, ‘Voltaire and the Necessity of Modern History’, *Modern Intellectual History* 6, no. 3 (2009).

⁵⁹ This is of course not to say that Voltaire completely abandoned writing *miroirs des princes*. In fact, he frequently addressed sovereigns directly in his histories and urged them to learn from the historical examples provided. The best example of a Voltairian *miroir des princes* is of course the *Histoire de Charles XII*, explicitly conceived to educate overly ambitious kings out of the folly of conquests: ‘Mais on n’a pas été déterminé seulement à donner cette vie par la petite satisfaction d’écrire des faits extraordinaires; on a pensé que cette lecture pourrait être utiles à quelques princes, si ce livre leur tombe par hasard entre les mains. Certainement il n’y a point de souverain qui, en lisant la vie de Charles XII, ne doive être guéri de la folie des conquêtes.’ See *Histoire de Charles XII*, OH, p. 55. However, in his philosophical histories there is a clear change in motivation. Here kings are no longer primarily advised to behave according to strict moral or political principles; instead these histories intend to urge sovereigns to actively reform and improve their dominions by emulating illustrious predecessors: ‘On doit cette justice aux hommes publics qui ont fait du bien à leur siècle, de regarder le point dont ils sont partis, pour mieux voir les changements qu’ils ont faits dans leur patrie. La postérité leur doit une éternelle reconnaissance des exemples qu’ils ont donnés, lors même qu’ils sont surpassés. Cette juste gloire est leur unique récompense. Il est certain que l’amour de cette gloire anima Louis XIV, lorsque, commençant à gouverner par lui-même, il voulut réformer son royaume, embellir sa cour, et perfectionner les arts.’ See *Siècle de Louis XIV*, OH, p. 963. Philosophic history, in other words, is still useful because of its capacity to provide examples that are either to be emulated or avoided. However, these examples no longer primarily pertain to the morality of individual actions. Instead the philosophic historian outlines how the various compartments of civilisation have been instituted at different times and in different places, thereby opening up a comparative perspective that enables purposeful reform in the present: ‘De l’utilité de l’histoire. Cet avantage consiste dans la comparaison qu’un homme d’Etat, un citoyen peut faire de lois et des mœurs étrangères avec celles de son pays: c’est ce qui excite les nations modernes à enchérir les unes sur les autres dans les arts, dans le commerce, dans l’agriculture.’ Article *Histoire* written for *l’Encyclopédie*, in OC, vol. 33, p. 176.

tracing its genesis. Thereby the philosophic historian is able to distinguish between the forces that are likely to contribute to its future progress (and hence need political support) and the ones which are likely to act as impediments (and therefore must be fought against).

A consideration of the content of the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV* will not only reveal the extent to which Voltaire managed to put his aspirations into practice, but also provide us with a detailed account of the mechanisms that he believed had driven Europe from the *rusticité barbare* of the early medieval period to a state of *politesse* in his own age. The *Essai sur les mœurs* is of course much more than a history of European civilisation, containing substantive sections on the ancient Oriental empires of China, India and Persia as well as excursions into the history of the Americas. And yet, its main thread clearly revolves around the emergence of modern, civilised Europe out of the ruins left by the fall of the Western Roman Empire. It is the dynamic process of this emergence, rather than the static accounts provided of the Oriental civilisations, that significantly informed Voltaire's thought on Russia, and therefore needs elaboration here.

The starting point of the European section of the *Essai sur les mœurs* is the destruction of the Western Roman Empire brought about by the barbarian invasions, happening just at the time when the Empire itself was weakened by quarrels about religion. These quarrels had been emerging ever since Constantine I had made Christianity Rome's dominant religion. By the time Alaric threatened the capital, the Franks invaded Gaul and the Visigoths started to penetrate into Spain, mighty Rome was crippled by the division between Arians and Athanasiens, bogged down in irresolvable debates about the consubstantiality of the Word, with quarrelsome monks outnumbering much-needed soldiers. All of which led Voltaire to conclude: 'Deux fléaux détruiraient enfin ce grand colosse: les barbares, et les disputes de religion.'⁶⁰

⁶⁰ ESM, vol. 1, p. 303.

There was little doubt in Voltaire's mind that a materially rich, well governed, and cultured civilisation was thus destroyed, and replaced by its barbarous opposite:

Lorsqu'on passe de l'histoire de l'empire romain à celle des peuples qui l'ont déchiré dans l'Occident, on ressemble à un voyageur qui, au sortir d'une ville superbe, se trouve dans des déserts couverts de ronces. Vingt jargons barbares succédèrent à cette belle langue latine Au lieu de ces sages lois qui gouvernaient la moitié de notre hémisphère, on ne trouve plus que des coutumes sauvages. ... La même révolution se fait dans les esprits; et Grégoire de Tours, le moine de Saint-Gall Frédegaire, sont nos Polybe et nos Tite-Live. L'entendement humain s'abrutit dans les superstitions les plus lâches et les plus insensées.⁶¹

If religion and barbarism brought about the end of the Roman Empire, they are also treated as the main explanatory factors for the long time it took until a new civilised way of living could emerge in Europe. Indeed, the chapters directly following the ones about the fall of Rome concern the establishment of papal power, inaugurating a long period in which popes could exert political and cultural, if not military, supremacy over Europe. Concurrent with this, and further reinforcing papal power, Voltaire described the rise of feudal governance across Europe and treated feudalism as an outcome of barbarism. We shall see how Voltaire judged the conjunction of feudalism and papal supremacy to be catastrophic, because he believed that it prevented the emergence of unified and strong states in Europe that could act as secure frameworks and drivers for civilising processes.

This rise of papal power was, according to Voltaire, based on a three-fold myth crafted in the early Latin church: first, the idea that Jesus had transmitted spiritual authority to Peter the apostle; second, that spiritual authority ultimately trumps any countervailing temporal authority; and third, that Peter had travelled to Rome and thereby founded and instituted the pontificate as the seat of this authority.⁶² From this imposture arose the papacy's claim of supreme jurisdiction over the whole Christian world – a claim gradually put into practice by a succession of

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 309-10.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 109-114, 279-81 & passim. The importance of Peter the apostle for the rise of papal power is further stressed in the article *Pierre* in Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique*, OC, vol. 36, pp. 447-55. On the same question, see also Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, pp. 121-3.

popes. During the pontificate of Gregory VII in the 11th century, this claim had been honed into a powerful political weapon, used by Gregory and his successors to assault the temporal sovereignty of European states. Such assaults may happen directly through claims to a right to dispose of kingdoms and implementation of this claim by means of papal bulls and excommunications of sovereigns, or indirectly through assertion of the superiority of ecclesiastic and monastic jurisdictions over civil courts.⁶³ At this point, Voltaire has established a theme that provides much of the internal structure of the *Essai sur les mœurs* well into the 16th century, the issue of '[I]a domination temporelle, cet éternel sujet de discorde.'⁶⁴

The second great theme guiding Voltaire through the early stages of medieval history is the establishment of feudal structures across Europe. In Voltaire's eyes feudalism was a direct outcome of the conquest of Europe: after having overrun the Roman Empire and destroyed its political structures and laws, the barbarian invaders shared the spoils of their conquests in a way that befits warrior peoples. According to Voltaire, feudalism is nothing other than the usurpation of the right to govern over a territory by the strongest, the usurper's imposition of tributes on the weak, thus effectively constituting a very thinly disguised form of armed robbery.⁶⁵ Its effects are deplorable in a number of ways. Politically, the division of states into a multitude of semi-independent fiefs further weakened the authority of kings, who were constantly obliged to fight both papal and feudal encroachment on royal sovereignty.⁶⁶ Socially, the usurpation of the power of feudal lords went hand in hand with the enslavement of the population at large: attached to their glebe and belonging to their lords, the majority of the population were kept in tight bondage and had no means to improve their social position.⁶⁷ From this bondage, Voltaire argued, also arose the economic problems of

⁶³ ESM, vol. 1, pp. 493-505.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 319. On the importance of the quarrel between the temporal and sacred authority for the *Essai sur les mœurs* as a whole, see also *Remarques pour servir de supplément à l'Essai sur les mœurs*, ibid., vol. 2, pp. 904-5. This leitmotiv of the Voltairian conception of European history is taken up again in the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, OH, p. 1042: 'Cet *Essai sur les mœurs* que vous avez parcouru vous a fait voir, depuis Théodose, une lutte perpétuelle entre la juridiction séculière et l'ecclésiastique; et, depuis Charlemagne, les efforts réitérés des grands fiefs contre les souverains, les évêques élevés souvent contre les rois, les papes aux prises avec les rois et les évêques.'

⁶⁵ ESM, vol. 1, pp. 425, 443; vol. 2, p. 19.

⁶⁶ Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 443-4, 522-4.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 525, 597, 760, 777-9; vol. 2, p. 27.

feudalism. With the aristocracy mainly driven by a desire to enhance their power and to make further conquests rather than to improve their lands, and the productive parts of the population reduced to serfdom, feudalism is equated with a languishing economy and poverty: ‘Cette administration [i.e. feudal governance] ... paraît injuste en ce que le plus grand nombre des hommes est écrasé par le plus petit, et que jamais le simple citoyen ne peut s’élever que par un bouleversement général: nulle grande ville, point du commerce, point de beaux-arts sous un gouvernement purement féodal.’⁶⁸

The political, social and economic depression of Europe in the early medieval period was further marked by a complete cultural decline. Apart from relating the major political and social transformations and tracing the progress of human industry, Voltaire also sought to throw light on how manners, human understanding and the arts developed from the time of Charlemagne to the present. And yet, up until at least the 14th century he only discovered the absence of any development: the conquerors of Rome had turned the polite Roman manners into their barbarous opposite, had destroyed all useful knowledge and had seemingly banished the arts forever from Europe.⁶⁹

The crusades provide a neat summary of all that Voltaire saw as being wrong with early medieval Europe: excited by pope Urban II as a means to arrive at a universal temporal and spiritual monarchy, enthusiastically welcomed by a superstitious and fanatical population, led by nobles driven by a desire for robbery and usurpation of further fiefs in the holy land, the episodes left Europe depopulated, economically ruined, and politically in a state of utter anarchy.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, the crusades mark something of a turning point in European history. Indeed, from the early 14th century onwards, Voltaire was able to relate how civilised Europe slowly evolved out of its barbarous, feudal and Christian opposite. This civilising process is first of all characterised by the gradual establishment of powerful and increasingly ordered states, strong enough to counteract the power of the lords and to correct the worst abuses of the feudal

⁶⁸ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 18.

⁶⁹ Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 337-41, 349-50.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 558-603.

anarchy, as well as to resist papal and ecclesiastical encroachments in its many guises.

In Voltaire's eyes, the paradigmatic case of how this happened is provided in French history, and manifested itself most conspicuously by the amassing of increasingly absolute power in royal hands. In a succession of reigns starting with Philip the IV (1285–1314) and coming to a head under Louis XI (1423-1483), Voltaire described the abolishment of feudal privileges first in the royal demesne and later across the kingdom, the often violent taking over of fiefs by kings, the gradual enfranchisement of serfs, and the corresponding humiliation of the nobility.⁷¹ If Louis XI had thus become the first absolute king in France, Louis XIV vigorously followed his example in the 17th century after the French nobility and the aristocratic controlled *parlements* had re-gained strength during the wars of religion and the civil war of the Fronde. By claiming absolute legislative, juridical and executive power and depriving the *parlements* of their right to remonstrate against royal decisions, the 'Sun King' effectively brought the power of the French monarchy to its climax.⁷²

Crucially, Voltaire stressed that with their authority increasingly on a safe footing, French kings started to look after the happiness of their subjects by improving their kingdom. In his account, such improvements encompass the gradual institution of a de-feudalised, professional army, the development of royal, efficient and impartial courts of justice, and the establishment of France's basic infrastructure.⁷³ Furthermore, with the fight over the question of sovereignty won against the feudal nobility, French sovereigns had reached a much stronger position in their dealings with the papacy. There was an intimate connection, Voltaire argued, between the assumption of absolute power and Philip IV's forceful insistence that he was the sole master of his jurisdiction against the countervailing pretensions by pope Boniface VIII's; or with the Charles VII's declaration of the pragmatic sanction of Bourges that instituted the liberties of the

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 776-9; vol. 2, pp. 1-5, 17-21.

⁷² *Siècle de Louis XIV*, OH, esp. pp. 963-82.

⁷³ For an account of the reform of the army under Charles VII, see ESM, vol. 1, p. 749; for the reform of the justice system, vol. 1. p. 84 (under Philip IV), vol. 2, p. 9 (under Louis XI), vol. 2, p. 115 (under Louis XII).

Gallican church under royal patronage – a declaration subsequently reaffirmed both by Louis XII in 1510 and Louis XIV in 1682.⁷⁴

Through this account of post-Roman France's descent into feudalism and its subsequent emergence through the activities of reforming sovereigns Voltaire entered the fray in a long standing debate between constitutionalists and absolutists about the true nature of France's government. By the early 18th century this debate had taken a distinctly historical turn, and was defined by two rival readings of France's past: the *thèse nobiliaire* on the one hand, and the *thèse royale*, on the other. The principle bone of contention was the nature of the system of government the Frankish conquerors of Gaul had initially instituted, and how this system had subsequently evolved. The main lines of battle had been drawn by Henri le comte de Boulainvilliers, whose *Histoire de l'ancien gouvernement de France* became a standard work of reference for the noble camp, and Jean-Baptiste Du Bos' *Histoire critique de l'établissement de la monarchie française*, fighting the corner of the royalists. But by the time Voltaire entered the debate, the *thèse nobiliaire* had already found further and significant support through Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*.⁷⁵

According to Du Bos, the early kings of the Franks taking possession of Gaul did not destroy the political arrangements instituted by the Romans, but merely inherited the absolute power of the Roman emperors over the conquered territory. Under their sway all inhabitants of France were initially substantially equal – feudal distinctions being a later usurpation by the lords, and hence a perversion of France's rightful form of government. For proponents of the *thèse nobiliaire*, by contrast, the Frankish conquerors were free noblemen bringing a completely new form of rule to France whose origins are to be found in the German woods rather than in Rome. This German system of government granted the free Frankish

⁷⁴ For Voltaire's assessment of Philip IV, see *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 649-57; on the establishment of the Gallican church, see vol. 1, pp. 795-6 and vol. 2, pp. 108-9, 270-3. On Louis XIV and the Gallican church, see *Siècle de Louis XIV*, OH, pp. 1037-40.

⁷⁵ The debate between proponents of the *thèse nobiliaire* and the *thèse royale* has been analysed in depth by Nannerl O. Keohane and Michael Sonenscher. My brief summary here is derived from their respective accounts. See Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France. The Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), esp. pp. 343-50; Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), chap. 2.

nobility a raft of privileges over the conquered native Gauls and, importantly, a substantive share of political power through their various assemblies and constituted bodies. Even though the status and function of the noble bodies had been subject to significant change over time, they were nevertheless conceived as forming the key part in France's constitutional arrangements by negotiating between the king and the populace at large. To the extent that they had subsequently been dismantled by the monarchy, so the proponents of the *thèse nobiliaire* claimed, France had slid towards a simple form of despotism. Although an argument about the correct interpretation of France's past, the quarrel between the two camps was of course substantially about contemporary French politics, and specifically about the direction political reform should take: further elimination of any residual feudal privileges through an alliance between the absolute monarch and the bourgeoisie on the one hand, or a shoring up of the remaining noble institutions, and especially the *parlements*, against further despotic encroachments, on the other.

Voltaire's position in the quarrel is in several respects straightforward. There was no doubt in his mind that the establishment of feudalism in France – the historical root of the institutions proponents of the *thèse nobiliaire* set out to defend – was an act of violent usurpation, and he had no intention of following Montesquieu in attempting to trace how feudal structures were transformed from a system of conquest into one of moderate, limited government over the course of a long and complicated history.⁷⁶ Moreover, Voltaire consistently painted the French monarchy as the most significant agent in reform, improving France by chiselling away at noble privileges and prerogatives. And yet, despite thus clearly pitching his tent in the royal camp, Voltaire never accepted the *thèse royal's* historical assumptions: according to Voltaire, the legitimacy of the absolute monarchy in no way derived from a transfer of power from the Roman emperors to the early Frankish kings. On the contrary, he argued that the barbarian invaders had completely destroyed the structure of Roman governance across Europe, thereby implying that claims on behalf of the French monarchs as the rightful heirs of the

⁷⁶ On Montesquieu's account of the transformation of a cluster of Germanic customs regarding property into a system of government, see Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*, pp. 131-49. On Voltaire's refusal to take this account seriously, see his article *Lois (Esprit des)* in Molland, vol. 20, esp. p. 44.

Roman emperors are as fanciful as the corresponding ones of the contemporary French nobility in regard to their Frankish predecessors. According to Voltaire, French history does not substantially legitimise the claims of either camp; history merely provides pragmatic and tactical support to the royalist position by demonstrating the significant role played by a series of French monarchs in improving their dominions, and, by contrast, undermines the noble position by highlighting the responsibility of the feudal aristocracy for acting as a barrier to progressive political, social and economic change.

Voltaire's flexible and pragmatic stance taken in the quarrel between royalists and nobles in the French context is further reflected in his wider European post-feudal history. Even though he detected a similar process of royal ascent in Spain⁷⁷ as he had in France, Voltaire was far from describing the formation of ordered states as a uniform process across Europe, and recognised a host of solutions different from the French-absolutist model as being valid in response to the anarchy created by feudalism. Therefore, it would be wrong to see Voltaire as a narrow absolutist, who only recognised kings with undivided authority as possible drivers behind social, political, economic and cultural progress. Indeed, while the French chapters of the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV* described the humiliation of the nobility at the hand of increasingly absolute kings as the precondition for France's subsequent development, the English chapters sketched the emergence of a mixed form of government in which the House of Commons, in conjunction with the royal court, became the principle mechanism to stem the undue influence of the feudal aristocracy.⁷⁸ In the German chapters a form of political organisation emerges even further removed from the French model, as it is based on a partial accommodation with feudalism rather than its outright rejection: in Voltaire's account, from the issuing of the Golden Bull by emperor Charles IV in 1356 via the establishment of the German concordat during the council of Basle in the 1430s, to the peace treaty of Westphalia in 1648, Germany became increasingly ordered and stable through a series of treaties that constituted the laws of the Empire, and fixed the respective rights and obligations

⁷⁷ ESM, vol. 2, p. 626.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 710-11. Voltaire had already aired a similar view on the English constitution in his *Lettres philosophiques*, see *Mélanges*, pp. 23-37.

of emperor, princes, lords, bishops and imperial cities.⁷⁹ As both England and Germany are fully integrated in the general account of the progress of European civilisation, it becomes clear that it is not the emergence of monarchies in tandem with absolutist pretensions *per se* that is central to Voltaire's conception of how progress had to be achieved, but the institution of public order achieved by settling the ultimate authority in a state, independent of the exact form such settlements may take.⁸⁰

If the ordering of sovereignty in European states emerges as one important cause behind development in Voltaire's account of European history, a second, and equally pertinent one, is the gradual rise of towns. Although during the worst time of the feudal anarchy towns were depressed, neglected and subjugated to the interests of the rural aristocracy, from the late 13th century onwards, Europe becomes more urban, and the bourgeoisie emerges as the ally of strong and ordered governments in the quest for civilisation. In Northern Europe this urban rise was initially due to the emancipation of a number of imperial towns from feudal servitude undertaken by a series of emperors to strengthen their hold over their nobility – a policy soon followed in France – and the establishment of the Hanseatic league of free towns as a common defence mechanism against les 'seigneurs de châteaux, qui subsistaient de brigandage'.⁸¹ In Italy it is the gradual emergence to strength of city republics such as Venice, Florence, Genoa, and Pisa from the 12th century onwards, gaining and defending their liberty against both imperial and papal encroachments, that greatly contributed to the urbanisation of Europe.⁸²

The emergence of towns is treated prominently by Voltaire because their activities are based on a different set of principles than the ones of feudal lords: rather than military valour, brigandage and a thirst for conquest, the *raison d'être* of towns is 'le commerce et l'industrie'.⁸³ Animated by such principles towns allow the

⁷⁹ ESM, vol. 1, pp. 355-7, 796; vol. 2, pp. 648-9.

⁸⁰ A very similar argument is made by Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 90-102.

⁸¹ ESM, vol. 1, p. 776; see also, vol. 2, pp. 634, 709-10.

⁸² *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 474-85, 704.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 721. On the complex relationship between conquest and commerce in 18th-century thought in general, see Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge*, pp. 108-21 and Istavan Hont, *Jealousy of*

peaceful activity of artisans and merchants that gradually can bring about an increase in material wealth and the invention of new useful arts and technologies that further increase the speed of wealth creation. Over time this dynamism engenders opulence, luxury and the fine arts – all the superfluities of life that can only arise once the basic necessities have been satisfied.⁸⁴ The prime example of such a virtuous circle is provided by the Italian city republics of the 14th century: increased industry of obscure artisans and merchants leads to useful inventions such as spectacles, windmills, the compass, and paper as well as to increased opulence and luxury among the populace.⁸⁵ From thence the fine arts could arise – the poetry of Dante and Petarch, the painting of Le Giotte, or the architecture of Brunelleschi.⁸⁶

Flourishing industry, great material wealth, and especially existence of fine arts were for Voltaire important indices to civilisation, as much, if not more, than strong and ordered governments.⁸⁷ The elevation of the development of the fine arts to a place of utmost importance in his historical universe may partly reflect a certain amount of self-satisfaction and egoism on the part of the poet and dramatist Voltaire, as Meinecke argues,⁸⁸ but there are other, much more pertinent reasons, why Voltaire consistently stressed the historical benefits of all the superfluities of life.

One such reason is that superfluities can lead to a secularisation of the mind. People driven by a desire to enjoy luxury and the agreeable things in life turn towards the this-worldly affairs of industry, commerce and cultivation of the arts, and leave the realms of theological speculation and religious superstition behind.

Trade: International Competition and the Nation State in Historical Perspective (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 2005), esp. pp. 1-62.

⁸⁴ See ESM, vol. 1, p. 769: 'Si les belles-lettres étaient ainsi cultivées ..., c'est une preuve que les autres arts qui contribuent aux agréments de la vie étaient très connus. On n'a le superflu qu'après le nécessaire ...'.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 757-61.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 762-6.

⁸⁷ See *Siècle de Louis XIV*, OH, p. 616: 'Tous les temps ont produit des héros et des politiques: ... toutes les histoires sont presque égales pour qui ne veut mettre que des faits dans sa mémoire. Mais quiconque pense, et, ce qui est encore plus rare, quiconque a du goût, ne compte que quatre siècle dans l'histoire du monde. Ces quatre âges heureux sont ceux où les arts on été perfectionnés, et qui, servant d'époque à la grandeur de l'esprit humain, sont l'exemple de la postérité.' The importance of the fine arts in Voltaire's historical universe has also been stressed by Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, pp. 84-7.

⁸⁸ Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, pp. 100-1.

Consider, for instance, Voltaire's account of the court of pope Leo X in the 16th century, just before the reformation started to trouble Europe. The Rome of Leo was marked by the cultivation of letters and the fine arts, public displays of courtly magnificence and the enjoyment of the most voluptuous luxury, but showed no desire to engage in dogmatic debate that might undermine public peace. Thereby Leo set an example that was soon followed across Europe:

Le faste de la cour voluptueuse de Léon X pouvait blesser les yeux; mais aussi on devait voir que cette cour même poliçait l'Europe, et rendait les hommes plus sociables. La religion ... ne causait plus aucun trouble dans le monde. ... La plupart des chrétiens vivaient dans une ignorance heureuse. Il n'y avait peut-être pas en Europe dix gentilshommes qui eussent la *Bible*. ... Le haut clergé, occupé uniquement du temporel, savait jouir et ne savait pas disputer.⁸⁹

Likewise, whilst the French Huguenots had troubled the French state throughout the 16th century with their religious disputes and their politically seditious behaviour, they were, at least temporally, brought back into useful civil life through Jean-Baptiste Colbert's encouragement of trade and industry:

Colbert, qui ranima l'industrie de la nation, et qu'on peut regarder comme le fondateur du commerce, employa beaucoup de huguenots dans les arts, dans les manufactures, dans la marine. Tous ces objets utiles, qui les occupaient, adoucirent peu à peu dans eux la fureur épidémique de la controverse ...⁹⁰

Apart from their secularising potential, luxury and the fine arts also have a socially integrative and progressive function. While during the early Middle Ages the great feudal lords were confined to their castles with little interaction among themselves, and virtually none with other social strata, the enjoyment of luxury is, in Voltaire's eyes, a sociable affair, taking place at court festivals, at public ceremonies, in theatres and in shops. Sociability and continuous interaction in turn improves people's manners: the ferocious, savage and coarse customs, mannerisms and habits are polished in good company and turned into their civilised and refined opposites. This Epicurean conception of the relationship between pleasure, fine arts, good manners and sociability was neatly expressed by

⁸⁹ ESM, vol. 2, p. 214.

⁹⁰ *Siècle de Louis XIV*, OH, p. 1048.

Voltaire when he discussed the increased frequency of public performances of plays in Europe from the 16th-century onwards: ‘Presque toutes les nations polies de l’Europe sentirent alors le besoin de l’art théâtral, qui rassemble les citoyens, adoucit les mœurs, et conduit à la morale par le plaisir.’⁹¹

Again, in Voltaire’s view, it is the court of Louis XIV that brought this mechanism to perfection. Indeed, since the reign of François II and especially during the war of the Fronde, Voltaire argued, France had been troubled by rebellions and factions, the manners had taken on a fierce turn, and social interaction was reduced to violent disputation: ‘Point de maisons où les gens de mérite s’assemblaient pour se communiquer leurs lumières, point d’académies, point de théâtres réguliers.’⁹² Louis, by establishing a court unprecedented in its magnificence, splendour and opulence managed to entice the nobility from their provincial castles to Paris by using the pleasures and diversions to be found there as incentives. Thereby a process was set into motion leading to a continuous reciprocal interaction between softer manners and increased sociability:

Les maisons que tous les seigneurs bâtirent ou achetèrent dans Paris, et leurs femmes qui y vécurent avec dignité, formèrent des écoles de politesse [L]es maisons, les spectacles, les promenades publiques, où l’on commençait à se rassembler pour goûter une vie plus douce, rendirent peu à peu près l’extérieur de tous les citoyens presque semblable. On s’aperçoit aujourd’hui, jusque dans le fond d’une boutique que la politesse a gagné toutes les conditions.⁹³

The nexus industry, luxury and arts not only improved the social dynamics within European countries by putting them on a more polite footing, but also changed the relations between these countries. During the early medieval period these relations were mainly informed by a spirit of envy and conquest – the desire of each state, and each feudal lord, to steal the little riches their neighbours may possess. With the advent of industry, luxury and the fine arts, however, a new principle emerged: the spirit of emulation. Voltaire never treated emulation as a simple antithesis of envy and conquest. Indeed, when discussing Mandeville’s contention that selfishness, restlessness and envy are social goods since they promote a thirst

⁹¹ ESM, vol. 2, p. 169.

⁹² *Siècle de Louis XIV*, OH, p. 635.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 980-1.

after luxury and industriousness, thereby creating the necessary conditions for a materially rich society, Voltaire concluded that '*Mandeville* a peut-être pris l'émulation pour l'envie; peut-être aussi l'émulation n'est-elle qu'une envie qui se tient dans les bornes de la décence'.⁹⁴ There is only a very fine distinction between envy and emulation as both spring from the same primordial selfish passions. However, historically, they have produced very different outcomes. During the envious period of European history, relations between countries were a zero-sum game based on robbery and progress was unknown: 'à peine un pays était un peu cultivé, qu' il était envahi par une nation affamée, chassée à son tour par une autre.'⁹⁵ From the 16th century onwards, this eternal cycle of invasions and counter-invasions, in which achievements were continuously destroyed, was not so much replaced as augmented by emulative cycles, potentially leading to open-ended progress.⁹⁶ Voltaire provides us with an analysis of the reasons why emulative behaviour started to occur at this point in time, as well as with a description of its beneficial outcomes.

On the one hand, with European states better ordered, richer and more powerful, simple conquest had become much more difficult. Hence the imperative to emulate the sources of a rival's riches and power. This mechanism is for instance highlighted in Voltaire's discussion of the conflict between Spain and England during the reigns of Elizabeth I and Philippe II in the late 16th century. Apart from relating the details of the conflict, culminating in the defeat of the Spanish armada, Voltaire also pointed out how the England consistently attempted to emulate its rival. The Spanish navy, the discovery and colonisation of extra-European lands, and the resulting increase in trade, riches and power became objects of English emulation – an emulation that thereby provided the foundation for England's subsequent military, commercial and political rise.⁹⁷

Moreover, given the general improvement of European manners from the 15th century onwards, the chances that emulation – envy carried out within the limits

⁹⁴ Article *Envie* in M. de V*** [i.e. François Marie Arouet de Voltaire], *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, 6 vols. (Genève: 1777), vol. 4, p. 130.

⁹⁵ ESM, vol. 1, pp. 407-8.

⁹⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the concept of 'emulation' in Enlightenment thought, see Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 115-35.

⁹⁷ ESM, vol. 2, pp. 465-8.

of decency - degenerates into envy had itself decreased. So much so that manners, decency and politeness themselves could become objects of emulation and provide a counterpoint to ongoing warfare. Voltaire's description of the relationship between Emperor Charles V and François I of France provides a good example. These two 'rival de gloire et de politique' plunged half of Europe into a long, destructive series of wars in a fight for supremacy.⁹⁸ Despite this bloody rivalry, however, they frequently met 'familièrement comme deux gentilshommes voisins', treated each other with greatest generosity and respect, and accompanied their meetings with sumptuous courtly festivals in which each party could vie with the other in the flouting of luxury, magnificence, and courtly manners.⁹⁹ Their rivalry, therefore, despite the barbarity of their wars, became also an engine to civilise European manners: 'Il y eut entre Charles-Quint et lui [François I] une émulation de gloire, d'esprit de chevalerie, de courtoisie, au milieu même de leurs plus furieuses dissensions; et cette émulation, qui se communiqua à tous les courtisans, donna à ce siècle un air de grandeur et de politesse inconnu jusqu'alors.'¹⁰⁰

We are now at a point where we can see all the principal ingredients that Voltaire believed marked progressive European history and civilisation and enabled the continent to develop out of its barbarous and feudal past: strong and well ordered states; industrious populations; material wealth and luxury; useful and fine arts; polite manners - all these ingredients were, according to Voltaire, inter-dependent, and, if properly arranged, could lead to cycles of emulative behaviour which in turn further accelerates progress. Through this conception, Voltaire arrived at a historical narrative, that conformed to the standards he himself had set: it is a history setting out Europe's emergence out of a state of barbarism, and the process underlying this emergence is understood as a complex one, driven by a variety of forces ranging from glorious kings to obscure artisans. Civilisation itself is conceived as a broad canvas that includes political institutions, the economy, social relations, mores as well as the arts and sciences. Moreover, it is an account with obvious political significance, providing its reader with a characterisation of

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 134.

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 197-9.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 135.

these forces that Voltaire believed deserved his support in the ongoing struggle against barbarism and religion: the reforming monarchy first of all, but also all the lower social strata that are economically active; the royal court as the centre of polished manners, as well as the theatre and the marketplace as important spaces where a refined way of life can be sampled and communicated.

Russia's entry into Europe: The *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand*

Russia only makes a very marginal appearance in the *Essai sur les mœurs* with merely two short chapters, very rapidly sketching its situation in the 16th and 17th century, devoted to it.¹⁰¹ And yet, throughout the time of the *Essai's* initial composition and later augmentation, Voltaire had intended to write a history of Russia centring on the reign of Peter I. In 1737, for instance, he asked his correspondent Frederic II of Prussia for help in assembling source material for a history of the czar. In 1745 he approached czarina Elizabeth to enquire whether she would guarantee official co-operation for his project of writing such a history. However, for a long time the Russian court did not warm to Voltaire's project. Deprived of necessary source material for a detailed history, Voltaire wrote the *Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand* (published in 1748) - a short portrayal of the character of Peter and his principal deeds.¹⁰² In 1757, finally, Elizabeth gave Voltaire an official invitation to write the history of Peter I, and ordered the St. Petersburg Academy to offer assistance through provision of any source material that Voltaire may need. The *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* in two volumes (volume one first published in 1760; second volume in 1763) was the outcome of this commission, and is by far Voltaire's most detailed account on Russian history and its relation to Europe, and will provide the main source for my analysis.¹⁰³

In the introduction of the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, Voltaire made it clear that the work was intended to be a *histoire en philosophe*. In a self-reference he described his own *Histoire de Charles XII* as merely 'amusante'; the work on the Russian czar, by contrast, was to be 'instructive'.¹⁰⁴ Whilst the earlier work was simply a portrayal of a king and his (futile) battles, the present volume was to be an account of how civilisation had developed in Russia:

¹⁰¹ See ESM, vol. 2, pp. 137-40, 745-51.

¹⁰² OC, vol. 46, pp. 51-84.

¹⁰³ OC, vol. 46-7. For detailed accounts on Voltaire's long quest to write a history of Russia under Peter I, the collaboration between Voltaire and Russian scholars, and the source material Voltaire assembled for his history, see Carolyn H. Wilberger, *Voltaire's Russia: Window on the East*, ed. Theodore Besterman, vol. CLXIV, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institute, 1976), chap. 2 and also Michel Mervaud's introduction to the Voltaire Foundation's edition of the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, OC, vol. 46, pp. 89-150.

¹⁰⁴ OC, vol. 46, avant-propos, p. 414.

L'un [i.e. Charles XII] n'a laissé que des ruines, l'autre [Peter I] est un fondateur en tout genre ... Les mémoires qu'on me fournit aujourd'hui sur la Russie, me mettent en état de faire connaître cet empire, dont les peuples sont si anciens, et chez qui les lois, les mœurs et les arts sont d'une création nouvelle.¹⁰⁵

In the correspondence that developed between Voltaire and Ivan Shuvalov – the Russian official charged by Elizabeth to act as mediator between the former and the Academy – Voltaire frequently raised the problem of how such an instructive history of the czar was to be written, and framed it in terms similar to the ones he used in his earlier reflections on philosophic history. What is absolutely essential, according to Voltaire, is to ‘forcer les lecteurs à voir Pierre en grand’.¹⁰⁶ However, readers will only regard Peter *en grand* if his historian paints him *en philosophe*. It is not Peter’s character or individual deeds that are in need of elaboration, but how Russia has been civilised during the czar’s reign.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, Voltaire explained to Shuvalov, the aim of his work was not to write the history of Peter, but, as its full title indicates, the history of Russia under Peter – and this particular history is instructive to the philosophic reader because of the rapid economic, social and cultural development that Russia underwent during the period under consideration.¹⁰⁸ It is the comprehensiveness of the transformation achieved, and the short time span required to effect it, that justifies the attribution of a *création nouvelle* to Peter. As Voltaire put it to Shuvalov, Peter’s rapid creation of a new civilisation is unique in history, and so far no explanation for this historically unprecedented feat has been forthcoming; a gap in historical knowledge which his own account of the czar’s reign endeavours to close:

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 414.

¹⁰⁶ OC, vol. 108, 14 November 1761, D10154, pp. 112-14.

¹⁰⁷ See, for instance, OC, vol. 103, 17 July 1758, D7792, pp. 88-91; OC, vol. 102, 7 August 1757, D7336, pp. 120-2.

¹⁰⁸ See, esp., OC, vol. 102, 24 June 1757, D7298, pp. 86-7: ‘Je vois avec satisfaction, Monsieur, que vous avez jugez comme moi, que ce n'est pas assez d'écrire les actions & les enterprises en tout genre, de Pierre le grand, Lesquelles pour la plûpart sont connües. L'esprit éclairé qui règne aujourd'hui dans les principales nations de l'Europe, demande qu'on aprofondisse ce que les historiens efléuraient autrefois à peine. On veut savoir de combine une nation s'end accrüe, quelle était sa population avant l'Epoque dont on parle, & quelle elle est depuis cette époque, le nombre de troupes régulières qu'elle entretenait, & celui qu'elle entretient; Quel a été son commerce, & comment il s'est étendu; quels arts sont nés dans le païs, quels arts y ont été apellés d'ailleurs, & s'y sont perfectionnés; quel était à peu près le revenu ordinaire de L'état, & à quoi il se monte aujourd'hui, quelle a été la naissance & le progrès de la marine; quelle est la proportion du nombre des nobles avec les Ecclésiastiques & les moines, & quelle est celle de ceux cy avec les cultivateurs &c.’

Il n'y a point d'exemple sur la terre d'une nation qui soit devenue si considerable en tout genre en si peu de temps. Il ne vous a fallu qu'un demi siècle pour embrasser tous les arts utile et agréables. C'est surtout ce prodige unique que je voudrais developper.¹⁰⁹

In order to be able to demonstrate the prodigious development Russia experienced during Peter's reign, Voltaire of course needed to give an account of the state of Russia prior to the czar taking over the reins of government. In the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* this account forms the first five chapters, providing a geographical description of the Empire and a sketch of pre-Petrine Russia's social, economic, political and cultural situation, which, throughout the remainder of the work, act as the baseline against which the achievements of Peter are measured. These achievements are then related in the following twenty-nine chapters, focusing on the czar's main military and diplomatic victories and, importantly, on his comprehensive programme of reform, specifically calibrated, according to Voltaire, to propel Russia into the orbit of European civilisation.

It is in the first, lengthy chapter - a geographical and historical description of the sixteen different provinces of Russia - where Voltaire stressed some of the problems faced both by Peter in his attempt to civilise Russia, as well as by any historian who attempts to relate Russian history *en philosophe*. The very first thing that struck Voltaire when surveying Russia's geography was the sheer size of its territory:

L'empire de Russie est le plus vaste de notre hémisphère; il s'étend d'occident en orient, l'espace de plus de deux mille lieues communes de France, et il a plus de huit cents lieues du sud au nord dans sa plus grand largeur. Il confine à la Pologne et à la mer Glaciale; il touche à la Suède et à la Chine.¹¹⁰

The passage not only highlighted the size of the Empire, but also indicated the manifold relations of Russia to other historical and cultural complexes, and, Voltaire continued, thus far the rest of Europe had been largely ignorant of its extent, its many relations and its global importance:

¹⁰⁹ OC, vol. 103, 20 April 1758, D7715, pp. 117-18.

¹¹⁰ *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, OC, vol. 46, p. 415.

Nous connoissons si peu les limites de ce pays dans le siècle passé, que lorsque en 1689 nous apprîmes que les Chinois et les Russes étaient en guerre ... nous traitâmes d'abord cet événement de fable.¹¹¹

The rest of the chapter is clearly designed to counter such ignorance, and to convey an idea of the geographical, historical, and cultural diversity of Russia. For instance, Voltaire reminded his readers that Livonia was for a long time a disputed territory between Sweden, Poland and Russia, and has had at least since the 12th century strong cultural and commercial ties to Northern Europe through its integration into the hansa trade system; a connection to Europe shared by other Russian towns and provinces such as Smolensk and Novgorod. By contrast, Kiev in the Ukraine, seat of the early Russian grand-dukes, has a historical tradition closely related to the one of Byzantium. Siberia, still mostly inhabited by savages – that is by hunter gatherer tribes – was seen by Voltaire as a place of non-history and cultural isolation, while in Kazan we not only find Tatar Muslims but also evidence of an ancient, flourishing trade with Persia and India.¹¹²

Voltaire summed up the chapter by reiterating the remarkable diversity of Russia and by reflecting on the challenges this very diversity poses to the Empire's civilisation:

C'est ainsi que dans l'empire de Russie il y a plus de différentes espèces, plus de singularités, plus de mœurs différentes que dans aucun pays de l'univers.¹¹³

Quand les nations se sont ainsi mêlées, elles sont longtemps à se civiliser ... les unes se policent plus tôt, les autres plus tard. La police et les arts s'établissent si difficilement les révolutions ruinent si souvent l'édifice commencé, que si l'on doit s'étonner, c'est que la plupart des nations ne vivent pas en Tartares.¹¹⁴

However, if the work's first chapter stresses the singularities of Russia and its history, all the challenges associated with this are swiftly resolved in chapters two and three, where Voltaire turned to an account of the political, social, economic

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 416.

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 415-79.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 472-3.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 479.

and cultural state of Russia prior to Peter's arrival on the scene. Essentially, the negation of cultural and historical singularities was achieved by means of complete alignment of the state of pre-Petrine Russia with the one of pre-civilised Europe. What we find therefore in these chapters is a sketch of a country beset by precisely the same problems that were identified in the *Essai sur les mœurs* as having prevented civilisation from emerging in Europe.

Pre-Petrine Russia, Voltaire argued, was subjected to a conflict between the secular and ecclesiastic powers just as Europe had been throughout most of its post-classical history. This conflict was started by the patriarchs of the Russian church, who, since gaining their independence from Constantinople in 1588, had allegedly attempted to encroach on the czar's authority.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the Russian czars had to contend with a strong and unruly nobility (the boyars) who acted as an impediment on the progress of the country. According to Voltaire, the boyars, in conjunction with the ecclesiastics, weakened the state economically by keeping the majority of the population in serfdom, politically by frequently stirring up revolts against the czars, and militarily through their pre-eminence in the army coupled with their independence and lack of discipline.¹¹⁶ Given the existence of these two familiar stumbling blocks to any progressive history, the assessment that pre-Petrine Russia was weak, poor and lacking industry, riches and almost all of the useful and fine arts hardly comes as a surprise.¹¹⁷ A predicament rendered even more severe by an alleged complete isolation of Russia from the rest of the world – an isolation which, of course, denied the possibility that processes of cross-cultural enrichment through emulation could occur. Indeed, Voltaire argued, there existed in 17th-century Russia a religious law that forbade Russians from leaving their country and engaging with foreigners, thereby effectively condemning the country to an eternal state of poverty and ignorance.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 495-501.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 481 (on serfdom), pp. 599-600 (on the nobility's propensity to trouble the state), pp. 560-3 (on the feudal characteristics of the Russian army).

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 507-8.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 508-10.

And yet, Voltaire did not claim that pre-Petrine Russia was exactly the same as medieval Europe, and he noted a few aspects that set the former apart from the latter. Most notably, a concession was made that Russian manners and customs had always been influenced by Oriental culture, and, when compared to the corresponding European ones, they were portrayed as being preferable:

Les usages, les vêtements, les mœurs en Russie avaient toujours plus tenu de l'Asie que de l'Europe chrétienne: telle était ... celle de ne se présenter ni dans l'église ni devant le trône avec une épée, coutume orientale opposée à notre usage ridicule et barbare d'aller parler à Dieu, aux rois, à ses amis et aux femmes, avec une longue arme offensive qui descend au bas des jambes. L'habit long dans les jours de cérémonie, semblait plus noble que le vêtement court des nations occidentales de l'Europe. Une tunique doublée de pelisse ... et ces espèces de hauts turbans qui élevaient la taille, étaient plus imposants aux yeux que les perruques et le justaucorps, et plus convenables aux climats froids¹¹⁹

Despite such sentiments the main strategy informing the opening chapters was clearly to demonstrate the similarities between Russia and Europe. Indeed, Voltaire's short essay *Pierre le Grand et J.-J. Rousseau*, published five years after completion of the first volume of the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, shows emphatically the extent to which Voltaire was prepared to push these similarities.¹²⁰ As we shall see in much more detail in the next chapter, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had attacked Voltaire's portrayal of Peter I in his *Du contrat social*.¹²¹ He claimed that the czar, far from having been a genial creator of a new civilisation, had in effect corrupted Russia in an untimely fashion. Voltaire's essay was intended as a comprehensive refutation of this claim by showing that Rousseau had not considered the historical state from which Peter had to start his project of civilisation and, as a consequence, had not made allowance for the enormity of the task to be performed. In the course of this refutation, Voltaire rendered explicit and amplified what was already implicit in the opening passages of the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*:

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 489.

¹²⁰ In Molland, vol. 20, pp. 218-22.

¹²¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1959-), vol. 3, p. 386.

Lorsque Pierre monta sur le trône, la Russie était à peu près au même état que la France, l'Allemagne et l'Angleterre au XI^e siècle. Les Russes ont fait en quatre-vingt ans, que les vus de Pierre ont été suivies, plus de progrès que nous n'en avons fait en quatre siècles: n'est-ce pas une preuve que ces vus n'étaient pas celles d'un homme ordinaire?¹²²

Just as he had done in the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, Voltaire insisted that the similarity between 11th century Europe and late 17th century Russia most prominently manifested itself in three regards: first, 'l'excesif pouvoir de la superstition sur les esprit, et l'influence des prêtres sur le gouvernement et sur les sujets', second, 'l'esclavage presque général des paysans, soit artisans, soit cultivateurs' and third, 'l'ignorance'.¹²³

Crucially, there is considerable evidence to suggest that Voltaire was well aware of the fact that this close alignment of the state of pre-Petrine Russia with the one of early medieval Europe was problematic. For instance, in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, Voltaire had argued that the usurpation of temporal authority by ecclesiastics – the phenomenon that dominated so much of the history of Latin Christianity - had been virtually unknown in the Greek church.¹²⁴ In his Russian history, by contrast, he defined the usurpation of temporal powers by the Russian clergy as a key problem facing Peter at the start of this reign, without giving us an account of how such an usurpation might have happened in a theological tradition that, according to his own arguments in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, had generally refrained from making claims on secular dominion. The activities of Nikon – patriarch immediately prior to Peter's ascent to power – who claimed the right to be seated next to the czar in the senate, and who excommunicated a number of senators, was the only evidence Voltaire marshalled to prove his point.¹²⁵ However, he never showed whether Nikon's claim to power was part of a larger systemic pattern, or just a temporary occurrence.

¹²² Molland, vol. 20, p. 219.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 218.

¹²⁴ See ESM, vol. 1, p. 319: 'La domination temporelle, cet éternel sujet de discorde dans l'Occident, fut inconnue aux Églises d'Orient. Les évêques sous les yeux du maître restèrent sujets' See also the article *Pierre* in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, OC, vol. 36, p. 447: 'Pourquoi les successeurs de Pierre ont-ils eu tant de pouvoir en Occident, et aucun en Orient? C'est demander pourquoi les évêques de Vurtzbourg et de Saltzbourg se sont attribués les droit régaliens dans des temps d'anarchie, tandis que les évêques grecs sont toujours restés sujets.'

¹²⁵ *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, OC, vol. 46, pp. 500-1.

Likewise, Voltaire's equation of feudal European nobles and 17th-century Russian boyars in regard to the institution of serfdom is not fully warranted. Even though it is undoubtedly true that the Russian boyars kept their peasants in bondage, this problem was further exacerbated in 17th-century Russia by the fact that the czar and the state themselves possessed a large number of serfs.¹²⁶ Tellingly, Voltaire did not deny this fact, but attempted to downplay it as much as he could. Indeed, he provides us with the results of a census of Russia after Peter's reign in 1747 which clearly shows the various classes of peasants belonging to the crown, but this fact was hidden away in this statistic and never mentioned in the narrative.¹²⁷ Conversely, he was much more explicit in regard to the existence of peasants bonded to the church and to the nobility, thereby highlighting the similarity of Russian and European serfdom:

De ces vingt-quatre millions d'hommes [i.e. the total population of Russia as calculated by Voltaire] la plupart sont des serfs, comme dans la Pologne, dans plusieurs provinces de l'Allemagne, et autrefois dans presque toute l'Europe. On compte en Russie et en Pologne les richesses d'un gentilhomme et d'un ecclésiastique, non par leur revenue en argent, mais par le nombre de leurs esclaves.¹²⁸

The immediate objective of this strategy of historical alignment is easy to identify. Having established that pre-Petrine Russia was beset by exactly the same problems as feudal Europe had been, and having claimed that thus far next to nothing had been undertaken to solve these problems,¹²⁹ he could now turn to the principle object of his history – Peter I – and demonstrate how the czar virtually single-handedly had brought civilisation to Russia:

Ils [i.e. les Russes] possédaient les plus vastes Etats de l'univers, et tout y était à faire. Enfin, Pierre naquit, et la Russie fut formée.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ On crown and court serfs in 17th- and 18th-century Russia, see also Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) pp. 98-106.

¹²⁷ *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, OC, vol. 46, pp. 481-3.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 481.

¹²⁹ Voltaire claimed that Peter's two immediate predecessors as czars – Alexei I and Feodor III – had undertaken some feeble steps toward reforming their country without, however, having left a lasting legacy. See *ibid.*, pp. 519-27.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 509-10.

The same strategy also enabled Voltaire to dismiss the many historical and cultural traditions that converge on the territory of Russia, and that he himself had discovered, as irrelevant in the great quest for attainment of civilisation in Russia. Given that the state of pre-Petrine Russia was essentially the same as the one of pre-civilised Europe, the history of Russia under Peter I could to a large extent be reduced to the czar's great programme of imitating civilised Europe, and the appropriateness of this programme as a remedy to all of Russia's ills was put beyond doubt. Indeed, there is in Voltaire's narrative a distinct point where Peter's great civilising mission begins in earnest. Having beaten the Turkish army in the course of his first major military campaign in 1696, and thereby having gained a foothold in the Crimea, Peter turned decisively to Europe:

Ce n'était pas assez d'inquiéter les Turcs sur la mer Noire: des établissements sur les Palus-Méotides, et vers la mer Caspienne, ne suffisaient pas à ses projets de marine, de commerce et de puissance; la gloire même que tout réformateur désire ardemment, n'était ni en Perse ni en Turquie; elle était dans notre partie de l'Europe, où l'on éternise les grands talents en tout genre. Enfin Pierre ne voulait introduire dans ses Etats ni les mœurs turques, ni les persanes, mais les nôtres.¹³¹

From this point onward, the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* becomes a straightforward account of Peter's project of propelling Russia into the orbit of European civilisation. The first step in this project was, of course, military. It principally concerns Peter's successful involvement in the Great Northern War (1700-1721), reaching its climax during the battle of Poltava in 1709 when a Swedish army was routed – a victory paving the way for Russia becoming the dominant power around the Baltic Sea. At the time the peace of Nystadt was signed in 1721, Voltaire argued, Peter had not only gained a secure territorial at the Baltic coast, but by replacing Sweden as the main power in the European North, had secured a prominent place for himself and his country at the table of European power politics and diplomacy.¹³²

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 583.

¹³² Ibid., vol. 47, pp. 902-12.

However, in Voltaire's account, Peter's internal reforms designed to civilise and reform Russia according to European models were even more important than his military exploits. In order to achieve this, Peter - having grown up in a country allegedly completely isolated from the rest of the world - first had to learn all about European civilisation. The *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* outlines in much detail the czar's two trips to Europe - the first to Prussia, Holland, England and Vienna in 1697-98; and the second to Denmark, Prussia, Holland and France in 1716-17 - where Peter learnt how to better govern his kingdom:

C'était une chose inouïe dans l'histoire du monde qu'un roi de vingt-cinq ans qui abandonnait ses royaumes pour mieux régner.¹³³

Voltaire's guiding theme in the chapters dealing with Peter's internal reforms is accordingly the czar's increasingly successful emulation of the Europe he had come to appreciate during his travels. Thereby, the story told in these chapters is to an extent a repetition of the *Essai sur les mœurs*: it is an account of how the stumbling blocks to civilisation were successively removed by a czar who had learnt the lessons of Europe's past.

Unsurprisingly therefore, Voltaire considered the restructuring of the Russian church as the most important reform undertaken. This was achieved through the abolishment of the office of the patriarch, and its replacement through a new synod of bishops, completely subservient to the czar, designed to act as the new depositary and executive of the ecclesiastic law. Interestingly, whilst earlier in the work Voltaire had claimed that the patriarchs had usurped secular power from the czars in the past, when he came to write about the reform of the Russian church, he introduced a new justification for the abolishment of the patriarchy. During his travels Peter had learnt how much damage the conflict between the secular and sacred powers had caused in Europe, and hence wanted to assert his complete power over the church by necessitating the members of the new synod to swear undivided allegiance to himself. This was a measure, Voltaire noted, directly inspired by the English oath of supremacy, but, again, he did not provide a

¹³³ Ibid., vol. 46, p. 581; on Peter's second trip, see vol. 47, pp. 790-809.

detailed consideration as to why this reform was appropriate in the context of Russia with its specific ecclesiastical tradition.¹³⁴

Equally unsurprising is Voltaire's account of Peter's attempt to re-structure Russian society by humiliating the nobility. The abolishment of the boyar-dominated law courts and their replacement with tribunals based on principle of Swedish jurisprudence, the reformation of the armed forces by breaking the noble stranglehold over the military (inspired by the example of Germany), and the institution of a new table of ranks according to which privileges are no longer awarded because of birth or blood, but on the basis of services rendered to the state all win Voltaire's unqualified adulation.¹³⁵ And yet, despite the fact that Voltaire frequently invoked the notion that Peter had created a completely new society – a society in which industriousness and societal usefulness were the new guiding principles – he never discussed the arguably biggest societal problem of 17th-century Russia: the serf question.¹³⁶ The reason for this is, of course, that Peter never attempted an emancipation. Indeed, the following is Voltaire's only reference to the serf question:

... [Pierre] abolit le mot de *golut*, *esclave*, dont les Russes se servaient quand ils pouvaient parler aux czars, et quand ils présentaient des requêtes; il ordonna qu'on se servît du mot de *raad*, qui signifie *sujet*. Ce changement n'ôta rien à l'obéissance, et devait concilier l'affection.¹³⁷

A reform weak enough in itself, but which did not even have the meaning Voltaire attributed to it, since, as Voltaire's Russian collaborators pointed out, both *golut* and *raad* signify serf in Russian.¹³⁸ Voltaire, however, chose to ignore his collaborators' correction.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Ibid., vol. 46, pp. 605-8; vol. 47, pp. 892-7.

¹³⁵ Ibid., vol. 46, pp. 603-4; vol. 47, pp. 887-90.

¹³⁶ The importance of the serf question in 18th-century Russia, and in European discussions about Russia after publication of Voltaire's *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, is stressed by Franco Venturi, *The End of the Old Regime in Europe*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989-91), vol. 2, pp. 806-51.

¹³⁷ *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, OC, vol. 46, p. 613.

¹³⁸ See editorial footnote no. 49 in *ibid.*, p. 613.

¹³⁹ He even repeated the story of Peter's reform unaltered in his article *Esclave* of the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*; ironically in order to attack factual inaccuracies in Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*. See V***, *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, vol. 4, pp. 200-1.

According to his reading, Peter had successfully reformed the internal affairs of Russia to such an extent that the building of a materially rich and polite civilisation could now begin in earnest. Again, it is the czar that single-handedly takes the lead in this by promoting the importation of Dutch, Swiss, English, French and German artisans into Russia; by setting up and encouraging new industries across the Empire; by improving highways, water channels and ports; by encouraging commerce with the rest of the world; and by laying the foundation for St. Petersburg.¹⁴⁰ This city, Voltaire argued, had gradually become one of the most beautiful places in the world, crowned by a magnificent court, which through its cultivation of the fine arts could now act as an engine to further civilise and polish Russia. Indeed, Voltaire noted that under Peter's successors French comedies and Italian operas were regularly performed in St. Petersburg – a clear sign that polite civilisation in all its glory had arrived in Russia.¹⁴¹

Voltaire considered the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* as being a history of the same genre as the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV* - it is a *histoire en philosophe* concerned with the development of civilisation. However, the two accounts are of course marked by a very significant difference: the history of European civilisation as outlined in the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV* is retold in a much condensed time-span in the case of Russia - 29 years (the time of Peter's reign) rather than 450 years (the time between the last crusade and the end of the reign of Louis XIV). We have seen that in order to be able to tell this story of rapid development, Voltaire needed recourse to a questionable strategy of aligning the respective historical states of early medieaval Europe and pre-Petrine Russia: Peter's historically unique and prodigious achievement was enabled by the czar having successfully learned the lessons of the continent's past, and these lessons, Voltaire endeavoured to show, were directly applicable to Russia.

And yet, Voltaire, by arguing that civilisation developed at a much quicker pace in Russia than it did in Europe, also tells a very different story in regard to

¹⁴⁰ *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, OC, vol. 46, pp. 591-8, pp. 637-49; vol. 47, pp. 867-75.

¹⁴¹ *Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand*, OC, vol. 46, pp. 68-9.

political reform and in regard to the agents that drive forward the process of becoming civilised in the two contexts. These differences are highlighted most succinctly in Voltaire's description of Peter's attempt to alter the fashion habits of his subjects:

Il était utile que les Russes ne fussent point vêtus d'une autre manière que ceux qui leur enseignaient les arts; la haine contre les étrangers étant trop naturelle aux hommes, et trop entretenue par la différence des vêtements. L'habit de cérémonie qui tenait alors du polonais, du tartare, et de l'ancien hongrois, était, comme on l'a dit, très noble; mais l'habit des bourgeois et du bas peuple ressemblait à ces jaquettes plissées vers la ceinture, qu'on donne encore à certains pauvres dans quelques-uns des nos hôpitaux ... Le czar n'eut pas de peine à introduire l'habit de nos nations, et la coutume de se raser à sa cour; mais le peuple fut plus difficile; on fut obligé d'imposer une taxe sur les habits longs et sur les barbes. On suspendait aux portes de la ville des modèles de justaucorps: on coupait les robes et les barbes à qui ne voulait pas payer. Tout cela s'exécutait gaiement, et cette gaieté même prévint les séditions.¹⁴²

There are several noteworthy aspects to Voltaire's treatment of this reform. First of all, it was of course not implemented in a spirit of *gaieté*. Mervaud, in his commentary on the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, notes that it caused a lot of resistance and several revolts.¹⁴³ Moreover, Peter's method was not justified because Voltaire believed that the old, Oriental way of dressing was in any way inferior to the European one – in fact, as already noted earlier and reinforced here, he considered it to be more noble. But this consideration is completely trumped by the need to destroy the barrier between the Russians and the Europeans who had come to instruct them. In other words, the desirability of introducing European arts, the subject the Russians are taught about, and, by implication, European civilisation, has reached for both Peter and Voltaire such a level of importance, that the cruelty of the reform becomes justified.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, OC, vol. 46, pp. 611-12.

¹⁴³ See editorial footnote no. 45 in *ibid.*, p. 612.

¹⁴⁴ On Voltaire's justification of violence as a means to achieve progress in the context of the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, see also John R. Iverson, 'La guerre, le grand homme et l'histoire: l'histoire de l'empire de Russie', in *Voltaire et ses combats*, ed. Ulla Kölving and Christiane Mervaud, 2 vols (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1997), vol. 2, esp. pp. 1420-2.

Importantly, to justify the use of force and constraint to change peoples manners is not something Voltaire advocated in the *Essai sur les mœurs* – there, as seen earlier, people had gradually become more polished through their own voluntary interactions at the court, in towns, during theatre performances and so on. However, such slow and voluntary means of social change are not operative in Voltaire's account of Russia's swift civilisation. As a consequence, Voltaire effectively reduces the long and complex process of becoming civilised, which, he had shown in the European context, involved a symbiosis between governmental reforms from the top that enabled societal growth and development from below, to the rather crude imposition of Peter's will on a passive nation in the context of Russia. Indeed, despite baptising his work on the czar the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand*, Voltaire tells us very little about Russia, but a lot about Peter - and unlike the European nations presented in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, Voltaire's Russia possesses next to no historical agency vis-à-vis its domineering czar.

The crucial question that still needs investigation pertains to the causes that may have led Voltaire to portray Peter I as the single-handed architect of an entirely new civilisation in Russia. This question is all the more pressing, since this portrayal stands in various respects at odds with the account of the reforming sovereign's role in the process of civilisation offered in the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV*. Modern scholarship on Voltaire provides us with at least two prominent answers to this question. However, neither is entirely satisfactory.

On the one hand, Wolff situates Voltaire's adulation of Peter, and specifically his embarrassed silence vis-à-vis the czar's crudeness, in the context of Voltaire's alleged wider project of typecasting Russia as an entity radically different from Europe.¹⁴⁵ Given that Voltaire condescendingly regarded semi-Oriental Russia as being barbarian and backward by its very nature, so Wolff claims, a despot such as Peter, using cruel and violent methods, becomes necessary to carry the light of

¹⁴⁵ Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*.

Western civilisation into the darkness of the East.¹⁴⁶ A different approach to asserting political authority, Wolff implies, flows directly from the more fundamental cultural difference between East and West that allegedly structures Voltaire's thought.

The problem with Wolff's argument in regard to Voltaire's portrayal of Peter is that it is based on an untenable reading of the latter's conception of the relationship between Russia, Europe and the Orient. As seen above, Voltaire by no means unduly Orientalises Russia; on the contrary, he radically Europeanises it by first portraying its 17th-century state as an instance of the general state of pre-civilised Europe, and, secondly, by outlining how the czar managed to close gap in historical development between the two entities. Peter, in other words, is not remarkable for Voltaire because he somehow managed to Europeanise a semi-Oriental empire, but because centuries of European history were repeated during his short reign on Russian territory. The Orient hardly makes an appearance in this story, and to the very limited extent that Voltaire detected Oriental features of Russian culture - such as the clothing habits of the old Russians - these were, from a cultural point of view, treated sympathetically rather than condescendingly.

Moreover, Wolff thereby also misrepresents Voltaire's status in the wider history of European engagement with Russia: far from being the first author of a highly influential conception of Russia, whose most distinct feature is a sharp contrast to Europe,¹⁴⁷ Voltaire conceived Russia as fundamentally belonging to Europe. As will be shown in the following chapters, whilst this aspect of Voltaire's Russian writings was widely taken up in late 18th-century European thought, the comprehensiveness by which Voltaire regarded Russia through the lenses provided by European history was not. Indeed, Levesque, Schlözer and Herder were interested in the very questions which Voltaire only briefly touched upon: namely whether and to what extent pre-Petrine Russia may have been influenced

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., esp. pp. 100, 197-205. Wilberger equally stresses the Oriental nature of Voltaire's sketch of pre-Petrine Russia, without, however, deriving the same radical conclusions as Wolff; see Wilberger, *Voltaire's Russia*, pp. 73-4.

¹⁴⁷ For the claim that Voltaire was the first author of the idea of Eastern Europe, see Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p. 5.

by histories other than the one of Latin Europe - especially Byzantine and Mongol or Tatar history - and whether such influences may have explanatory power for the nature and success of Peter's project of reform.

An alternative explanation for the laudatory portrayal of Peter is offered by Lortholary who claims that Voltaire was never interested in understanding Russia as it actually was, but instead constructed the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* the way he did, in order to lend support to his cherished political theory of enlightened despotism. Indeed, Voltaire allegedly created a myth of Peter whose prime function was to give credence to the belief that unlimited progress can be readily achieved if a sovereign has the will to radical reform and is unhampered by any institutional restraints.¹⁴⁸ According to Lortholary, Voltaire's ideal of enlightened despotism is based on a simplistic, and essentially a-historical, conception of the past in which an undue concern with future progress ultimately condones present violence:

Comment nous présente-t-il l'œuvre du tsar? Comme un commencement absolu. La Russie lui doit tout. Avant lui, le chaos. Il paraît, et sa main souveraine ordonne ce chaos, dissipe les ténèbres.¹⁴⁹

L'auteur plaçait au-dessus des ravageurs de provinces les princes législateurs, mais son législateur brandissait une hache et cette hache apparaissait comme l'instrument du progrès. Voltaire faisait - ou semblait faire - l'apologie de la contrainte, prônait une œuvre fondée sur le mépris des hommes et de la vie humaine et sur cette idée que progrès implique destruction du passé.¹⁵⁰

On the surface, this explanation corresponds well with the analysis of the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* provided above: there is no doubt that the enlightened despot Peter is the unqualified hero of this history, and, as the account of the reform of the old Russian clothing habits amply demonstrates, Voltaire did indeed at times turn a blind eye on the czar's violence. The question remains however, whether Voltaire thereby wanted to extol in general terms the kind of political theory which Lortholary alleges he did: a theory according to which rapid

¹⁴⁸ Lortholary, *Le mirage russe*, esp. pp. 62-7.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

progress is best brought about by one enlightened ruler alone who dares to destroy the past in order to bring about a better future.

The problem with such an interpretation is that it supposes a rather radical break in Voltaire's thought. In the *Essai sur les mœurs* and in the *Siècle de Louis XIV* no such theory can be found: the development of European civilisation was conceived as operating too diversely in different countries, as driven by too many actors and as spanning too many centuries for such a theory to emerge. Even the most absolute ruler that makes a prominent appearance in these works – Louis XIV – was not a despot without attachment to the past and his reign was not portrayed as having propelled France onto a completely new historical trajectory. In Voltaire's account Louis is firmly embedded within French history, standing at the end of a long tradition of rulers who have steadily and pragmatically reformed their country.

There is no reason to suppose such a break since there are good indications in the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* itself, that Voltaire, when penning his work on the czar, intended to urge for a continuation of such gradual reform in France rather than to advocate a general theory of a-historical despotism. In fact, Lortholary is not entirely correct in stating that Voltaire – like Peter - had no interest in Russia's pre-Petrine past, and that his account of the czar is devoid of any historical roots. Indeed, Voltaire's work does not suffer from the complete absence of such a pre-history, but from the fact that this pre-history is all too often not rooted in Russia's past, but in the past of early medieval Europe as it was understood by Voltaire. Of course, the consequences of this are largely the ones Lortholary sets out: by basing his history on the idea that pre-Petrine Russia was beset by a set of problems whose solutions had been revealed in European history but had never been tackled in Russia itself, he could describe Peter – the czar who had enlightened himself about the nature of these problems and their appropriate solutions in Europe – as the single-handed creator of an entirely new civilisation, and the benign destructor of Russia's previous history.

However, on the level of political advocacy, the alignment of pre-Petrine history with that of feudal Europe might well have had quite a different motivation than

to simply extol the virtues of enlightened despotism. By means of this alignment, Voltaire could claim that Peter's reforms and achievements are directly relevant in an European context. If Peter had emulated Europe in his successful attempt to civilise his own country, Voltaire in turn wanted to turn Peter's Russia into an object of emulation for Europe, and especially France. Written at a time when Voltaire was very actively engaged in French politics and often frustrated by the lack of reform originating from the court,¹⁵¹ the history of the czar who went further than Louis XIV in his religious reforms, and who showed much more zeal in improving his kingdom than Louis XV, could of course be usefully employed in attempts to spur the monarch into action. Indeed, the very last sentence of the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* reveals just how much Voltaire had European sovereigns in mind when he wrote the work:

Les souverains des Etats depuis longtemps policés se diront à eux-mêmes, 'Si dans les climats glacés de l'ancienne Scythie, un homme aidé de son seul génie a fait de si grandes choses, que devons-nous faire dans des royaumes où les travaux accumulés de plusieurs siècles nous ont rendu tout facile?'¹⁵²

Therefore, regarding the intended political message for home consumption, the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* is not a simple defence of enlightened despotism, but rather an attempt to inspire the continuation and acceleration of the gradual and pragmatic reform project that Voltaire believed had defined Europe's recent past. And yet, by writing this history with his mind directed towards Versailles rather than Siberia, Moscow or even St. Petersburg, Voltaire provided us with a skewed account of Peter's Russia.

Crucially, however, this is not the end, but the beginning, of our story. The notion that Peter managed to Europeanise his country swiftly simply by imposing his will on a passive nation, far from ever becoming hegemonic in late 18th-century France as Lortholary alleges, was comprehensively refuted in subsequent scholarship. Voltaire is important for a historical investigation attempting to trace how late 18th-century Europe conceived of Russian history, not because he gave an account

¹⁵¹ See, for instance, Gay, *Voltaire's Politics*, pp. 122-43, 310-15.

¹⁵² *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, OC, vol. 47, p. 942.

that was subsequently widely adopted, but because he framed the kind of questions that engaged subsequent thinkers. As we shall see in what follows, the idea from Voltaire's *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* that was taken up in subsequent scholarship was that Russia's history must be considered in its relationship to the history of Europe's civilisation; the nature of the relationship and the role of Peter in fostering it, however, were to prove contentious until the end of the century.

2. Diderot: The history and politics of old Europe and the ambivalent emergence of youthful Russia

Introduction

Denis Diderot produced the first substantive response to Voltaire's claim that Peter I had managed to quickly civilise Russia by means of a simple imposition of European models. This response was articulated in three texts concerned with Russia, occasioned by Diderot's six month stay at the court of Catherine II between October 1773 and March 1774: the *Mélanges philosophiques, historiques, etc. pour Catherine II*, the *Observations sur le Nakaz*, and the *Plan d'une université*.¹⁵³ On the surface these texts spell out a number of loosely connected proposals to the czarina on how to reform her country. And yet, underlying Diderot's discussion of specific reforming policies is a much more general concern with the historical process of civilisation and the role of the reforming sovereign within this process. It is this concern that gives coherence to the various proposals put forward, and that leads Diderot into a critical engagement with Voltaire's *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*.

This chapter will highlight Diderot's challenge to two core assumptions that underlie Voltaire's story of the czar. First, Diderot argues that the ability of reforming sovereigns to accelerate the march of history is subject to strict limits, which are constituted by the dependence of civilisation on slow bottom-up processes of development. Secondly, he denies that modern European history provides models of reform that can simply be emulated in Russia; on the contrary, in his view, the European experience supplies examples that are to be avoided in the Russian context. Diderot's advice to Catherine to shift away from a top-down model of development that is considerably dependent on external stimuli, to one where internal, bottom-up processes play a much larger part, is itself informed by his particular conception of philosophic history. According to Diderot, the history of civilisation is not an autonomous process, but one that is considerably

¹⁵³ Versini, vol. 3.

determined by the more fundamental course of nature, which is conceived in cyclical fashion. It is ultimately nature, and more specifically Russia's and Europe's respective position within the naturalised historical cycle, that determines the scope for political intervention in either context, and that explains the complex relationship between the two regions.

Diderot's Russian writings thus certainly possess substantive political and historiographical depth. However this depth only comes to full light if they are considered in conjunction with another body of texts Diderot produced during the same period: his contributions to Guillaume-Thomas Raynal's *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des européens dans les deux Indes*, written between 1770 and 1780.¹⁵⁴ It is in these contributions that Diderot conceptualises the relationship between nature, history, civilisation and politics in the context of a series of reflections upon the course of modern European history, thereby establishing the framework around which his Russian writings are implicitly structured.

Given that the full extent of Diderot's contributions to Raynal's work was only established in the 1970s, it is unsurprising that his Russian writings have for a long time not received the attention they deserve.¹⁵⁵ Read in isolation from the political and historiographical substratum provided by the *Histoire des deux Indes*, these texts have traditionally been regarded as unimpressive ancillaries to Diderot's main interests and strengths - philosophy, natural sciences and

¹⁵⁴ See HDI and HDI-70. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations used in this chapter have been attributed to Diderot by Michèle Duchet, *Diderot et l'histoire des deux Indes; ou l'écriture fragmentaire* (Paris: Editions A.-G. Nizet, 1978).

¹⁵⁵ There have been rumours that Diderot may have had a hand in the *Histoire des deux Indes* ever since its first publication. However, firm evidence about the extent, nature and content of these contributions only emerged with the re-discovery and cataloguing of the Fonds Vandeul by Herbert Dieckmann in 1951, and the subsequent work on the Fonds' manuscripts by Michèle Duchet in the 1970s. Duchet's work has provided us with tables precisely indicating all of Diderot's contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes*. These tables also clearly demonstrate his ever increasing input into Raynal's collaborative work over the course of its three main editions: Diderot wrote 83 fragments comprising roughly 8% of the total text for the 1770 edition, 130 fragments for the 1774 edition, and 270 fragments constituting almost a third of the work for the final edition of 1780. See Herbert Dieckmann, *Inventaire du fonds Vandeul et inédits de Diderot* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1951), esp. pp. 87-157; Duchet, *Diderot et l'histoire des deux Indes*, esp. pp. 28-47.

aesthetics.¹⁵⁶ However, the emergence of firm evidence about Diderot's substantial immersion in questions of a political and historiographical nature in the 1770s and 1780s that found expression in Raynal's work, has led to renewed interest in his political thought and philosophy of history.¹⁵⁷ This general reappraisal of Diderot's historical and political *oeuvre* has also had the effect of lifting his Russian writings out of the relative obscurity into which they had fallen, with a number of recent studies attempting to explore the relationship between those sections of the *Histoire des deux Indes* explicitly dealing with Russia,¹⁵⁸ and Diderot's works inspired by his stay in St. Petersburg.¹⁵⁹ Whilst this is certainly a very fruitful approach, it benefits from a further widening of scope which will be provided here. Indeed, this chapter seeks to provide a reading of Diderot's Russian writings in relation to all of his contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes* in so far as these contributions pertain to his conception of a naturalised history of civilisation, and to the specific application of this conception to the modern history of Europe.

¹⁵⁶ On the traditionally dismissive attitude towards Diderot's Russian writings, see Georges Dulac, 'Dans quelle mesure Catherine II a-t-elle dialogué avec Diderot?', in *Catherine II & l'Europe*, ed. Anita Davidenkoff. *Collection historique de l'Institut d'études slaves* (Paris: Institut d'études slaves, 1997), pp. 150-1.

¹⁵⁷ Works exploring Diderot's political thought by drawing extensively on the *Histoire des deux Indes* include: Yves Bénot, *Diderot, de l'athéisme à l'anticolonialisme* (Paris: François Maspero, 1970); Anthony Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics: A Study of the Evolution of Diderot's Political Thought after the Encyclopédie* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), chap. 3. The most significant studies on Diderot's philosophy of history are: Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières* (Paris: François Maspero, 1971), chap. 2.4; John Hope Mason, 'Materialism and History: Diderot and the Histoire des deux Indes', *European Review of History - Revue européenne d'histoire* 3, no. 2 (1996); Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 4, pt. 4.

¹⁵⁸ The sections in question are HDI, vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 23, pp. 46-54 and vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, pp. 52-8. In addition, there already exists a passage on Russia in the first edition of the *Histoire des deux Indes*, see HDI-70, vol. 2, bk. 5, pp. 204-5. For the attribution of this latter passage to Diderot, see footnote 222 below.

¹⁵⁹ See, for instance, Bertrand Binoche, 'Diderot et Catherine II ou les deux histoires', in *Sens du devenir et pensée de l'histoire*, ed. Bertrand Binoche and Franck Tinland (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2000); Georges Dulac, 'Diderot et la "civilisation" de la Russie', in *Colloque international Diderot (1713-1784)*, ed. Anne-Marie Chouillet (Paris: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1985); Dulac, 'Dans quelle mesure Catherine II a-t-elle dialogué avec Diderot?'; Georges Dulac, 'Diderot et le "mirage russe": quelques préliminaires à l'étude de son travail politique de Pétersbourg', in *Le mirage russe au XVIII^e siècle*, ed. Sergueï Karp and Larry Wolff (Ferney: Centre international d'étude du XVIII^e siècle, 2001); Gianluigi Goggi, 'Diderot et le concept de civilisation', *Dix-huitième siècle* 29 (1997); Gianluigi Goggi, 'Diderot et la Russie: quelques remarques sur une page de la première édition de l'histoire des deux Indes', in *L'encyclopédie, Diderot, l'esthétique*, ed. Sylvain Auroux, Dominique Bourel, and Charles Porset (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1991); Gianluigi Goggi, 'Civilisation et expérience de référence: à propos de la genèse du fragment politique Sur la Russie', *Studi Settecenteschi* 14 (1994).

A comprehensive reading of Diderot's contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes* will form the first section of this chapter. Particular attention will be paid to the complex relationship that exists between Diderot's account of the past, present and future of European civilisation and the one provided by Voltaire. We will see that despite the considerable agreement between the two thinkers in regard to the principal mechanisms that had enabled Europe to emerge from a period of barbarism following the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Diderot arrived at a reading of the present state of this civilisation considerably at odds with the one emerging from the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV*. In particular, Voltaire's relative optimism about the stability of 18th-century Europe and his cautious hopes for the future progress of the continent give way to an account informed by historical pessimism, and to a conviction that European civilisation is declining and will ultimately fall. The source for this pessimism will be located in Diderot's cyclical account of the workings of nature, and specifically in his application of the organic life cycle to the course of history.

The chapter's second part will analyse Diderot's Russian writings against the background provided by his contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes*. I will argue that these writings must be understood as a counterpoint to his pessimism about the present state and likely future of Europe: if Europe is an old civilisation on the decline, Russia emerges as its young and vigorous opposite, ready to embark on a progressive history. Indeed, Diderot's criticism of Peter I, the rejection of Voltaire's portrayal of the czar, and his alternative programme of reform proposed to Catherine II, are all premised on the observation that Europe and Russia stand at opposite ends of the historical cycle. However, we shall see that Diderot's initial optimism about Russia's future ultimately collapsed and was replaced by a pessimism even more severe than the one encountered in his reflection about the future of Europe. An analysis of the causes for this shift will form the concluding part of this chapter. In the course of this analysis we will return to a problem that we have already encountered in Voltaire's *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*: the difficulty both thinkers encountered in arriving at a rich account of Russian history prior to the reign of Peter I.

The past, present and future of European civilisation: Natural cycles, historical pessimism and the politics of damage limitation

The attempt to analyse Diderot's contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes* inevitably presents us with the methodological question of how to read them. Amounting in the final edition to 270 pieces of text scattered across the work's 19 books and ranging in size from a few lines to essays comprising more than 30 pages of printed text, Diderot's contributions were subjected in the Fonds Vandeul¹⁶⁰ to a classification and a thematic arrangement under a number of headings, such as 'du commerce', 'religion', or 'sur la guerre', that bear little resemblance to the actual order in which they appeared in the volumes of the *Histoire des deux Indes*. Even though an analysis of the fragments that follows the Fonds' thematic headings would undoubtedly be fruitful to arrive at an account of the *philosophe's* reflections on a number of pressing political, economic and social questions of the day, such a strategy would inevitably lose sight of the fact that Diderot wrote these fragments when reading the historical narrative provided by Raynal and his other collaborators.¹⁶¹ Or, to put it differently, such a strategy would focus our view on the fragments' political and philosophical content, but would ultimately leave us unenlightened about their historiographical context. For the purpose of this chapter a mixture of strategies will be employed. Whilst it is often convenient to consider Diderot's thought under schematic headings that are largely foreign to the work of Raynal, but proposed in the Fonds Vandeul, I will nevertheless endeavour to ground this thought within the overall historical narrative provided by the *Histoire des deux Indes*.

¹⁶⁰ The Fonds Vandeul comprises the collection of manuscripts written by Diderot, or concerning Diderot, that his daughter - Angélique, married to Caroillon de Vandeul - brought together after the *philosophe's* death. Discovery of annotated copies of Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes* within the Fonds Vandeul have been key to establishing Diderot's authorship of large parts of Raynal's work. See, Dieckmann, *Inventaire du fonds Vandeul*, introduction. On the ordering of Diderot's contributions under schematic headings in the Fonds Vandeul, see Duchet, *Diderot et l'histoire des deux Indes*, esp. pp. 62-3.

¹⁶¹ Diderot was by no means the only collaborator Raynal employed in the composition of the *Histoire des deux Indes*. For a list of other known collaborators, see A. Feugère, 'Raynal, Diderot et quelques autres historiens des deux Indes', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* (1913). For the sake of convenience I will in the following attribute all the sections of the *Histoire des deux Indes* which were not written by Diderot to Raynal, notwithstanding the fact that a third author may well have supplied the text in question.

Reading the *Histoire des deux Indes* as a history allows us, among other things, to see the similarity of historiographical concerns that inform this work and Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs* and *Siècle de Louis XIV*. If Voltaire aimed to write 'histoire en philosophe',¹⁶² Raynal's work is, as its full title indicates, a history both 'philosophique et politique'. It is, in other words, not merely a narration of events and deeds as they unfold diachronically, but additionally an interpretation of how modern European civilisation emerged historically, an analyse of how its political, economic, social and cultural mechanics operate, and an outline of a programme of reform fit to ensure the future prosperity and progress of the continent.

There are, of course, important differences between the *Histoire des deux Indes* and Voltaire's historical work. For instance, whilst the *Essai sur les mœurs* starts with the state of Europe during the reign of Charlemagne in the 8th century, and spends much time analysing the barbarity of, and the small steps of progress made during, the early medieval period, Raynal's work commences in earnest with Columbus' first travel of exploration to the Americas in 1492, and the Portuguese discovery of the passage to India via the Cape of Good Hope in 1488. The *Histoire des deux Indes*' narrative takes off, in other words, at a time when Europe had already become civilised to such an extent that it was able to engage and undertake commerce with the ancient empires of the Orient, and to colonise, exploit and cultivate the newly discovered lands to the West. It is of course Europe's subsequent engagement with the *deux Indes* that provides the thread around which the whole of Raynal's narrative is structured, whereas Voltaire's histories revolve mostly, if by no means exclusively, around the internal history of Europe.¹⁶³

And yet, in the introduction Raynal provides us with a short history of Europe prior to its colonial expansion overseas. This account starts with a description of the civilisations of the Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans, then passes through a period of barbarism and superstition that depressed Europe after the fall of Rome,

¹⁶² ESM, vol. 1, p. 3.

¹⁶³ The voyages of discovery and European trade with the outside world are treated in the *Essai sur les Mœurs*, but remain marginal to the work as a whole. See *ibid.*, vol. 2, chaps. 141-55, pp. 303-99.

and concludes with a relatively detailed analysis of how the continent developed out of this depression up to the point when it was able to look and move beyond its own borders. Significantly, the *Histoire des deux Indes* describes the process by which Europe moved from a state of barbarism to one of relative civilisation in terms which could well have been borrowed from Voltaire: if medieval Europe was poor, without industry, riches, arts and sciences, and oppressed both by feudalism and ecclesiastic pretensions to secular authority, the continent emerged from this sorry state of affairs through the enfranchisement of towns and serfs, the subjection of the unruly feudal nobility under impartial laws, and the gradual subjection of the church by more effective sovereigns.¹⁶⁴

Whilst this Voltairian account of the pre-history of European civilisation was written by Raynal, a variety of contributions by Diderot scattered across the work demonstrate that he essentially agreed with it.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, in a highly significant contribution to the introduction, Diderot himself identified the principal engine responsible for advancing modern European history:

Elevé au-dessus de toutes les considérations humaines, c'est alors qu'on plane au-dessus de l'atmosphère, & qu'on voit le globe au-dessous de soi. ... C'est là enfin que, voyant à mes pieds ces belles contrées où fleurissent les sciences & les arts, & que les ténèbres de la barbarie avoient si long-tems occupées, je me suis demandé: qui est-ce qui a creusé ces canaux? qui est-ce qui a desséché ces plaines? qui est-ce qui a fondé ces villes? qui est-ce qui a rassemblé, vêtu, civilisé ces peuples? & qu'alors toutes les voix des hommes éclairés qui sont parmi eux m'ont répondu: c'est le commerce, c'est le commerce.¹⁶⁶

What Diderot alludes to here, and outlines in much more detail elsewhere, is a conception of commerce as an agent of civilisation. Commerce is civilising because of its propensity to create reciprocal relationships of demand and supply between states and individuals and its seemingly infinite ability to create new wants, needs and demands which act as engine for potentially unlimited material progress. It is a view that has a close resemblance to Voltaire's discussion of the spirit of emulation which, as we have seen, acted as the prime motor for the

¹⁶⁴ HDI, vol. 1, bk. 1, chap. 1, pp. 4-25.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., vol. 5, chap. 24, pp. 270-3; vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, pp. 100-14.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., vol. 1, bk. 1, chap. 1, pp. 3-4.

progress of European civilisation in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, but in Diderot's case it might well have been inspired by Montesquieu's discussion of the spirit of commerce as outlined in *De l'esprit des lois*.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, similar to Montesquieu, Diderot conceived commerce to be inherently opposed to the spirit of conquest and religious prejudices, an agent of peace and, ultimately, a vehicle that has the potential to create a global society in which needs are universally communicated and satisfied; a system, in other words, in which the prosperity of all parts are reciprocally dependent on each other.¹⁶⁸

Moreover, the spirit of commerce has not only the fortunate propensity to bind entire nations peacefully into reciprocal relationships, but also to strengthen the social ties within each nation. This is because commerce is based on a sort of sociability that is not dependent on virtuous or altruistic behaviour, but solely on the desire of each member to exchange the products of his own labour against the goods produced by his fellow citizen with the aim of increasing his own selfish interest of happiness and well-being. Commerce leads, in other words, to a society defined by free exchanges which all classes – from the agriculturist, via the artisan to the merchant, and ultimately the sovereign – have an interest to perpetuate and perfect.¹⁶⁹ Crucially, according to Diderot, this commerce-inspired desire to enjoy material goods and the global communication of products and needs can lead to an open-ended cycle of new desires, new products, techniques and ideas. By

¹⁶⁷ Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Roger Caillois, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1949-1951), vol. 2. The relevant sections are: bk. 20, chaps. 1-2, pp. 584-6 (commerce in relation to peace and religious prejudices); bk. 21, chaps. 5-6, pp. 604-10 (commerce in relation to progress); and bk. 21, chap. 20, pp. 639-41 (commerce in relation to the regulation of the passions). For an analysis of Montesquieu's view of commerce as an agent of civilisation, see Céline Spector, 'Science des mœurs et théorie de la civilisation: De l'esprit des lois de Montesquieu à l'école historique écossaise', in *Les équivoques de la civilisation*, ed. Bertrand Binoche (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2005).

¹⁶⁸ See HDI, vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 33, pp. 97-8. Very similar views are expressed across Diderot's contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes*, see especially, vol. 1, bk. 1, chap. 8, p. 65; vol. 3, bk. 6, chap. 1, pp. 137-9; vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 6, p. 186.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 33, pp. 98-9. A very similar argument is set out in the *Observations sur le Nakaz*, where Diderot takes the physiocrats to task for suggesting that a good citizen and/or good sovereign should invest all surplus money into agricultural production. Diderot, by contrast, argued that in well-ordered societies all productive forces – agriculture, industry, commerce – are interlinked in such a way that purely self-interested spending would inevitably benefit society as a whole. See *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 73, pp. 544-6 and art. 130, pp. 569-71. On physiocracy and its analysis of large-scale agriculture as the main engine for economic growth, see T. J. Hochstrasser, 'Physiocracy and the Politics of *laissez-faire*', in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), esp. pp. 429-30.

constantly converting desires into needs and innovations into objects of emulation, commerce enables an unprecedented impetus to man's activity, industry and genius, thereby facilitating a continuous increase in material wealth as well as the flourishing of the arts and sciences.¹⁷⁰

And yet, if Diderot could thus contemplate the enormous benefits a global commerce could offer to mankind whilst *planer au-dessus de l'atmosphère*, as soon as he hit the hard ground of history much of his optimism dissipated. Indeed, the *Histoire des deux Indes* describes the chain of events that led to a reversal of commerce's promising potential into its often nightmarish opposite. This catastrophic history starts with the Spanish and Portuguese travels of explorations, reaches a first climax during the Seven Years' War, and, provisionally, ends with the War of American Independence which was in full swing when the final edition of the *Histoire des deux Indes* was written. It is a history, moreover, that moves in two distinct directions. On the one hand, it recounts how a succession of European explorers, traders, missionaries and governments – Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English and French alike – ravaged the lands of 'les deux Indes' rather than integrating them into a mutually beneficial system of reciprocity. Diderot contributed much to the writing of this account and many of the most severe indictments against, for instance, the slave trade, the genocide of the indigenous population of the Americas, and the subversion and impoverishment of the Oriental empires at the hands of European colonisers were written by him.¹⁷¹ At the same time, the *Histoire des deux Indes* attempted to analyse the damage that the Europeans had inflicted onto themselves and their civilisation in the course of this history. We must turn to Diderot's contributions to this second project, if we are to understand his conception of history in general.

The most striking analysis of the gap between the promise of commerce and the actual history of European colonial and commercial expansion is provided in Diderot's account of the development of European inter-state relations. If the

¹⁷⁰ HDI, vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 33, pp. 96-7.

¹⁷¹ See *ibid.*, vol. 4, bk. 8, chap. 22, pp. 158-9 and vol. 5, bk., 2, chap. 24, pp. 267-89 (on the slave trade); vol. 4, bk. 8, chap. 32, pp. 195-7 and vol. 7, bk. 15, chap. 4, pp. 160-3 (on the genocide of indigenous population in Americas); vol. 2, bk. 3, chap. 38, pp. 64-9 (on the impoverishment of Oriental empires).

promotion of commercial reciprocity should, in theory, lead to a more peaceful and stable state system, history proved the opposite. Not only were all European overseas establishments founded by conquest rather than by a reciprocal exchange of needs and industry, but, and even more fatally, colonial expansion went hand in hand with a general deterioration of inter-state relations. Rather than ending the fury of conquest, and the Machiavellian desire of each state to expand its border and its sphere of influence at the expense of its neighbours, European powers have simply added ‘*jalousie de commerce*’ to their habitual ‘*jalousie de puissance*’; that is, a desire to expand their commerce and riches by any means, including warfare, and at the expense of their rivals.¹⁷² Diderot was convinced that modern history proves that ‘[i]l n’y a pas une seule nation qui ne soit jalouse de la prospérité d’une autre nation’,¹⁷³ and he detected a fatal increase in state behaviour informed by *jalousie de commerce* from the 15th century onwards.¹⁷⁴ This increase came to a head during the Seven Years’ War, which is described as a global, commercial conflict caused by England taking *jalousie de commerce* to its logical conclusion. According to Diderot, England’s behaviour during the war proved that it was no longer satisfied with being rich, but wanted to be exclusively rich; a pernicious ambition manifested in the attempt to monopolise all trade, and to defend monopolies by means of warfare. Thus, commercial reciprocity had effectively been turned into its diametrical opposite.¹⁷⁵

Diderot further detected a reflection of the decline of reciprocity in inter-state relations within every commercial European society. Whilst commercial self-interest should strengthen the social fabric and lead to increased production and emulation, he portrayed late 18th-century Holland, England and France as societies in which a destructive ‘*soif d’or*’ has become the only guiding principle and in which both social cohesion and productive economic activity have been fatally undermined.¹⁷⁶ When discussing the effects of *soif d’or* Diderot at times appears

¹⁷² HDI, vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 6, p. 186. For a general discussion about the 18th-century debate on ‘jealousy of trade’ and its relation to ‘jealousy of state’, see Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, esp. chap. 1.2.

¹⁷³ HDI, vol. 2, bk. 4, chap. 33, p. 249.

¹⁷⁴ See, for instance, *ibid.*, vol. 2, bk. 5, chap. 4, pp. 274-5; vol. 6, bk. 13, chap. 41, pp. 236-8; vol. 7, bk. 14, chap. 40, pp. 95-7; vol. 8, bk. 17, chap. 16, pp. 81-2.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 5, bk. 10, chap. 13, p. 128; see also vol. 5, bk. 10, chap. 14, pp. 130-2.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, bk. 2, chap. 27, pp. 301-6 (Holland); vol. 7, bk. 14, chap. 45, p. 108 (England); vol. 2, bk. 4, chap. 18, pp. 162-9 (France).

to use traditional republican arguments according to which commerce inevitably leads to luxury and luxury to corruption, and, therefore, that commerce should be avoided and luxury replaced by simplicity and relative poverty.¹⁷⁷ However, he generally remained committed to the notion of commerce as an important civilising agent, and was adamant that the desirable peaks of civilisation – general prosperity, refined arts, perfected sciences – can only be climbed with the help of the wealth created through commercial activity. In actual fact, when Diderot deplored the social state of Holland, England and France, he did not attack commerce and luxury *per se*, but a certain kind of destructive luxury, which he termed ‘mauvais luxe’.¹⁷⁸

Luxury is destructive if wealth has become the only mark of distinction in a society and has completely displaced merit, virtue and industriousness as vehicles for social advancement. In such a society reciprocal self-interest – which, for instance, demands that public offices should be occupied by, and recognition given to, the most worthy person, and thus be objects of general emulation - has been replaced by pure self-interest or greed in which wealth, no matter how acquired, opens all doors. This phenomenon is best exemplified by the widespread venality of parliamentary seats in late 18th-century England, but the victory of gold over virtue and merit is portrayed as being equally characteristic of French and Dutch society.¹⁷⁹

Equally, in a society driven by *soif d'or* the reciprocal link between wealthy consumers and the nation's productive forces has been disrupted: spending no longer trickles down the chain of production, thereby no longer providing encouragement for increased economic activity. The typical example of such a society is France, and although Diderot did not analyse how such a disruption may

¹⁷⁷ See, for instance, Diderot's warning to the Dutch that 'la destinée de toute nation commerçante est d'être riche, lâche, corrompue & subjuguée' and his concomitant advice to return to a state of virtue and poverty. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, bk. 2, chap. 27, p. 306.

¹⁷⁸ On Diderot's differentiation between good and bad luxury, see also *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 87, pp. 549-50; *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 26, pp. 292-303; *Réfutation d'Helvétius*, Versini, vol. 1, pp. 888-94; and *Satire contre le luxe*, appended to the *Salon de 1767*, DPV, vol. 16, pp. 551-7.

¹⁷⁹ HDI, vol. 7, bk. 14, chap. 45, p. 108 (venality of English parliament); vol. 1, bk. 2, chap. 27, pp. 301-3 (loss of virtue among Dutch); *Salon de 1767*, DPV, vol. 16, pp. 553-4 ('soif d'or' destroys French meritocracy).

have happened, its effects are clear to see: it produces a society of ‘deux classes de citoyens. Les uns, regorgeant de richesses, étalent un luxe qui indignent ceux qu’il ne corrompt pas; les autres, plongés dans l’indigence, l’accroissent encore par le masque d’une aisance qui leur manque.’¹⁸⁰ Apart from creating unbridgeable social divisions, in a society in which social recognition is only to be gained through the flaunting of luxury there is the double danger that all classes continuously overspend in order to mask their relative poverty, thereby creating an economically disastrous cycle of bankruptcies, and that the quality of products decreases because appearance is valued higher than substance. In either case the effect is a depression of emulation and economic activity.¹⁸¹

Diderot argued that the increase in commercial warfare and the decline of merit and virtue as social norms also contributed to a third fatal trend in modern Europe: the gradual rise of despotism. On the one hand, ruinous warfare puts pressure on sovereigns to increase their tax intake, and, if tax rises are resisted by legitimate constitutional procedures, a sovereign may well employ arbitrary or despotic means to see his wish fulfilled.¹⁸² At the same time, a society devoid of virtue, corrupted by luxury and driven by a desire for pure enjoyment, will have taken on a slavish disposition and will not be able to marshal the necessary strength to resist despotic attacks on its liberties.¹⁸³

In the *Histoire des deux Indes* corrupted England and Holland were singled out as being in particular danger of losing their free constitutions in the near future.¹⁸⁴ More prominently, however, the rise of despotism is described in general and, at times, almost prophetic language affecting the whole of commercial Europe, without reference to any particular context:

Depuis deux siècles, tous les princes de l’Europe fabriquent entr’eux
... cette longue & pesante chaîne dont les peuples se sentent

¹⁸⁰ HDI, vol. 2, bk. 4, chap. 8, p. 165.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 9, pp. 227-8. See also *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 87, p. 549; *Réfutation d’Helvétius*, Versini, vol. 1, p. 889; *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 26, pp. 293-5.

¹⁸² HDI, vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 10, p. 232; vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 11, pp. 260-4.

¹⁸³ Ibid., vol. 8, bk. 18, chap. 42, p. 281.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., vol. 1, bk. 2, chap. 27, p. 306 and vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, p. 85 (Holland); vol. 7, bk. 14, chap. 43, p. 108 and vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, p. 79 (England).

enveloppés de toutes parts. ... Les guerres ne tendoient pas à rendre les états plus grands, mais les sujets plus soumis, en substituant pas à pas le gouvernement militaire à l'influence douce & lente des loix & des mœurs. Tous les potentats se fortifioient également dans leur tyrannie, par leurs conquêtes ou par leurs pertes.¹⁸⁵

There is little doubt that the country Diderot was most concerned about when writing these and similar lines was France. Indeed, in the *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, written during his stay in St. Petersburg, and thus at a time when he composed most of his contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes*, Diderot wrote a detailed account of Maupeou's coup d'état of 1771.¹⁸⁶ The coup, hastened by the severe disorder of France's finances following the Seven Years' War and the conflict between king and magistrates that this financial crisis engendered, resulted in the dismissal of the French *parlements*, the only remaining constitutional restraint on the monarch's power.¹⁸⁷ Diderot was in no doubt that France, that used to have a moderate monarchical government in which the *parlements* acted as an intermediary body to regulate the sovereign's will, had fallen under a despotic yoke.¹⁸⁸ The consequences of this yoke are severe. Indeed, if a commercial civilisation is underpinned by multiple reciprocal relations, continual communication of goods and ideas, innovation and continuous activity, the fall into despotism destroys its very basis and announces its end:

L'expérience de tous les âges a prouvé que la tranquillité qui naît du pouvoir absolu, refroidit les esprits, abat le courage, rétrécit le génie, jette une nation entiere dans une léthargie universelle.

...

On pense peu, on ne parle point, & l'on craint de raisonner. ... Le philosophe retient sa pensée, comme le riche cache sa fortune. ... La méfiance & la terreur forment la base des mœurs générales. Les citoyens s'isolent; & toute une nation devient mélancolique, pusillanime, stupide & muette. Voilà les chaînes, les symptomes funestes, ou l'échelle de misere sur laquelle chaque peuple connoîtra le degré de la sienne.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., vol. 8, bk. 18, chap. 32, p. 233.

¹⁸⁶ *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 1, pp. 203-27.

¹⁸⁷ On Diderot's reaction to the Maupeou coup, see Hope Mason, 'Materialism and History', pp. 153-4. On the coup's influence on French political thought in general, see Gay, *The Enlightenment*, vol. 2, pp. 477-83.

¹⁸⁸ *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 1, p. 221.

¹⁸⁹ HDI, vol. 7, bk. 14, chap. 2, pp. 7-9.

Diderot's contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes* were not intended to merely illustrate how the promise of a benign commercial civilisation was reversed in Europe's recent past by a combination of *jalousie de commerce* in international relations, a pernicious *soif d'or* within each commercial society, and the destruction of moderate government through the rise of despotism. In addition, he sought to analyse the root causes for this fatal history which was threatening to undermine the very basis of European civilisation. This analysis took two quite distinct forms.

At times Diderot suggested that Europe's ills were caused by mistakes or unfortunate historical circumstances. This strand of explanation was most prominently invoked in the discussion surrounding the problem of *jalousie de commerce*. Indeed, the authors of the *Histoire des deux Indes* were in no doubt that at the time when the journeys of discovery began, Europe in general, and Portugal and Spain in particular, had just about emerged from the worst abyss of barbarism. They remained, in other words, still in a state of semi-barbarity.¹⁹⁰ Raynal, for instance, argued that the first Portuguese journeys to Africa were nothing more than barbarian 'pirateries' and 'brigandages',¹⁹¹ and that the discoverers of the sea route to India were just not equipped to establish a real reciprocal commerce between the Orient and Europe. When the Portuguese started to penetrate into India, the world was, in Raynal's words, yet little acquainted with 'les principes politiques sur le commerce, sur la puissance réelle des états ... sur la maniere d'établir & de conserver des colonies'.¹⁹² It is little wonder that this nation, still feudal and half-barbarian, should be animated by a thirst for conquest rather than a spirit of commerce, and therefore found its empire on destructive plunder, theft and trade monopolies, rather than on a free, reciprocal trade which would have been beneficial to the world as a whole.

Tragically, Spanish and Portuguese mistakes were perpetuated by subsequent colonisers, who, because much more civilised, should really have known better, but were restricted in their choices by the political and economic context created

¹⁹⁰ For a similar argument, see also Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 4, esp. pp. 239, 265.

¹⁹¹ HDI, vol. 1, bk. 1, chap. 3, pp. 31-2.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, vol. 1, bk. 1, chap. 29, p. 173; see also vol. 1, bk. 1, chap. 9, pp. 79-81.

in the first wave of colonisation. Diderot made this argument explicit in the context of his discussion of the first English incursions into India:

La société [i.e. the Honourable East India Company] ... fut déterminée ... à former aux Indes des établissemens, mais à ne les former que du consentement des nations indigenes. Elle ne voulut pas débiter par des conquêtes. Ses expéditions ne furent que les entreprises de négocians humains & justes. Elle se fit aimer: mais cet amour ... ne la mit pas en état de soutenir la concurrence des peuples qui se faisoient craindre.

Les Portugais & les Hollandois possédoient de grandes provinces, des places bien fortifiées, & de bons ports. Ces avantages assuroient leur commerce contre les naturels du pays & contre de nouveaux concurrens ... Les Anglois au contraire, dépendans du caprice des saisons & des peuples, sans forces & sans asyle, ne tirant leurs fonds que de l'Angleterre même, ne pouvoient, selon les idées alors reçues, faire un commerce avantageux. Ils penserent qu'on acquéroit difficilement de grandes richesses sans de grandes injustices, & que pour surpasser ou même balancer les nations qu'ils avoient censurées, il falloit imiter leur conduite. C'étoit une erreur qui les jeta dans de fausses routes.¹⁹³

Thus the civilising spirit of commerce of the *négocians humains & justes* had become corrupted by the antithetical and barbaric spirit of conquest. From this moment onwards the spirit of *jalousie de commerce* could develop its historical dynamics, leading to the follies of commercial warfare and the destabilisation of Europe as a whole.

This is, of course, a profoundly tragic vision of history, but one which ultimately offers some hope for redemption. If the sorry contemporary state of affairs was caused by past mistakes, Diderot maintained in the very last paragraph of the *Histoire des deux Indes*, then the spreading of knowledge and enlightenment might enable rectification of these in the future:

Puissent des écrivains plus favorisés de la nature achever par leurs chefs-d'œuvres ce que mes essais ont commencé! Puisse, sous les auspices de la philosophie, s'étendre un jour d'un bout du monde à

¹⁹³ Ibid., vol. 1, bk. 3, chap. 2, pp. 317-18.

l'autre cette chaîne d'union & de bienfaisance qui doit rapprocher toutes les nations policées!¹⁹⁴

However, such optimism is generally over-shadowed by a profound pessimism. This pessimism takes its strength from the idea that Europe's contemporary ills, rather than being caused by past mistakes, may have their roots in the very nature of the historical process itself. Indeed, Diderot's contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes* are shot through with a notion of the historical process as cyclical, which demands that any civilisation, no matter how sound the principles on which it was established, must ultimately fall.¹⁹⁵ It is nature itself which has ruled that man-made historical progress will always be limited and short-lived:

Un Tartare brisera peut-être, d'un seul coup de hache, cette statue de Voltaire que Pigalle n'aura pas achevée en dix ans: & nous travaillons encore pour l'immortalité, vains atomes poussés les uns par les autres dans la nuit d'où nous venons! Peuples artistes ou soldats, qu'êtes-vous entre les mains de la nature, que le jouet de ses loix, destinés tour-à-tour à mettre de la poussiere en œuvre, & cette œuvre en poussiere?¹⁹⁶

Ainsi cette fatalité qui bouleverse la terre, les mers, les empires, les nations, qui jette successivement sur tous les points du globe la lumiere des arts & les ténèbres de l'ignorance, qui transporte les hommes & les opinions, comme les vents & les courans poussent les productions marines sur les côtes ...¹⁹⁷

By conceiving human beings as 'vains atomes poussés les uns par les autres', and by contending that human achievements only ever amount to temporarily putting dust into order – an order, which ultimately will be destroyed by nature herself - Diderot explicitly related history to his philosophy of nature as espoused most prominently in *La Rêve de d'Alembert*.¹⁹⁸ This view of nature is informed by a monistic materialism in which atoms themselves possess the potential for sensitivity and the capability of movement, and in which any organism is merely a temporary configuration of endless such atoms in random movement, and,

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 15, p. 311.

¹⁹⁵ The cyclical nature of Diderot's philosophy of history has also been stressed by Hope Mason, 'Materialism and History' and Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire*, esp. pp. 367-90. However, it has been overlooked by Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 4, chaps. 15-17 and Binoche, 'Diderot et Catherine II ou les deux histoires'.

¹⁹⁶ HDI, vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, p. 278.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., vol. 4, bk. 7, chap. 28, p. 63.

¹⁹⁸ *La Rêve de d'Alembert*, Versini, vol. 1.

therefore, inevitably subject to dissolution.¹⁹⁹ In a celebrated passage, Diderot explained to d'Alembert the history of the latter's own life in purely materialistic terms: a history that starts with an infinite number of molecules scattered in the bodies of his father and mother, and proceeds via the sexual act which brings these molecules together into a new organism to the birth of d'Alembert. The mathematician's subsequent life was again conceived materialistically – eating, digesting and secreting – and the conclusion provides a neat summary of Diderot's conception of the cyclical nature of all organisms inevitably moving from birth via a period of youthful growth to old age, decline, and death:

Et celui qui exposerait à l'Académie le progrès de la formation d'un homme ou d'un animal n'emploierait que des agents matériels dont les effets successifs seraient un être inerte, un être sentant, un être pensant, un être résolvant le problème de la précession des équinoxes, un être sublime, un être merveilleux, un être vieillissant, dépérissant, mourant, dissous et rendu à la terre végétale.²⁰⁰

Diderot explicitly denied that the kind of materialistic determinism that marked his conception of the physical and biological world could be directly applied to the realms of morality, politics or history, because the latter were held to be subject to the influences of particular circumstances which are hard to determine.²⁰¹ However, in the *Histoire des deux Indes*, he contended that if we neglect all fortuitous circumstances which may have moved history temporarily into an unnatural direction, we can detect similar cycles of birth and decay as in the material world:

On a dit qu'il y avoit deux mondes, le physique et le moral. Plus on aura d'étendue dans l'esprit et d'expérience, plus on sera convaincu qu'il n'y en a qu'un, le physique qui mene tout, lorsqu'il n'est pas contrarié par des causes fortuites, sans lesquelles on eût constamment remarqué le même enchaînement dans les événements moraux les plus surprenans ...²⁰²

Indeed, immediately following the paragraph just quoted, he provides us with an account of how all governments pass through a cyclical history. The ascending

¹⁹⁹ See also Hope Mason, 'Materialism and History', pp. 151-3.

²⁰⁰ *La Rêve de d'Alembert*, Versini, vol. 1, p. 614.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 620.

²⁰² HDI, vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, p. 41.

slope of the cycle describes a process that moves from simplicity to complexity and increasing levels of reciprocity, exemplified by the emergence of complex democratic, monarchical or aristocratic governments out of simple, primordial forms of patriarchal governance. However, ultimately, complexity and reciprocity will be destroyed, and the cycle inevitably ends in the most simple regime imaginable - despotism:

Malheureusement cet état de bonheur [as experienced during democratic rule] n'est que momentané. Par-tout les révolutions dans le gouvernement, se succèdent avec une rapidité qu'on a peine à suivre. Il y a peu de contrées qui ne les aient toutes essayées, & il n'en est aucune qui, avec le tems, n'acheve ce mouvement périodique. Toutes suivront plus ou moins souvent un cercle réglé de malheurs & de prospérités, de liberté & d'esclavage, de mœurs & de corruption, de lumière & d'ignorance, de grandeur & de faiblesse; toutes parcourront tous les points de ce funeste horizon. La loi de la nature, qui veut que toutes les sociétés gravitent vers le despotisme & la dissolution, que les empires naissent & meurent, ne sera suspendue pour aucune.²⁰³

For our present concerns this cyclical conception of the succession of forms of governments is highly informative in at least two respects. First, the descent of European countries into despotism is no longer explained through a history of mistakes or unfortunate circumstances, but an inevitable outcome of the continent's old age. Reflecting on Indian despotism Diderot wrote:

Il n'est point de nation qui, en se poliçant, ne perde de sa vertu, de son courage, de son amour pour l'indépendance; & il est tout simple que les peuples du midi de l'Asie, s'étant les premiers assemblés en société, aient été les premiers exposés au despotisme. Telle a été, depuis l'origine du monde, la marche de toutes les associations.²⁰⁴

There was little doubt in his mind that Europe, even if not as old and decrepit as India, had passed its point of maturity and entered old age. For instance, comparing Europe to Tahiti in the *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*, he remarked:

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 34, p. 108.

Le Tahitien touche à l'origine du monde, et l'Européen touche à sa vieillesse. L'intervalle qui le sépare de nous est plus grand que la distance de l'enfant qui naît à l'homme décrépité. Il n'entend rien à nos usages, à nos lois, ou il n'y voit que des entraves déguisées sous cent formes diverses, entraves qui ne peuvent qu'exciter l'indignation et le mépris d'un être en qui le sentiment de la liberté est le plus profond des sentiments.²⁰⁵

Second, when contemplating the cycle of forms of government, Diderot returned to a paradox that we have already encountered in his discussion on commerce: the gulf between the end to which an institution such as commerce should guide human beings, and its actual, tragic effects as demonstrated in history. Indeed, he detected exactly the same chasm in his discussion of the formation of society and government. He explained the establishment of society as the natural outcome of the physical weakness of isolated individuals in the encounter with nature. Threatened by wild beasts, natural catastrophes and subject to an uncertain and always limited supply of subsistence, human beings gather and form social associations in order to combine and multiply their strength, and, therefore, to increase their chances of attaining the ends nature has assigned to them: survival, propagation and, ultimately, attainment of happiness through an assured existence.²⁰⁶ Crucially, nature herself has provided human beings with the means by which association can be achieved: the physical similarity between human beings induces them to regard the suffering of their fellow creatures with compassion; a seed of sociability which is ultimately self-interested, but which, nevertheless, leads to social virtues and cohesion:

Ils [i.e. human beings] devoient la paix dont ils jouissoient, à cette pitié innée qui précède toute réflexion, & d'où découlent les vertus sociales. Cette douce compassion prend sa source dans l'organisation de l'homme, auquel il suffit de s'aimer lui-même pour haïr le mal de ses semblables.²⁰⁷

The establishment of government is, according to Diderot, secondary to the institution of society as it merely reflects the need to establish laws and the means to administer these laws once a human association has attained a certain degree of

²⁰⁵ *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*, PHI, p. 464.

²⁰⁶ HDI, vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 14, pp. 292-3; see also, *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 71, p. 544.

²⁰⁷ HDI, vol. 5, bk. 10, chap. 6, pp. 73-4.

complexity, and, therefore, the aims of government should be the same as those of society: to prolong life, to increase propagation and to ensure the happiness of the majority of citizens.²⁰⁸ However, as seen, all governments ultimately degenerate into despotism and the paradox between the natural aims and the actual outcomes of human institutions re-emerges with full force:

Vivre et peupler étant la destination de toutes les especes vivantes, il semble que la sociabilité ... devrait concourir à cette double fin de la nature, & que l'instinct qui le conduit à l'état social, devrait diriger nécessairement toutes les loix morales & politiques, au résultat d'une existence plus longue & plus heureuse pour la pluralité des hommes. Cependant, à ne considérer que l'effet, on diroit que toutes les sociétés n'ont pour principe ou pour suprême loi, que la *sûreté de la puissance dominante*. D'où vient ce contraste singulier entre la fin & les moyens, entre les loix de la nature & celles de la politique?²⁰⁹

We already know Diderot's answer to this persistent question: the natural propensity of everything that exists in the universe to degenerate and ultimately dissolve. When discussing the formation of societies, he expanded on this answer, thereby putting the relationship between man and nature into sharp focus.

Diderot conceived the establishment of society as a fight against nature. As already seen, we can undertake such a fight because we are naturally sociable which allows us to survive in a hostile natural environment by means of association and mutual assistance. However, if nature has thus endowed us with the means by which we can fight her effectively and carve out an assured and happy existence, she has not set any limits how far this fight should be taken. Thereby she has placed a seed of destruction within the very mechanism which should ensure our survival:

... c'est la nécessité de lutter contre l'ennemi commun, toujours subsistant, la nature, qui a rassemblé les hommes. Ils ont senti qu'ils luttèrent plus avantageusement avec des forces réunies qu'avec des forces séparées. Le mal est qu'ils ont passé le but. Ils ne sont pas contents de vaincre, ils ont voulu triompher; ils ne se sont pas

²⁰⁸ Ibid., vol. 8, bk. 18, chap. 42, p. 274.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., vol. 9, bk. 10, chap. 2, p. 40. Emphasis in original.

contentés de terrasser l'ennemi, ils ont voulu le fouler aux pieds; de là la multitude des besoins artificiels.²¹⁰

The reason why our institutions consistently fail lies in human beings' unlimited ambition, in their propensity not only to fight but to dominate, setting them on a historical course in which their institutions' ends gradually, but inevitably, get perverted. If society was instituted to attain subsistence and happiness for all, it historically manifests itself as a mechanism capable of generating unlimited *besoins artificiels* and thus *soif d'or, mauvais luxe*, unbridgeable social divisions and, ultimately, the dissolution of society itself. The same cycle could of course also be drawn for commerce which ends in *jalousie de commerce* and the concomitant will of one nation to be the only prosperous one, or, indeed, for government and its inevitable decline into despotism.

Crucially, Diderot considered man's unlimited ambitions as natural, and therefore unavoidable. Despite the fact that he at times invoked the ideal of a society which is half-savage and half-civilised – a society, in other words, which had successfully stopped its historical development at a point where all the benefits of association are present, but in which the destructive forces of limitless ambitions have not yet been generated²¹¹ - he fundamentally believed that instituting such a society by means of forcefully halting the historical process would involve doing violence to human nature itself:

Mais exiger que la raison nous persuade de rejeter ce que nous pourrions ajouter à ce que nous possédons, c'est contredire la nature, c'est anéantir peut-être les premiers principes de la sociabilité, c'est transformer l'univers en un vaste monastère, & les hommes en autant d'oiseux & tristes anachoretes. ...

... Comment fixer les limites du nécessaire, qui varie avec sa situation, ses connaissances & ses desirs? A peine eut-il simplifié par son industrie les moyens de se procurer la subsistance, qu'il employa le tems qu'il venoit de gagner, à étendre les bornes de ses facultés & le domaine de ses jouissances. De là naquirent tous les besoins factices. La découverte d'un nouveau genre de sensations excita le

²¹⁰ *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol 3, art. 71, p. 544.

²¹¹ See especially Diderot's description of the Inca civilisation of Peru, HDI, vol. 3, bk. 7, chap. 6, pp. 309-10. For the importance of this ideal of a half-savage and half-civilised society for Diderot's thought in general, see Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire*, pp. 459-63.

desir de les conserver, & la curiosité d'en imaginer d'une autre espèce. La perfection d'un art introduisit la connoissance de plusieurs.²¹²

An insistence that human activity and ambitions cannot – or in any case should not – be restricted can be found across most of Diderot's late writings. Diderot thus not only called into question his own ideal of a half-savage and half-civilised society, but also took issue with all those contemporary writers, who, worried by the contemporary state of Europe, advocated a curbing of its civilisation's progress, or a fundamental alteration in the mechanisms by which it operates. Indeed, Diderot's defence of human beings' tragic, because ultimately self-defeating, drive to dominate nature and thereby to continuously improve their material condition and their cultural achievements went hand-in-hand with arguments directed against Rousseau's criticism of luxury and artificiality, the physiocrats' depreciation of modern, global commerce, and Helvétius whom Diderot understands as having argued in favour of a mediocre civilisation, similar to his own idea of a society which is half-savage and half-civilised.²¹³ The objections directed against the latter's ideal are highly instructive, as they lead us back to the inevitability of historical decline and dissolution, and give us an indication of the considerable extent to which Diderot's conception of cyclical history imposed clear limits on what can be achieved by politics:

Helvétius a placé le bonheur de l'homme social dans la médiocrité; et je crois qu'il y a pareillement un terme dans la civilisation, un terme plus conforme à la félicité de l'homme en général, et bien moins éloigné de la condition sauvage qu'on ne l'imagine; mais comment y revenir, quand on s'en est écarté, comment y rester, quand on y serait? Je l'ignore. Hélas! l'état social s'est peut-être acheminé à cette perfection funeste dont nous jouissons, presque aussi nécessairement que les cheveux blancs nous couronnent dans la vieillesse.²¹⁴

Clearly, according to Diderot, history can neither be arrested nor undone by politics. Once a civilisation has ascended beyond its climax on the historical cycle and starts its descent, the only political strategy left is pragmatic and severely

²¹² HDI, vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 33, pp. 96-7.

²¹³ See especially, *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 73, pp. 544-6; art. 97, pp. 554-6; art. 130, pp. 569-71; and *Réfutation d'Helvétius*, Versini, vol. 1, pp. 901-3.

²¹⁴ *Réfutation d'Helvétius*, Versini, vol. 1, p. 903.

limited. Despite the urgency with which he painted the ills and misfortunes of modern Europe, his concrete political proposals for reform are restricted to attempts to mitigate the worst effects of Europe's illness and to shore up, as far as this is possible, the continent's remaining defences against the fall. In the case of France, for instance, he was far from advocating a violent, political revolution, as has sometimes been claimed,²¹⁵ but attempted to convince the country's new monarch, Louis XVI, to curb public expenses, continue the reform of the country's feudal tax system, and to stop the nation's slide toward despotism by reconvening the estates general in an attempt to arrive at a new constitutional settlement.²¹⁶

The limitations history imposes on politics are put into even sharper focus in Diderot's support for the continuation of European trade with the East Indies, even if such a trade can only be undertaken by means of monopoly companies. As a matter of principle, he was of course opposed to all trade monopolies as they always imply a weakening of commerce's potential to freely create multiple and mutually beneficial ties of reciprocity and, as such, are always a dangerous first step into the direction of *jalousie de commerce*.²¹⁷ However, surveying the present state of Europe, both Raynal and Diderot were convinced that a completely free trade with India was not possible – mainly because of the high risks and costs involved in this trade, preventing free, private merchants from ever being able to amass the necessary capital to undertake it.²¹⁸ In Diderot's final analysis monopolistic trade with India was an inevitable evil, because Europeans had become accustomed to the consumption of Asian luxury goods to such an extent that to prevent importation and hence consumption of such goods would involve erecting unnatural limits to the needs of the continent's population; needs, which through a long historical process of increasing satisfaction had themselves become

²¹⁵ See, for instance, Bénot, *Diderot, de l'athéisme à l'anticolonialisme*, esp. pp. 172-8, 256-8. Likewise, Strugnell argues that the contributions to the final edition of the HDI indicate that Diderot had given up any hope in political reformism in the late 1770s and had transformed himself into the 'first effective advocate in the modern world of social and political reconstruction through violent revolution'; see Strugnell, *Diderot's Politics*, p. 228.

²¹⁶ See, HDI, vol. 2, bk. 4, chap. 18, pp. 162-9. For a similar argument, see also Hope Mason, 'Materialism and History', pp. 153-5.

²¹⁷ For instance, HDI, vol. 2, bk. 3, chap. 41, pp. 77-9.

²¹⁸ In the *Histoire des deux Indes* this argument was made by Raynal; see HDI, vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 35, pp. 121-35. Diderot, however, repeated it in his *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 95, p. 553.

naturalised.²¹⁹ Of course there is scope to partially reform this trade – such as allowing private merchants to trade alongside monopoly companies as suggested by Raynal – but to root it out altogether would be an act of violence directed against both history and nature.

If Diderot was profoundly pessimistic about the likely future of Europe, and could not conceive of a politics that could reverse its decline, this of course did not imply that the history of mankind was on the wane as a whole, or that a politics going beyond damage limitation was impossible by definition. On the contrary, he was capable of considerable optimism when comparing young, emerging societies ready to start their historical cycle with old and terminally ill Europe. One such society was formed by the American colonies that were declaring their independence from England when Diderot wrote his final contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes*. His advice to the colonists shows his hope that new civilisations will emerge from the ruins left by fallen Europe:

Peuples de l'Amérique septentrionale, que l'exemple de toutes les nations qui vous ont précédés, & sur-tout que celui de la mere-patrie vous instruisse. Craignez l'affluence de l'or, qui apporte avec le luxe la corruption des mœurs, le mépris des loix; craignez une trop inégale répartition des richesses, qui montre un petit nombre de citoyens opulens & une multitude de citoyens dans la misere; d'où naissent l'insolence des uns & l'avilissement des autres. Garantissez-vous de l'esprit de conquête. ... Faites prospérer les sciences & les arts, qui distinguent l'homme policé de l'homme sauvage. Sur-tout, veillez à l'éducation de vos enfans. ... Partout où l'on voit la jeunesse se dépraver, la nation est sur son déclin. Que la liberté ait une base inébranlable dans la sagesse de vos constitutions, & qu'elle soit l'indestructible ciment qui lie vos provinces entr'elles.

...

Puisse ce vœu s'accomplir, & consoler la génération expirante, par l'espoir d'une meilleure!²²⁰

We shall see in the next section that Russia was another, if more ambivalent, example of such a young, emerging civilisation, that should, just like the American colonies, learn from the historical examples provided by the decline of Europe.

²¹⁹ HDI, vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 33, pp. 95-8.

²²⁰ Ibid., vol. 9, bk. 18, chap. 52, p. 26.

The present and future of Russia: From the hope of a new beginning to terminal despair

Unlike Voltaire, who had written about Russia and Russian history throughout most of his career, Diderot only developed an interest in the country relatively late in his life. His main writings on Russia – the *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, the *Observations sur le Nakaz*, the *Plan d'une université*,²²¹ as well as the fragments dealing with Russia destined for *Histoire des deux Indes*²²² – were all composed between ca. 1770 and 1780. This late curiosity about Russia was undoubtedly kindled by one landmark event. In 1765 Catherine II, who had ascended to the Russian throne three years earlier, bought his considerable library and thereby became his principal benefactor. With the *Encyclopédie* accomplished and in need of money in order to pay for his daughter's dowry, Diderot had for some time been looking for a buyer for his book collection, and the conditions offered by Catherine were extremely favourable: apart from paying a large sum upfront for the library itself, she also left him in possession of his books until the end of his life, and, additionally, granted him an annual lifetime stipend. Diderot, grateful for this generosity, resolved in 1766 to undertake a trip to St. Petersburg to personally show his gratitude to his imperial benefactor. However, citing an array of personal and health problems, he kept on postponing the journey until June 1773, when he finally embarked onto his Russian journey. He arrived in St. Petersburg on 8 October 1773 and stayed there until March 1774.²²³

²²¹ These three works will be quoted according to the Versini edition of Diderot's work; see Versini, vol. 3.

²²² There exist two substantial pieces of text on Russia in the final (1780) edition of the *Histoire des deux Indes*, which have been firmly attributed to Diderot by Duchet. One, entitled 'Sur la Russie' in the Fonds Vandeul, was first introduced into the second (1774) edition of the *Histoire* and its text was slightly altered in the final (1780) edition (see HDI, vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 23, pp. 46-54); the second was only introduced into the final (1780) edition (see HDI, vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, pp. 52-8). However, there already exists a passage on Russia in the first (1770) edition which was replaced in subsequent editions by Diderot's fragments 'Sur la Russie' (see HDI-70, vol. 2, bk. 5, pp. 204-5). Whilst the Fonds Vandeul does not provide direct evidence about the authorship of this passage, Goggi has convincingly argued that it was written by Diderot himself. See Goggi, 'Diderot et la Russie', pp. 100-2. Given that the main arguments of this passage – criticism of Peter's attempt to civilise Russia, the need to establish a third estate in Russia and to move the capital from the periphery of the empire to the centre – are repeated across all of Diderot's subsequent writings on Russia, this attribution seems very likely, and, following Goggi, I will assume that this passage was indeed written by Diderot.

²²³ For an account of Catherine and Diderot's relationship in general, see von Mohrenschildt, *Russia in the Intellectual Life of Eighteenth-Century France*, pp. 74-83.

While in the Russian capital, Diderot had frequent personal meetings with Catherine during which they discussed a wide range of philosophical, political, historical, economic and cultural subjects. Before every meeting, Diderot suggested a topic of conversation and wrote up his reflections on their discussions afterwards. Before his departure from Russia, he handed a manuscript copy of these reflections to Catherine. This manuscript was first published in the Assézat-Tourneux edition of Diderot's work in 1899 under the title *Diderot et Catherine II*, and has since been republished several times under the title *Mélanges philosophiques, historiques, etc., pour Catherine II*. Whilst the *Mélanges pour Catherine II* were in their origin conversations, the work's only voice is in fact the one of the *philosophe*: indeed, taken as a whole, they can be considered as his critical commentary on Catherine's wide-ranging reform project to modernise and civilise Russia.

Although the *Mélanges pour Catherine* is thus without doubt Diderot's central text on Russia, it is by no means the only product of his visit to St. Petersburg. Whilst staying in Holland during his return journey back to France in spring 1774, he composed the *Observations sur le Nakaz*. The *Nakaz* itself, or the *Instruction de l'impératrice de Russie aux députés pour la confection des lois* to give it its full French title, was written by Catherine and published in 1767, and was to serve as a basis for a completely new code of law to be established throughout the Empire.²²⁴ Catherine conceived her instructions as broad guidelines for the All-Russian Legislative Commission – first convened in 1767, but indefinitely suspended in 1769 after the outbreak of the Turkish-Russian war – composed of deputies from all of Russia's provinces and charged with drawing up the code.²²⁵ Already in the *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Diderot had singled out the establishment of a new law code and a new constitutional arrangement as the most pressing and important of Catherine's reform projects. A call to action repeated in the *Observations sur le Nakaz* where he commented on some 145 of the czarina's

²²⁴ Catherine composed her *Nakaz* in French and had the work translated into Russian, German and Latin. An English translation of the whole *Nakaz* was first published in 1931. See Empress of Russia Catherine, *Documents of Catherine the Great*, ed. W. F. Reddaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931).

²²⁵ For a good, general analysis of Catherine's *Nakaz* and of the workings of the Legislative Commission and its suspension, see de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*, chaps. 9-11.

526 articles, at times concurring with her guidelines, but more often than not, proposing alternatives and thereby advocating a legislative project considerably at odds with Catherine's. The *Observations sur le Nakaz* remained unpublished during Diderot's lifetime, but one manuscript was sent together with his library to Catherine posthumously. The czarina reacted unkindly to the *philosophe's* advice and probably had the manuscript destroyed.²²⁶

Shortly after his return to France Diderot also composed the *Plan d'une université*; a work commissioned by Catherine, and which, as the name implies, was conceived as a blueprint for a new university to be established in Russia.²²⁷ As such it was part of Catherine's considerable efforts to reform the Empire's education system: an effort which included the establishment of the Imperial Foundling Hospital in Moscow, the Smol'nyy Institute for Noble Girls, the Novodevich'ye Institute for Girls of the Third Estate as well as the reform of the Corps des Cadets originally founded by czarina Elisabeth. Diderot had already commented on the importance of these educational reforms in the *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, and, apart from writing the *Plan d'une université*, also helped Catherine to publish the French translation of General Betsky's *Système complet d'éducation publique, physique et morale, pour l'un & l'autre sexe, & pour les diverses conditions*, which provided in detail documentation about all Catherine's educational establishments.²²⁸

Modern scholarship has often severely criticised Diderot's wrings on Russia, and the circumstances of their composition – i.e. his sense of obligation to show gratitude to Catherine which sparked the trip to St. Petersburg - is typically seen

²²⁶ See Versini, vol. 3, pp. 503-5. Fortunately, four other manuscript copies of Diderot's *Observations sur le Nakaz* were preserved in the Fonds Vandeul.

²²⁷ On the origin of the *Plan d'une université*, see Roland Mortier, 'L'instruction publique. Des Mélanges pour Catherine II au Plan d'une université', in *L'édition du dernier Diderot. Pour un Diderot électronique*, ed. Gianluigi Goggi and Didier Kahn (Paris: Hermann, 2007).

²²⁸ M. Betsky, *Système complet d'éducation publique, physique et morale, pour l'un & l'autre sexe, & pour les diverses conditions. Exécutés dans les différens établissemens ordonnés par Sa Majesté Impériale Catherine II, pour l'éducation de la jeunesse, & l'utilité de son empire*, ed. D**** [i.e. Denis Diderot], trans. M. Clerc (Neuchâtel: De l'Imprimerie de la Société Typographique, 1777). For a good overview of Catherine's educational reforms, see also de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*, chap. 31.

as the prime reason for their perceived inadequacies.²²⁹ For Lortholary, for instance, the voyage to Russia is nothing other than a pilgrimage of the *philosophe* to his benefactor, in which Diderot, prostrating himself before Catherine, plays the unsuitable role of the courtier.²³⁰ According to this reading, the *Mélanges pour Catherine II* suffer from a double defect. On the one hand, it is alleged, none of the work's reflections are based upon any understanding of Russian history, society and culture, in which Diderot apparently had no interest, but are instead fantastic and naïve daydreams amounting to a rational project of civilisation which is to be implemented by the enlightened despot Catherine.²³¹ However, apart from betraying a naïve optimism about the means by which Russia could become civilised, Diderot's writings on Russia are also said to reveal his dishonesty. Indeed, whilst in Russia the committed anti-despot apparently conveniently forgot his political principles. Therefore, his praise for Catherine and his optimism that her programme of reform could genuinely advance Russia are not to be regarded as expressing his true opinions, but are simply the deceitful flattery of the courtier. A courtier who took on the mantle of the critical *philosophe* again as soon as he reached Holland, and was able to express his true feelings in the unpublished *Observations sur le Nakaz*; a work, in which Catherine is criticised and in which a historically and politically uninformed optimism about Russia's future is allegedly turned into an equally ignorant pessimism.²³²

It is beyond doubt that Diderot's attitude towards Russia shifted from the *Mélanges pour Catherine II* to the *Observations sur le Nakaz*, and from his early contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes* to the later ones. But the reason for this shift is not primarily to be found in a disenchantment with Catherine or in the anti-despotic *philosophe* getting the better of the base courtier. We will see that the writings on Russia are highly ambivalent as a whole, and that the shift from relative optimism to pessimism is caused by Diderot's cyclical conception of history; or, more precisely, by his inability to ever firmly determine the position of late 18th-century Russia within the historical cycle.

²²⁹ For a general outline of the hostile reception of Diderot's Russian writings see also Dulac, 'Diderot et la "civilisation" de la Russie', pp. 161-2.

²³⁰ Lortholary, *Le mirage russe*, chap. 3.2.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-7. For a similar argument see also Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, pp. 223-32.

²³² Lortholary, *Le mirage russe*, esp. pp. 231-6.

A first indication that Diderot's reflections on Russia are intimately bound up with his conception of history is provided by the fact that his first substantial writing on the country was undertaken as a contribution to the first edition of the *Histoire des deux Indes*.²³³ Significantly, he therein engaged with one of the principal historiographical problems that Russia posed to enlightened historians: the question whether Peter I had managed to civilise his Empire and align its history with that of modern Europe. We know the answer Voltaire gave to this question, and Diderot, without ever making direct reference to the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, clearly disagreed with its argument by insisting that Peter's reform project had been both ill conceived and, ultimately, utterly unsuccessful:

L'enthousiasme qu'on a conçu, qu'on a dû concevoir pour Pierre le Grand, a accoutumé l'Europe à se former de son empire une opinion exagérée. Les bons observateurs qui cherchent les résultats dans les faits, n'ont pas tardé à démêler au travers de tant de brillantes erreurs que ces vastes contrées étoient sans loix, sans liberté, sans richesses, sans population & sans industrie. Ils ont été plus loin. Ils ont osé affirmer qu'on n'établirait jamais une police, des mœurs, un gouvernement dans ces déserts, sans rapprocher les peuples les uns des autres.²³⁴

The most important reform Peter should have undertaken in order to strengthen the social ties within the Russian population and to genuinely advance the building of a rich civilisation, but failed to do, would have been the emancipation of the crown serfs. Diderot continued that a wise sovereign of Russia would

rompra les fers des esclaves de la couronne, & invitera, forcera s'il le faut, la noblesse à suivre cet exemple. On verra sortir de cet arrangement un tiers état sans lequel in n'y eût jamais chez aucun peuple ni arts, ni lumieres, ni liberté. Les Russes qu'on a voulu rendre précipitamment Allemands, Anglois, François, ne seront plus étrangers dans leur patrie. Ils seront Russes & auront un caractere national, mais différent de celui qu'ils avoient.²³⁵

Whilst Voltaire's eulogy of Peter as the builder of Russia's civilisation is undoubtedly the main target of the insistence that post-Petrine Russia was without

²³³ See footnote 222 above for the attribution of this text to Diderot.

²³⁴ HDI-70, vol. 2, bk. 5, p. 204.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 205.

laws, liberty, riches, population and industry, the above quote also engages with a passage of Rousseau's *Du contrat social*. In this passage Rousseau completely ridiculed Voltaire's notion of Peter as a great legislator or as a builder of a new civilisation. On the contrary, Rousseau insisted, Peter by simply imitating modern Europe had prevented Russia from ever becoming civilised:

Les Russes ne seront jamais vraiment policés, parce qu'ils l'ont été trop tôt. Pierre avoit le génie imitatif; il n'avoit pas le vrai génie, celui qui crée et fait tout de rien. Quelques unes des choses qu'il fit étoient bien, la plupart étoient déplacées. Il a vu que son peuple étoit barbare, il n'a point vu qu'il n'étoit pas mûr pour la police; il l'a voulu civiliser quand il ne falloit que l'agguerrir [sic.]. Il a d'abord voulu faire des Allemands, des Anglois, quand il falloit commencer par faire des Russes; il a empêché ses sujets de jamais devenir ce qu'ils pourroient être, en leur persuadant qu'ils étoient ce qu'ils ne sont pas. ... L'Empire de Russie voudra subjuguier l'Europe et sera subjugué lui-même. Les Tartares ses sujets ou ses voisins deviendront ses maitres et les notres: Cette révolution me paroît infaillible.²³⁶

Diderot's claim that Peter was wrong to attempt to prematurely create 'Allemands, Anglois, François' rather than Russians seems of course strikingly close to Rousseau's argument just quoted. However, it would be wrong to consider Diderot siding with the *citoyen de Genève* against the *patriarch de Ferney*, as his arguably most important claim is directed against both fellow *philosophes*. As seen, his principal point was that Russia simply did not change much during Peter's reign – it remained a desert without laws, liberty, riches, industry, mores and government despite the czar's reform programme – whereas Voltaire and Rousseau both believed that Peter had fundamentally altered the face of his empire, but presented this alteration in a completely different light. According to the former, the czar had successfully propelled his country into the orbit of European civilisation and provided Russian history with a progressive turn leading to increased strength and riches. For the latter, however, Peter had thus simply pushed Russia into a state of general decadence that also marked Europe – a decadence which will ultimately end through a barbarian invasion and the concomitant extinction of both Russia and Europe.²³⁷

²³⁶ *Du contrat social*, see Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, bk. 2, chap. 8, p. 386.

²³⁷ The fact that both Voltaire and Rousseau agreed on the efficacy of Peter's reform has also been stressed by Wilberger, *Peter the Great*, p. 52. Goggi, moreover, makes a very similar argument

Moreover, Diderot essentially agreed with Voltaire, in a way that Rousseau of course never did, that Peter was right to attempt to create the kind of civilisation that Europe possessed; a civilisation marked by riches, luxury and the cultivation of the sciences and the fine arts. The fundamental disagreement between the two thinkers only concerned the means employed by the czar to attain this end. Indeed, we shall see that Diderot's writing on Russia as a whole reveal that the problem was not that the czar tried to create *Allemands, Anglois, François* – and all the things these people stood for – *per se*, but that he went about doing it in the wrong way.

In a fragment written for the second edition of the *Histoire des deux Indes*, Diderot repeated his attack on Peter by claiming that the latter simply did not know how to improve his country. Here the most pointed criticism pertains to the czar's attempt to civilise the Russians by either sending them to Europe for instruction or by inviting European teachers, scientists and artists into Russia. This project was doomed to fail from the start, because Russia was simply not yet historically ready to receive the most elevated fruits of European civilisation:

Ces jeunes gens [i.e. Russians returning home after their instruction in Europe], au retour de leur voyage, seront forcés d'abandonner leur talent, pour se jeter dans des conditions subalternes qui les nourrissent. En tout, il faut commencer par le commencement, & le commencement est de mettre en vigueur les arts mécaniques & les classes basses. Sachez cultiver la terre, travailler des peaux, fabriquer des laines; & vous verrez s'élever rapidement des familles riches. De leur sein sortiront des enfans qui, dégoûtés de la profession pénible de leurs peres, se mettront à penser, à discourir, à arranger des syllabes, à imiter la nature; & alors vous aurez des poètes, des philosophes, des orateurs, des statuaires & des peintres. Leurs productions deviendront nécessaires aux hommes opulens, & ils les acheteront.²³⁸

According to Diderot, Peter committed two fundamental mistakes. First, he attempted to create a new Russia by introducing the chronologically latest achievements of European civilisation – the fine arts – without first creating the

about the relationship between Voltaire's, Rousseau's and Diderot's portrayal of Peter as is presented here. See Goggi, 'Diderot et le concept de civilisation', pp. 354-9.

²³⁸ HDI, vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 23, pp. 51-2. Exactly the same argument is repeated in the *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 42, pp. 330-2.

necessary economic and social infrastructure – the useful arts and agriculture – without which these achievements can never survive and flourish. But the insistence that one must *commencer par le commencement* also implies a criticism of Peter’s means of reform, which Voltaire of course celebrated. Diderot, by contrast, denied that the sovereign will would be enough to rapidly set a whole country on the historical journey towards civilisation. Instead, he affirmed that any civilisation must be based on the activity of the ‘classes basses’, and be carried and moved forward by the nation as a whole.

However, this does not imply that a sovereign cannot support the birth, and accelerate the progress, of a civilisation. We have seen that Diderot did not believe that politics can stop or undo history; but he did claim that political action can kick-start the historical process. In fact one key aim of his writings on Russia was to show Catherine how to genuinely put Russia onto the historical path of civilisation. And yet, any well-conceived project of civilisation has to follow certain parameters which must not be overridden by the sovereign, and Catherine was frequently reminded of the most important one:

Suivez la marche constante de la nature; aussi bien cherchez-vous inutilement à vous en écarter. Vous verrez vos efforts & vos dépenses s'épuiser sans fruit; vous verrez tout périr autour de vous; vous vous retrouverez ²³⁹presqu'au même point de barbarie dont vous avez voulu vous tirer ...

Unsurprisingly, given Diderot’s philosophy of history, to the extent that the sovereign will is effective in its attempt to civilise, it must be regulated by an understanding of nature. Therefore, it is of course of utmost importance for Catherine to first establish the exact position of Russia within the historical cycle, which is itself only a consequence of *la marche constante de la nature*, before formulating an appropriate programme of reform. As shown above, Diderot believed that the Russia Catherine had inherited was barbarian, and by this he meant a young country, that has not yet embarked on its journey up the ascending slope of the historical cycle. At times he even came close to suggest that Russia might be savage:

²³⁹ HDI, vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 23, p. 52.

il y a entre les deux nations [i.e. Russia and France] la différence d'un homme vigoureux et sauvage qui naît et d'un homme délicat et maniéré attaqué d'une maladie presque incurable.²⁴⁰

This is a surprising usage of terminology, as Diderot otherwise never used the word savage in a continental Eurasian context, but usually reserved it to denote the hunter-gatherer tribes of the Americas which he regarded as the most primitive forms of human association, and therefore as the closest possible approximation to a pure state of nature.²⁴¹ Whether savage or barbarian, Russia was, properly speaking, in a pre-, or at best, semi-social state, lacking firm social, economic and political ties of reciprocity which bind a nation together and in which members assist each other mutually by communicating their needs, wants and industry.²⁴²

Given the actual state of Russia, Catherine's task was to do what Peter never did: to start the civilising process at the beginning; that is to say to establish from scratch the political, social and economic infrastructure which stand at the very basis of any civilisation. Once this is accomplished, a history of progress can take place which will, in the first instance, inevitably lead to material well-being, luxury and the perfection of the fine arts, but which will, equally inevitably, ultimately also lead to decline and dissolution.

If Catherine's task seems immense, it is exactly the barbarity of her country that offers hope that she might succeed. Indeed, Diderot frequently invoked the notion that the sovereign of a youthful, emerging nation has opportunities for political intervention that simply do not exist in an old, declining one. In the *Histoire des deux Indes*, for instance, he remarked:

²⁴⁰ *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 12, p. 245.

²⁴¹ On Diderot's conception of American savagery, see HDI, bk. 17, chap. 4, pp. 21-7. For a general discussion on the usage of the terms 'savage' and 'barbarian' in the 18th century, see Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 4, chaps. 1, 9. On the etymology of both words more generally, Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), esp. chaps. 1-3.

²⁴² Throughout his writings on Russia Diderot stresses that it is precisely a lack of communication and exchanges between Russia's different provinces as well as between its citizens that keeps the empire in an uncivilised state. See, for instance, HDI, vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, p. 55; *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 7, p. 239, art. 11, p. 243, art. 37, pp. 325-6; *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 4, pp. 511-2.

Les grands hommes qui peuvent former & mûrir une nation naissante, ne sauroient rajeunir une nation vieillie & tombée.

...

Le fondateur s'adresse à un homme neuf, qui sent son malheur, dont la leçon continue le dispose à la docilité: il n'a qu'à présenter le visage & le caractère de la bienfaisance, pour se faire écouter, obéir & chérir; l'expérience journalière donne de la confiance en sa personne & de la force à ses conseils. On est bientôt forcé de lui reconnoître une grande supériorité des lumières. La condition du restaurateur d'une nation corrompue est bien différente. C'est un architecte qui se propose de bâtir sur une aire couverte de ruines. C'est un médecin qui tente la guérison d'un cadavre gangrené. C'est un sage qui prêche la réforme à des endurcis.²⁴³

Even though fundamental reform is impossible once the basic building blocks of a given society have become corrupted and the process towards ultimate dissolution has set in, deliberate political action can be effective in giving form to a new, emerging society. This idea of a *nation naissante* as a kind of *tabula rasa* on which the founder can be built without much interference from the ruins left by history is central to Diderot's writings on Russia. Taken as a whole, these texts can be seen as his advice to Catherine on how to plan and build solid foundations for a future Russian civilisation. They thereby amount to a general plan of how the historical passage from barbarism to civilisation can be accelerated through the political activity of an enlightened sovereign; a plan which is itself crucially dependent on three interrelated parts: legislation, education and colonisation.

Uppermost in Diderot's mind was the question of legislation, and he regarded the publication of the *Nakaz* and the concomitant establishment of the All-Russian Legislative Commission as one of Catherine's most important reforms. It is also when reflecting on the *Nakaz* that Diderot rendered the disjunction between the historical states of Russia and Europe explicit. Indeed, the first essay of the *Mélanges pour Catherine II* contained a short constitutional history of France, starting with Charlemagne and ending with the Maupeou coup and the country's descent into despotism.²⁴⁴ In the course of this history Diderot referred to a pamphlet entitled *Le parlement justifié par l'impératrice de Russie* written in

²⁴³ HDI, vol. 5, bk. 11, chap. 4, pp. 169-70. Very similar arguments are also set out in vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 14, p. 298 and vol. 7, bk. 15, chap. 12, p. 210.

²⁴⁴ *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 1, pp. 203-25.

1771 by André Blonde.²⁴⁵ Blonde's booklet is premised on the observation that just at the time when Maupeou was subverting France's moderate government through the destruction of the *parlements*, Russia followed an opposite policy by establishing institutions and laws designed to moderate the power of its despotic rulers.²⁴⁶ Blonde argued that Catherine's aim was to establish a government on the French model – in which her commission will ultimately act as a permanent intermediary body between the sovereign and the population just as the French *parlements* had been – and employed Catherine's *Nakaz* as a means to justify this model and thereby attack Maupeou.²⁴⁷ Diderot, however, whilst agreeing that France and Russia were travelling into very different historical directions, turned Blonde's thesis on its head: it is not France that should learn from Russia, but the other way round. The aim of his short history of the French *parlements* was to show to Catherine that they had been instituted on the wrong premises from the very beginning: the magistrates had always fatally depended on the monarch and had never enjoyed sufficient independence, and the totality of French laws were not based on any coherent plan of legislation but developed through a series of fortuitous historical accidents and as such were shot through with contradictions.²⁴⁸

The lesson of this history was of course that France is a model to be avoided rather than copied.²⁴⁹ When reflecting on the Maupeou coup, Diderot reiterated his conviction that any constitutional arrangement will ultimately be destroyed and that the fall into despotism is unavoidable on the one hand, but at the same time also reminded Catherine that she could delay the fall for centuries, if she was willing to learn the lessons provided by French history:

²⁴⁵ André Blonde, *Le parlement justifié par l'impératrice de Russie, ou lettre à M*** dans laquelle on répond aux différents écrits que M. Le Ch[ancelier, i.e. R. N. C. A. de Maupeou] fait distribuer dans Paris* (n.p: n.d.). For Diderot's discussion of Blonde, see *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 1, p. 224-5, *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art.15, p. 519.

²⁴⁶ Blonde, *Le parlement justifié par l'impératrice de Russie*, pp. 69-70: 'Comparez, Monsieur, la conduite du Chancelier avec celle de la Czarinne. Cette auguste Princesse a rassemblé des Députés de toutes les villes de son vaste Empire; elle leur a dit: mes enfants, pesez avec moi l'intérêt de la Nation; formons ensemble un Corps des Loix qui établisse solidement la félicité publique.'

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-17

²⁴⁸ *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol 3, art. 1, pp. 203-27.

²⁴⁹ Binoch has equally stressed that Diderot employed his account of French constitutional history as a counter-model to what Catherine II should attempt to achieve in Russia; see Binoche, 'Diderot et Catherine II ou les deux histoires', pp. 151-2.

Je présente à Votre Majesté un spectacle grand, mais affligeant; que son âme tendre et humaine en soit touchée, mais non découragée. Cependant il a fallu des siècles pour amener notre instant fatal [i.e. the Maupeou coup d'état]; et cet instant pouvait être retardé par des lois et des institutions sages, si nous en avions eu. Songez, madame, que je vous présente l'éboulement d'un grand amas de grains de sable que des circonstances fortuites avaient entassés, au lieu qu'il dépend de Votre Majesté de placer la base de votre pyramide sur le roc, et d'en lier les différentes parties par des crampons de fer. Le roc s'affaisse, il est vrai, les crampons de fer se relâchent, les pierres se disjoignent, et l'édifice s'écroule à la longue; mais il a duré cent siècles; cent siècles d'un bonheur continu et procuré par les travaux et le génie étonnant de Votre Majesté ...²⁵⁰

If ultimate dissolution of all human institutions is inevitable, we can nevertheless erect defences against the natural tendency towards destruction, by taking serious the lessons offered by past experience when undertaking the construction of new edifices. And Diderot duly provided Catherine with an outline of the most important steps she must take, if her legislative edifice is to be rationally erected on stone, rather than on a fortuitously ordered heap of sand, as had been the case in France.

The most urgent task prescribed by Diderot was for Catherine to give up her unlimited political power by fundamentally re-conceiving the function of the All-Russian Legislative Commission. Rather than instituting the commission as a mere trustee of the laws, charged with communicating the sovereign will to the people at large and invested with only limited powers to make representations against sovereign edicts, Diderot wanted Catherine to recognise that her authority ultimately derives its legitimacy from popular consent and to consider the commission as the embodiment of the general will of the nation.²⁵¹ As such, it would be invested with legitimacy entirely independent of the czar, and be the centrepiece of a constitutional arrangement in which the latter's powers are subject to limits which are to be prescribed in the land's fundamental laws and to

²⁵⁰ *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, p. 217. For the same argument see also *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 15, pp. 519-20.

²⁵¹ *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 9, p. 516: 'Il me semble que c'est le consentement de la nation, représentée par des députés ou assemblée en corps, qui est la source de tout pouvoir politique et civil.'

be guarded by the commission itself.²⁵² Whilst Diderot was not particularly prescriptive about the precise limits of sovereign authority, nor indeed about how exactly the commission should be constituted in order to be able to express the general will of the nation, the ultimate aim of such a constitution was clear: ‘d’élèver contre le despotisme à venir une autorité insurmontable.’²⁵³

By permanently alienating a part of her authority to the commission, Catherine would establish an entirely new kind of relationship between the Russian czars and their subjects. Russia would henceforward possess a political system in which not the will of the ruler but the one of the nation as represented by the commission would constitute the supreme guiding principle, and in which constant communication between nation and rulers would replace the top-down imposition of the sovereign will:

Qu’au lieu que notre Parlement enregistrât les volontés du souverain, il faudrait au contraire que ce fût le souverain qui enregistrât les représentations de la commission. Nos magistrats disaient: Nous voulons aussi ce que le roi veut; c’est Votre Majesté et ses successeurs qui diront: Nous acquiesçons aussi à ce que notre nation nous demande par la voie de notre commission; ce qui est fort différent.²⁵⁴

In this way the commission would ensure that the kind of excessive voluntarism which Diderot deplored in Peter’s reign could no longer be practical in the future – it would henceforward be the citizens themselves, having consulted one another about their needs and desires, who would give direction to Russia’s future.²⁵⁵ Moreover, if Catherine succeeded in establishing the commission on as solid a basis as is possible, it would constitute the best guarantee available that the true ends that should inform any association would not get as easily perverted in Russia as they had been in France: future Russian governments would, in other words, have the happiness and well-being of the population as a whole as their guiding principle rather than the security of the dominant power.

²⁵² *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 1, p. 207; *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 11, pp. 516-7.

²⁵³ *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 1, p. 208.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, art. 24, p. 280.

²⁵⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 274; *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 1, pp. 507-8, art. 14, p. 518.

And yet, Diderot was in no doubt that at present it was above all Catherine, rather than the commission, who had to take the initiative in order to create the legal code that was thus far lacking. Despite the fact that he frequently invoked the notion that the commission should be a truly legislative body,²⁵⁶ he nevertheless was convinced that the first legislator of Russia had to be Catherine herself.²⁵⁷ The general vision that emerges from the pages of the *Mélanges pour Catherine II* and the *Observations sur le Nakaz* is one of Catherine as the first and last enlightened despot of Russia. A despot, who in a single act establishes a new code of law, which is merely to be revised and approved by the commission, and, at the same time, destroys for good the very basis of Russian despotism by permanently giving away a substantial part of her authority.²⁵⁸ The reason for this somewhat paradoxical vision is, of course, that Diderot believed Russia to be utterly barbarian and as such incapable of formulating the kind of coherent code of law needed.²⁵⁹ Therefore, the country needs the guidance of enlightened Catherine and, by implication, of Diderot himself. However, by lifting Russia out of its barbarian youthfulness through her legislative project in particular, and her reform programme as whole in general, the czarina would, Diderot hoped, bring her subjects to a point of maturity which allows – indeed demands – a considerable reduction of parental guidance.

The main principles which Diderot urged Catherine to follow are unsurprising: the new code should ensure the equality of all citizen before the law, and consequently abolish all legal preferences due to rank;²⁶⁰ guarantee the right to, and security of, property for everyone;²⁶¹ establish liberty of profession and freedom of trade;²⁶² and institute a regime of law and fair, because equal,

²⁵⁶ *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 1, p. 507: ‘Il n’y a point de vrai souverain que la nation; il ne peut y avoir de vrai législateur que le peuple...’.

²⁵⁷ See, for instance, *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 24, p. 279.

²⁵⁸ *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 7, p. 515: ‘L’action héroïque d’un bon despote, c’est de lier un bras à son successeur; et c’était là la première question à proposer à la commission.’

²⁵⁹ Diderot frequently claimed that Catherine lacked all indigenous support for her reform programme. See, for instance, *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 15, p. 252.

²⁶⁰ *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 20, pp. 521-3; art. 42, pp. 529-30. *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 11, pp. 243-4.

²⁶¹ *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, arts. 76 and 78, pp. 546-7.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, arts. 92, 95, pp. 552-3 (free trade); art. 116, p. 562 (against all guilds); *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 56, pp. 357-8 (general freedom of profession).

taxation.²⁶³ One effect of Diderot's proposed code would of course be the legal abolition of serfdom,²⁶⁴ and thereby achieve what Peter never attempted. More generally, it would be a first important step towards the building of a civilisation *par le commencement* as it would create a legal, social and economic framework designed to foster the flourishing of agriculture and the mechanical arts by removing barriers to increased economic activity.²⁶⁵ As such it would, over time, help to generate the level of general prosperity needed for luxury the fine arts and sciences to develop.

However, Diderot never believed that a purely legalistic approach would be sufficient to lead Russia onto the road of civilisation. In his opinion the Empire not only lacked an adequate constitutional framework that guaranteed legal equality between all citizens and established institutions designed to moderate the exercise of sovereign power, but also an array of wider mechanisms that enabled social mobility and economic improvement. According to Diderot, one promising way to establish such mechanisms is through tightly regulated state education, and, therefore his repeated calls to Catherine to continue and widen her educational reform programme. Indeed, in the *Plan d'une université* he contended that '[i]nstruire une nation, c'est la civiliser',²⁶⁶ and elsewhere predicted that if the czarina would establish as good educational establishments for boys and she had done for girls,²⁶⁷ she could 'abrégé des trois quarts l'attente de la révolution dans les mœurs' in Russia.²⁶⁸ Again, the historic situation of the Empire was seen as being highly promising for a successful educational drive:

Je me contenterai d'observer ici que le moment où Sa Majesté Impériale forme le projet d'une université est très favorable. ... La futilité des études scolastiques est reconnue. La fureur systématique est tombée. Il n'est plus question ni d'aristotélisme, ni de cartésianisme, ni de malebranchisme, ni de leibnizianisme. ... Les connaissances en tout genre ont été portées à un très haut degré de perfection. Point de vieilles institutions qui s'opposent à ses vues. Elle

²⁶³ *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 109, pp. 560-1 and arts. 131-2, pp. 571-2.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, art. 80, p. 547.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 87, pp. 549-50; art. 145, p. 578.

²⁶⁶ *Plan d'une université*, Versini, vol. 3, p. 415.

²⁶⁷ A reference to the Smol'nyy Institute for Noble Girls and the Novodevich'ye Institut for Girls of the Third Estate; establishments founded by Catherine and greatly admired by Diderot.

²⁶⁸ *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 12, p. 245.

a devant elle un champ vaste, un espace libre de tout obstacle sur lequel elle peut édifier à son gré. Je ne la flatte point; je parle avec sincérité, lorsque j'assure que sous ce point de vue sa position est plus avantageuse que la nôtre.²⁶⁹

As with its legislation, the future of Russia's educational establishments is bright because the mistakes committed in their European counterparts can be avoided by their enlightened institutor Catherine on the one hand, and because Russia is a *tabula rasa* with no old, rooted institutions on the other.

The broad guidelines Diderot advocated for the reform of Russia's education system again emphasise the main concerns we have already encountered in his contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes*: the natural propensity of moderate governments to default into despotism, the need of building a new civilisation *par le commencement*, and the necessity to promote merit, rather than riches, as the only appropriate vehicle for social advancement.

Accordingly, the first aim of education has to be the forming of good, because politically aware, citizens. In order to achieve this aim, the inculcation of the nation's fundamental laws as expressed in its legal code and guarded by commission, must constitute a fundamental part of the syllabus at all levels of schooling.²⁷⁰ This would not only foster the development of a reliable, because law-abiding, population, but also erect yet another barrier against the dissolution of moderate government into despotism, because citizens aware of their rights and duties will ever keep a watchful eye on the activities of their sovereign.²⁷¹

Apart from instructing citizens, education must also develop a workforce equipped with the necessary skills to accelerate Russia's economic development.²⁷² For this purpose, Diderot proposed in his *Plan d'une université* a syllabus with eight subsequent classes moving from the economically most useful fields of knowledge, such as arithmetic, algebra and calculus to the more obscure ones: most particularly, Greek, Latin, eloquence and poetry. Crucially, the plan

²⁶⁹ *Plan d'une université*, Versini, vol. 3, p. 425.

²⁷⁰ *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 25, p. 289.

²⁷¹ *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 13, p. 518.

²⁷² *Plan d'une université*, Versini, vol. 3, p. 421.

stipulates that only a very small minority of pupils progress through all eight stages before entering the three higher faculties – medicine, jurisprudence, theology - responsible for creating highly skilled specialists. The large majority of pupils are obliged to leave the university as soon as they have acquired all the essential knowledge needed for their future metier.²⁷³ The principal aim of this syllabus is, of course, to start the civilising process *par le commencement*. It is not poets, orators and philosophers that the country needs, but a large pool of adequately skilled workers, artisans and merchants; the classes, in other words, that form the vital substructure of any civilisation.²⁷⁴

Education, finally, must lead to increased emulation, and the principle to which all of Catherine's establishments should adhere is that of competition. By granting stipends on a competitive basis and by instituting frequent public exams in which the best pupils are to be praised, and the worst shamed, these establishments should firmly inculcate the norms of industriousness and merit as the only appropriate vehicles for social advancement across the Empire's emerging population.²⁷⁵ If successfully implemented this will lead to a future flowering of talent and achievements in all possible fields by creating a socially mobile and economically active third estate.²⁷⁶ Moreover, the consistent promotion of such norms will of course also create a solid barrier against future *soif d'or* and its pernicious effects once Russia has developed material wealth and a taste of luxury.²⁷⁷

If legislation and education are thus the most promising mechanisms Catherine can employ to accelerate, and create a solid basis for, the process of civilisation in Russia, Diderot additionally proposed a programme of colonisation. This programme is to be designed in such a way as to gradually bring progress to Russia's far-flung provinces:

²⁷³ Ibid., pp. 423-6.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 427, 486-7.

²⁷⁵ See, for instance, *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 25, p. 287; art. 43, pp. 338-9.

²⁷⁶ *Mélanges pour Catherine II*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 4, pp. 235-6; art. 49, p. 352.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., art. 27, esp. pp. 305-9.

Si j'avais à civiliser des sauvages, que ferais-je? Je ferais des choses utiles en leur présence, sans leur rien ni dire, ni prescrire. J'aurais l'air de travailler pour ma seule famille et pour moi.

Si j'avais à créer une nation à la liberté, que ferais-je? Je planterais au milieu d'elle une colonie d'hommes libres, très libres, tels, par exemple, que les Suisses, à qui je conserverais bien strictement ses privilèges, et j'abandonnerais le reste au temps et à l'exemple.

..
Peu à peu, les femmes et les hommes de mon empire s'engageraient dans cette colonie.

Peu à peu, ce levain précieux changerait toute la masse, et son esprit deviendrait l'esprit général.²⁷⁸

For our present concerns the advocacy of a Swiss colony in Russia is highly informative in a number of respects. Most importantly, it is when reflecting on this colony that Diderot most conspicuously drew the analogy between the civilisation of savages and of Russians, and thereby also established an explicit linkage between his contributions to *Histoire des deux Indes* and his reflections on Russia.²⁷⁹ Indeed, the *Histoire des deux Indes* abounds with projects and advice of how to colonise well; that is to say of how to convert hunter-gather tribes to a settled way of life and to inspire in them a taste for regular, useful work, cultivation of the earth and trade.²⁸⁰ The methods to be employed to achieve this are exactly the same as the ones outlined in the passage just quoted: rather than attempting to force savages to settle and to work, as has been the usual practice among European colonisers, civilisation, should, according to Diderot, happen voluntarily. By providing savages with direct, sensible evidence of the material advantages of a civilised life in society, they will, without being forced, chose this way of life themselves.

Transposed to the context of Russia, the advocacy of such a method of civilising again implies a criticism of Peter's attempt to reform Russia, and Voltaire's

²⁷⁸ Ibid., art. 38, pp. 326-7. On the same idea, see also *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 4, p. 512; HDI, vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 23, pp. 49-50, vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, p. 54.

²⁷⁹ See also Goggi, 'Civilisation et expérience de référence', esp. pp. 330-80. Goggi provides a very detailed account of Diderot's plan for a Swiss colony in Russia, and shows that this plan must be understood as a specific application of the *Histoire des deux Indes*' general project of re-conceptualising the relation between colonising and civilising.

²⁸⁰ See, most prominently, HDI, vol. 4, bk. 9, chap. 1, pp. 233-5; vol. 4, bk. 9, chap. 6, p. 253; vol. 6, bk. 12, chap. 7, pp. 17-18.

apology of his reign. It is not by brute force, but through soft persuasion that a people should change its habits. Moreover, by advocating that the colony should be peopled by Swiss, Diderot re-iterated his underlying conviction that Russian civilisation must be built *par le commencement*. In the *Observations sur le Nakaz*, for instance, where the advocacy of a colony in Russia is repeated, the choice of the Swiss is explained by the fact that they are free, independent soldiers and agriculturists.²⁸¹ More specifically, Switzerland is portrayed in the *Histoire des deux Indes* as one of the few European countries that has neither climbed any of the great peaks of civilisation, nor been partaking in the general historical process of European decline.²⁸² It is, in other words, a country at a relatively early stage of historical development. As such importation of free Swiss agriculturists and soldiers into Russia is a much more appropriate strategy to advance the country than inviting highly civilised French, English, Dutch or Italian artists and men of letters as has been done by Peter. If Europe can directly support the civilisation of Russia, in other words, it must be through the relatively undeveloped Swiss, because they can help to create the kind of economic substructure needed for the higher arts and the sciences to develop and thrive.

But Diderot's discussion of the Swiss colony also reveals a tension which can be traced across his writings on Russia. As seen, the programme proposed to Catherine to civilise her country only works because Russia is in a state of youthful barbarity or savagery. Reforms are likely to succeed because no deep-rooted institutions which are almost impossible to alter exist, and because the voice of the enlightened sovereign Catherine is likely to find a receptive ear among *hommes neufs*, who, like children, have yet to develop inveterate habits that would constitute an insurmountable barrier to a radical reform project.²⁸³ However, when he contemplated the establishment of a Swiss colony, Diderot did not claim that 18th-century Russia was savage as such. He merely claimed that the operation of civilising savages is similar to the one of bringing an enslaved nation into a free state. When advocating the colonisation of Russian provinces by the Swiss in the *Histoire des deux Indes*, he attempted to bridge the gulf between the

²⁸¹ *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, p. 512.

²⁸² The relevant passage on Switzerland was not written by Diderot. See, HDI, vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, pp. 96-100.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, vol. 5, bk. 11, chap. 4, pp. 169-70.

two operations even further: here he argued that the enfranchisement and the civilisation of an empire are the same things under different names.²⁸⁴ And yet, thereby the tension was not solved but actually accentuated. Indeed, the contributions to Raynal's work as a whole are of course premised on exactly the opposite claim: that to enter society and to civilise always involves a certain loss of liberty and ultimately, that any civilisation ends through the fall into despotism, and, therefore, in slavery.²⁸⁵

The most troubling phenomenon underlying Diderot's problem is of course the existence of Russian despotism, which, according to his own philosophy of history, points to a country which does not stand at the beginning of the historical cycle but at its end. In his early writings on Russia – especially the *Mélanges pour Catherine II* and his first two contributions to the *Histoire des deux Indes*, Diderot did not probe deeply into this problem: the fact that Russians are both slaves and savages remained largely unanalysed. However, there are very good indications that Diderot was always aware of its existence. In a letter to Falconet, for instance, written in 1768 and thus five years before he departed to Russia, he wrote:

Le païs où il y aura moins de choses faites sera le plus avancé. J'aimerais mieux avoir à policer des sauvages que des russes, et des russes que des anglais, des français, des espagnols ou des portugais. Je trouverais chez les premiers l'aire à peu près nettoyée.²⁸⁶

This notion that Russia might not be a perfectly savage *tabula rasa* re-emerges in a passage written for the *Observations sur le Nakaz* with even more force:

Il y a bien de la différence entre la condition d'un peuple sous la barbarie, et la condition d'un peuple sous la tyrannie. Sous la barbarie, les âmes sont féroces; sous la tyrannie, elle sont lâches.

L'impératrice de Russie Catherine II regrettait les premiers Russes, et je crois qu'elle avait raison.

Tempérez la férocité et vous aurez des âmes grandes, nobles, fortes et généreuses. On ne sait comment ranimer, agrandir, fortifier des âmes une fois avilies.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, p. 54.

²⁸⁵ See, especially, *ibid.*, vol. 8, bk. 18, chap. 27, p. 217 and vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 34, p. 108.

²⁸⁶ *Corr.*, vol. 8, 6 September 1768, no. 490, p. 117.

Au moral ainsi qu'au physique, il est plus facile de descendre que de remonter. Le corps qui descend suit sa pente naturelle, et c'est contre sa nature, par l'effet d'un choc accidentel et violent, qu'il remonte pour un moment.²⁸⁷

In this passage Diderot's habitual optimism about Russia's future is thrown into fundamental doubt. The youthful 'premiers Russes', so essential for the success of his proposed programme of civilisation, simply do not exist anymore. Indeed, Catherine does not have to deal with 'féroce' but free barbarians, but with 'lâches' slaves. The implication of this is, of course, that Russians might not be in a state of youth, as are the hunter-gatherer tribes of the Americas, but already in old age and thus similar to India. In fact, Russia might well be descending on the historical cycle rather than rising, and there is very little a sovereign can do to reverse this direction.

A similar pessimism about the Empire's future also permeates Diderot's last writing on Russia, written for the third edition of the *Histoire des deux Indes* in 1780.²⁸⁸ Whilst he repeated therein the main contours of his reform programme, he also expressed considerable doubt whether Catherine could ever succeed in implementing it. The main obstacles to reform stressed are instructive. First, the fact that Russia is despotic is described as constituting a formidable, and potentially insurmountable, barrier to future Russian progress.²⁸⁹ Second, Diderot indicated another major impediment opposing itself to Catherine's efforts:

L'immense étendue de l'empire qui embrasse tous les climats, depuis le plus froid jusqu'au plus chaud, n'oppose-t-elle pas un puissant obstacle au législateur? Un même code pourroit-il convenir à tant de régions diverses; et la nécessité de plusieurs codes n'est-elle pas la même chose que l'impossibilité d'un seul? Conçoit-on le moyen d'assujettir à une même règle des peuples qui ne s'entendent pas, qui parlent dix-sept à dix-huit langues différentes, et qui gardent de tems immémorial des coutumes et des superstitions auxquelles ils sont plus attachés qu'à leur vie même.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁷ *Observations sur le Nakaz*, Versini, vol. 3, art. 69, p. 543.

²⁸⁸ HDI, vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, pp. 52-8.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

Again, as with despotism, if we follow Diderot's own philosophy of history, the existence of a large, multi-cultural empire of course points to an old, declining nation, rather than a young emerging one.²⁹¹ Moreover, the claim that the peoples converging on Russia's territory all possess deep-seated customs and superstitions of course stands in stark contrast to the earlier idea that Russians are *hommes neufs*. In such a historical context, a civilising programme structured around legislation, education and colonisation simply does not work anymore. Indeed, Russia might need a much more violent and unpredictable revolution than the one Diderot had hitherto proposed to Catherine:

Dans cet état de choses, le plus grand bonheur qui pût arriver à une contrée énormément étendue, ne seroit-ce pas d'être démembrée par quelque grande révolution, & d'être partagée en plusieurs petites souverainetés contiguës, d'où l'ordre introduit dans quelques-unes, se répandroit dans les autres? S'il est très-difficile de bien gouverner un grand empire civilisé, ne l'est-il pas davantage de civiliser un grand empire barbare?²⁹²

However, we also note that Diderot never completely gave up the notion that Russia is barbarian as the country is now described as 'un grand empire barbare'. But it would seem that such a 'grand empire barbare' cannot be meaningfully understood as a savage *tabula rasa* anymore. Clearly to understand such a country, to be able to locate it precisely within the historical cycle, and to formulate a historically sensitive programme of political reform, we would have to know how it had developed, that is to say how it historically arrived at this paradoxical state. And yet, despite at times implying that Russia might already have had a history prior to Peter's and Catherine's efforts to reform and civilise their country, Diderot never provided us with a possible account of such a history. In the *Histoire des deux Indes* Russia is introduced into the narrative in book five, which deals with Danish, Prussian, Swedish, Spanish and Russian incursions into the East Indies. Significantly, Russia is the only commercial country that is not provided with a pre-history to its colonial expansion: it just emerges out of nowhere when Peter I attempted to strengthen Russia's commercial ties with the

²⁹¹ In the *Histoire des deux Indes* territorial over-extension is presented as a prime indication that man's fight against nature has been taken too far, and, therefore, announces a civilisation's imminent fall. See, for instance, *ibid.*, vol. 6, bk. 13, chap. 1, p. 111.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 2, p. 55.

outside world in the late 17th century.²⁹³ Moreover, this omission is never rectified in any of Diderot's writings on Russia at large. Reading Diderot we simply do not know why 18th-century Russia has a despotic government or why a significant part of its population live in serfdom, we are not provided with an account that would enlighten us how it expanded its borders over time, and we do not learn anything about its pre-Catherinean institutions, laws and mores.

In the final analysis, therefore, Diderot's writings on Russia are beset with a similar problem to Voltaire's *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*: both thinkers struggled to provide Russia with a satisfying history prior to the accession of either Peter I or Catherine II. Whilst Voltaire unconvincingly argued that the state of pre-Petrine Russia was essentially the same as the one of feudal Europe, Diderot ultimately vacillated between two extreme and highly problematic positions: he gradually moved from an assessment of the state of pre-Catherinean Russia as a savage *tabula rasa*, to a notion that the country Catherine had inherited might already be old and declining. Or, to put it more starkly, Diderot was never entirely sure whether Russian history was about to start, or whether it had already happened.

As with Voltaire, it is this historiographical problem that explains the contradictions plaguing Diderot's political project. The shift from optimism to pessimism about Russia's future cannot be explained with reference to shifting attitudes towards the enlightened despot Catherine II as is, for instance, claimed by Lortholary: Diderot consistently deplored any form of despotism, and in all his writings urged Catherine to give up her unlimited power. The move from hope to despair about the chances of Catherine succeeding in reforming and civilising her country, simply follows the shift in Diderot's answer to the all important question of Russia's exact position within the historical cycle.

²⁹³ Ibid., vol. 3, bk. 5, chaps. 18-23, pp. 27-53.

3. Pierre Charles Levesque: The discovery of Russia's distant past and the politics of gradual reform

Introduction

Voltaire's and Diderot's omission of a pre-history from their respective accounts of Peter I and Catherine II did not go unnoticed among their contemporaries. Commenting on previous French scholarship on Russia, Pierre Charles Levesque remarked in his *Histoire de Russie* of 1782: '[o]n a beaucoup parlé de la Russie, sans en connaître l'histoire'.²⁹⁴ The reason Levesque provided for the soaring interest in Russia was, unsurprisingly, the reign of Peter I, who had seemingly propelled the Empire into the orbit of European civilisation through his military exploits and his programme of economic, social, political and cultural modernisation. And yet, writing more than twenty years after the first publication of Voltaire's *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, he could nevertheless contend that the various conflicting interpretations of Peter had not resulted in any adequate account of the country's pre-Petrine past, and, by implication, remained historically woefully uninformed. In Levesque's view, the question of how Russia's distant past connects with the present, and the wider problem of how this history as a whole relates to the history of European civilisation, remained unresolved.

This chapter aims to assess Levesque's contribution to the resolution of these questions through a close analysis of his *magnum opus*: the *Histoire de Russie*. Tracing the history of Russia from the perspective of the *longue durée* – starting with the institution of the state by Rurik in 862 and ending with the reign of Catherine II²⁹⁵ – enabled him to arrive at a reading of this history which was highly original: he was arguably the first French thinker to provide Russia with a progressive history without needing recourse to exceptional figures such as Peter I

²⁹⁴ HDR, vol. 4, pp. 146-7.

²⁹⁵ Levesque continuously extended his description of Catherine's reign across the work's four main editions. In the work's last edition, he also included a chapter on the reign of Catherine's successor: Paul I. See HDR-12, vol. 5 p. 441 – vol. 6 p. 122.

or Catherine II. According to Levesque, Russia had been slowly moving towards civilisation from its very beginning. Therefore, it simply did not require the importation of all the building blocks of civilisation from without through Peter in order to catch up with Europe's development, as Voltaire argued, nor was there any need for Catherine II to execute a rational programme of reform in order to civilise her country, as Diderot suggested. We will see that the guiding idea underlying Levesque's re-interpretation was that of normalising Russian history – that is to say to undermine any notion that Russia's history might be qualitatively different to that of Europe, or, indeed, any other history. This is an endeavour with clear political implications as this normalisation was bound up with a fundamental critique of the efficacy of despotism.

Both these concerns - the universality of the historical process and the related critique of despotism - were further elaborated upon by Levesque in a series of more theoretical works, most prominently his *L'homme moral, ou l'homme considéré tant dans l'état de pure nature, que dans la société* and *L'homme pensant, ou essai sur l'histoire de l'esprit humain*.²⁹⁶ These works will be considered alongside the *Histoire de Russie* throughout this chapter, and will fully flesh out Levesque's conception of history in general, its relation to politics, as well as make explicit his moderately optimistic outlook about the future progress of civilisation both in its European and Russian guises.

However, given that Levesque is an almost unknown thinker today, a few introductory words about his life and work are in order before plunging into a detailed analysis of parts of this work.²⁹⁷ Born in Paris in 1736 into a bourgeois

²⁹⁶ Referred to here as HM and HP, respectively. See also Pierre Charles Levesque, 'Considérations sur l'homme. Observé dans la vie sauvage, dans la vie pastorale, et dans la vie policée', *Mémoires de l'institut national des sciences et arts. Sciences morales et politiques* 1 (Thermidor an VI [ca. 1794]).

²⁹⁷ Not much is known about Levesque's biography. His own papers and letters, having been conserved by his descendants until the beginning of the 20th century, have since disappeared. See Vladimir A. Somov, 'Pierre-Charles Levesque, protégé de Diderot et historien de la Russie', *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 43, no. 2-3 (2002), p. 276. However, a small number of surviving documents relating to Levesque have been published recently, see André Mazon, 'Pierre-Charles Levesque: humaniste, historien et moraliste', *Revue des études slaves* 42, no. 1-4 (1963). Pierre Charles Levesque, 'Annexes: Lettres inédites de Pierre-Charles Levesque', *Cahiers du Monde russe* 43, no. 2-3 (2002). In addition to these few manuscript sources, there exist three published contemporary sources that shed some light on his life. These are:

family, Levesque enjoyed a good education first at the collège des Quatre-Nations and later at the Jesuit institution whose former pupils include Voltaire and Diderot: the collège Louis-le-Grand. Whilst he was still being educated, financial problems required his family to leave the capital. Unwilling to abandon his studies, and having learned the art of engraving which supplied him with a modest income, Levesque decided to stay in Paris on his own.²⁹⁸ It is during this time that he wrote his first literary work, *Les rêves d'Aristobule*,²⁹⁹ which seems to have caught the eye of Diderot.³⁰⁰ It is due to the latter that Levesque's life was to take a decisive turn. Diderot, in his capacity as recruitment agent for Catherine II in France, supplied his new acquaintance with a position as governor at the Corps des cadets in St. Petersburg in 1773.³⁰¹

Levesque thus spent the next seven years in the Russian capital. Apart from instructing his pupils in French and logic, he also found enough time to perfect his knowledge of modern Russian and to learn old Slavonic. This skill enabled him to read the old Russian chronicles, annals and documents; sources which had just recently begun to be collected, published and analysed.³⁰² The *Histoire de Russie*, first published soon after his return to France in 1780, was the main product of his engagement with these sources. Apart from studying Russian history, Levesque also wrote his two works concerned with the historical process in general whilst in

- A short appreciation of his life and work written by Conrad Malte-Brun, editor of the 4th (posthumous) edition of Levesque's *Histoire de Russie*: Conrad Malte-Brun, 'Éloge de feu M^r Levesque, Membre de l'Institut et de la Légion d'honneur, Professeur d'histoire au Collège de France', in HDR-12, vol. 1, pp. v-xxx.

- A funeral oration pronounced by Antoine Quatremère de Quincy, Vice-President of the classe d'histoire et de littérature ancienne of the Institut impérial de France: Antoine Chrysostôme Quatremère de Quincy, *Institut Impérial de France. Funérailles de M. Levesque* ([Paris]: De l'Imprimerie de Firmin Didot, 1812).

- A funeral oration pronounced by Bon Joseph Dacier, perpetual Secretary of the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres: Bon Joseph Dacier, 'Notice historique sur la vie et les ouvrages de M. Lévesque', in *Mémoires de l'Institut royal de France. Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres*. Vol. 5 (Paris: Chez Firmin Didot 1821).

²⁹⁸ Dacier, 'Notice historique', pp. 162-3. Malte-Brun, 'Éloge de feu M^r Levesque', pp. vi-ix.

²⁹⁹ [Levesque, Pierre Charles], *Les rêves d'Aristobule, philosophe grec, suivis d'un abrégé de la vie de Formose philosophe français* (Paris: 1762).

³⁰⁰ Maurice Prou, 'Levesque, Pierre Charles', in *La grande encyclopédie. Inventaire raisonné des sciences, des lettres et des arts. Par une société de savants et de gens de lettres*, ed. Pierre Eugène Marcelin Berthelot, Hartwig Derenbourg, and Ferdinand Camille Dreyfus, (Paris: 1887), vol. 22, p. 138.

³⁰¹ The contract signed by Levesque and Diderot, outlining the terms and conditions under which the former was to be employed, is still extant and has been reproduced by Mazon, 'Pierre-Charles Levesque', pp. 18-23.

³⁰² Malte-Brun, 'Éloge de feu M^r Levesque', pp. xi-xii; Somov, 'Pierre-Charles Levesque', pp. 276-8.

St. Petersburg: *L'homme moral* and *L'homme pensant*. It is through the former work that Levesque again crossed paths with Diderot. Either unwilling or unable to print *L'homme moral* in Russia, he handed a manuscript copy to Diderot during the latter's stay at Catherine's court in 1773-1774 and asked him to oversee its publication in Holland.³⁰³ Diderot not only fulfilled this task – *L'homme moral* was first published by Marc-Michel Rey in Amsterdam in 1775 – but we actually know that he read the book with some interest. Indeed, in the preface of a revised edition of 1784, Levesque complained bitterly that Raynal had plagiarised two parts of his work in the third edition of the *Histoire des deux Indes* without due acknowledgment.³⁰⁴ Probably unknown to Levesque, the most substantial passage of the *Histoire des deux Indes* which he himself had identified as being plagiarised was not actually written by Raynal but by his own acquaintance Diderot.³⁰⁵

After having returned to France in 1780, Levesque continued his historical research, but shifted his focus from Russia to his own country. His next major work was a history of France during the reign of the first five Valois kings in the 14th and 15th century, preceded by a lengthy introduction which traced the history of the French monarchy from the reign of Pepin in the 8th century until the accession of Philippe de Valois.³⁰⁶ It was originally conceived as only the first part of a general history of the French monarchy to cover the whole period from the Frankish conquest of Gaul up until the present; a work which was never completed, however. *La France sous les cinq premiers Valois*, first published in 1788, was well received among the scholars of the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres. It was this work together with a prize-winning essay on the abbé de Mably,³⁰⁷ which secured Levesque's election to the Académie in 1789.³⁰⁸ This

³⁰³ See Somov, 'Pierre-Charles Levesque', p. 278. HM-84, p. v.

³⁰⁴ HM-84, pp. vii-xix.

³⁰⁵ The plagiarised section in question is HDI, vol. 9, bk. 19, chap. 14, pp. 294-5. This section has been firmly attributed to Diderot by Duchet, *Diderot et l'histoire des deux Indes*.

³⁰⁶ Pierre Charles Levesque, *La France sous les cinq premiers Valois; ou histoire de France depuis l'avènement de Philippe-de-Valois, jusqu'à la mort de Charles VII. Précédée d'une introduction dans laquelle on suit les révolutions & les progrès de la monarchie, depuis le regne de Pepin jusqu'à la mort de Charles-le-Bel*, 4 vols. (Paris: Chez de Bure l'aîné, 1788).

³⁰⁷ Pierre Charles Levesque, 'L'éloge historique de l'abbé de Mably', in *Esprit de Mably et de Condillac, relativement à la morale et à la politique*, ed. Laurent Pierre Bérenger, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Grenoble: 1789).

³⁰⁸ Dacier, 'Notice historique', pp. 171-3. Malte-Brun, 'Éloge de feu M^r Levesque', p. xviii-xix.

honour was soon followed by his elevation to the chair of history and moral philosophy at the Collège de France in 1791, and, in 1795, Levesque was among the first to be invited into the new Institut national des sciences et des arts, established as replacement for the old academies which had been abolished during the revolution.³⁰⁹

We only have very limited information about his activity during the revolutionary period, but it would appear that the politically moderate Levesque was appalled by the political upheaval and kept a low profile. He certainly shifted his interests once again: away from the politically sensitive and potentially dangerous study of French history to classical antiquity. Most of the papers he read at the Academy and at the Institute dealt with the history and art of ancient Greece and Rome,³¹⁰ and his three main published works during this period are a translation of Thucydides' history, a critical study of early Roman history, and a collection of essays concerned with the history of ancient Greece.³¹¹ But he never completely lost his interest in either French or Russian history. There are good indications that he worked until his death on the continuation of his history of the French monarchy,³¹² and, apart from acting as the editor of the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* for the Palissot edition of Voltaire's work,³¹³ he also completed two new, and considerably augmented, editions of his own *Histoire de Russie*: the first published in Hamburg in 1800, and the second posthumously in Paris in 1812. Levesque died in Paris on 12 May 1812, aged 76.

³⁰⁹ Mazon, 'Pierre-Charles Levesque', pp. 50-1; Dacier, 'Notice historique', p. 173.

³¹⁰ A list of some of the papers Levesque read at the Institute can be found in J. M. Quérard, ed., *La France littéraire ou dictionnaire bibliographique des savants, historiens et gens de lettres de la France*, 12 vols., (Paris: Didot, 1827-64), vol. 5, pp. 276-7.

³¹¹ Pierre Charles Levesque, *Histoire de Thucydide, fils d'Olorus, traduite du Grec par Pierre-Charles Levesque* (Paris: J.B Gail, 1795); Pierre Charles Levesque, *Études de l'histoire ancienne et de celle de la Grèce; de la constitution de la république d'Athènes et de celle de Lacédémone; de la législation, des tribunaux, des mœurs et usages des Athéniens; de la poésie, de la philosophie et des arts chez les Grecs* (Paris: Chez Fournier Frères, Libraires, 1811); Pierre Charles Levesque, *Histoire critique de la république Romaine. Ouvrage dans lequel on s'est proposé de détruire des préjugés invétérés sur l'histoire des premiers siècles de la république, sur la morale des Romains, leurs vertus, leur politique extérieure, leur constitution et le caractère de leurs hommes célèbres*, 4 vols. (Paris: Dentu, 1812).

³¹² Dacier, 'Notice historique', p. 177.

³¹³ Levesque corrected many factual mistakes in Voltaire's text by means of editorial footnotes. See François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Œuvres*, ed. Charles Palissot de Montenoy, 55 vols., vol. 26 (Paris: 1792).

It is without doubt the *Histoire de Russie* which was most responsible for Levesque's relative fame during his own lifetime, and the only work for which he is still, albeit to a limited extent, remembered today. It was widely read during the 18th century, going through four main French editions, and quickly translated into Italian and Russian.³¹⁴ Moreover, it enjoyed substantive critical acclaim. In France, it was the subject of lengthy review articles in the *Correspondance littéraire*, *L'année littéraire*, *Le journal des sçavans*, *L'esprit des journaux* and *Mercure de France*.³¹⁵ All of these reviews, with the notable exception of the one published in the *Mercure de France*, were positive.³¹⁶ The consensus of the other journals was that Levesque had considerably heightened the standard of French historical scholarship on Russia, and that the endeavour to write a continuous account of the history of the Empire from its very beginning to the present had, effectively, opened up a whole new field of historical scholarship. The *L'année littéraire* concluded: '[C]ette Histoire de Russie est ce que nous avons de mieux fait en ce genre'; a sentiment almost literally repeated in the *Correspondance littéraire*, which regarded the work as 'la meilleure Histoire connue de cet empire.'³¹⁷

The positive appraisal was not restricted to France. Conrad Malte-Brun, the editor of the fourth edition of the *Histoire de Russie*, highlighted the positive reception of the work among the German Russian specialists:

³¹⁴ On the Italian edition and its reception, see Venturi, *The End of the Old Regime in Europe*, vol. 2, pp. 807-12. On the Russian edition, see S. N. Valk, 'Un mémoire de Pierre-Charles Levesque sur la Russkaja Prava', *Revue des Etudes Slaves* 41, no. 1-4 (1962), p. 8. An English version of the *Histoire de Russie* was planned, but never executed. See A. G. Cross, 'From Hull to Petersburg: Levesque's History of Russia Printed by George Prince', *Factotum* 33 (1991).

³¹⁵ Friedrich Grimm et al., eds., *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, 16 vols. (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877) vol. 14, Février 1782, pp. 70-6; Anonymous, 'Histoire de Russie tirée des chroniques originales des piécès authentiques, & des meilleurs historiens de la nation ... Par M. L'Evesque', *L'année littéraire*, no. 8 (1781); J. L. Geoffroy, 'Histoire des différens peuples soumis à la domination des russes, ou suite de l'Histoire de Russie, par M. L'Evêque', *L'année littéraire*, no. 6 (1783); [Joseph de] Guignes, 'Histoire de Russie, tirée des chroniques originales, des piécès authentiques & des meilleurs historiens de la nation. Par M. Leveque', *Le journal des sçavans*, no. 1-2 (1782); Anonymous, 'Histoire de Russie, tirée des chroniques originales, des piécès authentiques, & des meilleurs historiens de la nation; par M. Levesque', *L'esprit des journaux* Juin - Juillet (1782); Anonymous, 'Réflexions sur l'Histoire de Russie, par M. Lévesque', *Mercure de France* 25 Janvier (1783).

³¹⁶ The review in the *Mercure de France* deals exclusively with Levesque's treatment of Peter I. It is a straightforward defence of Voltaire's account of Peter's history, and a polemical attack on Levesque's attempt to revise this account.

³¹⁷ Anonymous, 'Histoire de Russie', p. 325. Grimm et al., eds., *Correspondance littéraire*, vol. 14, p. 70.

En Allemagne le mérite scientifique de l'Histoire de Russie pouvait d'autant mieux être apprécié que les recherches sur lesquelles elle se fondait, étaient communes à plusieurs savans allemands Il fut glorieux pour l'historien français de n'éprouver, de la part de ces juges sévères, aucune critique sérieuse, et d'en recevoir au contraire des éloges motivés et sincères.³¹⁸

A well-justified assessment, given that August Ludwig Schlözer, undoubtedly one of the most severe critics of French historical scholarship, regarded Levesque's work as the only tolerable history of Russia produced in the 18th century.³¹⁹

A faint echo of the acclaim accorded to Levesque's *Histoire de Russie* by his contemporaries can still be heard in modern scholarship. Most studies concerned with French scholarship on Russia in the 18th century include some discussion of Levesque's work, and typically arrive at a favourable assessment. For von Mohrenschildt, for instance, Levesque was the 'first serious [French] scholar of Russian history and culture'.³²⁰ This is an assessment not only shared by Wilberger,³²¹ but also by scholars usually fiercely critical of 18th-century France's intellectual engagement with Russia. Lortholary, for instance, mentions in passing that Levesque, very much unlike Voltaire and Diderot, demonstrated a real interest in Russian history and culture, whilst Wolff regards the *Histoire de Russie* as a 'historical masterpiece' of the French Enlightenment which 'held the field into the nineteenth century'.³²²

Despite such token recognition, however, no detailed reading of the *Histoire de Russie* exists to date. More often than not, Levesque's name is used to signify an alternative, and somehow more appropriate, 18th-century reading of Russian history to the ones supplied by better known thinkers, without much analysis to support such a claim. Given the considerable esteem accorded to the *Histoire de Russie* by its contemporary readers, and given the indication by its French reviewers that the work opened up a novel way of approaching the history of

³¹⁸ Malte-Brun, 'Éloge de feu M^r Levesque', p. xiii.

³¹⁹ Nestor, vol. 1, pp. 109-10.

³²⁰ von Mohrenschildt, *Russia in the Intellectual Life of Eighteenth-Century France*, p. 102.

³²¹ Wilberger, *Peter the Great*, p. 109.

³²² Lortholary, *Le mirage russe*, p. 270; Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p. 289.

Russia, an analysis that endeavours to define with some precision how Levesque responded to the late 18th-century debate about the history of Russian civilisation therefore seems imperative.

The writing of Russian history: *Érudits, philosophes* and Montesquieu

For Levesque himself, the answer to the question of how he primarily contributed to the historiography of Russia is evident. In the prospectus announcing the *Histoire de Russie* to prospective buyers in St. Petersburg, as well as in the work's preface, he emphasised the gulf separating his own endeavour to write the history of the Empire from previous attempts by his compatriots:

Les auteurs français n'ont presque rien écrit d'exact sur l'ancienne histoire de Russie. On peut même dire qu'ils l'ont absolument ignorée, ils n'ont pas eu la prudence de se taire. S'ils ont appris des étrangers ou des voyageurs quelques faits conformes à la vérité, il n'en ont fait usage que pour défigurer les noms des hommes des lieux, au point qu'il est impossible de les reconnaître.³²³

Lacking any credible source material regarding the ancient history of Russia, French historians had so far either ignored the Empire's distant past altogether, or had produced uncritical accounts based on data of very dubious veracity. According to Levesque, such an approach was deplorable, since Russia actually possessed a wealth of sources far more congenial to a reliable historical account than foreign travel writings. Indeed, in a 'catalogue raisonné' appended to the *Histoire de Russie*, he presented in detail his own sources and outlined the long tradition of chronicle writing in Russia.³²⁴ This tradition starts with the account written by the Kievan monk Nestor in the 11th century. Nestor's own chronicle reaches back into the earliest time, and continued by a host of successors, offers an uninterrupted record of Russian history from the institution of the state by Rurik in Novgorod in the 9th to the accession of Tsar Alexei in the 17th century.³²⁵

Levesque deemed his compatriots' failure to exploit this rich material unsurprising for two reasons: first of all, he acknowledged that his own undertaking would have been impossible a few decades earlier, simply because

³²³ Pierre Charles Levesque, 'Prospectus de "L'histoire de Russie" de Pierre-Charles Lévesque', in *Le livre et l'historien: études offertes en l'honneur du Professeur Henri-Jean Martin*, ed. Frédéric Barbier, et al. (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1997), p. 356.

³²⁴ HDR-12, vol. 6, pp. 456-76.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 456-8.

his sources had not been readily available then.³²⁶ For a long time hidden away in manuscript form in monasteries, these sources had only recently been systematically collected, collated, edited and published by some Russians – and Mikhail Lomonosov, V. N. Tatischev and M. M. Scerbatov are specifically mentioned – and, especially, by a group of German scholars associated with the St. Petersburg Academy: Gerhardt Friedrich Müller, Gottlieb Siegfried Bayer, and Johann Gotthelf Stritter; savants who had not only collected relevant source material, but also started to apply the rules of philological criticism in order to assess, compare and verify them.³²⁷

However, even once these sources had become available, French scholars were ill-prepared to use them, simply because of linguistic incompetence:

Mais en vain un Français se promettrait d'écrire l'histoire de Russie, en restant à Paris dans son cabinet Il faut aller en Russie, s'y livrer pendant plusieurs années à une étude sèche et opiniâtre, apprendre non-seulement le russe moderne, mais encore l'ancien dialecte slavon-russe, dans lequel sont écrites toutes les chroniques³²⁸

One of the prime targets of the injunction against Frenchmen writing the history of Russia from their studies was, of course, Voltaire. According to Levesque, the few disparaging remarks about Russia's medieval history in the *Essai sur les mœurs* – all premised on the notion that the country was then in a state of complete barbarism and ignorance – simply proved that Voltaire did not know anything about Russian medieval history.³²⁹ In regard to the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, he acknowledged that its author had made a genuine effort to assemble good source material. However, being dependent on translations and extracts of sources produced at the St. Petersburg Academy, and without any means to verify the quality and accuracy of the supplied material, it was almost inevitable that he committed a host of factual errors.³³⁰

³²⁶ HDR, vol. 1, pp. vii-xi.

³²⁷ Ibid., p. viii. See also HDR-12, vol. 6, pp. 456-74.

³²⁸ HDR, vol. 1, pp. viii-ix.

³²⁹ Ibid., p. 164; vol. 2, pp. 125, 322. See also Levesque, 'Prospectus de "L'histoire de Russie" de Pierre-Charles Lévesque', p. 356.

³³⁰ HDR-12, vol. 6, pp. 470-1. See also Levesque's account of Peter's reign in which Voltaire is frequently criticised for factual inaccuracies stemming either from simple errors in translation, or

Levesque's criticism of previous French historiography of Russia is, among other things, of course also an instance of the general 18th-century tension between a traditional erudite approach to the writing of history and the new attempt to write history *en philosophe*, which we have already encountered in the previous chapter on Voltaire. *Prima facie*, one might be tempted to regard Levesque's intervention as a simple defence of the traditional approach of the *érudits*, and a straightforward attack on the *philosophes*: his censure of Voltaire's factual inaccuracies and his insistence on the need to establish a sound empirical basis through the laborious compilation and collation of ancient manuscripts and documents seemingly point in this direction. Levesque's association with the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres – the citadel of French erudition³³¹ – after his return from Russia may further strengthen such a supposition.³³²

And yet, such a portrayal of Levesque's position would be an over-simplification. A first indication that he was far from straight forwardly adopting an erudite standpoint can be found in the reception of the *Histoire de Russie* in France. Whilst all reviews of the work were generally positive, the quality of Levesque's erudition and the merit of his project in painstakingly reconstructing Russia's early history from the old chronicles were assessed very differently.

On the one hand, the reviewer of the *Correspondance littéraire*, remarked:

On comprend aisément que l'histoire ancienne de Russie ne pouvait pas être susceptible d'un grand intérêt; ces premiers temps n'offrent que des monuments de guerre et de mœurs sauvages; il est même

from purposeful falsification of the historical record through his collaborators: for instance, HDR, vol. 4, pp. 204-5, 244, 303, 363, 378; vol. 5, p. 158.

³³¹ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 1, chap. 7.

³³² An association, moreover, which was partly the outcome of another challenge by Levesque to the works of a historian who had neglected the duties of erudition in order to support a philosophical system, albeit a very different one from Voltaire: the abbé de Mably. In both *L'éloge historique de M. l'abbé de Mably* and *La France sous les cinq premiers Valois*, the two works that led to Levesque's election to the Academy, Mably is taken to task for a cavalier handling of evidence in order to find in history proof that a republican political system is the most congenial to man's happiness. See Levesque, 'L'éloge historique de l'abbé de Mably', esp. pp. 26-8 and 71-81; Levesque, *La France sous les cinq premiers Valois*, vol. 1, pp. x-xv.

assez pénible de suivre la liaison du petit nombre de faits et d'événements dont on est parvenu à retrouver la trace.³³³

Such doubt about the worth of Levesque's undertaking was repeated in *L'année littéraire*. After having praised the endeavour to 'débrouiller un véritable chaos'³³⁴ – i.e. Russia's early history – the correspondent proceeded to criticise Levesque's long discussions of some minor points in regard to this history, and finished by questioning whether the effort to provide Russia with a detailed pre-Petrine history was really worth the effort at all:

Si les premiers volumes sont dénués d'intérêt, & n'offrent que des images révoltantes, nous montrant toujours une arène ensanglantée par des bêtes féroces qui s'entredéchirent, n'accusons que le sujet & non M. *L'Evêque*; je crois qu'il eût pu s'appesantir moins sur tout ce qui a précédé le règne de *Pierre I*, & développer davantage tout ce qui suit l'Histoire de ce Souverain, si célèbre à tant d'égards.³³⁵

On the other hand, however, the reviewer for *Le journal des sçavans*, Joseph de Guignes, one of France's foremost erudite orientalisists, flatly contradicted the notion that Levesque had given too much space to Russia's distant past or that this period is devoid of interest. On the contrary, de Guignes contended that the account of Russia's early rulers 'n'est pas aussi étendue ni aussi développée que nous l'esperions; sans doute parce que M. Levesque n'a pas trouvé plus de monumens.'³³⁶ Whilst acknowledging that Levesque had assembled a considerable amount of relevant sources, de Guignes was convinced that much more material could have been employed and censured the author several times for an uncritical and naïve approach when interpreting his raw data, and for inserting anachronistic reflections into his factual account.³³⁷

It is beyond doubt that de Guignes' criticism has some validity. Despite the fact that Levesque's command of the old Russian chronicles was unprecedented for a

³³³ Grimm et al., eds., *Correspondance littéraire*, vol. 14, p. 75.

³³⁴ Anonymous, 'Histoire de Russie', p. 217. This idea that the ancient history of Russia is a chaos, which may not be worth disentangling, is of course taken from Voltaire. Indeed, Voltaire had justified his passing over the ancient history of Russia in his *Histoire de l'empire the Russie* with the following words: 'Mon dessein est de faire voir ce que le czar Pierre a crée, plutôt que de débrouiller inutilement l'ancien chaos.' See OC, vol. 46, p. 424.

³³⁵ Anonymous, 'Histoire de Russie', p. 325. Emphasis in the original.

³³⁶ Guignes, 'Histoire de Russie', p. 824.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 824-6.

French historian, it pales in comparison with the work undertaken by contemporary German scholars, and especially with the source criticism of these chronicles carried out by Schlözer. Indeed, the latter deplored Levesque's lack of critical approach in the analysis of the chronicles, the failure to assess and compare different variants of the same passage in different manuscripts, a rush to judgment, and, at one point, alleged that his history was inspired as much by the 'Muse der DichtKunst' as by his proper sources.³³⁸

But we would miss the main analytical thrust of the *Histoire de Russie* and arrive at a very skewed assessment of the work, if we considered it exclusively as a work of erudition. Levesque was not an erudite in the narrow meaning of the term: his primary aim was never to establish beyond doubt the authenticity of individual documents and facts – there are in actual fact only very few learned dissertations about details so deplored by the reviewer of *L'Année littéraire* in the *Histoire de Russie* - nor is there any sense that he found the study of Russia's distant past inherently fascinating, or even worthwhile. On the contrary, he can sound very similar to Voltaire, or indeed his own reviewer in the *Correspondance littéraire*, when reflecting on the first few volumes of his own work:

Enfin l'histoire ancienne de Russie n'excite quelque intérêt que lorsqu'un Souverain réunit sous sa domination presque toutes les parties de l'Etat, comme sous le règne du premier Vladimir et sous celui d'Iaroslaf, son fils; ou quand lui seul attire sur lui toute l'attention, comme a fait André ...³³⁹

Clearly, a preoccupation with Russia's medieval past for its own sake and on its own terms in order to carefully reconstruct its former state of being in all its individuality by means of erudition had little appeal to Levesque. Instead, as we shall see, his goal was very much to write history *en philosophe*: his primary interest was to trace the process of civilisation in Russia, which is merely a specific example of the progress of mankind itself. The reconstruction of Russia's distant past with the help of erudition was only a means to get to this higher end: we must know what Russia was, in order to understand what it is at present, and

³³⁸ Nestor, vol. 3, p. 63.

³³⁹ HDR, vol. 1, p. xiii.

what it might become in the future. In this respect there is a close analogy between *the Histoire de Russie* and Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs*. Whereas the latter work enquired into the means that had enabled Europe to emerge from a period of barbarism, Levesque attempted to analyse the same process for Russia. Accordingly, his arguments with Voltaire were not about how history should be studied and written *per se*, but merely a reminder that Voltaire was never equipped to write the history of Russia's civilisation, simply because he knew nothing about what Russia was like prior to the reign of Peter I.

To write the history of Russia's civilisation required Levesque to engage in the debate about the role of Peter I. The structure of the *Histoire de Russie* suggests that the work should be read as a long, detailed and learned contribution to this debate. In its final edition of 1812, the work consists of eight volumes, out of which two are dedicated to an ethnographic exploration of the various peoples converging on the Empire's territory. Of the remaining six volumes, only the first three deal with Russia's history from the 9th century to the beginning of the 17th century. The 17th and 18th century are thus given an equal amount of space to the nine preceding ones, and the reign of Peter takes up more than a third of the pages devoted to these last two centuries.³⁴⁰

There are even more direct indications about the centrality of the reign of Peter for the work as a whole. It commences with four introductory chapters concerned with the language, religion and history of the ancient Slavic tribes prior to the 9th century. After these short dissertations and before starting the historical narrative with the reign of Rurik in earnest, Levesque included a short interlude in which he squarely positioned his work within the debate about Peter's contribution to the civilisation of Russia.³⁴¹

After having noted that Russia was hardly known in Europe a generation ago, Levesque contended that this general ignorance ceased due to Peter's reign, but that the newly generated interest never led to a more profound appreciation of its history:

³⁴⁰ See HDR-12.

³⁴¹ HDR, vol. 1, pp. 55-6.

Les rares talens d'un grand homme, une qualité plus rare encore, sa ferme et constante volonté de faire le bien, ses voyages, ses conquêtes, et peut-être encore la singularité frappante et la grandeur sauvage de son caractère, ont attiré sur le pays qu'il gouvernait les regards de l'Europe.

La Russie, dès-lors, est devenue célèbre; mais son histoire n'en était guère mieux connue.³⁴²

Rather than placing the czar's reign into a historical narrative, French writers had invented the myth that Russia had no history at all prior to Peter taking over the reins of government:

On croit assez généralement que Pierre I, en montant sur le trône, ne vit autour de lui qu'un désert peuplé de quelques animaux sauvages dont il sut faire des hommes. Montesquieu, qui cependant manquait de bons mémoires sur la Russie, eut seul le génie de soupçonner que la nation était disposée d'avance à seconder les travaux du réformateur.³⁴³

This is a comprehensive rejection of all interpretations of pre-Petrine Russia we have so far encountered. Despite the significant differences in Voltaire's, Diderot's and Rousseau's accounts of the efficacy of Peter's reforms, all three *au fonds* concurred that the country he had inherited was in a decisively primitive state, lacking all the essential civilising mechanisms. The reference to Montesquieu as a source for an alternative reading of Peter to the one prevalent in France is intriguing, however, simply because Montesquieu had not much to say about Russia at all. And yet, if we study Montesquieu's few references to Russia more closely, we can see emerging a conception of the country's past and present that is highly original in a late 18th-century context, and that could provide Levesque with important clues for his own project.

In Montesquieu's early *Lettres persanes*, Russia is mentioned just twice. Once its name is included in a reflection on the Tatars who had subjugated China, Muscovy and Turkey.³⁴⁴ The second, and longer discussion, revolves around Peter

³⁴² Ibid., p. 55.

³⁴³ Ibid., p. 56.

³⁴⁴ Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, letter 81, p. 254.

I. In this passage, Nargum – Montesquieu’s interlocutor – mentions the country’s dreadful climate, and presents Russia as a paradigmatic case of an Oriental despotism. However, despite this unlimited despotic power, Nargum also notes the trouble the present czar – i.e. Peter – has with modernising his empire by relating how his subjects have resisted the imperial command to Europeanise by trimming their beards.³⁴⁵

In his later *De l’esprit des lois*, Russia only gets marginally more space. But the four elements noted above – the Tatar conquest, Russia’s climate, its despotism, and Peter’s attempts at modernisation – are now inter-connected much more closely than they were in the *Lettres persanes*. It is exactly this inter-connection that must have caught Levesque’s eye, because it allows for a genuine historical account of Peter’s reign.

The crucial discussion of Russia in the *De l’esprit des lois* is undertaken in the fourteenth chapter of book nineteen which is concerned with the best means available to a sovereign to change the mores and manners of his nation.³⁴⁶ The maxim Montesquieu tried to defend in this chapter is that manners and mores – being institutions of the nation as a whole rather than the work of the legislator – should never be changed by laws since this would be a tyrannical infringement on the nation by the legislator, but only through the provision of alternative examples. Peter’s attempt to outlaw the wearing of beards in Russia is given as a prime example of such a tyrannical way of proceeding.

Apart from defending a political maxim, Montesquieu also attempted to solve a wider problem that Russia causes in his system. As outlined above, in the *Lettres persanes* Montesquieu conceived Russia as having a ‘dreadful’ climate – and it is safe to assume that he thereby meant a very cold climate – and as being governed despotically. According to the taxonomy of political regimes developed in the *De l’esprit des lois*, this combination is problematic. The principle underlying despotic regimes – fear – is associated with hot climates, and geographically located in the East - the Oriental empires of China, Persia, India and Turkey -

³⁴⁵ Ibid., letter 51, pp. 204-6.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., vol. 2, pt. 3, bk. 19, chap. 14, pp. 564-5.

whilst Europe is portrayed as having cold and moderate climates which give rise to republican or monarchical regimes regulated by the principles of virtue and honour, respectively.³⁴⁷

Russia is, in other words, a deeply paradoxical case for Montesquieu: its climate is European but its regime is Asiatic. Peter's reign simply adds another layer of contradictions: he attempted to Europeanise his country but did this in an Asiatic manner (and the attempt to change his subjects' liking for beards by legislative *fiat* is, of course, only a striking instance of this wider project). However, Montesquieu was not content with just leaving the argument at this paradoxical impasse, which would have subverted the stability of his system as a whole, but tried to give an explanation resolving all contradictions. It is here that the Tatars and their conquest of Muscovy enter the picture once again.

Whilst Montesquieu had noted the resistance in Russia to Peter's reform in the *Lettres persanes*, he now contended that the czar's project had been successful. And yet, this success is not explainable by the choice of methods of reform on Peter's part, but by the fact that the czar had inadvertently resolved Russia's paradox that had itself been caused by the Tatar invasion:

La facilité et la promptitude avec laquelle cette nation s'est policée, a bien montré que ce prince avoit trop mauvaise opinion d'elle, et que ces peuples n'étoient pas des bêtes, comme il le disoit. Les moyens violents qu'il employa étoient inutiles; il seroit arrivé tout de même à son but par la douceur.

...

Ce qui rendit le changement plus aisé, c'est que les mœurs d'alors étoient étrangères au climat, et y avoient été apportées par le mélange des nations et par les conquêtes. Pierre I^{er}, donnant les mœurs et les manières de l'Europe à une nation d'Europe, trouva des facilités qu'il n'attendoit pas lui-même. L'empire du climat est le premier de tous les empires.³⁴⁸

We can easily see that it was this passage that Levesque had in mind when he wrote that of all the commentators of Peter's reign it was only Montesquieu who had appreciated that 'la nation était disposée d'avance à seconder les travaux du

³⁴⁷ Ibid., pt. 1, bk. 3, pp. 250-61; pt. 3, bk. 17, pp. 523-30.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., pt. 3, bk. 19, chap. 14, p. 565.

réformateur’, and that a historical explanation was needed to explain the seemingly rapid progress Russia experienced during his reign. To put it differently, Montesquieu provided Levesque with the important idea that pre-Petrine history matters a great deal if we are to make sense of the country at all. However, whilst taking this important clue from the *De l’esprit des lois*, he was far from adopting the other elements that enabled Montesquieu to resolve the paradox presented by Russia. Levesque had very little time for climatic determinism and never believed that moderate governance, or indeed civilisation, is dependent on geography. Neither was he as sanguine as the author of the *De l’esprit des lois* that Peter had, paradoxically, managed to destroy despotism by despotic means. Furthermore, unlike Montesquieu, who had lacked detailed sources about Russia and whose pre-Petrine history was restricted to the vague, but crucial, invocation of the Tatar conquest, Levesque, who had spent his time in St. Petersburg reading the Russian chronicles, proceeded to provide his readers with a detailed and complex account of this history.

In fact, rather than adopting Montesquieu’s scheme of history according to which a European nation’s mores were subverted through the Tatar conquest and then rapidly restored by Peter, Levesque proposed a historical account of slow, gradual, but intermittently interrupted development. This account traces the intricate history of a nation that was travelling in the direction of civilisation since its very beginning, but whose journey never followed a straight, linear path:

On [i.e. previous French writers on Russia] ignorait qu’il fut un temps où cette contrée, par l’étendue de sa domination, par son commerce, par ses richesses, était supérieure à la plupart des Etats de l’Europe dans le même temps; que l’imprudence de ses Souverains affaiblit cette puissance en la partageant; que, minée par leurs interminables querelles, et presque abattue par les généraux de Tchinguis-Khan, elle offrit à ses successeurs une conquête facile; qu’après deux siècles d’esclavage, délivrée enfin de ce joug, elle le fit, à son tour, porter à ses vainqueurs; ... et qu’enfin rétablie, elle vit préparer sa splendeur par l’aïeul, le père et le frère du héros [i.e. Peter I] auquel on attribue toute sa gloire.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁹ HDR, vol. 1, pp. 55-6.

In order to fully understand Levesque's conception of Russian history, we have to follow him along the path proposed above; a path which can be divided into three parts. The first part is concerned with the history of Russia from its very beginning until the Tatar conquest in the 13th century and is marked by the relative flowering of society, economy and culture on the one hand, but also by systemic political instability, on the other. It is this instability which causes the sudden end of this period through the Tatar invasion, resulting in Russia becoming dependent on the Golden Horde in 1238. The second part is marked by stagnation and misery and only comes to an end through the defeat of the Tatars in the late 15th and early 16th century, leading to the restoration of full Russian independence: an event marking the beginning of the third period which leads all the way to the reign of Peter I and beyond. We shall see that in Levesque's account this is again a highly ambivalent period, characterised by benign reforms and progress, but also by political mistakes, strife and despotism.

Surveying this history, we need to enquire into the causes and criteria Levesque presented to account for progress, stagnation and decline, and we need to be alert to the frequent comparison the author makes to contemporaneous processes in Europe. Moreover, interweaving our reading of the *Histoire de Russie* with an analysis of Levesque's writings on the historical process in general, will enable us to assess how the relationship between Russian and European history is conceived, and the extent to which Levesque managed to normalise the history of Russia.

The history of medieval Russia: Emulative communication, feudal fragmentation and a barbarian invasion

Levesque's narrative of Russian history starts with Rurik taking over the sovereignty of Novgorod in 862, but already the circumstances of Rurik's ascendancy indicate that there exists a rich history prior to this event. Following Nestor, Levesque contended that Novgorod and Kiev – the two principal *loci* of Russia's early history – were both founded as early as the 5th century by people speaking a Slavonic language. Acknowledging that we can know only very little about the histories of these towns prior to the 9th century, he still found enough evidence to suggest that Novgorod had by then already become powerful and rich, holding other towns tributary and engaging in considerable commerce with the peoples living along the Baltic coast and, possibly, even with Constantinople.³⁵⁰ Politically, this flourishing city was a free republic; a constitution favourable to its commercial and enterprising spirit but inherently unstable and liable to default into anarchy.

It was internal dissensions and the concomitant threat of foreign domination that led the citizens of Novgorod to send a delegation to the Varangian Rus' across the Baltic Sea to plea for a force capable of offering protection against their enemies. The Varangian Rurik responded to the call and came to Novgorod in 862 with a considerable army. Even though initially only called as a general and charged with defending and extending the republic's frontiers, Rurik soon usurped sovereign power. Thereby, he initiated a throne remaining in his family until the 16th century, and, by giving the name of his people – Rus' – to the Slavic lands he was about to govern, effectively stands at the beginning of Russian history.³⁵¹

The survey of the pre-history of Russia up to the reign of Rurik in Novgorod already contains all the themes that will guide Levesque all the way to the Tatar conquest in the 13th century: the political question about the location of sovereign authority in the state and the potential for disastrous turmoil this question entails;

³⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 44-6, 56-60. See also Pierre Charles Levesque, 'Mémoire sur la Pravda Russkaja publié par André Mazon et Michel Laran', *Revue des Etudes Slaves* 41, no. 1-4 (1962), p. 31.

³⁵¹ HDR, pp. 60-6.

the gradual expansion of Russia's borders and its commerce; and the existence of ancient relations between Russia and its neighbours and the considerable potential such relations possess to act as engines for material and cultural progress.

The expansion of Russia's territory by means of conquest already commenced with Rurik, but got underway in earnest under his immediate successors. Oleg, acting as regent to Rurik's filial successor, was the first in a long succession of early Russian rulers engaged in aggressive wars that led to the gradual acquisition of many towns and lands: especially of Kiev and large parts of the Ukraine in the South, Belarus in the West and towards the Black Sea in the South.³⁵² Even though Levesque rejected the notion that military prowess was a quality a historian should judge commendable,³⁵³ he nevertheless admitted that warfare and conquest have considerable potential to lead to progress. In fact, the conquest of new lands went hand-in-hand in Russia's early history with the construction of new towns, increases in population, the colonisation and fertilisation of formerly uncultivated land; activities that rendered the state richer and stronger.³⁵⁴

Levesque's discussion of early Russian conquests also reveals a second and much more important method by which warfare can contribute to development. This method operates if a relatively undeveloped, barbarian people engages in armed conflict with a much more civilised opponent. In the context of Russia's early history it was exemplified by the various Russian raids on Constantinople – the last remnant of the great Roman civilisation. Although initially only undertaken as a form of barbarian brigandage with the aim of bringing rich spoils back home, simple plunder and warfare was soon supplemented, if not completely replaced, by reciprocal and peaceful means of communication.³⁵⁵

Levesque illustrated the process of this transition most succinctly in the course of his discussion of the reign of Vladimir I, who converted Russia to Greek Christianity in 988. Dissatisfied with the primitive cult so far followed by his people, he sent delegations to the Bulgares (Islam), Germany (Latin Christianity)

³⁵² See, for instance, *ibid.*, pp. 67-73, 102-5, 116-21, 155-7, 294-8.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-4.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 134-5, 288-90, 298.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-9, 83-9.

and Constantinople (Greek Christianity) to learn about the different religions followed by his neighbours.³⁵⁶ Having been impressed by the pomp of the Greek ritual, he decided to convert his country to the religion of Constantinople. However, still a barbarian he did this in a barbarian way: too fierce to ask the Greek emperor for any favours, he attacked Constantinople in order to extort the priests, books and religious images needed to effect the conversion.³⁵⁷ If the methods employed to plant Christianity in Russia were in Levesque's eyes barbarian, Vladimir's reign constitutes nevertheless the starting point of a fruitful and non-violent process of diffusion of civilised Byzantine culture in Russia. Already Vladimir himself followed up the barbarian conversion by much softer means of civilisation by inviting Greek architects, artisans and teachers into his own country in order to embellish towns, palaces and churches, and to start the process of enlightenment by planting the seeds of Greek learning in his country.³⁵⁸ This project was emulated by his successors, and especially by Yaroslav I whose educational establishments, efforts to translate Greek books into Russian, and promotion of the fine arts through the importation of Greek painters find Levesque's unqualified approval.³⁵⁹

This switch from the zero-sum game of warfare and plunder to a state of mutually beneficial reciprocity generated through treaties and the continuous exchange of products and ideas is central to Levesque's conception of history. It is not only responsible for moving forward medieval Russian history, but constitutes the principal agent of progress in any history; an argument made explicit in his two theoretical works on the historical process: *L'homme moral* and *L'homme pensant*.³⁶⁰ Both works are principally concerned with providing a conjectural explanation for human beings' passage from a state of pure nature, or savagery, to one of civilisation, and engage closely, if only implicitly, with the account Rousseau provided of this transition in his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité*.³⁶¹

³⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 122-5.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 125-8.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., p.135.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 161-3.

³⁶⁰ HM, HP.

³⁶¹ *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité*, in Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, pp. 111-237.

Indeed, Levesque's conception of the initial savage state is identical to Rousseau's. Just as Rousseau had done, he described primordial human beings as living in complete isolation and in habitual inactivity unless pressed by hunger or, periodically, by an impetuous desire to procreate. If not activated by such needs of primary necessity, savage man has no interests, desires or appetites and peacefully languishes in a state in which neither language, ideas nor industry exist.³⁶² Levesque further concurred with Rousseau that man's savage existence may have lasted for a very long time and came only to an end through fortuitous accidents – some natural catastrophe which enclosed a sufficient number of savages in a small space thereby rendering social contact more probable. Without such a natural revolution, Levesque argued, human beings would never have developed: propagating only very slowly and with no need or desire for interaction, human beings could have lived in brutish isolation forever.³⁶³

Levesque's account of the transformations human beings undergo once they begin to socialise, was again taken from Rousseau: pressed closer together and with subsistence becoming sparse, primordial man's complete independence is replaced by a need to co-operate and communicate. The invention of a language is the first result of this need, which itself produces a psychological revolution with dramatic consequences: being able to communicate with his fellow human beings, primordial man's *amour de soi*, which is exclusively directed towards the self and its preservation, is supplemented by a feeling of *amour-propre*, directing man's concerns towards the outside world and the goal of attaining social recognition.³⁶⁴ Whilst Levesque continued to follow Rousseau's account of the principal stages of development after the birth of the feeling of *amour de soi*, he arrived at a very different assessment: whilst Rousseau went on to show how an increasingly overblown sense of *amour-propre* unleashes in social man a will to dominate over others, leading to a history of increasing corruption and dehumanisation, Levesque joined Voltaire and Diderot and sought to demonstrate how the

³⁶² HM, pp. 5-15; HP, pp. 6-12. Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, esp. pp. 134-44.

³⁶³ HM, pp. 15-16, 22-4. Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, esp. p. 162.

³⁶⁴ HM, pp. 17-19, 202-22; HP, pp. 20-9, 146-7. Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, esp. pp. 146-51 (development of language), 173-7 (development of *amour-propre*).

ambitions generated through *amour-propre* stand at the basis of all human progress.

Most importantly, social man increases his needs, thereby developing new desires. Given that savage man only knows the needs of first necessity - subsistence and procreation – his desires are strictly limited. Social man, on the contrary, surrounded by his fellows and in communication with them, increases his potential needs dramatically. Driven by his *amour-propre*, all the possessions of his neighbours become targets of his own desires and thereby objects of emulation. Therefore, once an increase in population and related scarcity have driven one man to invent a new means of subsistence – and Levesque thought that savage hunter-gathering was first supplemented by husbandry and later agriculture - this invention is rapidly imitated by his fellow human.³⁶⁵ Pastoralism and agriculture, in turn, herald the beginning of personal property, which provides another imperious spur to human ambitions, activity and emulation: to the desire to satisfy the needs of first necessity is added an ambition to satisfy a potentially unlimited number of artificial ones. In order to be able to procure superficialities, man needs to accumulate riches, which, once accomplished, allows for the division of labour, and from thence luxury, the fine arts and the sciences are born.³⁶⁶ The institution of a system of commerce is the last step in this process, and the one most responsible for the acceleration of historical progress. As we can never desire what we do not know, indigenous development within one single community will always be very slow, and, unless some accident suddenly produces new needs, will sooner or later grind to a halt. Commerce, by enabling the communication of needs, desires and industry across communities provides the mechanism by which this limitation can be overcome and, as such, constitutes, the most important engine for historical progress.³⁶⁷

According to Levesque, the Russia of Vladimir I had long left a savage state, without having become fully civilised yet. Indeed, parallel to the process by which human beings become richer and more industrious runs a gradual cultural

³⁶⁵ HP, pp. 105-11. See also Levesque, 'Considérations sur l'homme', pp. 220-4.

³⁶⁶ HM, pp. 24-6, 192-8; HP, pp. 59-62.

³⁶⁷ HP, pp. 146-8. Levesque, 'Considérations sur l'homme', p. 243-4.

transformation by which they become softer and less warlike. It is not Vladimir I's selfish desire to get the religion and riches of Constantinople which make him a barbarian in Levesque's estimation, but the means he employed to achieve it. The means chosen by Vladimir – force - is the response of primitive man to unfulfilled desires; establishing ties of reciprocity, which satisfy the self-interest of both parties, is that of the fully civilised one. It is of course the question of whether this kind of selfish reciprocity works without leading to inhuman domination that fundamentally separates Levesque from Rousseau. Unlike the latter, but similar to Voltaire and, to an extent, Diderot, Levesque answered the question in the affirmative. Increased communication and social interaction will ultimately not only polish people, but also, so he hoped, increase their appreciation of the fact that their own well-being is irrevocably related to the one of their neighbours.³⁶⁸ Vladimir I exemplifies the process by which pure self-interest is at least partly transformed into enlightened self interest: as seen, Vladimir I supplemented his initial, barbarian desire for stealing the riches and pomp of civilised Constantinople with an enlightened interest to start a regular commerce and to build up Russian industry by emulating the Greeks, thereby creating the conditions that could potentially enable the perpetual enjoyment of such riches.

Levesque suggested that the principal mechanism driving early medieval Russian history was that which Voltaire had identified as defining Europe since the Renaissance: emulative communication. Because of its proximity to Byzantium, Russia experienced an activation of this mechanism almost four centuries earlier than Europe, and, as a consequence, quickly started to outpace the continent in terms of economic, social and cultural development. Indeed, the *Histoire de Russie* is shot through with comparisons between the respective states of Russia and European nations during the early medieval period that are consistently in the former's favour. For instance, a description of the pompous reception an embassy of the German emperor Henri IV received at the court of Sviatoslav II in Kiev in the 11th century, is commented on by Levesque in the following manner:

³⁶⁸ HM, pp. 16, 26-33; HP, pp. 79-84, 95-7.

Une telle magnificence répandit l'étonnement dans la cour peu fortunée de Henri IV. Les princes russes devaient étaler un luxe inconnu à l'Allemagne, parce que depuis long-temps ils entretenaient du commerce avec les Grecs, parce qu'ils leur avaient fait la guerre, parce qu'ils leur avaient vendu des secours ...³⁶⁹

One objective of such comparisons was, of course, to counter the widespread perception that medieval Russia was in a state of utter barbarism, and that its history was not worth writing or studying. Whilst such a perception undoubtedly predates Voltaire,³⁷⁰ Levesque's target was very specifically the *Essai sur les mœurs*. The first significant mention that Russia received in this work is when Henri I of France married the daughter of the Russian ruler Yaroslav. Voltaire judged this event as remarkable, but almost impossible to explain, because he believed that barbarian Russia had at that time no relations whatsoever with Europe. However, rather than attempting to arrive at an explanation by questioning his own preconception about Russia's barbarian isolation, Voltaire just dismissed the whole story with a pithy remark: 'Quoi qu'il en soit, Anne, fille d'un Jaraslau, duc inconnu d'une Russie alors ignorée, fut reine de France.'³⁷¹

For Levesque, there is nothing remarkable nor inexplicable about the marriage. In an explicit rebuke to Voltaire, he recalled the relative military strength and riches of Russia during Yaroslav's reign and proceeded to show that the country was far from isolated, but had by then already established blood relations with the courts in Constantinople, Poland, Germany, Norway and Hungary, and was integrated into diplomatic ties spreading from Constantinople to England.³⁷² It was not Russia, in other words, that was ignored then, but Voltaire who was ignorant about what Russia was like in the 12th century.

Moreover, the relatively civilised state of medieval Russia is not only demonstrated by its commerce and conduct of foreign politics, but also reflected in its laws. Levesque found some evidence about the existence of a body of

³⁶⁹ HDR, vol. 1, p. 182.

³⁷⁰ See, for instance, Mervaud and Roberti, *Une infinie brutalité*, pp. 124-5. Roberti contends that in 17th century French literature, Russia was typically perceived as having existed in a static, pre-historic state at least until the reign of Ivan IV in the 15th century.

³⁷¹ ESM, vol. 1, p. 450.

³⁷² HDR, vol. 1, pp. 163-4.

Russian law as early as the peace treaty signed with Constantinople in 912,³⁷³ but his crucial discussion of medieval law occurred in the context of the reign of Yaroslav I, who published a new code of law – the *Russkaja Pravda* - in 1017, which was subsequently revised and extended by his grandson Vladimir II Monomakh.³⁷⁴

The first thing that struck Levesque when reflecting on the *Russkaja Pravda* was that the society receiving the code must have already travelled a long way along the historical road to civilisation.³⁷⁵ Laws only become necessary once social interactions have reached a certain complexity, and the content of the *Russkaja Pravda* proves, Levesque argued, that 11th century Russia was already close to the last societal state: the one of commerce. By constantly drawing comparisons between Yaroslav's legislation and the law of the Franks, Levesque further illustrated medieval Europe's underdevelopment when compared to Russia.

The sophisticated commercial nature of Russia is first of all evident in Yaroslav's criminal code. As murder was punished either by means of vengeance by the injured family or by a pecuniary fine, Levesque could employ the diverging fines stipulated for the murder of members of different classes to arrive at an outline of early medieval Russia's social stratification. Merchants and foreigners comprised the second class right after the high nobility, which provided commerce with a legal protection it did not enjoy in the context of Salic law:

Ce qui distingue la loi d'Yaroslav de celle des Francs, c'est la faveur que la première accorde au commerce, et encore, pour l'utilité du commerce, aux étrangers. Immédiatement après la première classe, venaient les officiers du prince et des boïars, les marchands et les étrangers. Les Francs, uniquement guerriers, ne connaissaient pas ou méprisaient le commerce, et c'était sur le commerce qu'était fondée la fortune de Novgorod. Les habitants offraient un appas aux étrangers pour les attirer dans leur ville, parce que ceux-ci

³⁷³ Ibid., pp. 77-8.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 167-70. In the *Histoire de Russie* itself the discussion of Yaroslav's legislation remains somewhat short and general, probably because Levesque was only familiar with it to the extent that it is mentioned in the Russian chronicles. However, after he had been made aware of an edition of the whole code first published in St. Petersburg in 1772, he undertook a much more detailed exposition in a paper read at the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres in 1804. See Levesque, 'Mémoire sur la Pravda Russkaja'.

³⁷⁵ Levesque, 'Mémoire sur la Pravda Russkaja', pp. 31-2.

apportaient avec eux leurs capitaux, leurs correspondances et leur industries.³⁷⁶

Moreover, the relatively high social standing of artisans, the preference given to the testimony of foreign witnesses at courts of law, and the special protection afforded to foreigners lending money to natives, all provide further evidence that Russia was then an increasingly urban society keen to promote commerce and industry, and always prepared to absorb, and profit from, external influences.³⁷⁷

Despite the commendable legislation introduced for the promotion of industry and commerce, Levesque deplored the low esteem in which agriculture and especially the Russian peasants were held.³⁷⁸ In fact, the Russian situation appears to precisely mirror the one of feudal France:³⁷⁹ with agricultural work held in general contempt, and with many peasants kept in serfdom, the Russian countryside remained in a state of oppression and poverty. However, even in regard to the social and legal standing of the serfs, Levesque found some alleviating features in the Russian context: unlike their French counterparts, Russian serfs remained under the protection of the law. He argued that up until the 17th century, they were at least *de jure* not attached to the glebe, and that all servile labour in medieval Russia was contractual and restricted to a stipulated amount of time after which contracted persons recovered their full liberty.³⁸⁰

With commerce and industry protected and encouraged legally, culturally and socially and a regular communication with civilised Constantinople in place, 11th-century Russia as perceived by Levesque is significantly advanced in comparison with the state of Europe at the same time as presented in Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs*. And yet, in one respect the two accounts coincide: just as Voltaire had done in the European context, Levesque outlined in great detail how a succession of early Russian rulers fatally undermined their own authority through the

³⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 41-2, 51-2.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 57.

³⁷⁹ For Levesque's assessment of French serfdom, see especially Levesque, *La France sous les cinq premiers Valois*, vol. 1, pp. 42-57.

³⁸⁰ Levesque, 'Mémoire sur la Pravda Russkaja', pp. 53-5. See also HDR, vol. 3, pp. 192-4. The only exceptions to contractual serfdom relate to captives made in war and to slaves bought from foreigners. In these cases, Levesque admitted, full, unmitigated, slavery ensued.

granting of fiefs, and how they thereby weakened Russia to such an extent that its emerging civilisation tumbled as soon as it faced its first major military challenge: the Mongol and Tatar incursions occurring from the early 13th century onwards.

According to Levesque's account, the roots of Russian feudalism reach back to the very beginning of the state. After Rurik had taken over the sovereignty of Novgorod and extended its territory, he was in need of support to secure his new dominions against internal opposition and external threats. The solution he found to this problem is the same that the Frankish barbarians employed to manage and fortify their conquest of Europe:³⁸¹ the parcelling up of the conquered territory into fiefs and the distribution of these fiefs among the warrior nobility in exchange for military services.³⁸²

Rurik thereby set an example which was followed by all of his early successors, albeit with one important alteration. According to Levesque, there never developed a feudal warrior nobility in Russia, as the heirs of Rurik's throne divided their dominion among their own princely offspring as appanages in return for military services and homage. Through the further subdivision of the distributed land among the various male heirs to appanaged princes, Russia soon became divided into a host of little quasi-sovereign entities, each headed by a prince from the house of Rurik, leading to a situation where grand prince of Kiev – the formal suzerain over all appanaged territory – soon only held very tenuous authority over the lands outside his own personal demesne.³⁸³

Levesque focused his discussion of Russian feudalism almost exclusively on its military and political implications. We have seen that for Voltaire feudalism also stood at the root of a host of essentially legal, social and economic ills – most prominently all the problems associated with serfdom and lordly justice – and

³⁸¹ Levesque described the establishment of Frankish feudalism in a lot of detail in Levesque, *La France sous les cinq premiers Valois*, vol. 1, pp. 35-74. On the same subject, see also HP, p. 316. For Levesque's understanding of the source of feudal governance, which he found among the barbarians of the Central-Asian steppe, see HDR, vol. 7, pp. 112-13.

³⁸² HDR, vol. 1, pp. 63-4.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8, 136, 171.

Levesque himself agreed with this analysis in the French context.³⁸⁴ However, as has already been indicated above, Levesque did not think that Russian feudalism ever resulted in full-blown serfdom, nor did he find any evidence of systematic usurpation of judicial functions by the appanaged princes. Whilst no explicit reason for such a difference is given in the *Histoire de Russie*, it might well be that Levesque thought that Russia – whose roots, we remember, must be found in commercial and republican Novgorod – had too strong a tradition of municipal self-governance³⁸⁵ and of commercial and contractual reciprocity for such perversions to succeed.

And yet, in the final analysis, feudalism was more fatal in Russia than it ever was in France. It was fatal because it weakened the Russian state militarily and politically at a time when the geopolitical situation demanded strong and vigorous state action. In Levesque's account, feudalism's propensity to undermine the state is in a sense paradoxical and is framed in the language of interest. On the one hand, feudalism was instituted as a means to secure the state by getting the principal members interested in its survival by granting them large, dependent fiefs as military benefits.³⁸⁶ And yet, feudalism generated forces turning a vassal's interest away from the promotion of the good of the whole to the protection of his own particular fief. The more the land becomes parcelled out into small semi-independent fiefs, the smaller the authority and power of the principal suzerain, and therefore, the bigger the temptation for a vassal to attempt to increase the size, power and standing of his own domain even if this should happen at the expense of the strength of the whole.³⁸⁷ This is exactly what Levesque saw happening in early medieval Russia: rather than helping to protect Russia's borders against external threats, the appanaged princes soon started an endless series of petty wars among themselves as well as against the grand prince of Kiev, in attempts to extend their respective spheres of influence. Even worse, they invited Russia's neighbours to take part in their internal quarrels as allies, thereby providing

³⁸⁴ Levesque, *La France sous les cinq premiers Valois*, vol. 1, pp. 90-115; Levesque, 'L'éloge historique de l'abbé de Mably', p. 37.

³⁸⁵ On Russia's system of municipal government, see especially, HDR, vol. 3, p. 185-6.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 63-4. See also Levesque, *La France sous les cinq premiers Valois*, vol. 1, pp. 40-1, 68.

³⁸⁷ HDR, vol. 1, pp. 174-7. See also Levesque, *La France sous les cinq premiers Valois*, vol. 1, pp. 64-6, 71-4.

ultimate proof that the interest for which feudalism was instituted – to secure Russia militarily against external threats – had become perverted.³⁸⁸

Apart from outlining how Russia was gradually getting richer and more civilised during the early medieval period, Levesque thus also offered a parallel narrative showing how the constant wars between the appanaged princes gradually destroyed the very basis which enabled progress in the first place. Indeed, if civilisation is dependent on interaction and communication leading to a reciprocal arrangement of interests, feudalism inevitably leads to fragmentation and to the clash of interests. Ultimately, Levesque argued, the centrifugal forces generated by feudalism were stronger than the unifying ones and ruined the state.

The moment of fatal crisis for the Russian state came in 1237 when a part of the enormous Mongol-Tatar army assembled by Genghis-Khan – the Golden Horde commanded by Bati - invaded Southern Russia. Levesque was in no doubt that had Russia been united under one strong sovereign, it could have stemmed back the barbarian incursions. However, divided into multiple parts all following their own interests, Russia became easy prey for the invaders, who, after a succession of devastating incursions erected their capital in Sarai on Russia's southern frontier. From here the Golden Horde was able to keep Russia in submission for the next two and a half centuries.³⁸⁹

The period of Tatar domination was described by Levesque as one of Russian depression. Whilst the Golden Horde never formally conquered Russia nor settled widely in its territory, it effectively put the country under a form of vassalage requiring its princes to pay homage and tributes to the reigning khan at Sarai. Crucially, the Tatars further contributed to Russia's fragmentation. Securing Russian dependence through a politics of divide and rule, the khans were successful in keeping the flames of discord between the princes burning, thereby preventing Russia from ever assembling the required strength to shake off its yoke.³⁹⁰ The loss of independence, and the concomitant state of military and

³⁸⁸ HDR, vol. 1, pp. 214-15, 228-32.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 88-110.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 105, 112, 159.

political weakness, also put a sudden halt on the civilising mechanisms that had hitherto been in operation in Russia. Cut off from any communication with the disintegrating Byzantine Empire in the South by the Golden Horde, and increasingly losing its Western territories to Lithuania, Poland, Sweden and the Teutonic Knights – a crumbling process most graphically illustrated by the loss of Russia's old capital Kiev to Lithuania in 1320 - Russia was left isolated from any civilising outside influences.³⁹¹

The way Levesque conceived the Tatar subjection of Russia was highly original as it did not match any established conceptions of what happens when a barbarian people subjugates a more civilised one. Enlightenment thought offered two main models to explain the historical effects of barbarian invasions, both of which were employed in Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs*. The first model is based on the experience of the fall of the Western Roman Empire. It recounts how a declining civilisation is overrun and completely destroyed by a barbarian influx and outlines how the barbarians themselves subsequently become civilised. The second model is based on the Chinese experience and the frequent invasions and subjugations of the Empire by nomadic tribes of the Central Asian steppe. In the Chinese context, Voltaire believed, the ancient civilisation was never destroyed, but the invading barbarians were themselves quickly civilised by becoming Sinicised.³⁹² The first model attempts to explain the historical dynamics of rapid cultural destruction followed by slow development; the second accounts for perceived Chinese historical stasis in which an unchanging civilisation is constantly reconstructed in its original form even after the shock of a barbarian conquest.

Whilst Levesque adopted both models himself to explain aspects of European and Chinese history,³⁹³ he did not consider either appropriate to explain the Tatar conquest of Russia: in his account, the emerging Russian civilisation was neither destroyed by the barbarians nor did the barbarians themselves become civilised. Likewise, the conquest did not herald a new period of historical dynamism nor

³⁹¹ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 165-6; vol. 3, pp. 161-2.

³⁹² On Voltaire's perception of the interaction between Chinese and Tatar history, see ESM, vol. 2, pp. 394-6, 785-91. On the same question in 18th-century thought more generally, see Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 4, esp. pp. 100-1.

³⁹³ See esp., HP, pp. 314-15.

prolong eternal stasis: according to Levesque, Russia had already been historically dynamic before the conquest and stasis only persisted as long as the subjugation lasted. In his eyes, therefore, the Tatar conquest of Russia points to a third possible model: one in which a civilising country's development is temporarily put on hold through a barbarian incursion, and taken up again as soon as this external impediment to progress has been removed.

Such an account of the conquest also constitutes a break with Montesquieu's view of Russian history, which, as we have seen, Levesque found at least partly appealing. The fundamental disagreement lay with Montesquieu's contention that Russia had taken on the manners and mores of its conquerors during the time of the subjugation; a claim which of course strongly implied that Russia had become Orientalised, which in turn meant for Montesquieu that it had taken on some of the cultural characteristics of despotism. According to Levesque, however, not much happened at all during the time of Russia's subjugation. He of course admitted that there was some cultural exchange between the Tatar masters and their Russian subjects, and that the latter did take on some habits and customs of the former.³⁹⁴ But he generally described such cultural transformations as being limited, accidental, and, fundamentally, unimportant. The time of the subjugation really was one of temporary historical stasis: of course there were internal dissension, petty wars and the loss of territory to neighbours – events described in much detail in the *Histoire de Russie* – but culturally, economically and socially Russia just stagnated.

The idea that the Tatar conquest brought about a period of temporarily arrested development allowed Levesque to account for Russia's relative underdevelopment when compared to Europe from the 14th century onwards. In fact, the period of Russian stagnation was almost exactly synchronous with the time when European progress was accelerated significantly. Levesque regarded the crusades as the crucial, if paradoxical, turning point in European history; an event marking the end of the period of unmitigated barbarism and the beginning of the gradual civilisation of the continent. Following arguments we have already found in

³⁹⁴ HDR, vol. 3, pp. 199-200.

Voltaire, Levesque contended that the crusades led to the crumbling of European feudalism as many crusading nobles had to sell their domains back to their kings. This process coincided with the establishment of free towns and, importantly, increased communication and commerce with civilised Constantinople and with the Arabs in Spain and in the holy land.³⁹⁵ Subjugated Russia, however, did not share any of those developments. As seen, feudal fragmentation increased during the Tatar period, and the country's only open channel of communication was with its barbarian masters in the South, and with underdeveloped Lithuania and Poland to the West.

At the same time, this conception of the conquest also enabled Levesque to establish a historical framework allowing him to normatively judge post-Tatar Russian history. Most importantly, it implied that Russian despotism was a truly modern phenomenon, taking root at the time when the country emerged from the yoke, rather than having been introduced by the conquerors themselves or having been established in Russia's pre-Tatar past. Moreover, given that all the building blocks for civilisation were already in place before the conquest, and given that the conquest only temporally interrupted the flowering of Russian civilisation rather than having substantially subverted it, Levesque was in a position to condemn all manifestations of modern despotism as unnecessary for Russia's development. Indeed, we will encounter in Levesque's account of post-Tatar Russian history a narrative of reform and civilisation which has no need for enlightened despots such as Peter I and Catherine II, thereby constituting a more consistent attack on the politics of despotism than we have encountered in either Diderot's or even Montesquieu's writings on Russia.

³⁹⁵ HP, pp. 321-5.

The history of modern Russia: The despotic and the moderate road to civilisation

This history of the renaissance of Russian progress commences with a role-reversal between the Russians and the Tatars. Whilst the conquest had been made possible through Tatar unification vis-à-vis Russian fragmentation, the end of the yoke was prepared by an ever-increasing disunity within the Golden Horde. Dissensions among the Tatars about the question of succession started as early as the mid-13th century, reached a climax a century later when the Golden Horde was effectively split into four semi-independent Khanates, and came to a fatal conclusion when Tamerlane defeated the Horde in 1395; a shock from which it would never recover.³⁹⁶

In Levesque's account, the fragmentation and decline of the Golden Horde was matched by simultaneous attempts by a series of Russian grand princes to increase their own power. A process started by Dmitri IV who successfully enlarged his own dominion through negotiation and warfare and, in turn, reduced the number, and the influence, of appanaged princes.³⁹⁷ His example was vigorously followed by three of his successors: Ivan III, Vasily IV and Ivan IV.³⁹⁸ For all these grand princes, such a centralisation of power was merely a means to an end: to focus the strength of Russia against its common Tatar over-lord. A project soon put into practice with Dmitri defeating a Tatar army in 1380, followed by Ivan III completely destroying the Golden Horde in Sarai, and Ivan IV breaking the last remnants of Tatar power by forcing the Khanates of Kazan, Astrakhan, and the Crimea into submission.³⁹⁹

With full independence restored, and the power of the appanaged princes broken, Russia was again put into a situation in which the grand princes could promote the common good of the country rather than having to devote all their energy to fight the particularised pretensions of the appanaged princes. Levesque could turn,

³⁹⁶ HDR, vol. 2, pp. 128-31, 220-3, 264-9.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 230-8.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 317-19, pp. 374-5; vol. 3, pp. 166-9.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 240-5, 339-43; vol. 3, pp. 52-8.

therefore, to a narrative of progress in which reforming sovereigns protect and encourage commerce, industry and the arts and increase the power, strength and riches of the state. This narrative spans the whole of Russian history from Dmitri IV via Peter I to the reign of Catherine II.

The aim of the grand princes' reforming activities is uniform throughout the period: to enable Russia to catch up with the development of Europe by getting the engine of civilisation running again. As soon as Ivan III had destroyed the Golden Horde, Levesque argued, he successfully attempted to open Russia's channel of communication with the outside world. However, with Constantinople having fallen to the Turks, he turned principally to the West rather than to the South as had been usual in Russia's past. His first act in this respect was to re-establish diplomatic relations with the German Empire, the papacy, Poland, Venice and Denmark. Ivan III supplemented this endeavour with a conscious policy of importing the fruits of Europe's recent progress into Russia, thereby sowing the seeds for a renaissance of Russian industry, sciences and arts.⁴⁰⁰

Ivan III's project was followed by all his successors, and Levesque outlined in detail how Russia's temporary isolation was gradually broken from the early 16th century onwards. The various efforts to recruit foreign officers to accelerate the professionalisation of the army, Ivan IV's promotion of commerce with the main European powers by means of opening a new port and market in Archangelsk, his efforts to import English artisans, doctors and teachers into Russia, and Alexei translating various foreign books on the sciences and the arts and kick-starting a new trading relationship with China, are only a few examples Levesque offered to indicate the post-Tatar czars' desire to get the virtuous cycle of communication and emulation started again.⁴⁰¹

Thereby, Levesque of course attempted to counter the perception that Peter I's opening up towards Europe was an unprecedented event in modern Russian history; an argument made explicit in his reflection on Boris Godunov's policy of

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 364.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 73, 254, vol. 4, pp. 26, 105 (recruitment of foreign officers); vol. 3, pp. 154-5, 161-2 (Ivan IV); vol. 4, 103-6 (Alexei).

sending young Russian nobles to Sweden and Germany for their education during the early 17th century:

Animé pour les connaissances utiles et agréables, du même zèle que marqua depuis Pierre I, il fit partir pour les pays étrangers seize jeunes gens d'une bonne noblesse, pour y faire des études encore inconnues dans leur pays.⁴⁰²

However, Peter had not only a host of predecessors in regard to the promotion of commercial and cultural exchanges with European neighbours, but also in regard to internal reforms and modernisation. Interwoven with the description of how Russia opened up to the outside world, the *Histoire de Russie* related how the pre-Petrine reforming czars endeavoured to modernise their country's social, economic and legal infrastructure, thus attempting to ensure that the assorted imports fell onto a fertile indigenous ground. A short consideration of the kind of reforms Levesque specifically emphasised is instructive, as it reveals his conviction that most of Peter's own reforming activities were far from unprecedented in Russia. Ivan IV's and Alexei I's legislative projects; the establishment of new industries across Russia throughout the period; the construction of a merchant fleet under Alexei; or Ivan IV's and Feodor III's attempts to establish a meritocracy by making social distinction dependent on service rendered to the state rather than on birth, all stand witness to the fact that Peter, far from being a creator *ex nihilo*, could emulate models of reform already firmly established in Russia.⁴⁰³

Whilst these czars all pursued the same end – the civilisation of Russia – they followed divergent models of reform. Indeed, Levesque argued that throughout modern Russian history two very different approaches to political reform are in operation, which are distinguished both in regard to the agents involved in the articulation of the reforming project as well as in their modes of implementation. One approach, labelled by Levesque as 'despotic' or 'tyrannical', is exclusively driven by the sovereign. It is the ruler's will alone that determines the content of reform, and once he has made up his mind, he proceeds towards swift execution.

⁴⁰² Ibid., vol. 3, p. 239-40.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., pp. 152-3, vol. 4, p. 45-6 (legislation); vol. 3, p. 157, vol. 4, pp. 106-7 (establishment of industries); vol. 4, p. 106 (merchant fleet); vol. 4, pp. 125-7 (service nobility).

Any resistance to the ruler's reforming will, which, because unregulated, may well aim at a radical overhaul of existing states of affairs, is typically answered by a violent response. By contrast, rulers following a moderate or gradual approach, involve the nation in the formulation of reforming policies. Their reforming wills are moderated through continuous efforts to communicate with their people by means of councillors or assemblies. Their reforms typically proceed at a slower pace than the ones of the despots, because they will only act once they are satisfied that the proposed alterations have been understood to be beneficial by the nation at large. Rather than quickly and comprehensively altering existing institutions, they will change them gradually, and almost imperceptibly, so as to avoid violent upheaval. According to Levesque, only the latter approach can ever lead to substantive and sustainable progress, and his history of modern Russia is to a large extent devised to prove this proposition.

In the *Histoire de Russie* the moderate approach is most firmly associated with the pre-Petrine Romanov czars, ruling Russia from 1613 until Peter I's ascendancy in 1689. It is particularly the reign of Alexei that provided Levesque with a paradigmatic case study in the politics of moderate reforms. Levesque was particularly impressed by Alexei's attempt to update Ivan IV's code of law. Tellingly, he did not give any details about the content of the new legislation, but focused his discussion almost exclusively on the mechanisms the czar employed to pass the new laws:

Il fit concourir à leur rédaction [i.e. the new laws] une assemblée des hommes les plus considérables de ses Etats. Sans doute on peut relever bien des fautes dans ce corps de législation. Mais ne refusons pas un sentiment d'amour et de respect à la mémoire d'un prince qui, lorsque les lumières de l'esprit pénétraient à peine dans ses Etats, voulut donner à ses peuples des lois fondées sur leur situation, sur leurs idées religieuses, sur leurs mœurs, sur leurs usages, sur la forme de leur gouvernement⁴⁰⁴

By commending Alexei's attempt to legislate via a national assembly, Levesque did not primarily make a constitutional argument. Although he believed that Russia had a long tradition of national interventions in the legislative and

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., vol. 4, p. 45.

executive functions of government reaching as far back as 9th century republican Novgorod, he never portrayed such interventions as constituting a fundamental law limiting the power of the czars. The relative power of the czars had vacillated throughout Russian history, and by the time Alexei took over the reins of government it was absolute. Since the end of the Tatar yoke, the czars had increasingly amassed authority by breaking the power of the appanaged princes, limiting the privileges of towns such as Novgorod, and increasing the service obligations of the boyar nobility. Levesque generally approved of this process of centralisation of power.⁴⁰⁵ In his view, Alexei's method of legislation was not commendable because it followed constitutional precedent, but because it was politically prudent.⁴⁰⁶

There are two main reasons why such a way of proceeding is advantageous. First, by engaging the nation in major reforms, the potential for resistance is considerably lessened. As long as people believe that they have a say in decisions that affect their lives – even if their say is, in actual fact, more symbolic rather than substantive – they are far less likely to revolt.⁴⁰⁷ Secondly, and more importantly, ruling through assemblies or councils provides sovereigns with an important feedback mechanism, ensuring that their reforms are appropriate to the country's situation and will be understood as a salutary improvement by the nation at large.⁴⁰⁸ Indeed, we shall see in the following, that Levesque approved of Alexei's project to introduce a code of law that was founded on the country's situation, mores, habits and ideas, because he fundamentally believed that radical reform projects leading to unprecedented historical departures cannot work.

It is precisely this idea that only slow and gradual reforms lead to desired ends which Levesque stresses when comparing Alexei's reign with the one of Peter I:

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 167-70.

⁴⁰⁶ See also Levesque's criticism of the abbé de Mably who is taken to task for suggesting that a historian should always assess political regimes and historical events according to their conformity with certain fundamental, natural and unchanging principles. Levesque argued that this amounts to injecting a highly speculative metaphysics into history and prevents a historian from undertaking his proper task: to narrate and pragmatically assess events as they unfold historically. Levesque, 'L'éloge historique de l'abbé de Mably', p. 72.

⁴⁰⁷ HDR, vol. 4, pp. 60-1, 167-8.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 45-6.

Enfin, Alexis a commencé à lever un coin du voile qui tenait ses sujets dans les ténèbres. Pierre I, son fils, a voulu le déchirer d'un seul coup. C'était le moyen d'être plus ébloui qu'éclairé de la lumière dont ses yeux et ceux de ses peuples n'étaient pas encore préparés à soutenir l'éclat.⁴⁰⁹

Peter, in other words, should have followed the path traced by his father. However, rather than gradually enlightening and civilising Russia as Alexei did, he emulated a very different kind of ruler: Ivan IV.

It is important to stress that in Levesque's account moderates such as Alexei and despots such as Ivan and Peter share the same intentions: both types of rulers want the good of their country, and, as seen above, the kind of reforms undertaken by all modern Russian czars are in fact very similar, and, in terms of their motivations, praise-worthy. The problem with the latter type of ruler arises from their ill-informed belief that it is possible to rule well by consulting their own wills only:

Il [i.e. Peter I] avait l'amour de tout ce qui est bien: mais trop souvent emporté par l'impétuosité de son caractère, il fit mal le bien, parce qu'il voulut le faire trop vite; trop souvent il rendit le bien même odieux, en employant, pour l'opérer, des moyens violens réservés à la tyrannie. Il s'est acquis l'estime de ceux qui n'ont considéré que ses intentions, et le blâme de ceux qui ne se sont arrêtés qu'à ses moyens d'exécution. Il est approuvé de ceux à qui ne déplaisent pas les grandes secousses et les réformes rapides: il a pour censeurs ceux qui sont persuadés qu'elles sont toujours du mal, et que le bien qu'elles opèrent manque de solidité, parce qu'on n'a pas eu le temps d'en préparer et d'en affermir les fondemens.⁴¹⁰

Rulers like Peter and Ivan 'fit mal le bien' because they were too convinced that they themselves knew the remedies to all the ills of their country, and rejecting all advice or moderating influences, imposed them on the nation violently and impetuously against all difficulties or opposition.⁴¹¹ This, according to Levesque,

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 108.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., vol. 5, p. 194.

⁴¹¹ The similarity between Peter I and Ivan IV in regard to their desire to impose their will on their nation whatever the cost and against all opposition, is maybe best illustrated in Levesque's description of the fate of their respective sons: Alexei and Dmitri. Indeed, both rulers effectively killed their sons and Levesque pointed to the same motive for their actions: both believed their sons to be in league with parties opposing their own reforms. Too proud to be able to accept that

almost inevitably results in two sets of problems – resistance and mistakes – which, ultimately, meant that the ends for which the reforms were undertaken in the first place, were never attained.

Both these problems are neatly exemplified in Levesque’s account of Peter’s attempt to impose European clothing fashion and his related endeavour to ban his subjects from wearing beards. Like Voltaire and Montesquieu, Levesque believed that this reform was undertaken in order to increase communication between Russians and Europeans by decreasing cultural differences.⁴¹² However, he found at least three faults in the manner Peter went about achieving this goal. The first objection is Montesquieuian: indeed, Levesque concurred with the author of the *De l’esprit des lois*, that it is bad policy to change manners and mores through laws:

Il est des usages qu’un prince doit abandonner aux caprices de ses sujets, ou ne changer que par l’influence que ses goûts, ses mœurs, ses manières ont sur les manières, les mœurs, les goûts de ses peuples: tels sont les usages qui ne portent que sur la forme des vêtements, sur celle de la barbe ou de la chevelure; et c’est pour réformer de tels usages que Pierre I employa tout la rigueur de la puissance absolue.⁴¹³

Moreover, this particular instance of the deployment of absolute power to change manners was all the more deplorable, since there was simply no need for a reform at all. Completely detached from his own people, and surrounded by an assorted group of foreigners, rather than the representatives of the nation that had advised his father Alexei, Peter naïvely believed that everything that is progressive comes from Europe and, conversely, that everything that is backward is Russian.⁴¹⁴ Therefore, he failed to notice that clothing habits and similar usages have simply no effect on the quality and quantity of cross-cultural communication. Interaction with foreigners may or may not happen, independently from whether people wear robes or grow long beards. In fact Levesque argued that in Catherinean Russia, foreign merchants deal by preference with Raskolniki – old believers who, among

there might be cause for discontentment, and unable to bear the idea that their respective successors might deviate from the path they had chosen, they employed ultimate violence against their own offspring, to see their will fulfilled. See *ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 110-14; vol. 5, pp. 1-69.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, vol. 5, pp. 142-3.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 141, 158-9.

other things, have successfully resisted Peter's reform – because of their integrity and honesty and in spite of their beards.⁴¹⁵

However, the argument that customs such as clothing habits do not matter much at all, does not mean that the reform was pointless but otherwise neutral in the sense that an indifferent custom was exchanged for an equally indifferent one. On the contrary, for Levesque it was a telling instance of Peter's wider project of radical and rapid reform; a project that led to a cultural, social, and political transformation of such magnitude and swiftness that Russia was in danger of losing all its moorings that provide for a measure of stability. Indeed, Levesque provided his readers with many more examples of the czar rapidly abolishing traditional institutions without prior enquiry whether a change was in fact needed and without consideration of likely outcomes. For instance, he attacked Peter's institution of the senate as a replacement for the traditional council of boyars, and, particularly, for giving members of the new senate new, Europeanised titles. Although such a change of titles is in itself indifferent, two consequences ensued: first of all it alienated the nobles who were jealous of their old titles. Secondly, and more importantly, it destroyed the respect of the nation as a whole for the institution, because, Levesque claimed, people always have a superstitious respect for old things and like to examine and censure what is new.⁴¹⁶ Likewise, the abolition of the office of the patriarch, and its replacement with the religious synod was in Levesque's eyes another instance of Peter ruthlessly and foolishly abolishing an ancient institution and replacing it with a new structure whose authority and role was simply not understood by the population at large.⁴¹⁷ The cumulative outcome of such and similar reforms was disastrous:

Le prince aurait-il dû toucher si légèrement aux anciennes coutumes? Ne devait-il pas craindre le danger de faire connaître à ses sujets l'inconstance? Les nations sont gouvernées non-seulement par les lois, mais par des usages qui tiennent lieu de lois et qui sont encore plus sacrés, parce qu'étant l'ouvrage de la nation entière qui tend sans cesse à les maintenir, ils lui sont plus chers que les ouvrages des législateurs. Oter brusquement à un peuple ses usages, c'est lui ôter ses lois mêmes; c'est faire que rien n'est plus respectable pour lui, que

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., vol. 4, p. 469.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 421-2.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., vol. 5, pp. 94-7.

rien n'a plus sur lui d'empire, si ce n'est la crainte. Dès-lors, il n'est plus rien de solide, rien de fondamental; les lois ne dureront qu'un jour, et, au lieu de coutumes, on n'aura que des caprices.⁴¹⁸

The language Levesque employs here – i.e. that the Russia Peter left behind was predominantly governed by ‘fear’ and ‘caprice’ – is adopted from Montesquieu’s critique of despotism.⁴¹⁹ Using absolute power wrongly, Peter had helped to create a despotic regime, in which a sovereign’s will, which may well be capricious, is directly imposed on the population. With all moderating institutions abolished or replaced by rootless and therefore toothless ones, only fear of punishment can be employed to keep the population in check. However, constant and ruthless attacks on habits and institutions that the people hold sacred will inevitably lead to popular discontent, which, in the absence of any channels of communication between the sovereign and the people, can only be expressed by violent resistance. Despotism, in other words, constantly threatens to default into anarchy.⁴²⁰

And yet, it would be wrong to believe that Levesque exclusively blamed Peter for having created a despotic regime in Russia. In actual fact, he believed that Peter had simply intensified a trend in Russian history that had been set in motion during the reign of Ivan IV. And he outlined how a second defining element of despotism – the servile disposition of the population – was the unintended outcome of a whole series of political mistakes, caused by the imperious desire to reform too quickly and by too violent means.

Levesque’s account of how contractual serfdom was transformed into a system in which peasants are eternally attached to the glebe with no hope of ever improving their status, is particularly revealing in this respect. The transformation happened during the reign of Feodor I, but its causes must be found in the previous reign of Ivan IV. The latter’s ambitious project to quickly modernise his country, and especially the violent means he employed to squash any opposition to this quest, led to turmoil and upheaval, resulting in many peasants leaving their traditional

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 144-5.

⁴¹⁹ This critique is most prominently articulated in *De l'esprit des lois*, see Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, esp. pt. 1, bk. 3, chaps. 8-9, pp. 258-9.

⁴²⁰ HDR, vol. 4, pp. 333-4, vol. 5, pp. 94-6.

abodes and therefore in a general depopulation of the Russian countryside. In order to stem this process, Levesque contended, Feodor found no other means than to legally attach the Russian peasants to their glebe.⁴²¹ This loss of liberty on the part of the peasants was further exacerbated by Peter's tax reform. By taxing noble landowners according to the number of serfs they possess, Peter effectively introduced a form of chattel slavery.⁴²²

The enslavement of the peasants was for Levesque merely the most dramatic example of a more general trend discernible in modern Russian history: the spreading of a servile mentality across all social strata, and Ivan and Peter were again portrayed as the major, if unintentional, authors of this phenomenon. As seen, in Levesque's view historical progress is fuelled by free exchanges and communication between people that can lead to competition and thereby to potentially unlimited emulative cycles. He also believed that both Ivan and Peter aimed to accelerate the operation of such cycles. Hence, the opening up towards Europe, and hence the attempt to increase internal emulation by creating meritocratic institutions such as Peter's table of ranks, designed to ensure that talent and service to the state rather than birth were rewarded.

And yet at the same time, both czars' style of rule actively undermined the attainment of such ends. Both tried to command emulation and the flowering of talent, not realising that these are essentially free and voluntary activities. By using excessive force to punish any opposition to their respective wills or to castigate the slightest mistakes, and by constantly increasing the service obligations of the population, they instituted a slavish climate of fear and compulsion. Such a climate is, of course, diametrically opposed to a situation susceptible to a flourishing of talent and genius through voluntary interactions and competition. Put differently, rather than providing individuals with the liberty to follow their inclination, and thereby with an opportunity to release their potential, which in turn might provide a spur to others, they shackled their subjects with

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 106-7, 281-2.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, vol. 5, pp. 91-2, and esp., 154-5.

terror, fear and obligations, thereby rendering them less active, communicative and emulative.⁴²³

It is exactly this contradiction between end – liberty – and means – command – that Levesque stressed in his final, very negative, assessment of Peter's reign. Rather than having furthered the civilisation of Russia, Peter, by following erroneous means of reform, may well have undermined progress:

Il [i.e. Peter I] aggravait leur [i.e. Russians] servitude, en leur ordonnant de ressembler à des hommes libres; il les chargeait de chaînes, et voulait les voir voler dans la carrière des sciences et des arts. On est étonné de leurs progrès, et l'on dit qu'ils ont été civilisés par Pierre I: je dirais plutôt qu'il leur a montré la route, et qu'ils y sont entrés d'eux-mêmes malgré le gouvernement de ce prince. Les talens doivent être encouragés; on les détruit quand on leur commande.⁴²⁴

Apart from deploring Peter's despotic approach to political reform, Levesque returned here to a concern we have encountered throughout the *Histoire de Russie*: the idea that Russia had been gradually moving towards civilisation for a long time. Consequently, the story of its civilisation cannot be reduced to the reign of Peter as Voltaire had done in the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, but instead needs to be carefully reconstructed from the perspective of the *longue durée*. If this is done, Levesque showed, a complex history emerges marked by both similarities and differences to the ones of Europe in general, and France in particular; histories which Levesque invoked frequently in order to gain a comparative viewpoint on his Russian story. That there should exist marked affinities between these histories is of course to be expected. After all, Levesque conceived all concrete civilising histories as particular instances of the general conjectural process by which natural, savage man is transformed into social, civilised man. This process, we have seen, is primarily driven by the unfolding over time of human beings' communicative potential that acts as the engine for both material progress as well as for the strengthening and softening of social relationships. Differences emerge because of particular historical circumstances that considerably influence the way this generic process unfolds. In order to

⁴²³ Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 17-18, 74-6, 85-8, 181 (Ivan IV); vol. 4, p. 248, vol. 5, pp. 142-3, 155, 162 (Peter).

⁴²⁴ Ibid., vol. 5, p. 137.

explain variations in the histories of civilisation in Europe and Russia, Levesque pointed to divergences in regard to the emergence of feudalism in either context, and more importantly, to the interaction of Russian history with Byzantine and Tatar history; interactions which in turn both accelerated and retarded its progression from isolation to emulative communication when compared to Europe.

According to Levesque, far from being the principal agent in the civilisation of Russia as Voltaire argued, Peter had endangered the further development of his country by his despotic approach to reform. The question remains, however, how Levesque assessed the legacy of Peter's rule. For all we have been told so far, Peter had fatally undermined the potential for emulative communication to occur in Russia, and his reign could potentially be seen as similarly catastrophic as the earlier Tatar conquest – a reign, in other words, with the potential to push Russia from a naturally progressive historical trajectory into yet another period of stasis. However, we shall see that Levesque remained cautiously optimistic about Russia's future despite Peter. In order to be able to fully understand this optimism, we have to turn once again to Levesque's conception of the historical process in general. In particular, we need to look at the role reform plays in this process, and especially how political mistakes and their consequences are conceptualised therein.

The question of political reform is prominently treated both in *L'homme morale* and in *L'homme pensant*.⁴²⁵ Its prominence partly derives from its absolute necessity in the context of a progressive historical process. When a society develops by means of communication and emulation, some of its traditional laws, institutions and habits, which may have been perfectly adequate in the past, will gradually become anachronistic, thereby no longer fulfilling their intended function in the present. Even worse, by becoming ossified traditions, they stand in

⁴²⁵ HM, HP.

contradiction to the present developmental state of a society, and may prevent future progress.⁴²⁶

Whilst periodic reform of ossified traditions, laws and institutions is thus absolutely crucial for development, Levesque stressed throughout the difficulties of reforming well. In particular he was concerned with the ultimate danger inherent in any reform project:

Un tems de réforme est un tems de crise; toute crise est dangereuse, on ne sait pas quelle en sera la fin. Le corps souffre par un changement de régime; on veut augmenter sa force & l'on risque de lui donner la mort. Toute loi ancienne est sacrée; on ne peut y toucher que d'une main tremblante. Elle peut être défectueuse, & cependant être analogue à la constitution du Corps qui l'a reçue.⁴²⁷

A period of reform is a period of crisis because there always exists the danger that we might actually worsen a given situation rather than improving it. At its most extreme, by interfering with some of the institutions, laws and habits by which people structure their lives and which provide for stability, we might cure a particular illness by universal death, that is to say, completely break a society rather than improving its strength and vigour. The political lessons Levesque derived from this danger were, of course, the ones we have already encountered in his discussion of reform in the *Histoire de Russie*. Reform must always be undertaken with a trembling hand: changes must be implemented slowly and gradually, and only after due deliberation in councils and after having prepared the nation to the impending alterations.⁴²⁸ However, in *L'homme morale* and *L'homme pensant* he additionally endeavoured an analysis of the root causes that render good reform difficult.

Levesque's most succinct illustration of the problems inherent in reform is provided by means of a reference to Michel de Montaigne. After a short

⁴²⁶ See, for instance, Levesque's discussion of trial by duel in France - an institution initially well suited to a barbarous, warrior people with little capacity to gather and to assess evidence, but which became actively harmful once France had become more enlightened. HM, pp. 235-48.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

⁴²⁸ HM-84, pp. 72-3.

discussion of various proposals for a radical and swift root-and-branch reform of French society, Levesque rejected such a project by invoking Montaigne:

Qu'ils [advocats of radical reform] écoutent ce que Montaigne semble leur avoir adressé. ...

"Il est bien aisé, dit-il, d'accuser d'imperfections une police, car toutes choses humaines en sont pleines. Il est bien aisé d'engendrer à un peuple le mépris de ses anciennes observances. ... Mais d'y rétablir un meilleur état en la place de celui qu'on a ruiné, à ceci plusieurs se sont morfondus qui l'avaient entrepris."⁴²⁹

The quote is taken from the essay *De la Praesumption* in which Montaigne reflected on our presumptuous nature which constantly asserts itself in spite of the uncertainty of our knowledge.⁴³⁰ Knowledge is based on experience, Montaigne asserted, but experience is itself infinite and contradictory, and therefore most of our knowledge is only probable rather than certain. Politics in particular is a domain almost exclusively concerned with probabilities. Even worse, it is often impossible to decide which political opinion is the most probable when presented with conflicting views. Therefore, to attempt to completely restructure a society from scratch is vainglorious in the extreme, ultimately based on a dangerous overestimation of our capacity to generate sufficient knowledge: we may see what is wrong when we contemplate a given society, but to know for certain what would be better in its place is often above our reasoning powers.⁴³¹

It is a scepticism very similar to Montaigne's that Levesque employed time and time again in his discussion of reform. Reflecting on the qualities that a good prince should possess, he, for instance remarked: 'il ne suffit pas qu'il aime, qu'il veuille le bien; il faut qu'il le connaisse'.⁴³² However, to know the good and to

⁴²⁹ HM, p. 67. Levesque invoked a similar argument from Montaigne to counter the idea of rapidly changing the form of government. See, HM, pp. 51-3.

⁴³⁰ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. Alexandre Micha, 3 vols. (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1969), vol. 2, bk. 2, chap. 17, pp. 295-324.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, esp. 316-20. For an analysis of Montaigne's sceptical rejection of radical change imposed from above and his concomitant advocacy of improving communication between ruler and ruled, see Biancamaria Fontana, 'Accounting for Human Actions: Individual Agency and Political Judgment in Montaigne's *Essais*', in *Political Judgment. Essays for John Dunn*, ed. Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. pp. 238-53.

⁴³² HM-84, p. 77.

devise appropriate means to bring it about, he freely admitted, was difficult and often, almost impossible:

Hélas! tous les hommes pensent différemment. Leurs idées sont aussi variées que leurs traits. Quel est celui qui a raison? Que les bornes de notre esprit sont étroites! Que notre raison est faible! Quelle est l'obscurité de nos lumières! Il semble que nos bouches ne soient que des organes d'erreurs. Nous ne savons riens, hors de nous, en nous-mêmes. Nous nous sommes tous trompés, nous nous tromperons encore: & nous avons de l'orgueil!⁴³³

According to Levesque, our knowledge is partial because, knowing nothing by ourselves, we are dependent on sense impressions from the outside world to form any ideas. But sense impressions are potentially infinite, whilst we only have a finite existence, and hence our direct knowledge of the world will always be strictly limited. The only possible solution to this limitation is provided through tradition or communication. By exchanging our impressions and ideas with others, and by learning from past experiences through books, we can extend ourselves in time and space and thereby significantly increase our capacity for knowledge. And yet, such an extension is as much a danger as an opportunity as it might well lead us to copying and perpetuating mistakes committed by others.⁴³⁴

We are seemingly, therefore, in a no-win situation. Unable to generate much new knowledge without recourse to traditions and others, but in danger of preventing real new knowledge from occurring if we do not shed ourselves of all received ideas which may be mistaken, we are caught up in a potentially unsolvable conflict between innovation and tradition. It is exactly this conflict which renders political reform hazardous:

Un homme, placé dans les circonstances les plus favorables, ne peut connaître que peu de choses par lui-même. Nous devons nos connaissances à nos livres, à ce que nous entendons de tout côté. ...

Accablés sous le joug de l'autorité, il ne nous reste que peu de moyens de le secouer, puisque le plus souvent nous ne pouvons la combattre

⁴³³ HM, p. 82.

⁴³⁴ HP, pp. 31-4.

que par l'autorité même. Et qui nous assurera que nous n'opposons pas le mensonge au mensonge?⁴³⁵

The only way we can fight the authority provided by tradition is through asserting the superiority of our own, present knowledge. But such an assertion, Montaigne had shown, and Levesque agreed, may well be presumptuous, and our attempted reform may make things worse rather than better. And yet, despite such scepticism about our ability ever to be able to precisely know the ends and means of reforms, Levesque did not end his discussion in a fatalistic mood. In his view, the problem of the insufficiency of knowledge is not only one of politics, but also, and maybe even more importantly, one of history; and it is history that provides a partial solution to the problem.

Levesque traced the history of human knowledge in *L'homme pensant*. Whilst the first part of the work deals with the factors that enabled the first steps in the development of the human mind – the formation of big societies with flourishing industry and commerce, providing a part of the population with enough leisure to think rather than to work - the second part is entitled 'Progrès & égarements de l'esprit humain'. The history of the human mind and its productions is, in other words, an integral part of the history of civilisation, happening alongside and interacting with the historical development of industry and material inventions, which are themselves a consequence of increasing levels of socialisation. And yet, it is not a history of linear progress tracing an ever increasing sophistication of the human mind and a consequential accumulation of knowledge, but a complex one, in which progress is constantly checked and thrown off course by mistakes. Nevertheless, it offers a qualified optimistic assessment about our potential to increase our knowledge over time, thereby also implying that the political problem of reform is a solvable one.

However, much of Levesque's account is written in a highly sceptical mode, and traces a history in which the perpetuation of errors, rather than the generation of real knowledge, is the main subject matter. This history starts in ancient India –

⁴³⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

according to Levesque, the first big society and also the cradle of philosophy⁴³⁶ – and, to a considerable extent, explores how a host of errors committed by the early Indian philosophers have been copied and plagiarised throughout much of human history.

Levesque argued that Indian philosophy was mistaken both in its method and in its subject matter. Methodologically, the Indians attempted to generate knowledge through meditation, thereby arriving at purely intellectual constructions, rather than by means of observing the material world through their senses and of forming ideas inductively from the data provided. Rather than slowly and empirically increasing certain knowledge about nature, they attempted to answer everything at once by means of a pure rationalism. This erroneous way of proceeding, Levesque contended, also induced Indian philosophers to ask the wrong kind of questions: rather than enquiring into *how* nature operates, they wanted to know *why* nature exists. In other words, they started to theorise about domains of which, Levesque was convinced, we can never have any knowledge such as final causes and the essence of divinity.⁴³⁷

Such a philosophy is deplorable for a number of reasons in Levesque's view. First, completely detached from the material world, it cannot provide any support to mundane human concerns, offering, for instance, no help or spur to agriculture and industry. Secondly, Indian philosophy is inherently unsociable both in its mode of production and transmission of knowledge. According to Levesque, the Brahmins constructed their metaphysical systems by means of ascetic mediation rather than through sociable co-operation, and the products of such austere attempts to grasp transcendence are socially corrosive rather than integrative. Indeed, because the Brahmins' systems are pure intellectual speculations that cannot be verified by means of empirical data, philosophical debate is reduced to petty and unintelligible conflicts about the meaning of words and definitions. Since such conflicts are essentially irresolvable, they necessarily lead to dogmatism and the establishment of irrevocably opposed sects.⁴³⁸ Rather than

⁴³⁶ Ibid., pp. 149-52.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., pp. 149-50, 163.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., pp. 175-80.

supporting progressive economic development, and assisting socialisation, the history of the human mind as it manifested itself in India, Levesque implied, undermined both processes.

Moreover, Levesque's discussion of the *égarements* of the human mind is by no means restricted to his account of ancient Indian philosophy. Indeed, Levesque sought to show how through a long history of uncritical adoptions, the erroneous doctrines of the Brahmins travelled from 5th century BC India to classical Greece and Rome via Chaldean, Phoenician and especially Egyptian intermediaries, before being taken up again in Christian Scholasticism in medieval Europe.⁴³⁹

Large parts of *L'homme pensant* thereby underline human beings' considerable capacity for fatal error, and the difficulties involved in correcting errors that have become ossified through long intellectual traditions. But the work's fundamental aim is to show that despite difficulties, such errors can and will be rectified over time. In fact, interspersed with the account of how errors have been perpetuated are descriptions of attempts to reform philosophy: the Egyptian physicists, Anaxagoras and Epicurus being the most prominent examples.⁴⁴⁰ And he outlined how the erroneous assumptions of Indian philosophy were finally defeated for good in modern European history. The beginning of the end for these doctrines must be found in the reformation. Whilst it started as yet another dogmatic and essentially fruitless controversy over unintelligible subtleties, it led to an intellectual fermentation which ultimately heralded a new dawn for philosophy:

Mais enfin on avait franchi le pas le plus difficile. Après avoir ébranlé l'autel d'un bras audacieux, il en coutait peu de renverser des opinions profanes, que la vanité seule rendait chères à leurs défenseurs.

D'ailleurs les querelles de controverse aiguèrent les esprits. On voulait attaquer, on voulait se défendre: il fallait étudier. De nouvelles difficultés se proposaient & entraînaient à de nouvelles études. L'impulsion une fois donnée aux esprits, ils ne purent plus goûter le repos; & les premières connaissances acquises leurs firent avidement rechercher les connaissances qui leur manquaient encore.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁹ Ibid., pp. 155, 160, 180-2, 185-8, 207-8, 224-5, 310, 324-5.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 180, 248-50, 296-8.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., p. 329.

Indeed, the account of the reformation is immediately followed by chapters on Gassendi, renewing the philosophy of Epicurus, and Descartes, breaking decisively with Christian Scholasticism. Levesque admitted that Descartes committed a host of mistakes himself: by starting his enquiry with the *cogito* rather than with external sensations, he came close to re-establishing a system of spiritual rationalism, and thus to losing himself in idle, meaningless speculation. However, the intellectual fermentation gripping Europe prevented Cartesian rationalism from ever becoming another ossified tradition. Already some of his early followers, Levesque argued, corrected mistakes committed by their master. And he ended his short history of modern European philosophy with a chapter on Locke who, by instituting a new method of philosophical enquiry firmly based on empiricism and on a clear conception of the limits of human knowledge, was portrayed as standing at the source of many of the philosophical advances made during Levesque's own time.⁴⁴²

Locke, therefore, stands at the end of a long history which is marked by processes of trial, error and rectification. Whilst Levesque is at times agonised by the slowness of this process, wishing, for instance, that Locke had been born 2000 years earlier, thereby preventing the Greeks from foolishly following Indian mistakes, he ultimately conceded that the weakness of the human mind is such that it can only develop slowly and via the by-way of mistakes and rectification rather than the highway of instantly discovering truths:

La vérité semble avoir écrit l'ouvrage de Locke sous la dictée de la raison. Si ce grand homme eût pu naître dans les beaux siècles de la Grèce, on peut croire que l'esprit humain n'eût pas été si longtemps égaré dans le labyrinthe de l'erreur. Mais il fallait peut-être que le siècle qui produisit ce génie profond, fût préparé par tous les siècles qui l'ont précédé.⁴⁴³

A sentiment that is repeated in Levesque's survey of his history of philosophy from its Indian beginning to its enlightened present as a whole:

⁴⁴² Ibid., pp. 329-38.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., pp. 336-7.

De grandes sociétés sont formées: elles permettent à l'industrie de s'accroître; & elle seule peut développer l'esprit humain, qui d'abord consiste tout en industrie. Un tems bien long s'est écoulé jusqu'à cette époque: mais, dans une durée immense, les siècles sont des momens. Nous pouvons suivre à présent les progrès de l'esprit & ses erreurs qui sont les suites de ces progrès même & qui doivent être détruites par des progrès nouveaux.⁴⁴⁴

There are, Levesque argued, certain strategies that can be employed to decrease the chances of errors occurring, and to increase the possibilities that old errors are recognised and rectified. These strategies bear a close resemblance to the ones which we have already encountered in his discussion of how to reform well. This is unsurprising, because the art of the philosopher is in fact very similar to the one of the political reformer: both have to be able to carefully assess which traditions work and are worth keeping, and which ones are in need of innovation. Such an operation requires a moderately sceptical disposition capable of doubting all received traditions on the one hand, without falling into the presumptuous trap of believing that it is in any man's power to erect a completely new system of either knowledge or society from scratch, on the other. Rather than pretending that they know everything, philosophers and sovereigns alike should recognise that they can only know very little by themselves.⁴⁴⁵ Hence the need for constant communication both in philosophy and politics. The dogmatic assertion of a philosophical position is as likely to lead to the creation of new, or perpetuation of old, errors as is the despotic implementation of radical political reform against all opposition. Therefore, the rapid exchange of ideas and observations among thinkers fulfils the same function as governance by council: both provide means to verify new propositions and speed up the process of mistake detection.⁴⁴⁶

Returning to the *Histoire de Russie*, and particularly Levesque's assessment of Ivan IV's and Peter I's reforms, we can easily see that neither sovereign fulfilled the criteria Levesque laid down. Reforming despotically, impetuously and without due consultation and deliberation, many of their projects inevitably ended in mistakes and unintentional consequences. Moreover, from the background of Levesque's theoretical discussion of political reform in which knowledge on the

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 148.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 240-5.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 327-8.

part of the reformer is the single most limiting factor, it also becomes clear that he regarded Voltaire's account of Peter as a historical impossibility. According to Levesque, a reform project in which one man attempts to build a completely new civilisation by breaking sharply with all the traditions and habits of the past could never have succeeded. The generation of the new knowledge required that such a project could succeed without ending in fatal errors could simply never have happened quickly enough. Indeed, Levesque implied, Peter failed miserably to the extent that he tried to do what Voltaire claimed he had achieved: to break his country's connection to its own past.

However, Levesque did not deem this failure fatal. Even though deeply concerned about the turmoil created by the czar's misguided reforms, he did not believe that Russia had thereby been thrown off its normal historical track of gradual progress. On the contrary, Peter's mistakes provided post-Petrine history with much of its subject matter. In fact, one of the key themes running through Levesque's account of this history is the gradual rectification of problems created during Peter's reign. In particular, its most harmful legacy – the servile disposition of the Russian population – Levesque argued, was being reversed since Peter's death: Anna's endeavour to govern through mild generosity rather than fear,⁴⁴⁷ Peter III reducing the strict service obligations of the nobility⁴⁴⁸ and, especially, Catherine II's project to break despotic power in Russia through her programme of legislation and education,⁴⁴⁹ all bear witness that the lessons of Peter's reign had been learnt. Indeed, far from having fallen into yet another period of stasis, Levesque concluded, Russia was again moving forward.

⁴⁴⁷ HDR, vol. 5, p. 252.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 289-91.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 389-406.

4. August Ludwig Schlözer: From the erudite reconstruction of the past towards the marrying of scholarship and politics in the present

Introduction

Levesque, whilst stressing the entirely novel character of his undertaking of writing a critically astute and continuous history of Russia from its very beginning to the present, freely admitted that his work was only rendered possible by the recently increased availability of source material in regard to the country's past. As outlined in the last chapter, he gave due credit to a group of Russian and German scholars associated with the St. Petersburg Academy for having thus prepared the ground for his own work. Arguably the most important of those scholars was August Ludwig Schlözer, who had entered into Russian service in 1761 and worked at the Academy for 8 years before returning to Germany to pursue an academic career at his *alma mater* – the University of Göttingen.⁴⁵⁰ Indeed, Schlözer, never given to undue modesty, regarded himself as the first real scholar of Russian history;⁴⁵¹ a characterisation often repeated in subsequent scholarship with Wesendonck for instance declaring him the 'Vater und Schöpfer der russischen Geschichte'.⁴⁵²

Given that Schlözer reciprocated this expression of respect in regard to Levesque's own *Histoire de Russie*, which he considered the only tolerable

⁴⁵⁰ There exists a good deal of literature on Schlözer's biography. The most important source is his own, unfinished autobiography that deals with the period from 1761 to 1765; see *Leben*. Other good overviews of his life include Adolf Bock, *Schlözer. Ein Beitrag zur Litteraturgeschichte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Hannover: C. F. Kius, 1844), chap. 2; Johann Michael Heinrich Doering, *Leben A. L. v. Schlözer's. Nach seinen Briefen und andern Mittheilungen*. (Zeitz: Immanuel Webel, 1836); Friederike Fürst, *August Ludwig von Schlözer, ein deutscher Aufklärer im 18. Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1928), chap. 1. For a good biographical overview of his time in Russia see E. Winter, ed., *August Ludwig v. Schlözer und Russland*, vol. 9, *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte Osteuropas* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1961), introduction.

⁴⁵¹ *Leben*, pp. 77, 206.

⁴⁵² Hermann Wesendonck, *Die Begründung der neueren deutschen Geschichtsschreibung durch Gatterer und Schlözer, nebst Einleitung über Gang und Stand derselben vor diesen* (Leipzig: Joh. Wilh. Krüger, 1876), p. 77.

narrative of Russian history produced in the 18th century,⁴⁵³ it comes as little surprise that there should be very striking similarities in their respective careers and approaches to history. At the most general level, Russia was for both a genuine starting point: both left for St. Petersburg at a young age, and their historical works on Russia gained them a scholarly reputation that served as launching pads for successful academic careers. Similarly, Levesque and Schlözer alike, and here in sharp contrast to Voltaire and Diderot, had immersed themselves very deeply in the study of Russia, mastering its language both in its ancient and modern guises, and possessing a commanding knowledge of its historical sources. It is from this erudite basis, moreover, that both of them attacked the factual inaccuracies of contemporary historical scholarship on Russia in general, and of Voltaire's *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* in particular.

And yet, their respective erudite reactions ultimately took very different paths, indicating the complexity involved in the 18th-century debate between erudites and *philosophes*. As outlined in the last chapter, for Levesque the erudite reconstruction of Russia's ancient history was merely a means to a philosophical end – to uncover the slow, gradual march of Russian civilisation and thus to firmly reject Voltaire's claim that Peter swiftly created an entirely new civilisation *ex nihilo* as historically implausible and, indeed, impossible. For Schlözer, by contrast, the writing of Russia's pre-Petrine history was a task of such magnitude and complexity that he was convinced that it could never be completed within his lifetime. As a consequence, he never undertook the writing of a narrative history of Russia, but concentrated his energy on the establishment of a firm empirical basis for the writing of such a history in the future. At first glance, it might thus well appear that, in the case of Schlözer, the erudite means have taken over and become an end in itself.

However, this intense and seemingly purely antiquarian preoccupation with Russia's ancient past did not prevent Schlözer from engaging actively in debates central to the country's contemporary politics. First, during his sojourn in St.

⁴⁵³ Nestor, vol. 1, p. 110. See also a letter by Schlözer to Karl Julius Schütz (Göttingen, 13 April 1802) in which Schlözer singled out Levesque's *Histoire de Russie*, apart from his own *Russica*, as the best available account of Russia's past. In G. Ziegengeist, 'Ungedruckte Briefe von und an Schlözer aus den Jahren 1761-1809', *Zeitschrift für Slawistik* 30, no. 4 (1985), pp. 512-13.

Petersburg he consistently stressed that the time needed to cultivate Russia's ancient history could be shortened, if his methodical plans were properly implemented. Moreover, this claim was always coupled with the assertion that the adoption of his plan would, by itself, make a significant contribution to the future improvement of Russia as a whole. Second, Schlözer additionally wrote a work about the contemporary state of Russia - entitled *Von der Unschädlichkeit der Pocken in Rußland und von Rußlands Bevölkerung überhaupt* – which he considered an important guideline for Catherine in the context of her reforming efforts.⁴⁵⁴ Again, he believed that the advice offered, if heeded, would ensure a very marked increase in the efficiency of Catherine's quest to improve her country.

The key argument of this chapter is that there exists a very strong connection between Schlözer's commitment to the detailed and laborious reconstruction of Russia's ancient past and his belief in the efficacy of rapid and historically unprecedented development through the imposition of Catherine's enlightened will in the present. This double commitment, which Levesque would have judged incompatible, is made possible by Schlözer turning his attention significantly, if by no means exclusively, away from the content, that is to say the events and deeds of the past, to the method of how we should study and write history. To put it differently, the aim of this chapter is to show that for Schlözer history never legitimises certain structures and institutions on account of their historicity as it did, to an extent, for Levesque, nor is the erudite study of history an end in itself. For Schlözer, history, if written and studied properly, provides its practitioners first and foremost with a certain outlook and a certain set of skills that render rational reform in the present possible by enabling them to deal with complexity. History, in other words, provides an education in complexity and thereby becomes the school of politics.

In providing this reading of Schlözer, I will pursue, and further elaborate upon, an argument running through this thesis as a whole: namely that the Enlightenment's engagement with Russia was more intricate than has hitherto been appreciated. As

⁴⁵⁴ See Pocken.

we have seen, Lortholary argues that the *philosophes'* writings on Russia amounted to a mirage of utopianism generated through an exaggerated believe in the efficacy of radical reform based on the imposition of the enlightened will of Russia's rulers, and a concomitant neglect and disrespect for the complex empirical realities of the country's past and present.⁴⁵⁵ However, Schlözer complicates this antithesis between erudite realism and philosophic utopianism by combining both – a fact that may have troubled Lortholary if he had ventured beyond the French context, and that has certainly disquieted and at times embarrassed scholars of Schlözer. Indeed, whilst the quality of his research into Russia's history is without exception lauded in the relevant secondary literature,⁴⁵⁶ there is frequent concern about what is perceived as his facile, uninformed praise for the enlightened despots Peter I and Catherine II.⁴⁵⁷

In order to unravel the complex relationship between erudition, political reform and despotism as conceived by Schlözer, this chapter will first of all focus on his engagement with Russian history. Here, particular attention will be paid to Schlözer's attempt to sketch a history of Russian historiography and to situate his own work within an erudite tradition; a tradition with a pedigree reaching back to the 11th century, but which subsequently became superseded by what Schlözer described as unscholarly – *ungelehrte* - approaches to the past, and which was only re-established through the combined efforts of Peter I and Catherine II. The remainder of the chapter will then investigate Schlözer's central claim that these two rulers should be regarded as enlightened, precisely because of their respective attempts to give erudition a new life in Russia. In the course of this investigation we will see that Schlözer's praise for Peter and Catherine, far from being a facile nod towards enlightened despotism in general, is of a very specific nature:

⁴⁵⁵ Lortholary, *Le mirage russe*, esp. p. 7.

⁴⁵⁶ See esp., Wesendonck, *Die Begründung der neueren deutschen Geschichtsschreibung*, pp. 77-88, 199-205; E. Donnert, 'Schlözer als Russlandhistoriker', *Zeitschrift für Slawistik* 30, no. 4 (1985); J. Harney and G. Sturm, 'Schlözers Texttreue', *Zeitschrift für Slawistik* 30, no. 4 (1985); Heinz Pohrt, 'August Ludwig v. Schlözer Beitrag zur deutschen Slawistik und Russlandkunde', in *Gesellschaft und Kultur Russlands in der 2. Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Erich Donnert, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Halle (Saale): Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 1983).

⁴⁵⁷ See, for instance, Hans Hecker, 'Russland und die deutsche Historiographie des 18. Jahrhunderts', in *Russen und Russland aus deutscher Sicht. 18. Jahrhundert: Aufklärung*, ed. Mechthild Keller (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987), esp. pp. 209-10; Werner Hennies, *Die politische Theorie August Ludwig von Schlözers zwischen Aufklärung und Liberalismus* (München: tuduv-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1985). p. 146; Fürst, *August Ludwig von Schlözer*, p. 146.

according to Schlözer, despotism can only ever become enlightened through a marriage of power and erudite scholarship; a marriage which both enables government to engage in rational reform and which in itself imposes limits to despotic abuses of power.

The history of Russian historiography: The struggle over erudition from Nestor to Voltaire

Schlözer arrived in Russia in October 1761 in order to take up a position in the house of Gerhard Friedrich Müller, the imperial historiographer at the St. Petersburg Academy. Even though Schlözer was at the outset merely employed to tutor Müller's children, the latter had from the outset more elevated plans for his young compatriot. Müller had been looking for some time for a suitably skilled scholar who could initially assist him in his historical works, and ultimately take over for good his responsibilities. Schlözer, who had been highly recommended by the eminent Göttingen orientalist Johann David Michaelis under whom he had previously studied, seemed to fit the bill perfectly. In the event, Schlözer did gain employment at the Academy – first as an adjunct (1762), later as a professor (1765) – but, having comprehensively fallen out with Müller, suffering from ill health, and having been offered a position at his *alma mater* in Göttingen, decided to retire from his position at the Academy in 1769.⁴⁵⁸

Looking back towards the end of his life over the prospects Russia offered him as a young scholar in the pursuit of future academic glory, Schlözer singled out the old Russian annals as having particularly fired his imagination:

Doch mer, als alles Andre, lagen mir, ..., die russischen Annalen am Herzen. Von diesen hatt ich eine hohe Idee mit ins Land gebracht:.... Noch glaub ich nicht, daß ich mich dieser Schwärmerei zu schämen habe. So viele Ausländer seufzten laut nach der Publication dieser Annalen ...

Und war mir denn nicht auch ein wenig Schwärmen zu verzeihen? In nicht ser weiter Ferne sah ich eine volle Erndte vor mir, in die noch keine Sichel gekommen war, und in welche keine, außer der meinigen, so bald einschneiden konnte. Zwar muß ich vorher, ein noch völlig wüstes Feld, erst mit Schweis urbar machen? aber desto besser, desto mer Ehre! Und, der erste Herausgeber, der erste Ausleger, der Annalen, des in Größe, Macht, und Furchtbarkeit ersten Volks in Europa, zu seyn, war dann das eine Kleinigkeit?⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁸ Leben, pp. 1-11.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 50-1.

Schlözer's recollection of his first impressions of arriving in St. Petersburg encapsulates one of the central preoccupations that unites all thinkers discussed in this thesis: Russia, despite the power, influence and importance it has assumed in European affairs since Peter I, still lacks a satisfying history. The terminology Schlözer employs to describe the contemporary state of Russian historiography - *ein noch völlig wüstes Feld* - which can, however, be readily cultivated through the application of his sickle - a metaphor for the skills he had acquired during his studies in Göttingen and which had gained him his employment in Russia - of course is also reminiscent of Voltaire's and Diderot's characterisation of pre-Petrine Russia as constituting a *tabula rasa* on which its subsequent enlightened sovereigns could build without interference from the past. And yet, there exists of course a crucial difference between the Russian *tabula rasa* as perceived by the two French *philosophes* and Schlözer's *völlig wüstes Feld*. According to Schlözer, pre-Petrine Russia does not lack a history as such - it is after all the existence of the old Russian annals that fired his imagination - but its rich history had so far, for reasons which we shall discuss below, not been sufficiently cultivated both within and outside Russia.

Schlözer's starting point was, in other words, similar to the one adopted by Levesque: namely that there exists an under-appreciated history of Russia reaching back into antiquity which demands consideration. However, we can already see that Schlözer's ambitions were severely limited when compared to Levesque's. Indeed, during his spell at the St. Petersburg Academy, Schlözer repeatedly urged caution against undue expectations in regard to the timescale needed to achieve the thus far missing history by asserting that it could under no circumstances be written with any authority or precision before the end of the century.⁴⁶⁰ This stance is still reflected in his later assessment about his time in Russia, where he claimed that his intention had solely been to establish the empirical basis needed for the writing of Russia's pre-Petrine history, most particularly through a critical edition of the old Russian annals.

⁴⁶⁰ See, for instance, PRA, n.p.

Moreover, Schlözer did not even fully achieve these limited aims. During his time at St. Petersburg and the first five years at Göttingen, when he was still very much preoccupied with Russian history, he merely oversaw the printing of one extant manuscript copy of the Nestor chronicle without critical commentary,⁴⁶¹ a number of detailed enquiries into questions of factual details,⁴⁶² two short chronological overviews of Russia's history as a whole,⁴⁶³ as well as a variety of methodical plans and proposals of how Russia's ancient history should be cultivated, and specifically how its sources should be critically edited and published.⁴⁶⁴ The publication of a critical edition of the whole Nestor eluded him until the very last years of his life. Indeed, it was only from 1802 onwards that Schlözer was finally in a position to send the first five volumes of his Nestor edition - including the text both in its Slavonic original and in German translation and enhanced by extensive critical annotations - to the press. In the last volume of 1809 - the year of his death - he had reached the year 980 of the annals, still almost seven centuries short of the time span covered by Nestor and his successors.⁴⁶⁵

Despite Schlözer's limited, and *prima facie*, purely antiquarian aims, he nevertheless engaged with the full range of debates we have traced throughout this thesis - most importantly the question of the relationship between the history of Russian and European civilisation and the role Peter I and Catherine II played in fostering such a relationship. In order to uncover Schlözer's contribution to these debates, we need, however, to turn away from the immediate content of his erudite investigations into Russia's remote past. Instead we need to, first of all, pay close attention to Schlözer's endeavour to situate his own work within a

⁴⁶¹ For a German translation of Schlözer's Russian introduction to this edition, see August Ludwig Schlözer, 'Hrn. Schlözer's Vorrede zum ersten Bande seiner Ausgabe der Rußischen Annalen. Aus dem Rußischen übersetzt', *Allgemeine Historische Bibliothek* 5 (1768).

⁴⁶² August Ludwig Schlözer, *Oskold und Dir: eine Russische Geschichte. Erste Probe Russischer Annalen. Zugleich eine Beilage zu Hrn. Schmidts Versuch einer Russischen Geschichte, und Hrn. Büschings Wöchentlichen Nachrichten St. 27.* (Göttingen und Gotha: Johann Christian Dietrich, 1773); August Ludwig Schlözer, *Historische Untersuchung über Rußlands Reichsgrundgesetze* (Gotha: Carl Willhelm Ettinger, 1777).

⁴⁶³ August Ludwig Schlözer, *Geschichte von Rußland. Erster Theil: biss auf die Erbauung von Moskau im Jahr 1147*, vol. 2, *August Ludwig Schlözers Kleine Weltgeschichte* (Göttingen: Joh. Christ. Dietrich, 1769); August Ludwig Schlözer, *Tableau de l'histoire de Russie* (Gotha & Göttingue: J. C. Dieterich, 1769).

⁴⁶⁴ PRA; August Ludwig Schlözer, 'Gedanken über die Art, die Russische Geschichte zu traktieren', in *August Ludwig v. Schlözer und Russland*, ed. E. Winter (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1961).

⁴⁶⁵ Nestor.

comprehensive history of Russian historiography; and, second, we need to consider in detail his methodological proposals outlining how Russian history should be cultivated in the future.

Even though Schlözer's history of Russian historiography was only fully developed in the introductory part of his Nestor edition,⁴⁶⁶ the main contours of this history are already implicit in two early works: the *Gedanken über die Art, die russische Historie zu traktieren* (1764)⁴⁶⁷ - a submission by Schlözer to the St. Petersburg Academy in which he sketched the work he envisaged to undertake if appointed professor - and the *Probe Rußischer Annalen* (1768)⁴⁶⁸ - a much extended and published version of the same plan. The rationale for sketching a history of Russian historiography was, according to Schlözer, to provide an outline of how it came about that he found a *völlig wüstes Feld* in regard to the study of history when he first arrived in St. Petersburg.⁴⁶⁹ In the introduction to his Nestor edition, for instance, the chapter devoted to this history is entitled *Seltsame Schicksale der russischen Geschichte* - whereby the strange fate to be explained is the absence of any satisfying history of Russia despite the fact that the country could look back to a long tradition of chronicle writing, and despite the fact that both Peter I and Catherine II, Schlözer alleged, had invested considerable money and energy into the promotion of historical scholarship. Indeed, the reign of Peter constitutes an important turning point in Schlözer's story: up to that point he is mainly, if not exclusively, concerned with tracing the history of the recording of contemporary events by Russian annalists and contextualises their activities with both the general history of the Russian state and synchronous processes taking place in Europe. With the ascendancy of the Romanov czars in general, and Peter in particular, his focus shifts from annalists towards efforts by historians to employ the annals as sources for the crafting of a history of Russia.

⁴⁶⁶ Nestor, vol. 1, pp. 74-115.

⁴⁶⁷ Schlözer, 'Gedanken über die Art, die Russische Geschichte zu traktieren'.

⁴⁶⁸ PRA, esp. pt. 1 and 3.

⁴⁶⁹ Given the originality of Schlözer's history of Russian historiography, it is surprising how little this aspect of his historical works has been considered so far. To my knowledge, only Butterfield has noted the close connection Schlözer established between the general history of Russia and the history of Russian historiography. See Herbert Butterfield, *Man on his Past: the Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), pp. 6-7.

The first part of Schlözer's account - the history of the writing of annals in Russia from the 9th to the 17th century - mirrors to a large extent Levesque's narrative of Russian history as a whole. Indeed, Schlözer closely interwove his history of historiography with a general history of the Russian state, and his rough, general characterisation and periodisation of this latter history shares many features that would mark Levesque's later, detailed analysis. Underlying both Levesque's and Schlözer's account is the notion of Russian history exemplifying the phenomenon of uneven development: rapid progress during the first 300 years after the institution of the state was soon followed by a period of stagnation and decline brought about by the fragmentation of political power and the concomitant conquest by the Mongols; a downward spiral in the first instance reversed through Russian military victories over their Mongol overlords in the 15th and 16th centuries, leading, ultimately, to a period of unprecedented growth and expansion since the 17th century.⁴⁷⁰

In regard to historiography, the first period for Schlözer is exemplified by the Kievan monk Nestor - the first recorded annalist of Russia who lived in the second half of the 11th century. Nestor's work is described as a product of the intense cultural and religious communication Russia then enjoyed with Byzantium. It was with the spread of Greek Christianity in the 11th century that the art of writing first entered Russia, thereby creating the precondition for the development of rudimentary scholarship and a learned culture. Indeed, in terms of language, structure and presentation, Schlözer characterised Nestor's chronicle as thoroughly Byzantine, and as such far superior to anything that was produced in Europe around the same time.⁴⁷¹ Whilst his Greek models may not have been historians of the quality of a Thucydides, Schlözer argued they were nevertheless 'ernsthafte, ehrliche, Wahrheit liebende Chronikenschreiber, und nicht Possen- oder Sagenschreiber'. Nestor, following such models, produced a work very different from contemporaneous attempts at chronicle writing in Latin Europe, where the monkish historians, either through pure ignorance or in order to

⁴⁷⁰ PRA, pp. 91-6.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 165-7; Nestor, vol. 1, pp. 10-15.

legitimise the spiritual power of the pope, littered their works with inaccuracies, lies and fables.⁴⁷²

The factual purity of Nestor's chronicle was kept up by his immediate successors who truthfully copied his account and supplemented it by recording the remarkable events of their own times. And yet, this golden period of Russian chronicle writing did not last for long, and its downfall was prepared by the fragmentation of sovereign authority in Russia caused by the increasing feudal distribution of its territory, and concluded by the Mongol invasion of the early 13th century. These events, Schlözer showed, resulted in a manifold corruption of the chronicles. First, with the division of political authority among an ever increasing number of appanaged princes occurred a similar division of the historical record: a myriad of annalists sprang up in the various centres of power in Russia. Whilst each still used Nestor's all-Russian annals as the basis for the historical narrative before his own time, contemporary events were now recorded from a purely local perspective. The writing of a unified Russian history ceased to exist, and just like the state, Russia's historical record fragmented into a plethora of hardly related little entities.⁴⁷³

More fatally yet, with the Mongol conquest, Russia lost all of its cultural links to Byzantium, and its culture, cut off from the rest of the world, underwent a period of profound decline. In the context of the writing of annals, this decline manifested itself above all in a deterioration of the factual accuracy and reliability of the recorded information. Far less educated than their predecessors, the historiographers of the Mongol period committed the double sin of carelessness in the recording of contemporary events, and, even more deplorable in Schlözer's

⁴⁷² Nestor, vol. 1, p. 12. See also PRA, pp. 7-12. Schlözer's very positive characterisation of the quality of Nestor's work, and especially the stark contrast he drew between Nestor's and contemporaneous European chronicles, did not go unchallenged. Indeed, two German reviews of the *Probe Russischer Annalen*, whilst generally very positive, criticised Schlözer explicitly for an over-enthusiastic account of Nestor's reliability and accurateness. See [Gatterer, Johann Christoph], 'Rezension: Probe Rußischer Annalen von August Ludwig Schlözer, Rußisch-Kayserlichen Professor der Histoire &c. Bremen und Göttingen, im Verlag Försters, 1768. 8. 15 Bog. ohne dem Vorbericht', *Allgemeine Historische Bibliothek* 10 (1769), esp. pp. 234-5; [Richter, A. G.], 'Rezension: Probe Rußischer Annalen von August Ludwig Schlözer, Rußisch-Kayserlichen Professor der Histoire &c. Bremen und Göttingen, im Verlag Försters, 1768. 8. 15 Bog. ohne dem Vorbericht', *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* 10 (1769), pp. 50-2.

⁴⁷³ PRA, pp. 41-2; Nestor, vol. 1, pp. 18-20.

eyes, of vandalising the historical account they had inherited from Nestor. Not content to just reproduce the original chronicles, they freely altered and mutilated them; and given that no version of Nestor's original work or of his immediate predecessors survived, but only a multitude of unfaithful copies of these later writers, potentially caused irrevocable damage to Russia's historical record. In places where Nestor had wisely been quiet because he did not know the facts, they formed conjectures and inserted fables; where his language was archaic and, to their ears, unclear, they modernised it, thereby often changing the semantic content of the original text; and, worst of all, having the ambition of being authors rather than mere copyists they sprinkled Nestor's purely factual account with their own reasoning on the meaning of the recorded events.⁴⁷⁴

If the Mongol conquest had brought about a first revolution in Russian chronicle writing, the regaining of independence brought about a second, ultimately resulting in its termination. Indeed, coinciding with the reestablishment of an increasingly strong and unified czarist power over the whole of Russia, Schlözer outlined how central government agencies increasingly took over from the cloisters the task of recording contemporary events - a process starting with Ivan IV, and coming to a conclusion with the Romanov ascendancy in the early 17th century, and particularly with the reign of Peter I; the point in time at which the chronicles become silent and official governmental documents kept in state archives begin to speak.⁴⁷⁵

Schlözer did not analyse this process in any detail, but he provides us with strong hints that it must be understood in the context of the czars attempting to monopolise all power in their hands, and that it was accompanied by considerable violence.⁴⁷⁶ Nor did he have much to say about the functioning of the newly

⁴⁷⁴ PRA, pp. 198-205; Nestor, vol. 1, pp. 20-1.

⁴⁷⁵ PRA, pp. 47-9, 173; Nestor, vol. 1, pp. 22, 58, 65-6; vol. 4, pp. iv-vi.

⁴⁷⁶ In the second volume of his *Nestor*, Schlözer had argued that the establishment of the secret chancellery under Peter I's predecessor, Alexei I, was the immediate reason for the end of chronicle writing in Russia. However, Karamzin challenged Schlözer's account by showing that Alexei's chancellery, far from being charged with policing and censoring historical writing, was merely an office overseeing the czar's domestic affairs. According to Karamzin, it was another chancellery set up by Peter I, the *Viestnik Jevropy* - specifically charged with punishing any slandering of the czar with utmost severity - that spelled the end of the Russian chroniclers. Schlözer accepted Karamzin's objection in the fourth volume of his *Nestor* as correct, without,

established state archives. Schlözer's interest, we remember, lay with the history of the annalists in general, and with the question as to why their works of immense antiquity had not been duly appreciated in contemporary Russia and Europe. With the end of the tradition of chronicle writing, Schlözer turned his focus decidedly to the second part of the question: the history of the employment of the old chronicles in 18th-century historical scholarship both in Russia and in Europe.

The central figure in this history is Peter I. Indeed, whilst Schlözer frequently made references to Peter in his Russian writings, and used epithets for the czar that could have flown straight from Voltaire's pen - the most usual Schlözerian designation for Peter is 'der große Mann', but the 'zweite Stifter [von Rußland]',⁴⁷⁷ is also prominently employed - the czar's only action described by Schlözer in any detail apart from the territorial expansion of Russia through warfare,⁴⁷⁸ is his promotion of scholarship in general, and of historiography in particular. In his autobiography, for instance, Schlözer credited Peter with having recognised 'daß die heutige Welt mit gelerten Kenntnissen regirt werden müsse', and elsewhere he summarised the czar's undertaking in the following manner: 'Peters großer Endzweck war, die Wissenschaften des übrigen aufgeklärten Europens in seinen neugeschaffenen Staat zu verpflanzen.'⁴⁷⁹

In the context of this general project of governing by means of learned knowledge, and of enabling such a method of government by means of importing

however, assessing the methods employed by Peter. As we shall see below, Schlözer argued that Peter's main achievement was the introduction of European, critical scholarship into Russia, and it would appear as if he regarded the silencing of the chroniclers as negligible in comparison. See Nestor, vol. 1, p. 22; vol. 4, pp. iv-vi. Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin, 'Über die Geheime Kanzlei in Rußland. Aus dem "Europäischen Anzeiger" des Hrn. Karamzin', *Neue Berlinische Monatsschrift*, no. 2 (1803).

⁴⁷⁷ See, for instance, [Jankovič-de-Mirievo, Fedor Ivanovič], *Handbuch der Geschichte des Kaisertums Rußland vom Anfange des Stats, bis zum Tode Katharina II*, trans. August Ludwig Schlözer (Göttingen: Philipp Georg Schröder, 1802), pp. ix, xiv-xv; Schlözer, *Geschichte von Rußland*, p. 34; PRA, p. 90; Johann Joseph [i.e. August Ludwig Schlözer] Haigold, *Neuverändertes Rußland oder Leben Catharina der Zweyten Kayserinn von Rußland. Aus authentischen Nachrichten beschrieben*, 3rd ed., 2 vols., (Riga und Mietau: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1771), vol. 1, introduction (n.p.).

⁴⁷⁸ See, for instance, Schlözer, *Geschichte von Rußland*, p. 34; PRA, p. 96.

⁴⁷⁹ *Leben*, p. 279; Johann Joseph [i.e. August Ludwig Schlözer] Haigold, *Beylagen zum Neuveränderten Rußland*, 2 vols. (Riga und Mietau: Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, 1769-1770), vol. 1, introduction (n.p.).

European knowledge into Russia, the promotion of historical scholarship assumes a particularly prominent place. Indeed, according to Schlözer, Peter's new creation - *die zweite Stiftung von Rußland* - was intimately bound up with a concern to study the past out of which this new creation emerged, and he detailed a variety of concrete steps taken by the czar to facilitate such a study: the ordering of a copy of a Nestor codice he himself had discovered in a Königsberg library during his first travel to Europe; the issuing of a decree ordering the cataloguing and collection of the various extant codices of the old chronicles hitherto dispersed across Russia at a central place; and, most importantly, the creation of the St. Petersburg Academy including the establishment of a historical class with its own professor of history and imperial historiographer at its helm.⁴⁸⁰ Such institutions favourable towards the cultivation of historical scholarship, Schlözer argued, were continued by Peter's most notable successor: Catherine II. Indeed, if Peter is *der große Mann*, Catherine is *die große Frau*. The reason Schlözer offered for awarding Catherine this title of honour is the same as the one provided in regard to Peter:

Jetzt erschien *Katharina II*. Sie selbst eine Gelehrte, folglich beseelt von Ehrfurcht für das Wissenschaftliche, das sie als unerläßliches Bedürfnis bei ihren ungeheuern, woltätigen, und notwendigen Entwürfen, ansah.⁴⁸¹

Again the study of the past was central to the concerns of the *gelehrte* czarina in her pursuit of continuing Peter's project to improve and reform Russia. Indeed, according to Schlözer, Catherine, sensing the importance of historical scholarship for her projects, did not merely wish for a critically astute and comprehensive history of her own country, but used all her available powers to actually order one.⁴⁸²

Before turning to the key question about the exact relationship between the study of the past and successful political reform in the present that is implied in the discussion of Peter and Catharine, we will first have to consider Schlözer's explanation as to why the promotion of historical scholarship since Peter did not

⁴⁸⁰ PRA, pp. 159-60; Nestor, vol. 1, pp. 88-93.

⁴⁸¹ *Leben*, p. 280. Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁸² PRA, introduction (n.p.); Nestor, vol. 1, pp. 108-9.

bear any fruits. Or, to put it differently, we have to investigate why he found *ein völlig wüstes Feld* when he first arrived in St. Petersburg, and we have to sketch the main contours of Schlözer's plan of how this situation could be rectified. Such a consideration will provide us with a clear idea of the kind of historiography that could, in Schlözer's eye, be instrumental in guiding the future development of Russia.

The relative failure of Russian historiography is to a considerable extent explicable in terms of the enormity of the task to be performed, and by the unenviable situation in regard to learning in which Russia found itself at the beginning of Peter's reign. As seen, Schlözer had discovered an immense wealth of sources regarding Russia's past in the old chronicles, and he was adamant that these chronicles must provide the empirical basis for any Russian history. However, he had also shown that they had suffered considerable corruption during their long and complicated history, and, as a consequence, that the first step in the writing of a Russian history had to be a process of cleaning up the relevant sources: the many different extant codices of the Nestor chronicle had to be collected and compared; later interpolations and mutilations had to be identified and eliminated; all recorded facts had to be cross-checked with reference to other contemporaneous sources, most notably the Byzantine, Polish and Lithuanian chronicles; archaic expressions had to be understood and explained; fanciful and plainly wrong information had to be purged, etc.⁴⁸³

In order to achieve this feat, scholars versed in modern historical criticism were needed; however, historical criticism is, according to Schlözer, in many ways the most difficult of all sciences, as it is itself dependent on a variety of other fields of scholarship:

Wenn eine Nation mit RiesenSchritten zur Cultur emporsteigt, wenn es bei ihr von Genien wimmelt: so werden unter ihr Maler, Bildhauer, TonKünstler, Dichter, Mathematiker, ScharenWeise auftreten; nur noch keine Historiker, die ihr ihre alte Chroniken und Denkmäler, falls sie dergleichen hat, richtig entziefen können. Chroniken wird sie

⁴⁸³ See, for instance, Schlözer, 'Gedanken über die Art, die Russische Geschichte zu traktieren', pp. 54-6.

früh lesen; aber der Uebergang von ChronikenLeserei zum gelerten GeschichtStudium wird immer eine der späteren Erscheinungen seyn. Dies läßt sich leicht erklären. Alle Künste und Wissenschaften, bei denen das Genie das meiste wirkt, und höchstens nur durch vorliegende Muster geweckt zu werden braucht, werden in Flor kommen, und in wenigen Generationen ihre Muster einholen, wo nicht gar sie übertreffen: alle andre hingegen, wo das Genie allein nicht Schöpfer seyn, nicht alles aus sich selbst spinnen kan, wo ihm Materialien von außen, weit ausgeholte Vorrichtungen und Zurüstungen ... durchaus nötig sind, werden sich verspäten. Genie, Gelehrsamkeit, und Verstand ... sind rein verschiedene Dinge ...⁴⁸⁴

Historical scholarship does not primarily require *Genie* (genius) or *Verstand* (reason) but *Gelehrsamkeit* (erudition, learning); a claim by which Schlözer of course positioned himself firmly on one side in the ongoing 18th-century debate between *érudits* and *philosophes*. Indeed, the tripartite division of the operations of the human mind into *Verstand*, *Genie* and *Gelehrsamkeit* mirrors the one established in the *Encyclopédie's Discours préliminaire* where *raison*, *imagination* and *mémoire* were identified as underlying philosophy, the belle lettres and history respectively.⁴⁸⁵ However, whilst for d'Alembert memory and history, solely concerned with probability and particularity, were subservient to philosophy as a provider of material for reflection and reasoning, ultimately aimed at certainty and generality, they have, for Schlözer, an autonomous and, as we shall see in the following, a highly elevated existence within the overall framework of human knowledge.⁴⁸⁶

In the context of the history of Russian historiography, Schlözer was in the first instance at pains to show that the attainment and operation of erudition is itself a historically slow process: erudition can never develop out of nothing, nor, once attained, can it produce results as quickly as cultural endeavours that are predominately dependent on mental processes that require genius or reason. Whilst a genius requiring nothing but his genius may quickly produce something

⁴⁸⁴ Nestor, vol 4, pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.

⁴⁸⁵ Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres*, 17 vols. (Paris: 1751-65), vol. 1, esp. pp. xlvii-li. For a good interpretation of d'Alembert's conception of erudition, see Jean Starobinski, 'From the Decline of Erudition to the Decline of Nations: Gibbon's Response to French Thought', *Daedalus* 105, no. 3 (1976), pp. 190-2.

⁴⁸⁶ This concern to elevate the status of historical erudition within the system of scholarship was shared by many of his Göttingen colleagues; see, for instance, Ulrich Muhlack, 'Histoire und Philologie', in *Aufklärung und Geschichte*, esp. pp. 65-7.

ex nihilo, the historian needs materials – sources – and he needs a variety of techniques to make sense of his sources; techniques which need a long time of gestation to appear historically; and once they are available in a given culture, need to be painstakingly learned by each historian individually.

Even though Peter's Russia certainly possessed ample source material to stimulate the development of historical scholarship, it woefully lacked, according to Schlözer, the critical methods needed to make sense of these sources. The long period of Mongol oppression had put an end to learning and scholarship in Russia, and whilst the art of writing and reading chronicles may have survived this period, it had been impossible for an erudite study of history to emerge. However, Peter recognised the problem and took steps to rectify it: most importantly, the establishment of the St. Petersburg Academy and the staffing of this academy with foreign, principally German, scholars which in this combination could act as a catalyst for the development of *Gelehrsamkeit* in Russia.

Schlözer's discussion of Peter is premised on an observation that unites all thinkers considered in this thesis: what Peter keenly observed is the existence of a fundamental gap between the levels of development of Russia and the rest of Europe, and his reign must be assessed against his endeavour to bridge this gap. Schlözer's originality lies in the fact that he focused on an analysis of the cultural, or even more specifically, the scholarly dimensions of this gap, rather than the political, economical and social ones as had been done by Voltaire, Diderot and Levesque. Indeed, in the *Vorstellung seiner Universal-Historie* of 1772, Schlözer started a new period of world history around the 15th century brought about by a number of interrelated events: the invention of the printing press, the transfer of scholarship from Greece to Europe caused by the sacking of Constantinople by the Turks and, finally, the reformation, breaking the cultural and political stranglehold the papacy had hitherto exerted over the continent. It is from this point in time onwards that the history of European *Kultur* (culture) and *Aufklärung* (enlightenment) starts in earnest, leading to a remarkable period of progress, and, ultimately, to contemporary Europe eclipsing all other past or

present cultures.⁴⁸⁷ Russia, that, due to its ancient ties to Byzantium, had experienced an early flowering of scholarship supported by a religion far less corrupting than the one emanating from Rome, had been cut off from these developments. Only just emerging from the Mongol yoke when the European renaissance commenced, it had been recovering its military and political strength since the regaining of its independence in the 16th century, Schlözer argued, but had been stagnating culturally until the advent of Peter.

And yet, despite Peter's efforts to import European *Gelehrsamkeit* into Russia, Schlözer contended that the actual results achieved were woefully disproportionate to the energy invested. In the context of historical scholarship, this was due, in the first instance, to the difficulties inherent in the project. The necessary critical cleaning of the old Russian annals - we remember, in Schlözer's eyes, the *sine qua non* for any progress in Russian historiography - required a combination of skills difficult to attain. It needed scholars both conversant in the full range of philological methods and techniques developed in Europe, as well as equipped with the ability to read and understand old Slavonic. The two German historians employed by the Academy discussed in detail by Schlözer - Gottfried Siegfried Bayer, professor of classical history at the Academy since 1726 until his death in 1739; and his first employer, Gerhard Friedrich Müller (1705-1783), associated to the academy since its inception in 1725, first as an adjunct, since 1747 as imperial historiographer - fell short of either the one or the other requirement.⁴⁸⁸ Bayer, was, according to Schlözer, one of the greatest critical scholars and humanists of his time, but never mastered modern Russian, let alone old Slavonic, and was, therefore, depended on translations of Russian annals of questionable accuracy and on Byzantine sources for his investigations into Russia's past.⁴⁸⁹ Müller, on the other hand, who became completely Russified during his long stay in St. Petersburg, lost all connection to European scholarship.

⁴⁸⁷ UH, vol. 1, pp. 3, 73-7, 83-4.

⁴⁸⁸ For biographical information on Bayer and Müller, see Historische Kommission bei der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, ed., *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, 23 vols. (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1953-), vol. 1, p. 678 (Bayer), vol. 18, pp. 394-5 (Müller). On Müller, see also Peter Hoffmann, ed., *Geographie, Geschichte und Bildungswesen in Russland & Deutschland im 18. Jahrhundert: Briefwechsel Anton Friedrich Büsching - Gerhard Friedrich Müller, 1751 bis 1783* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995).

⁴⁸⁹ PRA, pp. 151-3; *Leben*, pp. 52-3.

Ignorant of any modern European language apart from German, and, even worse, only having a substandard grasp of Latin, Müller, Schlözer alleged, simply lacked the necessary philological skills to Europeanise Russian historical scholarship, and thereby lift it into modernity.⁴⁹⁰

However, the technical difficulty of recruiting the right kind of historian by the Academy is only one part of the explanation for the slow progress of historical scholarship in Russia. The second, and in many ways more substantial, one is an increasing abandonment of Peter's central objective by his successors: to establish the Academy as the principal driver for the development of *Gelehrsamkeit* in Russia. Indeed, in the period between Peter's reign until the ascendancy of Catherine II, Schlözer detected an increasing corruption of the Academy's initial aims, caused by two interrelated developments. First, an ever increasing concern with the development of fields of knowledge that are of immediate practical use, especially mathematics and the natural sciences, and a corresponding loss of status for erudite history within the Academy.⁴⁹¹ Second, ever increasing endeavours by the government to take direct control over the Academy. Both these developments came to a head, according to Schlözer, with the reformation of the Academy in 1747 under czarina Elisabeth which resulted in the cancellation of the historical class, and the institution of the academic chancellery as a governing body which, staffed by organisers rather than scholars, constituted a formidable barrier rather than a support to scholarship. Whilst the first development demonstrated the ascendancy of reason and genius over erudition, and the associated valuing of rapid cultural achievements over the slow development of *Gelehrsamkeit*, the second pointed to the supremacy of what Schlözer termed 'ungelehrte' over 'gelehrte'.⁴⁹² Both strands of development come together, in Schlözer's account, by the rise to power of Mikhail Lomonosov since the 1740s; a phenomenon which ultimately resulted in Russian historical

⁴⁹⁰ Schlözer's criticism of Müller was, of course, guarded and implicit whilst he worked for the St. Petersburg Academy, and therefore was dependent on the imperial historiographer, and only became more explicit later in his life. See, for instance, *Leben*, pp. 53-5.

⁴⁹¹ PRA, p. 159.

⁴⁹² *Leben*, pp. 53, 76-7.

scholarship declining in quality after the first tentative steps made by Müller and Bayer to put it on a modern, European footing.⁴⁹³

Lomonosov, a polymath, but mostly renowned for his groundbreaking work in the natural sciences, became professor of chemistry at the Academy in 1745, and soon after became member of the academic chancellery. It is from this position of power, Schlözer argued, that Lomonosov launched his attacks against erudite historical scholarship. In the first instance, this attack involved a silencing of Müller. Müller, in a public lecture of 1749 entitled *Origines gentis et nomine russorum*, had upheld a thesis first developed by Bayer: namely that the founder of the Russian monarchy, Rurik, was of Norman, that is to say of German, origin. This proposition offended the patriotic sentiments of the Russian Lomonosov, who did not hesitate to use his power and influence to suppress the publication of the lecture and to achieve the temporary demotion of Müller within the Academy. This experience, Schlözer believed, traumatised Müller to such an extent that he did not dare to publish anything on Russian history for the next six years.⁴⁹⁴ Moreover, Lomonosov also opposed Schlözer's professorial appointment to the Academy in 1764 under the pretext that the latter was only interested in smearing the good name of Russia with his historical research. This, ultimately unsuccessful, objection was commented on by Schlözer retrospectively in the following manner:

Wenn beim Aufkeimen gelerter Cultur in einem Lande, dem *didicisse artes* das *fideliter* abgeht, und daher dessen seligste Folgen, das *emollire mores nec sinere esse feros*,⁴⁹⁵ ausbleiben; wenn HalbGelerte, die dabei noch imme HalbBarbaren sind, an die Spitze der Leitung des GelertenWesens kommen ...: so zeigen sich Fänomene, die den meisten Lesern nicht nur neu, sondern kaum denkbar, seyn werden ... Nun frage man nicht mer, warum damals die Petersburger Akademie nicht das geworden ist, was sie in ihren sonstigen Verhältnissen hätte werden können und sollen, - die erste,

⁴⁹³ On Schlözer's view of the St. Petersburg Academy before the reforms undertaken by Catherine II, see also Fürst, *August Ludwig von Schlözer*, pp. 39-41.

⁴⁹⁴ Nestor, vol. 1, pp. 91-2; *Leben*, pp. 53-5. On the relationship between Müller and Lomonosov, see also Hoffmann, ed., *Geographie, Geschichte und Bildungswesen*, pp. 13-14.

⁴⁹⁵ A reference to Ovid's *adde quod ingenuas didicisse fideliter artes emollit mores nec sinit esse feros* (add the fact that to have studied faithfully the liberal arts softens the manners, not allowing them to be barbarian).

die glänzendste, Akademie der Wissenschaften in unsrer ganzen
LiterarWelt!⁴⁹⁶

However, Lomonosov did not only attempt to hamper the activities of the few German scholars possessing the requisite skills to work on Russia's history. On the contrary, he considered himself a historian and published a short chronological account of Russia in 1762, and, posthumously, a substantial history of the Russian monarchy since its inception up to the 11th century.⁴⁹⁷ Schlözer anonymously wrote scathing reviews of the German translations of both works – the first whilst on home leave from the Academy in 1768, the second after he had returned to Germany for good in 1771.⁴⁹⁸ The first line of Schlözer's attack is unsurprising. Lomonosov may be a man of genius and versed in the natural sciences, but an erudite historian he is definitely not:

Freylich sieht dieses historische Werk eines Chymicus so aus, wie
eine Chymie aussehen würde, die ein Geschichtsgelehrter schriebe.⁴⁹⁹

The cumulative result of the chemist dabbling in the field of history, without an understanding of his sources, and without ever having heard of the concept of historical criticism, was an unscholarly mishmash of inaccuracies and straight untruths, lifted randomly out of the untreated, corrupted annals. As such, Schlözer concluded, Lomonosov's work must be considered as constituting a great leap backward in Russian historiography:

Der College von Bayern ist um ein volles Jarhundert in seiner
Geschichtskunde zurück ...⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁶ Leben, p. 214.

⁴⁹⁷ Mikhail Lomonosov, *Kurzgefaßtes Jahr-Buch der Rußischen Regenten*, trans. Peter Stählin (Copenhagen und Leipzig: Pelt, 1765); Mikhail Lomonosov, *Alte Rußische Geschichte, von dem Ursprung der Rußischen Nation bis auf den Tod des Großfürsten Jaroslaws des Ersten, oder bis auf das J. 1054.*, trans. Christian Bacmeister (Riga und Leipzig: Hartknoch, 1768).

⁴⁹⁸ [Schlözer, August Ludwig], 'Rezension: Kurzgefaßtes Jahr-Buch der Rußischen Regenten, aus dem Rußischen des Hrn. Staats-Raths Michaila Lomonossoff übersetzt durch Peter von Stählin, Ihre Kaiserl. Maj. von allen Reußen Legations-Secretair bey Allerhöchst Deroselben Gesandtschaft am Königl. Dähmischen Hofe. Copenhagen und Leipzig. 1765. 70 Seiten: die Vorrede des Uebersetzers hat 8. Seiten', *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* 8, no. 1 (1768); [Schlözer, August Ludwig], 'Rezension: Alte Rußische Geschichte, von dem Ursprunge der Rußischen Nation bis auf den Tod des Großfürsten Jaroslaws des Ersten, oder bis auf das J. 1054. Abegaßt von Michael Lomonossow ...', *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek Anhang* Bd. 1-12, no. 1 (1771).

⁴⁹⁹ [Schlözer], 'Rezension: Kurzgefaßtes Jahr-Buch der Rußischen Regenten', p. 101.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Solche Historien schrieb man einst vor 200 Jahren in Deutschland, ehe es noch historische Kritik und gelehrte Geschichtsforscher gab. Da fielen Pfarrherren, Stadtschreiber, und Schulmeister über alte Chronicken her Trauriges Schicksal für Rußland noch im vorigen Jahrzehend. Doch der Verf. ist nun todt: sanfte ruhen seine Gebeine, weil er nicht mehr seine Nation entehren, und der Rußischen Geschichte schaden kann!⁵⁰¹

It is the displacement of the at least proto-erudite historical method of Bayer and Müller by the anachronistic one of Lomonosov that serves Schlözer as explanation why he found a *völlig wüstes Feld* in regard to historical scholarship when he first arrived in Russia. It is this very internal failure of Russian historiography to fulfil Peter's project of closing the gap between European and Russian *Gelehrsamkeit*, that equally elucidates the failing of European historians in regards to Russia's past. Indeed, in the absence of critically cleaned sources, Schlözer argued, it was an *a priori* impossibility for any foreigner to write anything meaningful about its history. The mistake of European historiography is not that it has written so little about Russia, but that it has written about it at all.⁵⁰² In the absence of reliable source material, the field of Russian history became occupied, Schlözer claimed, not by professional erudite historians, but by uncritical polyhistorians on the one hand, simply randomly collecting pieces of available information with little concern about their authenticity or relevance, and, even worse, by *philosophes* such as Voltaire, masking their ignorance of the past with witticisms and reasoning, and producing histories littered with mistakes and qualitatively not dissimilar to the kind of accounts written by the ignorant medieval monks, or, indeed, Lomonosov.⁵⁰³

⁵⁰¹ [Schlözer], 'Rezension: Alte Rußische Geschichte', p. 231. See also Nestor, vol. 2, p. 284.

⁵⁰² Nestor, vol. 1, p. 90; PRA, p. 139; Schlözer, 'Gedanken über die Art, die Russische Geschichte zu traktieren', p. 52.

⁵⁰³ Nestor, vol. 1, pp. 103, 110-12; PRA, 33-5, 97, 145-53. See also Schlözer's review of the German translation of Voltaire's *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, which is characterised as 'dichte mit Faux-Brillans, mit historischen Fehlern, mit historischen Lügen und mit falschen Raisonnemets besäet mit einem Worte: alles Voltäirisch'. [Schlözer, August Ludwig], 'Rezension: Von Voltaire's Geschichte des Rußischen Reichs unter Peter dem Großen. Aus dem Französischen übersetzt. Zweyter Theil. Frankf. und Leipz. verlegts Heinrich Ludwig Bröner. 8. S. 310', *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* 10, (1769), p. 254.

The cultivation of Russian history: The methodical steps towards a pragmatic history

The primary purpose of Schlözer's history of Russian historiography was to serve as an introduction to his own methodical plan of how Russian history should be cultivated in the future. Whereas the account since the foundation of the Russian state up until Peter I indicated the immense wealth of source material lying dormant in monasteries, as well as the challenges these sources presented to the critically aware historian, the failures of Russian historiography since the czar's reign clearly demonstrated the pitfalls to be avoided if a truly erudite history is ever to be written. We have further observed that this history also provided an analysis of the relationship between Russia and Europe; most prominently by means of tracing the genesis of a fundamental gap between the two regions in regard to the status of learning. Schlözer's plan addressed all these questions by outlining how its adoption would significantly shorten the time required to critically edit the sources, and how it would thereby contribute toward closing the gap. Moreover, a consideration of this plan will also provide us with a first indication of what an erudite history as conceived by Schlözer would look like, and, as such, will constitute an important point of departure for our final investigation into the relationship between the writing of history and successful political reform.

Schlözer's claim that Russian erudition may quickly catch up with its European counterpart is somewhat paradoxical, and is reminiscent of Diderot's argument that Catherine could, if she adopted the right measures, swiftly build solid foundations for the civilisation of her country in general. Indeed, for both thinkers, Russia's unenviable starting point – Schlözer's *völlig wüstes Feld*, Diderot's *tabula rasa* – provides a unique opportunity if the lessons of Europe's past were duly considered in Russia, and if, therefore, the naturally slow process of civilisation (Diderot) or of the development of *Gelehrsamkeit* (Schlözer) were assisted by a historically informed rationality imposed from above. In his 1764

submission to the academic chancellery *Gedanken über die Art, die russische Historie zu traktieren*, Schlözer expressed this idea in the following manner:

Ich folgere nicht daraus [i.e. from the fact that Russian historiography currently lags significantly behind European historiography], daß Rußland noch in 100 Jahren keine Geschichte wie Frankreich, wie Deutschland, wie England usw. haben könne. In allen diesen Reichen arbeitete bloß die Natur gleichsam sich selbst überlassen, ohne durch die Kunst erleuchtet und durch fremde Fehltritte gewitziget zu sein. Man arbeitete ohne System aufs Geratewohl, man schrieb aus Chroniken, die man nicht verstand, man gründete wichtige Sätze auf bloße Schreibfehler der Kopisten, man vermengte zuverlässige Nachrichten mit apokryphischen.

Es müßte sehr unnatürlich zugehen, wenn ein methodischer Fleiß für die russische Geschichte in 20 Jahren nicht so viel täte, als für die Historie andrer Reiche in 100 Jahren geschehen ist.⁵⁰⁴

Just as it was for Diderot, the main lesson revealed by the European experience is the benefit of starting the work from its natural beginning, thereby enabling the execution of all the steps needed to achieve the desired end in an orderly and methodical fashion. In the context of historiography, starting from the beginning of course meant for Schlözer commencing with the critical cleaning of the sources and only to proceed to the writing of history once this has been done. It is in this respect that Russia holds a significant advantage over the rest of Europe: in France, Germany and England, the construction of what Schlözer termed complete historical systems had always been one step ahead of what should have been done before – source criticism – resulting in a situation where critical scholars not only need to clean their sources from inaccuracies and falsehoods, but also spend considerable time and energy to investigate and correct untruths that had become generally accepted knowledge due to the untimely activities of the constructors of systems.⁵⁰⁵ In Russia where historiography still presents a *völlig wüstes Feld*, only insignificantly littered by the works of chemists and poets such as Lomonosov and Voltaire, such an inefficient mode of proceeding, Schlözer endeavoured to show, is preventable. In order to achieve this, erudition,

⁵⁰⁴ Schlözer, 'Gedanken über die Art, die Russische Geschichte zu traktieren', p. 53.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 53-4; PRA, pp. 222-4.

by its nature always the last branch of the arts and sciences to flourish, needs to be imported from Europe into Russia.⁵⁰⁶

At the time Schlözer was writing his methodical plans, he believed that the conjectures were promising for his proposals to be implemented, thereby ensuring that Russian historiography would in the future develop in the most methodical manner. First, Catherine II had become czarina in 1762, and Schlözer was convinced that she would resume Peter's project of rendering the development of Russian erudition the central objective of her Academy.⁵⁰⁷ Thereby, the ascendancy of mathematics and natural sciences over history could be reversed, and thus the much needed institutional support for his project be achieved. Secondly, Schlözer was convinced that he was predestined to achieve the required fusion of skills needed for a particularly Russian historical criticism to develop.⁵⁰⁸ Having studied at the University of Göttingen, the renowned German centre for historical erudition, under the guidance of what he considered the world authorities in classical and biblical philology – most prominently Michaelis – and having rapidly acquired the ability to read Old Slavonic, he had no doubt that he was far better equipped to tackle the challenges posed by the Russian sources than either Bayer or Müller had been.⁵⁰⁹

Moreover, Schlözer's plan incorporated measures designed to lessen the reliance of its success on himself. The task to be performed, Schlözer argued, was too extensive to be undertaken by one person alone.⁵¹⁰ He therefore advocated that a number of Russian students should be assigned to him in order to be instructed in the necessary critical skills and ultimately to assist him in his work.⁵¹¹ Likewise, he endeavoured throughout his stay in Russia to convince the chancellery of the Academy to grant stipends to particularly promising young Russians to spend a

⁵⁰⁶ See also a letter by Schlözer to Vladimir Grigorievich Orlov (Petersburg, 29 January 1767), published in Winter, ed., *August Ludwig v. Schlözer und Russland*, pp. 178-81.

⁵⁰⁷ PRA, p. 130.

⁵⁰⁸ *Leben*, p. 77.

⁵⁰⁹ On Schlözer's education at the University of Göttingen in particular, and on Göttingen's importance for the development of the critical method more generally, see, for instance, Muhlack, 'Histoire und Philologie', pp. 66-74; Fürst, *August Ludwig von Schlözer*, esp. pp. 18-23; Wesendonck, *Die Begründung der neueren deutschen Geschichtsschreibung*, pp. 50-4, 73-7; Hennies, *Die politische Theorie August Ludwig von Schöpfers*, pp. 10-27.

⁵¹⁰ PRA, p. 129.

⁵¹¹ PRA, p. 227.

spell at the Universität of Göttingen, and offered to oversee their education there.⁵¹² The intention of both measures was of course to provide historical erudition with a much wider basis in Russia, and, in a sense, to nationalise it: if all his measures were adopted, reliance on German scholars such as himself would be significantly lessened in the future.⁵¹³

Once equipped with a group of suitably skilled helpers, Schlözer was convinced that he could relatively swiftly establish the basis for what he called a *corpus historiae Russicae*; that is to say a systematised registry of all available facts pertaining to the history of Russia. The facts for this registry would be provided by two interrelated investigations – the *studium monumentorum domesticorum* and the *studium monumentorum extrariorum*. The first investigation comprises the collection of all available Russian sources pertaining to its history, and the application of historical criticism on these sources in order to distil the factual from the false; the second, the methodical study of all foreign sources that may contain information relevant to Russia's past, thereby gaining a wider empirical basis to be employed to further interrogate the accuracy of the information extracted during the first step, as well as to plug gaps that may exist in Russia's internal historical record.⁵¹⁴

The resulting *corpus historiae Russicae*, would, according to Schlözer, possess a number of important characteristics. First, it would be as comprehensive as possible containing all available information on Russia's past, and therefore be constituted very differently from the random collections of facts hitherto produced by polyhistorians. Secondly, it would be a collection of pure facts whose accuracy would be of the highest possible order, being devoid of both reasoning on the possible meaning of events, as well as of information of questionable truthfulness and, as such, of course very different from the kind of histories produced by, for

⁵¹² Winter, ed., *August Ludwig v. Schlözer und Russland*, pp. 11, 19; Doering, *Leben A. L. v. Schlözer's*, p. 133; Martin Peters, *Altes Reich und Europa: Der Historiker, Statistiker und Publizist August Ludwig (v.) Schlözer (1735-1809)* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2000), p. 79.

⁵¹³ On the idea that Russian historiography should primarily be cultivated by Russians in the future, and that the Academy should support the development of Russian erudition, see also a letter by Schlözer to Peter Stählin (Göttingen, 25 April 1768) in Winter, (ed.) *August Ludwig v. Schlözer und Russland*, pp. 217-19.

⁵¹⁴ Schlözer, 'Gedanken über die Art, die Russische Geschichte zu traktieren', pp. 54-9. See also PRA, 226-31.

instance, Lomonosov and Voltaire. Third, it would be set up in such a way that it could be continuously expanded and improved: if new information should come to light, it could be easily incorporated into the corpus; likewise, all facts contained could be conveniently cross checked back to their sources, and, therefore, continuously re-verified in case of doubt.⁵¹⁵

However, such a collection of pure facts was not considered by Schlözer a history, but merely a necessary, preliminary step toward what he called the writing of a pragmatic history of Russia – the ultimate end to which his methodical plan was geared.⁵¹⁶ In order to understand why Schlözer found it necessary to invest so much energy and time into the establishment of a *corpus historiae Russicae* – a work merely considered as a means to an higher end – and in order to understand why he awarded considerable political significance to the development of historical scholarship in Russia, we have to briefly investigate what such a pragmatic history would look like.

In his Russian writings, Schlözer did not specify the nature of such a history. But he turned to a precise definition of pragmatic history in one of his first major works after he left Russia, and took up a professorship at the Universität of Göttingen: the *Vorstellung seiner Universal-Historie* of 1772.⁵¹⁷ Schlözer's project of writing a pragmatic universal history was by no means an original one. To a very considerable extent, he merely followed his erstwhile teacher, and now colleague, Johann Christoph Gatterer, who had endeavoured to conceptualise such a history since the 1760s.⁵¹⁸ In his essay *Vom historischen Plan, und der darauf sich gründenden Zusammenfügung der Erzählungen* of 1767, for instance,

⁵¹⁵ PRA, pp. 232-4.

⁵¹⁶ PRA, pp. 234-5; Schlözer, 'Gedanken über die Art, die Russische Geschichte zu traktieren', p. 52.

⁵¹⁷ Schlözer revised this work throughout his life. A second edition of the work was published in 1775; and the two versions of the *WeltGeschichte* of 1785/89 and 1792 are augmented versions of the original *Universal-Historie*. My discussion of Schlözer's conception of universal history is derived from the first editions of his *Universal-Historie* and *WeltGeschichte*; see UH and WG. The later editions of both works are: August Ludwig Schlözer, *Vorstellung der Universal-Historie*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Johann Christian Dietrich, 1775); August Ludwig Schlözer, *WeltGeschichte nach Ihren HauptTheilen im Auszug und Zusammenhange*, 2nd ed., (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1792).

⁵¹⁸ For a good, brief overview of Gatterer's historical works, see Peter Hanns Reill, 'Johann Christoph Gatterer', in *Deutsche Historiker*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, 9 vols., vol. 6 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980).

Gatterer defined the ultimate, if unachievable, goal of a pragmatic universal history in the following manner:

Der *höchste Grad des Pragmatischen* in der Geschichte wäre die Vorstellung des allgemeinen Zusammenhangs der Dinge in der Welt (*Nexus rerum universalis*). Denn keine Begebenheit in der Welt ist, so zu sagen, *insularisch*. Alles hängt an einander, veranlaßt einander, zeugt einander, wird veranlaßt, wird gezeugt, und veranlaßt und zeugt wieder.⁵¹⁹

Pragmatic history, according to Gatterer, is causal history, and, a universal pragmatic history would, by definition, reveal the causal relations between everything that has ever happened in the world.⁵²⁰ However, Gatterer also showed the impossibility of ever establishing such a *Nexus rerum universalis*: there simply have occurred too many events in world history brought about by too many causes and themselves causing too many subsequent events for such a feat ever to be possible. Therefore, the two main problems a historian has to confront are, first of all, to select all those events that are significant enough, either by themselves or as contributing causes to other events, to be included in a universal history; and, secondly, to arrange all selected events in such a way that the causal connection between them is rendered as clear to the reader as possible.⁵²¹

Schlözer followed Gatterer very closely in defining both the goal and challenges of a pragmatic universal history:

Wir wollen die Revolutionen des Erdbodens, den wir bewohnen, und des menschlichen Geschlechts, dem wir angehören, im Ganzen übersehen, um den heutigen Zustand von beiden aus Gründen zu erkennen. Wir wollen der Geschichte der Menschheit ... ihrer succeßiven Entstehung, Veredlung und Verschlimmerung auf allen ihren Wegen, von Ländern zu Ländern, von Volke zu Volke, von Zeitalter zu Zeitalter, nach ihren Ursachen und Wirkungen

⁵¹⁹ Johann Christoph Gatterer, *Vom historischen Plan, und der darauf sich gründenden Zusammenfügung der Erzählungen* (1767), ed. Walter Blanke and Dirk Fleischer, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Theoretiker der deutschen Aufklärungshistorie* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: frommann-holzboog, 1990), p. 659.

⁵²⁰ On the usage of the term *pragmatisch* to denote a causal enquiry in 18th-century German scholarship in general, see Gudrun Kühne-Bertram, 'Aspekte der Geschichte und der Bedeutungen des Begriffs "Pragmatisch" in den philosophischen Wissenschaften des ausgehenden 18. und des 19. Jahrhunderts', *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 27 (1983), esp. pp. 168-73.

⁵²¹ Gatterer, *Vom historischen Plan*, pp. 634-6.

nachspüren; und in dieser Absicht die *grossen Weltbegebenheiten* im *Zusammenhange* durchdenken. Mit einem Worte: wir wollen *Universalhistorie* studiren.⁵²²

The difficulty of grasping world historical events in their mutual causal connections arises from the fact that such events are often rooted in a puzzling multiplicity of, what are in themselves, very small causes – examples given by Schlözer of small but world historically relevant causes include, for instance, the arrival of smallpox, gypsies or tobacco in Europe; events, in his opinion, as pertinent to an understanding of universal history as is the battle of Zama, the destruction of Jerusalem or the peace of Westphalia.⁵²³ Furthermore, not only can small causes produce world historical effects, but there might often exist a vast temporal and/or spatial gap between first cause and final result to be explained, which needs to be filled by enumeration of all intermediate causes if the account is to be pragmatic.⁵²⁴

Schlözer's solution to the problem of historical causation - which is of course most marked in the construction of a universal or world history simply because of the vastness of the subject matter to be covered, but which in essence needs to be addressed in any pragmatic history – is, again, the one Gatterer had proposed before him. Only the establishment of methodical rules for selection and ordering of events can enable the revelation of historical interconnections. In regards to selection for a pragmatic universal history, Schlözer proposed only to treat events pertaining to those peoples that have had a significant bearing on the course of history as a whole, either through conquests or through wisdom, inventions, trade or religion. Whilst this rule of selection of course greatly reduced universal history's subject matter, a second rule led to a widening: for each selected universal historical people a wide range of material had to be considered in order to understand causally how it had developed and how it fitted into world history as a whole. Indeed, for each people relevant causal forces had to be discovered in

⁵²² UH, vol. 1, pp. 1-2.

⁵²³ WG, vol. 1, pp. 6-7; UH, vol. 1, pp. 29-30. See also Schlözer's essay on Europe's trade with the East Indies, in which he argued that this trade only came about because of a concatenation of minute causes but, once established, contributed significantly to world historical events. August Ludwig Schlözer, 'Ueber den Ostindischen Handel', *Encyclopädisches Journal* 1, no. 6 (1774), esp. pp. 483-7.

⁵²⁴ WG, vol. 1, pp. 74-7.

its geographical positioning, its political, social and economic situation, as well as in its cultural and religious life.⁵²⁵ In terms of ordering the selected material, Schlözer proposed a two-pronged model according to which universal history had to be read twice: first a diachronic reading of the history of each selected people focusing on its causal development over time; second, a synchronic ordering of the same material, allowing at each point in time a horizontal cut through history, showing the interrelatedness of synchronous, but spatially removed, events.⁵²⁶

Schlözer never wrote such a pragmatic universal history. His writings in this respect were merely conceived as illustrated plans or models of such a history. It is of course doubtful whether implementation of this model could ever have led to a history that would approach the ideal of revealing the *nexus rerum universalis*; an ideal with strong religious root. Indeed, to approach the *nexus rerum universalis* was for Schlözer nothing less than to approach the ways of God on earth by revealing how everything human beings do and experience is ultimately interrelated, and by showing the existence of a unifying higher order and harmony despite the complex, intractable and seemingly random nature of these relations.⁵²⁷ However, if the ultimate phenomenon to be explained is the interconnection of all things that have ever existed or occurred, any process of selection and ordering will endanger such an explanation by either leaving out, or misplacing, relevant causes. It is exactly this attempt to approach God in history by means of selection and ordering mechanisms only, that led Johann Gottfried Herder to attack Schlözer's *Vorstellung seiner Universal-Historie* in a lengthy review.⁵²⁸ As we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, what Herder found missing in Schlözer's plan was a firm determination of human nature which would in turn allow an exact definition of what it is that humans are meant to achieve in history.⁵²⁹ Only such a teleological determination, Herder argued, can provide us with a sufficient perspective to select and order; without it, all selection and ordering mechanisms will ultimately be purely arbitrary and super-imposed

⁵²⁵ UH, vol. 1, pp. 20-2.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., pp. 46-50.

⁵²⁷ Ibid., pp. 37-8.

⁵²⁸ Herder, SWS, vol. 5, pp. 436-40.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., esp. p. 438.

on history, thereby hindering rather than sharpening our ability to perceive causal relations, and, ultimately, the meaning of history.

For our present concerns, however, more important than the ultimate practicability of Schlözer's model of pragmatic history is the question of its precise relationship to the kind of purely erudite investigation he advocated in the case of Russia's past. In this respect Schlözer was adamant that a comprehensive registry of critically verified facts of the domain to be studied such as the *corpus historiae Russicae* is a precondition for any attempt at writing a pragmatic history. The causal analysis the historian undertakes by means of selection and ordering must always happen after the due consideration of all available facts within the registry.⁵³⁰ And if very small causes can produce enormous results, two consequences follow. First that any factual inaccuracy within this registry, no matter how small, can lead to catastrophic mistakes in the causal explanation; and, second, that no fact is by itself too small to be included in the registry: what is unimportant only becomes clear during the process of causal analysis.

By repeating the absolute centrality of erudition to the project of a pragmatic history, Schlözer also renewed his attacks against polyhistorians on the one hand, and against *philosophes* such as Voltaire, on the other. The purely random compilations of facts by the former, Schlözer contended, will never lead to an appreciation of complex causes; the latter with their cavalier attitude towards factual accuracy, and, even worse, by substituting the empirical and inductive method Schlözer proposed with preconceived ideas and by filling gaps in this records by flights of genius and hypotheses, will never be able to differentiate between what is real and what is purely imagined.⁵³¹

And yet, Schlözer's ideal of pragmatic history also involves a considerable softening of the strict divide between reason, genius and erudition which he had maintained in his work on Russian history. The discovery of causal connections among the mass of information to be processed by the historian is, according to Schlözer, an operation that requires more than erudition:

⁵³⁰ UH, vol. 1, p. 13.

⁵³¹ UH, esp. pp. 3-4, 40-5.

Wer *Facta* verschmähen kan, die unsre Väter mühsam eintrugen, *Facta*, die sonst ihren guten Nutzen haben, hier aber zwecklos wären; wer dagegen gering scheinende Vorfälle bemerken, und in ihnen den Keim neuer Jahrhunderte erblicken kan; wer heterogene Begebenheiten, die gar keinen Bezug auf einander zu haben scheinen, zusammen zu knüpfen versteht, und bei allem diesem *Denken* doch nichts *erdichte*: der hat ächtes *Welthistorisches Gefühl*, zu welchem aufblühende historische Genies zu gewöhnen, die stolzeste Beschäftigung des Lerers seyn muß.⁵³²

The practice of pragmatic history, in other words, requires genius which manifests itself as a world historical feeling. But this historical feeling is never allowed to operate independent of the available empirical evidence; on the contrary its function is to give form to the unwieldy historical facts dugout by erudition by establishing their interconnections. By closely intertwining the operations of reason, genius and erudition, the pragmatic historian creates a work which no longer merely appeals to the faculty of memory.⁵³³ Instead by moving from disparate, individual facts to causal knowledge, pragmatic history becomes philosophical:

Natürlich hört sie also auf, ein ödes *GedächtnisWerk* zu seyn, das Namen an Namen und Zalen reihet; sondern sie wird *Philosophie*, die immer Wirkungen an Ursachen kettet; sie wird Unterhaltung für jeden *denkenden Kopf*.⁵³⁴

Crucially, by combining erudition and philosophy, pragmatic history, unlike pure antiquarianism, becomes politically useful:

Diese ... Beschreibung [of what pragmatic history is] verspricht doch schon etwas sehr würdiges, und praktisches. Menschen und Länder *umschaffen*, ist doch in vielen Fällen das Höchste aller Regierungskunst: die Mittel dazu lert eben die Wissenschaft, die beider

⁵³² WG, vol. 1, p. 73. Emphasis in the original.

⁵³³ Reill shows that Schlözer's project described here - to establish a historical methodology standing in sharp contrast to the aimless empirical compilations of the polyhistorians, without, however, falling into the trap of what he believed to be an over-reliance on hypothetical reasoning by the *philosophes* - can be generalised as being characteristic of 18th-century German professional historians. Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*, esp. pp. 31-43.

⁵³⁴ WG, vol. 1, p. 8. Emphasis in the original.

bisherige (gute oder schlimme) Veränderungen aus *Gründen* beschreibt.⁵³⁵

Pragmatic history, as the science of the causes of historical change, Schlözer implied, is central to any attempt to wilfully transform the world. It is the science any reforming sovereign needs to consider to increase the chances of success. As such, we are of course provided with a first indication why Schlözer deemed Peter's and Catherine's support of historical erudition – always the first step towards a pragmatic history - as crucial to their respective political projects.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., pp. 4-5. Emphasis in the original.

From history to politics: Statistics, *Gelehrte* and the enlightened ruler

Despite indicating the political function of history, Schlözer's historical writings do not reveal in any detail how political reform informed by historical knowledge works in practice. The main reason for this is that Schlözer never actually wrote a pragmatic history. As seen, his works in regard to both Russian and universal history were merely conceived as plans of how such a history could be written in the future. Therefore, they only provide us with a characterisation of the political significance of historical knowledge in general, abstract terms and not in practical ones. Moreover, the focus of these works is very much on the relatively remote past: the period from the 9th-century institution of the Russian state to the Romanov ascendancy in the early 17th century in the former case; from the foundation of Rome in ca. 800 BC (or in later versions of his universal historical conception from the reign of Cyrus in ca. 550 BC) to the 15th century in the latter.⁵³⁶ Given that Schlözer posited a radical break between what he termed ancient or old history on the one hand, and modern or new history, on the other, this absence in his historical *oeuvre* of any sustained engagement with modernity, again renders the explication of how he precisely conceived of political reform in the present difficult.

And yet, a much more detailed consideration of political reform can be found in Schlözer's work, if we turn our attention away from his explicitly historical writings to his contribution to another field of scholarship closely related to it: *Statistik* (statistics) or the systematic empirical description of the contemporary situation of a given state in all its aspects. Schlözer had been interested in statistics throughout his career. As a student in Göttingen, he attended the courses offered by the leading German statistician Gottfried Achenwall.⁵³⁷ While in

⁵³⁶ Schlözer changed the periodisation of universal history throughout the successive versions of the work; however the beginning of modern history is consistently located around 1500. There of course exists a prehistory to either the foundation of Rome or the reign of Cyrus, but, according to Schlözer, the dearth of sources in regard to this history do not allow us to study it pragmatically. See UH, vol. 1, pp. 67-73; WG, vol. 1, pp. 92-3.

⁵³⁷ On Achenwall's statistics, see Pasquale Pasquino, 'Politisches und historisches Interesse: "Statistik" und historische Staatenlehre bei Gottfried Achenwall (1719 - 1772)', in *Aufklärung und Geschichte*.

Russia he taught statistics to students at the educational institute of the Cossack hetman Kirill Razumovsky,⁵³⁸ and, when on leave in Germany, published two works concerned with the statistics of Russia: the *Neuveränderte Rußland*⁵³⁹ - a compilation of source material pertaining to Catherine's reform projects - and *Von der Unschädlichkeit der Pocken in Rußland und von Rußlands Bevölkerung überhaupt*⁵⁴⁰ - a statistical investigation into Russia's population, coupled with a reform project designed to quickly increase this population. Back in Göttingen, he took over the statistical courses of his erstwhile teacher Achenwall in 1772, and continued to teach and publish on the subject until his death: most notably through three statistical periodicals he edited between 1775 and 1783,⁵⁴¹ and, towards the end of his life through a theoretical treatise on the subject – the *Theorie der Statistik* of 1804.⁵⁴²

Through these studies Schlözer fed into a distinctly German scholarly project, whose roots reach back to the early 17th century, but which had especially gathered momentum and importance since the mid-18th century, not least due to the efforts of Achenwall: to establish the basis for a new academic discipline of political learning whose main subject matter is provided by the modern state. The approach of statistics to the state was empirical: in sharp contrast to a kind of political philosophy based on abstraction or on a normative conception of the state as it ought to be as provided by natural law, statistics was firmly grounded on an empirical understanding of how states actually are and operate. If its empirical foundation was the most distinctive feature of this new discipline, practicality was its principal end: taught at universities, the principal target audience of statistics were future statesmen and government officials, and its importance derived from

⁵³⁸ *Leben*, chap. 7.

⁵³⁹ Haigold, *Neuverändertes Rußland*; Haigold, *Beylagen zum Neuveränderten Rußland*.

⁵⁴⁰ Referred to her as Pocken.

⁵⁴¹ The three periodicals are: August Ludwig Schlözer, *Briefwechsel meist statistischen Inhalts. Gesammelt und zum Versuch herausgegeben von August Ludwig Schlözer* (Göttingen: Johan Christian Dieterich, 1775); August Ludwig Schlözer, *Briefwechsel, meist historischen und politischen Inhalts, 1776-82*, 10 vols. (Göttingen: 1776-82); August Ludwig Schlözer, *Stats-Anzeigen*, 18 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1782-93).

⁵⁴² Referred to here as *Statistik*.

its ability to inculcate a kind of political knowledge that would further directly what was termed *Staatskunst*, or the art to govern.⁵⁴³

If we are to fully understand Schlözer's related claims that Peter's and Catherine's reigns must above all be understood as attempts to govern with learned knowledge, and that the promotion of historical scholarship is central to their endeavours, we have to investigate three aspects of his conception of statistics. First, we need to examine the nature of the relationship between history and statistics both in terms of their aims and methods. Second, we need to consider the nexus between statistics and the art to govern, which is based on an infusion of *Gelehrsamkeit* into government. In particular, we have to be attentive to Schlözer's contention that rational reform is critically dependent on such an infusion. Finally, we have to turn to Schlözer's claim that princely support for statistics is not merely political useful, but legitimising, by providing a sufficient limit to the dangers of tyranny.

In his *Theorie of Statistik* Schlözer took over his teacher's Achenwall's definition of statistics:

*Stat[istik] heißt der Inbegriff alles dessen, was in einer bürgerlichen Gesellschaft und deren Lande wirkliches angetroffen wird. ... Der HauptNutzen unsrer Wissenschaft besteht darinn, daß man daraus einsehen lernt, wie glücklich oder unglücklich ein Reich sei Also gehört nur das hieher, was die Wolfart eines Stats in einem merklichen Grade angeht, es mag nun solche hintern oder befördern; und dieses nennen wir mit Einem Worte, was merkwürdig ist. Dieses wollen wir aus Ursachen einsehen, also eine Wissenschaft davon erlangen. Demnach enthält Statistik eine "gründliche Kenntniss der wirklichen Merkwürdigkeiten eines Stats".*⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴³ For general accounts of the development of statistics in 18th-century Germany, see Pasquino, 'Politisches und historisches Interesse'; Gabriella Valera, 'Statistik, Staatengeschichte: Geschichte im 18. Jahrhundert', in *Aufklärung und Geschichte*; Hans Erich Bödeker, 'Das staatswissenschaftliche Fächersystem im 18. Jahrhundert', in *Wissenschaften im Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, ed. Rudolf Vierhaus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985). On the increasingly important role played by university educated government officials in 18th-century German cultural and political life in general, see Rudolf Vierhaus, *Germany in the Age of Absolutism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 55-8.

⁵⁴⁴ Achenwall, quoted in *Statistik*, pp. 6-7. Emphasis in the original.

From this initial definition we can already discern a number of commonalities between statistics and the ideal of a pragmatic universal history as advocated by Schlözer. If universal history traces the improvement or deterioration of mankind across time and places, and seeks to uncover the causes for these successive revolutions, statistics provides a systematic, causal account of the present state of happiness or unhappiness of a given people. Schlözer himself expressed this intimate connection between the two fields of enquiry pithily: 'Geschichte ist eine fortlaufende Statistik; und Statistik ist eine stillstehende Geschichte'.⁵⁴⁵

Indeed, strictly speaking statistics is not a separate academic discipline at all, but part of history. History written in a modern fashion, Schlözer showed, no longer has biographies of kings, and accounts of wars and battles as its main subject matter, as had been the case with the monkish chroniclers of the past. On the contrary, it is concerned with tracing the manifold ways by which governments have transformed their countries, for better or worse, in all their dimensions - economically, culturally, socially and politically - and with assessing the impact of such reforms on the happiness of the people. Historians are therefore interested in *Staatsmerkwürdigkeiten* - the determinants of improvements/deteriorations, happiness/unhappiness - of the past, whilst statisticians are, essentially, historians of the present.⁵⁴⁶

Crucially, historians and statisticians face exactly the same kind of challenges, and are urged by Schlözer to use the same methodological apparatus to overcome them. Both are thoroughly non-speculative fields of enquiry, whose starting point must be the establishment of a firm empirical basis. Although their sources may be different - annals and historical documents in the case of history; travel accounts, newspapers, contemporary governmental records, and, if available, officially compiled lists and tables in the case of statistics - the twin enemies of either kind of investigation are insufficient evidence, or, even worse, unrecognised factual mistakes within the body of available empirical data. Hence,

⁵⁴⁵ Statistik, p. 86.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 92-3.

both historian and statistician need to possess the same critical skills to compile, assess and verify their sources.⁵⁴⁷

Whilst knowledge of erudite criticism is therefore a prerequisite for the successful statistician, it is not sufficient. A random collection of facts, no matter how truthful, is useless. Just like the historian, therefore, the statistician needs to systematise his facts by means of rules of selection and ordering. Moreover, if he wants to produce a statistical work of the highest order - or, as Schlözer termed it a *räsonnierte Statistik* - selection and ordering must be carried out in such a way that causal connections between otherwise insignificant facts become apparent:

Manches Datum scheint unbedeutend zu seyn, und wird übersehen; seine Wichtigkeit ist versteckt, und wird erst durch *Combination* gefunden. Hier zeige sich Genie und Gellersamkeit des Statistikers: je reicher er an Kenntnissen aller Art ist, desto öfter, und manchmal überraschend, wird er zwischen 2 Erscheinungen einen Zusammenhang, als zwischen Ursache und Wirkunge, finden.⁵⁴⁸

The methodological process of statistics, is the same as the one of history. Both types of enquiry are dependent, according to Schlözer, on the empirically controlled application of genius, in order to establish causal connections between potentially very heterogenous and disparate pieces of data. Thereby, a form of knowledge is produced which, because of its causal characteristic, speaks to the faculty of reason.

It is this kind of knowledge that is indispensable to the art of government. By precisely establishing what concrete factors either hinder or further the happiness of a given population, the *gelehrte* statistician, employing the methods of pragmatic history on the data of the present, renders the effective manipulation of those factors possible. The statistician is, in other words, the most important ally for sovereigns trying to fulfil their duty: to increase the happiness of the population by engaging in the kind of reform that is most likely to advance this desired end. Indeed, as Schlözer put it:

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 40-4.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 45-6. Emphasis in the original.

[Statistik ist] gerade die Wissenschaft, die fast mer als jede andre, dazu geeignet ist, one Anmassung und Blödigkeit, Gelersamkeit und Regierung mit einander *vertraulich* zu machen.⁵⁴⁹

According to Schlözer, reform informed by statistical *Gelehrsamkeit*, is fundamentally different from reform based on the fanciful ideas of what he calls projectors (*Projectenmacher*). The projector is always a dangerous being, who should be avoided by the sovereign as much as the *Gelehrte* should be courted. The fundamental problem with projectors is that their proposals are not derived from sound knowledge of the specific circumstances of the society that is to be reformed, but instead emanate directly from their empirically uninformed geniuses. Following such an erroneous method, projectors envisage grand and abstract projects of reform, that typically aim at a swift and radical reconstitution of a given society. Such projects, Schlözer argued, either are not practicable at all, or if an attempt at implementation is undertaken, will by necessity end in failure, as they do not take account of existing complexities.⁵⁵⁰

Similar to Levesque, Schlözer regarded sound knowledge rather than the will of the sovereign as the crucial limiting factor in political reform. A sovereign may well have the will to do good, but without the knowledge of what exactly hinders or promotes the good in specific circumstances, this will is unlikely to ever be translated into a successful transformation of reality. And yet, Schlözer did not share Levesque's principled scepticism of all forms of radical reform and conscious attempts at rapid development. Whilst Levesque cannot conceive of any situation in which sufficient knowledge for such a feat would be available, and therefore advocates the institution of a variety of defensive barriers to prevent an overenthusiastic will to act too swiftly and ruthlessly, the function of Schlözer's *Gelehrte* is not to hamper and temporise the energy of the reforming will, but to channel it into the most fruitful direction. Or, to put it differently, Schlözer was convinced that the kind of *Gelehrsamkeit* that underlies both history and statistics, with its ability to methodically organise enormous amounts of disparate data into

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., introduction (n.p). Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁵⁰ For Schlözer's criticism of *Projectenmacher*, see August Ludwig Schlözer, *Allgemeines StatsRecht und StatsVerfassungslere. Voran: Einleitung in alle StatsWissenschaften. Encyklopädie derselben. Metapolitik. Anhang: Prüfung der v. Moserschen Grundsätze des Allgem. StatsRechts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck- und Ruprechtschen Verlag, 1793), p. 11. See also, *Leben*, pp. 89-91, 146-7.

coherent, causal knowledge, can at least in principle render rapid development practicable.

Schlözer made the practical case of how statistics can inform reform in the context of Russia. Indeed, whilst in St. Petersburg, Schlözer urged Catherine II to institute a regular compilation of statistical tables recording all births and deaths that had occurred across Russia. Schlözer's proposals were transmitted to Catherine who agreed to partially implement them in 1764. Crucially, Schlözer regarded her support for statistics in the same light as her promotion of erudite historical scholarship: it was, in his eyes, a return to the principles of Peter I, who had already instituted a methodical regime for the periodic surveying of the development of Russia's population; a regime, however, which fell into disuse under his immediate successors.⁵⁵¹

In the *Von der Unschädlichkeit der Pocken in Rußland und von Rußlands Bevölkerung überhaupt* (1768), Schlözer presented his analysis of the data compiled in St. Petersburg during the first year of the new regime's operation. His findings were stark: Russia is woefully under-populated, and the measures so far used to counter this – mainly to attract foreigners as colonists to the Empire's remote parts; a measure, we have seen, that attracted the attention of Diderot – are unduly costly and inefficient.⁵⁵² Instead, he urged the czarina to adopt a completely different approach to transform Russia's demography – an approach that would focus on the country's existing, native population, rather than on foreigners.

Schlözer's alternative approach was based on the manipulation of two small causes significantly influencing the growth of Russia's population. On the one hand, by carefully comparing the assembled empirical evidence in regard to causes for death between foreigners temporarily living in St. Petersburg and Russian nationals, he came to the conclusion that the latter are far less likely to die from smallpox than the former. Moreover, he found in the venerable Russian custom of frequently visiting public saunas the most likely cause for the relative

⁵⁵¹ *Leben*, pp. 131-2; *Pocken*, pp. 65-7.

⁵⁵² *Pocken*, pp. 132-5.

harmlessness of a disease that elsewhere accounts for a significant proportion of premature deaths.⁵⁵³ If saunas are therefore highly beneficial to population growth, and should get as much governmental support as possible, their benign influence is more than countered by another, again particularly local, demographic determinant: the excessive consumption of spirits in which Russians habitually indulge, leading to disproportional death rates among adult males. Hence, the second part of Schlözer's reform proposal: to start a comprehensive programme to decrease spirit consumption in Russia.⁵⁵⁴

Schlözer was convinced that Russia's flagging population - a central concern of Catherine, and seen as pivotal to Russia's development - could easily be doubled during the lifetime of the czarina, if she were to act on his recommendations.⁵⁵⁵ Importantly, he deemed these proposals as fundamentally different from the kind of reform advocated by projectors: rather than being informed by abstract, general theories about population growth that are taken out of thin air, his proposals were based on the manipulation of the real causes for demographic development in Russia.⁵⁵⁶ Furthermore, the discovery of these causes was of course only rendered possible through the rigorous following of the methodical steps Schlözer advocated across his historical and statistical writings. As seen, this methodology involved the application of a specific kind of learned genius, able to detect all the small, often hidden, and, to the untrained eye, apparently insignificant causes, when carefully surveying a comprehensive empirical collection of facts that cover all aspects of the phenomenon to be explained.⁵⁵⁷

We are now of course in a position to understand more fully why Schlözer deemed Peter I and Catherine II's support for erudition not solely important for the renaissance of Russian historiography, even though this undoubtedly had for Schlözer a value *sui generis*, but also as central to their politics. Realising that effective reform is only possible with the help of *Gelehrsamkeit*, Peter did what he could to kick-start its development within Russia, and Catherine, so Schlözer

⁵⁵³ Ibid., pp. 21-9, 77-112.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 29-36.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 15-16.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 136-9; see also *Leben*, pp. 153-5.

⁵⁵⁷ *Pocken*, p. 17.

thought, attempted to re-establish and re-strengthen its position after it had suffered decline at the hands of the czars in the intervening period. In particular, Schlözer's account of statistics explains why he deemed the establishment and maintenance of the St. Petersburg Academy, and its staffing with German scholars, the most important of Peter's institutions. Peter thereby effectively provided himself and his successors with the means absolutely necessary for his central end - the second foundation of Russia through rational reform - to succeed: a corps of *Gelehrte* possessing the requisite skills to produce the kind of knowledge without which this end could never be achieved.

Moreover, considering Schlözer's assessment of Peter and Catherine from the perspective provided by his discussion of political reform, also clearly elucidates how he perceived their project of development through Europeanisation. Most importantly, Schlözer was not primarily interested in whether the reforming czars imported any specific political, economic, cultural or social policies from Europe – in fact, he has hardly anything to say about this. Instead, he draws our attention to their promotion of European *Gelehrsamkeit* within Russia, thereby enabling the indigenous formulation of reforming policies that are best suited to the particular circumstances of Russia. Schlözer's claim that Russia's complicated history needs to be painstakingly studied in all its individuality extends to the study of its contemporary situation, and specifically to the learned elucidation of those dimensions of this situation most in need of reform. What are universal and hence directly importable are merely the methods and tools by which these investigations are to be undertaken; the resulting history and reforming policies, however, may well turn out to have a distinctly Russian flavour.

The most important outcome of the marriage of government and *Gelehrsamkeit* is undoubtedly the formulation of the most efficient and appropriate reforming policies, thereby enabling rapid development. And yet, in the context of a country such as Russia in which no formal constitutional limitations on sovereign authority exist, governmental support for statistical *Gelehrsamkeit* takes on a wider significance. Schlözer contended that a sovereign that actively promotes such a marriage – for instance by means of promoting the study of statistics at universities, by instituting the regular compilation of official statistical reports,

and, most importantly, by allowing the free circulation of publications concerned with the empirical description of the state – also imposes a powerful limit to his otherwise unbridled authority. In his *Theorie der Statistik*, Schlözer characterised this statistical bridle in the following manner:

Statistik und Despotism vertragen sich nicht zusammen. Unzählige Gebrechen des Landes sind Fehler der Statsverwaltung: die Statistik zeigt sie an, controlirt dadurch die Regierung, wird gar ihr Ankläger: das nimmt der Despot ungnädig, der in solchen Angaben sein SündenRegister liest. ... Wenn der Satrap Unwarheiten einberichtet, oder LandesGebrechen verschweigt, an denen er vielleicht selbst Schuld ist; wer mag dem aufgeklärteren Patrioten zumuten, seine Stimme dagegen zu erheben, so bald er den langen Arm des Satrapen zu befürchten hat? ... Offene hingegen, und Jar aus Jar ein fortgesetzte Statistik, ist, ... auch die unverdächtigste und urkundliche *LobRede* auf eine weise Reigierung. Unzähliges Gutes im Lande ist ihr Werk; der Bürger erfährt es nun actenmäßig und in Zalen ... welch süße Belonung für gute Regenten! Dies fangen daher an, sich aus den JaresBerichten über ihre Reiche ein Studium zu machen ... “So viel ists noch nie gewesen“, sagte einst Friedrich der Einzige auf den ersten Blick, als er in seiner KirchenListe die Summe aler Gebornen seines Reichs übersah.⁵⁵⁸

Whilst Schlözer juxtaposed here the Satrap, or the subaltern Persian despot, who consciously falsifies the statistics of his province, thereby depriving the citizen of the possibility of informing the government about existing afflictions, with Frederick II of Prussia, the latter can be legitimately substituted with either Peter I or Catherine II. Indeed, the beginning of the quote is directly lifted out of Schlözer’s earlier *Öffentliches und privat-Leben* where he explained the incompatibility of statistics with despotism in the context of Catherine’s support for his own proposals to introduce statistics into Russia.⁵⁵⁹

Despotism, according to Schlözer, is defined solely by the abuse of absolute power, and is therefore improperly applied to a regime that actively uses unlimited power to achieve its proper end: to increase the happiness of its population.⁵⁶⁰ Encouraging the production of the kind of knowledge that can

⁵⁵⁸ Statistik, pp. 51-2. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁵⁹ Leben, p. 131.

⁵⁶⁰ Schlözer, rather implausibly, thought that such a definition of despotism is supported by Montesquieu. See, Schlözer, *Allgemeines StatsRecht*, p. 114.

channel sovereign power towards the achievement of its desired end, and transparently giving account of the results of the application of sovereign power, thereby inviting subjects to critically scrutinise governmental activity and to participate in the production of statistical knowledge, are the hallmarks of an enlightened, rather than a despotic, regime. Enlightened governments - or government by means of learned knowledge - are geographically and historically specific: they have developed in modern Europe through the infusion of *Gelehrsamkeit* into government, and are fundamentally different from Oriental despotisms, where ignorant Satraps rule by power only,⁵⁶¹ or from the regimes of antiquity which could not benefit from the immense capacity of knowledge production and organisation that defines modern Europe.⁵⁶²

According to Schlözer, it was the main achievement of Peter and Catherine to have propelled Russia into modernity by emulating European *Gelehrsamkeit*. Thus, they provided Russia with the most important means for rational reform and rapid development. However, their formally unlimited power has become subject to limits in the process. Just as Russian historiography has become the legitimate property of any scholar with the requisite critical skills, thereby curtailing the power of an unscholarly writer such as Lomonosov attempting to despotically distort uncomfortable truths, the political actions of Russian sovereigns could now be checked against existing evidence for their appropriateness and, if needed, criticised by the learned public both within and outside of Russia.

⁵⁶¹ On this point see, for instance, Schlözer, *Briefwechsel, meist historischen und politischen Inhalts, 1776-82* vol. 3, issue 16, pp. 254-5. In this small article Schlözer takes a Viennese professor – Heyrenbach - to task for having suggested that certain state affairs should be off-limit for learned investigations: ‘Alle RegierungCabineter der Welt ... sind von 2erlei Art. Entweder sie sprechen und handeln nach Einsicht und gelerter Kenntnis von Rechts- und Tatsätzen: oder sie sprechen und handeln blos nach Macht. Die erstern brauchen Litteratur, und ermuntern, ehren, und suchen sie; die letztern brauchen sie nicht, vielmehr ist sie ihnen im Wege, also scheuen und verscheuchen sie sie. – Danke doch Hr. H. mit mir dem Himmel, daß alle unsre europäischen Cabineter von der erstern Art sind! Und dringe er ihnen nicht wider ihren Dank und Willen ein Recht auf, das sie nicht haben, dessen sie nicht bedürfen, dessen Ausübung sie verschmähen, so lange sie christlich-europäische Cabineter, und nicht asiatische Divane und Serails, d. i. Stille düstere PolyphemusHölen, sind.’

⁵⁶² Statistik, pp. 1, 110-12; Pocken, pp. 122-3.

5. Johann Gottfried Herder: Russia as the future of civilisation between Europe and Asia

Introduction

To finish a thesis on the European engagement with Russian history during the Enlightenment with a chapter on Johann Gottfried Herder might be seen as problematic for at least two reasons. First, Herder never engaged substantially with Russian history. Despite the fact that he intended to write a book on Russia's civilisation early in his career, this project was never undertaken and, as a consequence, his reflections about Russia and its history remain fragmentary and cursory. Second, it is often questioned whether Herder should be included in the tradition of the Enlightenment at all, or whether his writings constitute a complete break with the French *philosophes* and the German *Aufklärers*.⁵⁶³

Much of the secondary literature on Herder's writings on Russia also focuses extensively on either the cursory nature of his relevant writings or his apparently troubled relationship to the Enlightenment. On the one hand, there is a tradition of scholarship claiming that his reflections on Russia should not be taken too seriously, because they are not based on sustained, reasoned argument, but find their source in Herder's creative imagination running wild.⁵⁶⁴ On the other hand, however, the big impact of the same writings in 19th century Russia has also been noted, and Herder has been firmly established as a forerunner and source of inspiration for Slavophilism - a movement which, in its most radical form, wanted to completely break the Slavs' connections to Europe, resist cultural imposition

⁵⁶³ The classic portrayal of Herder as a rebel against the Enlightenment is Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp.168-243.

⁵⁶⁴ See, for instance, Rudolf Haym, *Herder*, ed. Wolfgang Harich, 2 vols. (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1954) vol. 1, p. 360; Ernst Birke, 'Herder und die Slawen', in *Schicksalswege deutscher Vergangenheit: Beiträge zur geschichtlichen Deutung der letzten hundertfünfzig Jahre; Festschrift für Siegfried A. Kaehler*, ed. Walther Hubatsch (Düsseldorf: Droste-Verlag, 1993), esp. p. 95; B. Suphan, 'Peter der Grosse, Herders Fürstenideal', *Altpreussische Monatsschrift* 10 (1873), p. 108; Lubov Keefer, 'Herder's Russian Utopia', *Modern Language Notes* 51, no. 6 (1936), p. 358.

from the outside, and promote the development of a native culture instead.⁵⁶⁵ In its extreme forms, Slavophilism constitutes a radical reaction to the Enlightenment discourse on Russia which we have traced so far, which was largely based on establishing links between Russia and Europe by indicating the ways in which their respective histories may relate and interact.

This chapter seeks to show, however, that both views are based on an essentially de-contextualised and partial reading of Herder's reflections on Russia, which scarcely does justice to the richness and complexity of his thought. Whilst the accusation of a creative imagination running wild can certainly be supported if Herder's most famous piece on Russia - the chapter on the Slavs in the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*⁵⁶⁶ - is read in isolation, it becomes apparent that the prophecy of the future of Russia contained therein, appears far less spectacularly imaginative if it is integrated within his reflections about Russia as a whole, and if these, in turn, are read in the context of his anthropology and philosophy of history. Such a comprehensive reading of Herder also reveals that the portrayal of Herder as an anti-Enlightenment figure needs serious qualification. In particular, and most important for our present concerns, the chapter will show that the project that has united all thinkers so far considered here, namely to find a relationship between the histories of Europe and Russia, also informs Herder. In seeking to establish such a relationship, Herder, far from rebelling against the Enlightenment discourse on Russia, largely stays within its boundary by critically engaging with a host of themes centred around the key Enlightenment problem of how to civilise Russia: What is the role of the will in history in general, and the one of the enlightened ruler when civilising in particular? Should civilisation happen from the bottom-up or be imposed top-down? What is the role of cultural importation and imitation and how do these relate to internal development? Herder's answers to such questions in the context of the debate about Russia reveals that neither his thought, nor the Enlightenment,

⁵⁶⁵ Mechthild Keller, "'Politische Seeträume': Herder und Russland", in *Russen und Russland aus deutscher Sicht. 18. Jahrhundert: Aufklärung*, ed. Mechthild Keller (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987), pp. 393-4; Peter Drews, *Herder und die Slaven. Materialien zur Wirkungsgeschichte bis zur Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, (München: Verlag Otto Sager, 1990), pp. 7-10; Birke, 'Herder und die Slawen'; Wolfgang Gesemann, 'Herder's Russia', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26, no. 3 (1965), pp. 424-5.

⁵⁶⁶ Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 4, bk. 16, chap. 4, pp. 640-3.

can be properly understood, if we regard him as a rebel against an ostensibly monolithic Enlightenment tradition.

In order to capture some of the richness and complexity of Herder's thought, this chapter's first section contains a comprehensive overview of his writings that touch upon Russia. The majority of these writings were written early in Herder's life, during the late 1760s, with later remarks about the country to a considerable extent merely reinforcing arguments already contained during this first, most intense, phase of engagement. In subsequent sections, these fragmentary reflections will be considered within the context of Herder's conceptions of anthropology and the philosophy of history as they developed over the next three decades. By offering such a reading of the early fragments on Russia against the background provided by his later anthropology and philosophy of history, I am not seeking to make a substantive argument about the development of Herder's thought as a whole. To put it differently, the argument pursued here is not that the Russian writings of the 1760s were already pregnant with a complete anthropology and philosophy of history that subsequently merely unfolded. Rather my claim is that the young Herder, when contemplating Russia, formulated a number of interrelated problems to which he continuously returned, and that the substantive engagement with such problems in his anthropological and historical writing in turn illuminates two important aspects of his Russian fragments. First, that the distinct elements of Herder's reflections on Russia, whilst appearing unconnected when read on their own, show a considerable degree of consistency and relatedness when integrated within Herder's total philosophy. Secondly, that the account of Russia that emerges from such a reading, whilst highly original, does not fall outside the Enlightenment discourse of Russia as traced throughout this thesis, but rather tries to mediate between rival conceptions already contained within it.

The Russian fragments: Peter, the Black Sea, and the question of true *Bildung*

Herder showed an interest in Russia throughout his career, and reflections about the country's recent past, present and future are scattered across his *oeuvre*. However, the most intense preoccupation with the country occurred early in his life, and, intriguingly, found written, if not published, expression just at the point in time when he was leaving Russia. Herder had lived and worked in Riga since 1764 and left this town under Russian dominion in 1769 for Nantes. It is the *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769*⁵⁶⁷ – conceived as a philosophical travel diary to be distributed among close friends, but never completed – and a host of smaller texts, written in France alongside the diary,⁵⁶⁸ that contain the fullest picture of his conception of Russia. Herder established three main topics relevant to Russia in these texts - an appraisal of Peter I; an outline for a comprehensive programme of reform to be implemented by Catherine II; and a prophecy about Russia's near future – which structure his thought about the country throughout his life. Indeed, cursory reflections about Russia published later, most particularly in the *Vom Einfluß der Regierung auf die Wissenschaften, und der Wissenschaften auf die Regierung* (1780),⁵⁶⁹ the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784-91)⁵⁷⁰ and the *Adrastea* (1801-1803),⁵⁷¹ are to a considerable extent mere elaborations upon arguments already contained in the *Journal*. The aim of this section is to trace the immediate content of Herder's account in regard to all three topics across these writings. This will reveal the consistency and relatedness of Herder's Russian reflections despite their fragmentary nature, as well as indicate the considerable extent to which Herder explicitly engages therein with the wider Enlightenment discourse on Russia.

The first theme of Herder's Russian writings revolves around an appraisal of the historical role of Peter I in the civilisation of Russia. It is generally a very positive

⁵⁶⁷ Hanser, vol. 1, pp. 355-474.

⁵⁶⁸ These are: *Sammlung von Gedanken und Beispielen fremder Schriftsteller über die Bildung der Völker*, SWS, vol. 4, pp. 469-78; *Gedanken bei Lesung Montesquieus*, Hanser, vol. 1, pp. 468-73; *Über die Bildung der Völker*, SWS, vol. 32, pp. 231-4.

⁵⁶⁹ SWS, vol. 9, pp. 307-408.

⁵⁷⁰ Hanser, vol. 3.

⁵⁷¹ SWS, vols. 23-4.

portrayal, which led Suphan to declare and deplore that Peter was nothing less than Herder's *Fürstenideal* (his ideal monarch).⁵⁷² However, we shall see in the course of this chapter that it might be misleading to impute any ideals of governance to Herder. Governments are in his philosophy only means and not ends, and, therefore, must be of a flexible and pragmatic disposition, rather than of a fixed or ideal one, in order to deliver constant ends in changing historical circumstances. If we are to understand Herder's view of Peter, in other words, it is necessary to enquire precisely what he believed the czar achieved given pre-Petrine Russia's state of development.

The textual context of the very first, fleeting reference to the czar is already highly instructive for Herder's understanding of his achievements. In a short essay written for the *Gelehrte Beyträge zu den Rigischen Anzeigen* in 1764, which deals with the advantages and disadvantages of learning foreign languages, Peter is cited as an example of the benefits foreign influences can have on development:

Alsdenn (i.e. through learning foreign languages) erhebe ich mich zu ihm (i.e. a genius speaking or writing in a foreign tongue), und gebe meiner Seele die Ausdehnung jedes Klimas. So ward Cicero an Demosthenes Schriften ein Redner: so weinte Alexander am Grabe Achills nach dem Ruhm des Ueberwinders, an Alexanders Bilde schuff sich Cäsar zum Helden, und Peter an der Säule des Richelieu zum Schöpfer von Rußland.⁵⁷³

Even though the essay advocated the learning of foreign tongues in order to widen the education of the individual, and to speed-up the process of the development of the arts and sciences through inter-communal communication, Herder qualified this argument in two important respects. First, he noted that cultivation through foreign influences is historically specific. In ancient history, spanning the period before the Roman Empire, individuals and nations generally developed in autarky, and there was simply no need to learn foreign languages or indeed have any communication with the outside world.⁵⁷⁴ It is therefore no coincidence that the passage just quoted starts with the example of Cicero successfully imitating Demosthenes. Secondly, Herder urged caution against the soaking up of foreign

⁵⁷² Suphan, 'Peter der Grosse, Herders Fürstenideal', p. 108.

⁵⁷³ *Über den Fleiß in mehreren gelehrten Sprachen*, SWS, vol. 1, p. 5.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

languages, arts and sciences in a unreflecting manner: we can only benefit from foreign influences if we approach them from the fixed starting point provided by our own cultural background. When entering into a foreign world, we have to carefully compare the foreign with the indigenous, and be conscious to only import influences that can be adapted to, and enrich, our own traditions.⁵⁷⁵ Or, to put it differently, Cicero, by learning from Demosthenes, did not endeavour to become Greek, but to create a distinctly Latin oratorical tradition by adapting elements of the vocabulary and style of the Athenian statesman. Likewise, as we shall see in the following, Herder did not believe that Peter's importation of certain elements of European culture – signified here by his tribute to Richelieu made during his second journey to Europe in 1716-1717 – was a sufficient cause for the creation of a new Russia.

In this short early essay Herder has already established the main lines of argument that frame his assessment of Peter throughout his life. Most importantly, the essay clearly indicates that for Herder, just as for all thinkers considered in this thesis, Peter's reign must be assessed in the context of an attempt to propel Russia into modernity by emulating Europe. However, the essay also highlights the complexity involved in processes of cultural imitation, and the subsequent writings dealing with Peter elaborate on such complexities, thereby arriving at a successively more distinct conception of the state of Russia prior to Peter, the achievements of his reign, and his legacy.

In all his writings Herder was adamant that Peter was correct to attempt to civilise Russia by imitating Europe. In the *Journal*, for instance, Peter was lauded for having induced a passion for imitation and innovation in his subjects:

Leichter nachzuahmen, zu arripiere[n] ist keine Nation, als sie [i.e. Russia]; alsdenn aber, da sie alles zu wissen glaubt, forscht sie nie weiter und bleibt also immer und in allem stümperhaft. So ists; auf Reisen welche Nation nachahmender? in den Sitten und der französischen Sprache, welche leichter? in allen Handwerken, Fabriken, Künsten; aber alles nur bis auf einen gewissen Grad. Ich sehe in dieser Nachahmungsbegierde, in dieser kindischen Neuerungssucht nichts als gute Anlage einer Nation, die sich bildet,

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

und auf dem rechten Wege bildet: die überall lernt, nachahmt, sammlet ...⁵⁷⁶

This defence of Russians' passion for imitation was no doubt directed against Rousseau's charge that Peter merely possessed a *génie imitatif* and not a real *génie créative*, and that, by turning his subjects into weak, degenerate copies of Europeans he had corrupted them in an untimely fashion.⁵⁷⁷ For Herder, just as for Voltaire, starting the civilisation of Russia by means of imitation was entirely appropriate.

Herder not only defended Peter against Rousseau, but also against Diderot. In his most comprehensive account of the czar, undertaken in an article dedicated to Peter in the *Adrastea*,⁵⁷⁸ Herder implicitly engaged with Diderot's argument that Peter, by only following his own will and not the laws of nature, had confused the natural order by which civilisation develops. Contrary to Diderot's contention that Peter was mistaken to start the civilisation of Russia by promoting the fine arts and higher sciences rather than first strengthening Russia's agricultural and industrial basis, Herder claimed that the czar's project involved all aspects of life at the same time and that this way of proceeding was entirely appropriate:

An den Rand des Entwurfs einer *Akademie der Wissenschaften* bemerkte er Commissionsen an seinen General in der Ukraine über Ochsen und Schaaf. Sämmtliche wahre Wissenschaften sah er als unentbehrlich in ihrer hohen Nutzbarkeit an; er betrachtete sie sowohl als Unterricht und Vervollkommung zu größerer Tüchtigkeit, als auch wie Werkzeuge zu unzähligen praktischen Vortheilen.⁵⁷⁹

Whilst invoking the simultaneity of the establishment of the St. Petersburg Academy and a concern with agricultural production in the Ukraine challenged Diderot's argument on empirical grounds, Herder equally denied the veracity of the *philosophe's* wider point that the czar's reforms were directed against the normal course of nature. In a dialogue entitled *Über die schnelle Kunstbildung*

⁵⁷⁶ *Journal*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 366-7.

⁵⁷⁷ *Du contrat social* in Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, p. 386.

⁵⁷⁸ *Adrastea*, SWS, vol. 23, pt. 5, pp. 436-42.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 439. Emphasis in the original.

der Völker that immediately follows the article on Peter in the *Adrastea*,⁵⁸⁰ Herder tackled the question whether forced, rapid development such as the one attempted in Russia can ever succeed or whether such a method of civilisation necessarily collides with the rhythm of nature.

One of the protagonists in the dialogue makes Diderot's point that nature imposes both an order and a rhythm on the process of civilisation that cannot be overridden by man:

Eben wie die Natur bei jedem Gewächs *seine*, und eben damit ihre Zeit hält sollten die Menschen nicht auch bei dem feinsten Werk, das *sie* zu treiben haben [i.e. the civilisation of their country], indem sie die Natur nicht etwa nur nachahmen, sondern sie veredlen, sollten sie nicht auch mit jedem Gewächs *seine* Zeit halten? D.i. bei keinem Frucht vor der Blüthe, bei keinem Blüthe im Keim fodern?

However, it is his opponent that wins the argument by means of a reference to Peter:

Doch aber, wo es die Natur des Gewächses will, die Blüthe durch Ein befruchtendes Donnerwetter *hervortreiben*? Ich dachte eben an *Peter den Großen*, der seine Nation auf Einmal, und zwar mit Gewalt in Künsten blühend machte.⁵⁸¹

By indicating that Russia was in a situation which demanded that the process of civilisation be forcefully speeded-up,⁵⁸² Herder of course needed to give an account of this situation. In his early writings he, just like Diderot, was ambivalent on this question. Indeed, he generally claimed that pre-Petrine Russia was in a youthful, savage state close to nature,⁵⁸³ whilst at the same time also giving strong hints that Peter had inherited a complex country comprised of cultivated, semi-cultivated and savage provinces, whereby the cultivated provinces were described as having characteristics more akin to Oriental empires

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 442-55.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 443-4. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁸² See also *Haben wir noch jetzt das Publikum und Vaterland der Alten? Abhandlung zur Feier der Beziehung des neuen Gerichtshauses*, SWS, vol. 1, p. 25.

⁵⁸³ *Journal*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 418. See also *Sammlung von Gedanken und Beispielen*, SWS, vol. 4, p. 476.

than of savage tribes.⁵⁸⁴ In the *Adrastea*, however, Herder unequivocally stressed the Oriental nature of Russia: far from having been confronted by a savage *tabula rasa*, Peter had inherited an Empire profoundly influenced by what he described as Asiatic and late Greek, read Byzantine, culture, and whose main characteristic was not ahistoricity but stasis.⁵⁸⁵

Herder's precise conception of the role of an enlightened ruler faced with an inert country and his account of the historical nexus between Asia and stasis will be explored in much more detail in the subsequent sections of this chapter. Here it suffices to note that his defence of Peter against Rousseau and Diderot was based on a conviction that static 17th century Russia needed the imposition of Peter's will, expressing itself through the importation of European culture and inducing imitative behaviour in his subjects, in order to provide it with a source of dynamism previously lacking.

This account of Peter as the creator and founder of a new civilisation through emulation of Europe is of course strikingly Voltairian. However, Herder departed from Voltaire's assessment of the czar in two important respects. First of all, he explicitly faulted Peter for having exclusively turned towards Europe. In particular, the building of St. Petersburg - the czars window to Europe in the North - was a mistake that had decentred Russia. According to Herder, the Empire's real centre did not lie at the Baltic coast in the Northwest, but at the shore of the Black Sea in the South. The contrast between Voltaire and Herder is best illustrated through their diverging assessments of Peter's actions after he had conquered Azov from the Turks in the course of his first major military campaign in 1696. As we have seen, for Voltaire this was a decisive moment in Peter's career, and he fully supported the czar's decision to turn his attention away from the Turks and the South and towards Sweden and the North, thereby starting his project of Europeanisation in earnest.⁵⁸⁶ Herder, by contrast, judged this decision very differently:

⁵⁸⁴ *Journal*, Hanser, vol. 1, pp. 412, 426-7.

⁵⁸⁵ *Adrastea*, SWS, vol. 23, pt. 5, pp. 447-9.

⁵⁸⁶ *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, OC, vol. 46. p. 583.

Sonderbar ist der Gedanke, daß, wenn Peter die Wünsche, die er seinem Reich bei der Bestürmung Azows nöthig fand, nach dessen Eroberung *dort* bevestigt, und von *dortaus* seine Plane [sic.] zu See und zu Lande angelegt hätte; Welch eine andre Gestalt hätte Rußland erhalten! Eine Residenz im schönsten Klima, am Ausflusse des Don, in der glücklichsten Mitte des Reichs, von da der Monarch seine Europäischen und Asiatischen Provinzen wie die rechte und linke Hand gebrauchen, dem Türkischen Reich hätte Trotz bieten, dem Handel der drei alten Welttheile, mithin auch des vierten, im Schoos seyn mögen!⁵⁸⁷

Secondly, in Herder's view, the emulation of Europe was only a necessary first step for Russia's development, and he consistently stressed that a second, equally necessary step, was still missing. In the *Journal*, for instance, Herder claimed that if Peter's main achievement had been to induce in Russians an appetite for imitation and a passion for innovation, his successors now needed to nationalise the imitations and innovations, thereby raising its culture to a state of perfection.⁵⁸⁸ Likewise, in the *Adrastea*, Herder summed up Peter's achievements in the following manner:

Fremde Künstler und Glaubensgenossen mochte der große Kaiser einführen; sie cultivirten *von innen* seine Nation nicht. Der Nationalcharakter, die griechische Sitte und Lebensweise, endlich die griechische Kirche standen Felsenfest da; sie konnten weder, noch wollten bei einer andern, geschweige der Holländisch-Deutschen Sitte und Kirche zur Lehre gehen. Peter indeß erfüllte seinen Beruf; mit dem übersehendsten Geist diente er auch im Bau seines Staates *von unten hinauf*, so weit er kommen mochte; den Fortbau überließ er der Nachzeit.⁵⁸⁹

Peter's first step in the civilisation of Russia had been to import aspects of European culture, but he had not had sufficient time to provide these imports with strong roots; the cultivation of Russia from within, in other words, was still outstanding. Likewise, the imposition of Peter's will on his previously static nation, Herder implied, is not the end, but the beginning of the story: this top-down imposition is merely conceived as a beginning for building Russia from below. We can see that Herder took a mediating stance in the Voltaire-Diderot debate about Peter and Russia. Rather than presenting external, top-down

⁵⁸⁷ *Adrastea*, SWS, vol. 23, pt. 5, p. 439. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁸⁸ *Journal*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 367.

⁵⁸⁹ *Adrastea*, SWS, vol. 23, pt. 5, p. 451. Emphasis in the original.

civilisation (Voltaire) and internal, bottom-up development (Diderot) as mutually exclusive models, Herder sought to combine both by conceiving them in a temporal sequence. What Peter had started, his successors - and most notably Catherine II - had to bring to fruition, but not by following in the great czar's footsteps as Voltaire had suggested, but through a change of direction.⁵⁹⁰

When Herder wrote his *Journal*, he harboured high hopes that he himself could inspire this necessary change of direction by finding the ear of Catherine II with a number of proposals for reform.⁵⁹¹ Indeed, the *Journal*, written at an important cross-roads in Herder's life after his sudden departure from Riga, contains a variety of plans for future possible career moves.⁵⁹² One such move involves participating by word and deed in Catherine's efforts to improve Russia. Herder sketched two related options of how he could contribute to the development of Russia. On the one hand, he contemplated at length an eventual return to Riga in order to continue his previous career as a priest and educator.⁵⁹³ At the same time, the *Journal*, as well as a number of concept notes and letters written in Nantes and Paris in 1769-1770, contain a draft for a book entitled *Über die wahre Kultur eines Volks und insonderheit Rußlands* which he hoped to send to the czarina in order to directly influence the direction of her reform programme.⁵⁹⁴

Underlying both these options is one unifying idea: Peter's imposed cultural imports need to be assimilated or nationalised through reforms to be undertaken by Catherine, and thereby the new civilisation, which had so far been an external,

⁵⁹⁰ To my knowledge only Keller has noted how closely Herder engaged with Voltaire and Diderot in his appraisal of Peter and Catherine. According to Keller, Herder's assessment of these two rulers indicates the extent to which Herder shared with Voltaire and Diderot an alleged general Enlightenment hope about the efficacy of reform from above. However, such a monolithic frame of reference can neither capture the differences between Voltaire's and Diderot's conception of the enlightened ruler of Russia, nor, indeed, Herder's attempt to synthesise the two. See Keller, "Politische Seeträume": Herder und Russland', pp. 365-7.

⁵⁹¹ *Journal*, Hanser, vol. 1, pp. 410-1. The idea that Catherine was destined to be the ruler to bring Peter's reforms to their conclusion predates the *Journal*. See, for instance, Herder's *Predigt am Namensfest der Monarchin* (1768), SWS, vol. 31, p. 45, and his *Ode auf Katherinens Thronbesteigung* (1765), SWS, vol. 29, pp. 24-7.

⁵⁹² For an account of the biographical context of the *Journal*, see Haym, *Herder*, vol. 1, pp. 337-80 and LB, vol. 1, pp. xxxviii-xliii.

⁵⁹³ *Journal*, Hanser, vol. 1, pp. 373-7, 380-409.

⁵⁹⁴ See *ibid.*, 410-12. Two letters by Herder written whilst in Nantes touch upon the planned work on Russia: To J. F. Hartknoch, *Briefe*, vol. 1, Nantes, October 1769, Nr. 72, pp. 166-71; to Begrow, *Briefe*, vol. 1, Nantes, November 1769, Nr. 73, pp. 172-4. For references to the three drafts closely related to the projected work on Russia, see footnote 568 above.

European veneer artificially imposed on the country's static and Asiatic core, could be internalised. The concept Herder employed to denote this idea is *Bildung*. For instance, working as a priest, Herder hoped to improve the souls of Riga's population 'nicht schriftlich, nicht durch Federkriege, sondern lebendig, durch Bildung'⁵⁹⁵, and the aim of his theoretical work dedicated to Catherine was to investigate '*Zeiten der Bildung, Wege der Bildung, Mittel [und] Folgen*'.⁵⁹⁶

Bildung, which emerged as a central concept in German discourse at the time Herder was writing, and to whose emergence he contributed significantly, is, notoriously, virtually untranslatable.⁵⁹⁷ Used as a noun it is in Herder's usage almost indistinguishable from both *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, which are themselves used inter-changeably. All three terms denote the result of a historical process during which human beings' increasingly learn to master nature through the co-operative development of their inherent faculties. As we shall see in the next section on Herder's anthropology, there exist stages of *Kultur*, *Zivilisation* and *Bildung*, leading to the highest possible actualisation of human faculties; a final stage Herder increasingly came to term *Humanität*.

For our present concern, however, Herder's employment of *Bildung* as a verb (*bilden*) - that is, as a means to reach the goal of *Kultur*, *Zivilisation*, and, ultimately, *Humanität* is more important. In its active sense, Herder generally distinguished *Bildung* from yet another semantically close term, namely *Erziehung* or education. Even though *Bildung* like *Erziehung* has in Herder's usage strong pedagogic elements, it is nevertheless used to denote a very distinct kind of pedagogy. Indeed, whereas *erziehen* has a connotation of an active teacher imposing norms or knowledge on a passive pupil, *bilden*, according to Herder, signifies an iterative process between teacher and pupil, which emphasises the active absorption of the norms or knowledge by the latter by means of reappraisal and adaptation.⁵⁹⁸ When applied to a whole people rather than an individual,

⁵⁹⁵ *Journal*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 374.

⁵⁹⁶ *Sammlung von Gedanken und Beispielen*, SWS, vol. 4, p. 478. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁹⁷ See Raymond Geuss, *Morality, Culture, and History: Essays on German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 29-50; Rudolf Vierhaus, 'Bildung', in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 1, pp. 508-23

⁵⁹⁸ Vierhaus, 'Bildung', pp. 515-17; Frederick M. Barnard, *Herder on Social and Political Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 32.

Bildung, thereby describes a process which can negotiate between external importation and internal assimilation as well as between top-down imposition and bottom-up development.

By exhorting Catherine to start a comprehensive programme of *Bildung*, Herder re-iterated his conviction that Russia was in need of a second, distinct phase of development after the initial impetus provided by Peter: if Peter had imposed his will on a passive, static nation, and had thereby managed to influence its external behavioural patterns, Catherine's task was to change the nation's core from within. Even though Herder never wrote his book *Über die wahre Kultur eines Volks und insonderheit Rußlands*, which would no doubt have provided us with more detail about what such a programme of *Bildung* might look like in practice, his various drafts and notes written in preparation of the work still offer us some clues about its *modus operandi*.

First of all, the *Bildung* of a nation needs to be guided by the sovereign. Indeed, Herder explicitly denied that completely spontaneous bottom-up development could achieve the desired results. In a draft for his *Über die wahre Kultur eines Volk*, he noted:

Der Fluß der Zeit, der Fortgang der Regierung bilden weiter, können aber auch zurückbilden. Häufige Beispiele von beiden aus der Geschichte. Hier das wahre Verdienst des Monarchen. Gegen die Einwendungen derer, die da sagen, alles bilde sich von selbst. Ja aber auch zurück. Hier muß ein Monarch den Fluß leiten.⁵⁹⁹

Despite such guidance, Herder was equally adamant that the aim and direction of *Bildung* must never be based on the will or the insights of the sovereign alone; on the contrary its aim must be to foster and strengthen what Herder called a *Nationalgefühl* or *Nationalgeist*, which will itself, as the expression of the will of the nation, influence the direction of *Bildung*.

⁵⁹⁹ *Sammlung von Gedanken und Beispielen*, SWS, vol. 4, pp. 473-4. See also the draft *Über die Bildung der Völker*, SWS, vol. 32, pp. 231-3. In this draft Herder proposed four different means of *Bildung* - religion, poetry, belle esprit, philosophy - but concluded that none is sufficient by itself, and that all of those means need to be combined with a fifth one: government.

Bildung, driven by the nation but guided by the sovereign, was termed by Herder ‘*Bildung einer Nation durch sich*’. Such an ideal of development, however, does not preclude imitations of other nations. Without such imitation, Herder argued, a nation will never fully actualise its potential; and, therefore indigenous development must be supplemented through outside influences, or through ‘*Bildung einer Nation nach andern*’.⁶⁰⁰ However, as with guidance through the sovereign, such imitations must be undertaken with utmost care. All nations are different in mores and character, Herder claimed, and such differences must be respected and not stifled:

Grosser Artikel von der Bildung einer Nation nach andern, daß sie nichts an sich verliere. Er setzt voraus, daß jede Nation ihre Reichthümer und Eigenheiten des Geistes, des Charakters, wie des Landes hat. Diese sind aufzusuchen: und zu cultiviren. Kein Mensch, kein Land, kein Volk, keine Geschichte des Volks, kein Staat ist dem andern gleich, folglich auch das Wahre, Schöne und Gute in ihnen nicht gleich. Wird dies nicht gesucht, wird blindlings eine andre Nation zum Muster genommen, so [sic.] Alles erstickt.⁶⁰¹

The lessons for Catherine were clear. No other nation could be taken as an exclusive model for the reform of Russia: indeed, to the extent that Peter simply tried to substitute Russia's Greek-Asiatic character with a German-Dutch one, he was mistaken. On the contrary, Catherine's task was to assimilate and nationalise Peter's cultural imports, thereby synthesising external and internal *Bildung*.

Herder illustrated the need to negotiate between external and internal as well as between bottom-up and top-down *Bildung* most succinctly with reference to the St. Petersburg Academy. As we have seen throughout this thesis, Peter's Academy was invariably invoked to underline the relative virtues and weaknesses of Peter's project of civilisation through Europeanisation. In Schlözer's view, it was Peter's most important establishment as it provided him with the means needed to close the gap between Europe and Russia. According to Voltaire, its establishment and the related ability to join the other European nations in the emulative pursuit of the higher arts and sciences stood as proof that Russia had

⁶⁰⁰ See *Sammlung von Gedanken und Beispielen*, SWS, vol. 4, p. 477.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 472.

caught up with Europe.⁶⁰² For Diderot, by contrast, the Academy symbolised all that was wrong with Peter's project: mainly staffed by foreigners, and serving the glory of Russian sovereigns rather than the needs of the nation at large, its existence symbolised the need for radically different indigenous educational institutions exclusively focusing on the basic arts and sciences.⁶⁰³ Herder, characteristically, combined these diverging views:

Peters Akademie hat noch keinen Nationalgeist: sie lebt noch nicht für, durch und in der Nation. Sie dient niedrig dem Hof, und schläft. Aber eine zu schaffen, aus und für die Nation, aus ihrem Geist und der ihn fortleite.⁶⁰⁴

A reformed Academy that would henceforward operate for and through and in the nation is only one of several concrete institutions Herder planned to suggest to Catherine. Regarding how such nationalised institutions could be set up in practice, Herder turned sharply against Catherine's *Nakaz* and its programme to drive forward Russia's development through legislation.

The criticism of the *Nakaz* is two-fold. Firstly, Herder, like Diderot, was concerned by the extent to which Catherine's guidelines to the Russian All-Legislative Commission were influenced by Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*. But unlike Diderot, for Herder the problem was not that Catherine proposed to institute a system of government similar to the French monarchy as conceived by Montesquieu because he believed it is defective as such, but because he considered such an imitation as being inappropriate for Russia. Indeed, one of the core lessons he wanted to teach Catherine II was

Daß weder Englands noch Frankreichs noch Deutschlands gesetzgeberische Köpfe es in Rußland sein können.⁶⁰⁵

Apart from repeating his caution against blind imitation, Herder's criticism of the *Nakaz*, and of Montesquieu, has a second, more substantive, dimension. Montesquieu is in Herder's opinion, a too abstract and legalistic head to be taken

⁶⁰² *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, OC, vol. 47, p. 931.

⁶⁰³ HDI, vol. 3, bk. 5, chap. 23, p. 51.

⁶⁰⁴ *Sammlung von Gedanken und Beispielen*, SWS, vol. 4, p. 474. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁰⁵ *Journal*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 412.

as a guide in the *Bildung* of a nation such as Russia. His three principles - fear, virtue and honour - underlying the different forms of governments and laws are pure abstractions pulled from a small empirical sample,⁶⁰⁶ and then inappropriately applied across the globe. As these principles are too general and too abstract, they are, Herder argued, not applicable anywhere in particular.⁶⁰⁷

Related to this criticism is Herder's claim that Montesquieu, despite his desire to study the spirit behind the laws, only really investigated the legalistic aspects of governments and the socio-cultural mechanics of courts and capitals, without ever getting to the manners, mores and spirit of a nation at large. *De l'esprit des lois* is, in Herder's view, only a 'Metaphysik für ein totes Gesetzbuch ..., [a] Metaphysik zur Bildung der Völker ist nicht'.⁶⁰⁸

Legal abstractions and court culture can never be the starting point for a metaphysics of *Bildung* such as the one Herder planned to write for Catherine. On the contrary, it must start with an in-depth investigation into the cultural and social milieu in which people live. Likewise, the reforming sovereign is ill-advised to overly rely on centrally imposed laws or on the cultural prestige of the court in order to guide and influence the direction of *Bildung*. Instead, Catherine needs to start her reforms at the micro-level in order to effect the required internal transformation of her nation; an idea neatly encapsulated in Herder's sketch of an alternative approach to reform to a Montesquieu-inspired legalistic one:

Worinn die wahre Cultur bestehe? nicht bloß im Gesetze geben, sondern Sitten bilden Vortrefflichkeit guter *Anordnung*, die über Gesetze und Hofbeispiele geht. Einrichtung des Ackerbaues, der Familien, der Haushaltungen. Der Dependenz der Untertanen, der Abgaben, ihrer Lebensart. Daß das Exempel des Hofes nur an Hofe gelte, und da auch große Vorteile aber auch Nachteile habe. Daß viele

⁶⁰⁶ Herder alleged that Montesquieu only ever studied and knew Rome, Sparta, Crete, Rome, France, Venice and Turkey in any detail. See *Gedanken bei Lesung Montesquieues*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 465.

⁶⁰⁷ See also Herder's criticism of Montesquieu in the *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 665: 'Durchs Werk [i.e. *De l'Esprit des lois*] also ein Taumel aller Zeiten, Nationen und Sprachen, wie um den Turm der Verwirrung, daß jedweder seinen Bettel, Reichtum und Ranzen, an drei schwache Nägel hange – Geschichte aller Völker und Zeiten, dies große lebendige Werk Gottes auch in seiner Folge, ein Ruinenhaufen von drei Spitzen und Kapseln – aber freilich auch sehr edler, würdiger Materialien – *Montesquieu!*'

⁶⁰⁸ *Gedanken bei Lesung Montesquieues*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 470.

einzelne Exempel in einzelnen Provinzen mehr tun; und noch mehr
einzelne Beispiele in einzelnen Familien.⁶⁰⁹

If Herder was thus convinced that Catherine should start the formation of mores and manners in Russia by means of many decentralised institutions offering beneficial examples, he was equally adamant that such a process of *Bildung* could be further facilitated if the czarina corrected Peter's mistake, and moved Russia's capital to the shores of the Black Sea. During the time that the *Journal* was written, the Russo-Turkish war of 1768-1774 was under way, and Herder fully supported Catherine's war efforts. He feverishly anticipated the chasing of the Turks from Constantinople, and Russia becoming master of the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.⁶¹⁰ Crucially, Herder explicitly established a connection between his proposed programme of reform and the extension of Russia's territory towards the South. In the *Journal*, for instance, he mentioned two conjectures providing him with optimism that the proposals to be outlined in his *Über die wahre Kultur eines Volkes* could be implemented in Russia: the weakness of Catherine's *Nakaz* which he set out to demonstrate, and the opportunities afforded by the Russian successes in the present war.⁶¹¹

Herder held on to the notion that Russia could only become truly civilised if its centre and capital were moved throughout his life.⁶¹² Calls to Russian rulers to develop the Ukraine, to liberate the various Slavic peoples living under Turkish dominion, to incorporate Greece, and to move the Empire's capital to the Black Sea were repeated in *Vom Einfluß der Regierung auf die Wissenschaften* (1780),⁶¹³ in the fourth part of the *Ideen* (1791)⁶¹⁴ and in the third volume of the *Adrastea* (1802).⁶¹⁵ Although there are notable differences in Herder's account of such a Southern expansion of Russia across his writings,⁶¹⁶ two salient elements

⁶⁰⁹ *Journal*, Hanser vol. 1, p. 411. Emphasis in the original.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 411. See also, *Sammlung von Gedanken und Beispielen*, SWS, vol. 4, p. 473, and a letter to Begrow, *Briefe*, vol. 1, Nantes, November 1769, Nr. 73, pp. 172-4.

⁶¹¹ *Journal*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 411.

⁶¹² See also Kurt Stavenhagen, 'Herders Geschichtsphilosophie und Geschichtsprophetie', *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung* 1, no. 1 (1952), pp. 28-30.

⁶¹³ SWS, vol. 9, p. 363.

⁶¹⁴ Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 4, bk. 16, chap. 4, pp. 642-3.

⁶¹⁵ SWS, vol. 23, pt. 5, pp. 449-50.

⁶¹⁶ Especially the chapter on the Slavs in the *Ideen* differs markedly from Herder's other accounts about the Black Sea region, and it is on this chapter that much of the secondary literature has focused. Most importantly, the story told in the *Ideen* is not principally concerned with Russia, but

remain largely unchanged. First, whilst his starting point was generally with the civilisation or *Bildung* of Russia, and thus with the desirability of taking full commercial and agricultural advantage of this region endowed with an excellent climate and a strategically favourable position, Herder invariably moved far beyond this initial concern. The Russian-led development of the Black Sea area was ultimately not solely important for the future civilisation of Russia, but for human civilisation *tout court*. In the *Adrastea*, for instance, Herder painted the following glowing picture of the future, if his proposals were followed:

Rußland hätte seinen Mittelpunkt am schwarzen Meer gefunden; seine Asiatischen sowohl als Europäischen Provinzen hätte es fruchtbar, nutzbar, urbar gemacht, und alle seine Völker, jedes nach *seinem* Maß, in *seinen* Sitten cultivirt. Aus dem unzugänglichen Herzen Asiens wäre die Aorta aller Handelswege geöffnet; die Osmannische Pforte wäre nicht mehr; das mittelländische Meer wäre, was es seyn sollte, in

with the Slavs as a whole. Moreover, Herder bases his very optimistic account of the Slavs' future on an argument that is not taken up elsewhere: indeed, here his optimism is derived from the allegedly peaceful and industrious national character of the Slavs; a character which is favourably compared to the destructive and warlike Germanic one. However, it appears justifiable not to overly concentrate on this unusual argument for a number of reasons. First, the concern with the Slavs rather than with Russia is explicable by the structure of the *Ideen*: the sixteenth book of the fourth part of the *Ideen* that contains the chapter on the Slavs is concerned with a summary ethnographic description of European peoples rather than with states. A chapter on the history of the Russian state is missing in the *Ideen*, but was projected for the unachieved fifth part of the work. Secondly, and more importantly, Herder is likely to have partly followed a polemical, rather than a substantive, goal in his chapter on the Slavs. Indeed, in 1790, and thus one year before the appearance of the fourth part of the *Ideen*, the Göttingen philosopher Meiners wrote an article on the Slavs in which he endeavoured to demonstrate their natural inferiority when compared to peoples of Germanic stock, concluding with the argument that no purely Slavic nation could ever become fully civilised on its own accord, and that the Slavs' best hope for improvement was through intermarriage with Germans. It is hard not to read the stark characterisation of the Slavs and the Germans in the *Ideen* as a polemical reversal of Meiners' position, whose racial typologies Herder abhorred. Nevertheless, there certainly exists a substantive core beneath Herder's polemic, namely his conviction that the future of civilisation will be played out on territory at least partly inhabited by Slavic peoples. This conviction was, however, not generally based on an argument about a certain determinate character of the Slavs, but, as we shall see in the following, on a confluence of climatic determinism and a conjecture about the future of the historical process as a whole. See *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 4, bk. 16, chap. 4, pp. 640-3; Christoph Meiners, 'Über die Natur der Slawischen Völker in Europa', *Göttingisches Historisches Magazin* 7, no. 4 (1790). On Herder's quarrels with Meiners in general, and the 'race' debate that ensued in late 18th-century Germany partly in response to Meiners' writings, see Luigi Marino, *Praeceptores Germaniae - Göttingen 1770-1820*, trans. B. Szabo-Bechstein, revised ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995) pp. 90-110; Thomas Strack, 'Philosophical Anthropology on the Eve of Biological Determinism', *Central European History* 29, no. 3 (1996). For accounts on Herder's portrayals of the Slavs and Germans, see Konrad Bittner, *Herders Geschichtsphilosophie und die Slawen*, ed. Franz Spina and Gerhard Gesemann, vol. 6, *Veröffentlichungen der Slavistischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft an der Deutschen Universität in Prag* (Reichenberg: Verlag Gebürder Stipel, 1929), pp. 57-165; Birke, 'Herder und die Slawen'; Drews, *Herder und die Slawen. Materialien zur Wirkungsgeschichte bis zur Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, chap. 2. On the projected continuation of the *Ideen*, see Hanser, vol. 3/1, pp. 1157-8.

allen seinen Küsten und Häfen ein Freihafen der Welt, das Mittelmeer aller Nationen des östlichen Welthandels, welches ein ungeheures, reiches, mächtiges, arbeitsames, Gewerbevolles Reich wäre Rußland. ... In seiner prächtigen Mitte zwischen Europa und Asien geböte es der Welt friedlich.⁶¹⁷

Similarly, in the *Vom Einfluß der Regierung auf die Wissenschaften* Herder speculated that after the arts and sciences had declined in Europe, they would either migrate to the English colonies in the Americas or to a reformed Russia with its centre at the Black Sea.⁶¹⁸ Furthermore, he consistently predicted that this migrant culture would ultimately radiate out from this new epicentre across Asia and Europe, thereby leading to a global cultural regeneration.⁶¹⁹

Secondly, Herder always framed this prophecy in language of inevitability, but at the same time conceived its actualisation as being contingent on certain actions being carried out. In the *Journal*, for instance, he remarked that the Ukraine would inevitably become the centre of a global culture in the future, but equally insisted that for this to happen it was necessary that his proposed reforms were implemented by Catherine.⁶²⁰ Similarly, in the *Adrastea*, he conceded that even if Peter had been committed to move his capital to the Black Sea, he may have been unable to do so because of historical conjectures – especially the military power of the Ottoman Empire – but concluded by insisting that his glowing picture of Russia's future would become reality through a future happy confluence of contingent circumstances, wilful human actions and historical necessity.⁶²¹

The above summary of the content of Herder's writings on Russia should already allow us to appreciate the scope and depth of his conception of the country, its history and future. Indeed, Herder moved from an assessment of the role of Peter I to the sketching of a comprehensive programme of further reform to be

⁶¹⁷ *Adrastea*, SWS, vol. 23, pt. 5, p. 449. Emphasis in the original.

⁶¹⁸ SWS, vol. 9, p. 363.

⁶¹⁹ *Adrastea*, SWS, vol. 23, pt. 5, p. 450. See also *Journal*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 410: 'Was für ein Blick überhaupt auf diese Gegenden von West-Norden, wenn einmal der Geist der Kultur sie besuchen wird! Die Ukraine wird ein neues Griechenland werden aus so vielen kleinen wilden Völkern, wie es die Griechen vormals auch waren, wird eine gesittete Nation werden: ihre Gränzen werden sich bis zum schwarzen Meer hin erstrecken und von dahinaus durch die Welt.'

⁶²⁰ *Journal*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 410. See also, *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 4, bk. 16, chap. 4, pp. 642-3.

⁶²¹ *Adrastea*, SWS, vol. 23, pt. 5, pp. 450-1.

undertaken by Catherine II on the one hand, as well as from an initial concern with the recent history of the civilisation of Russia to a vision about a Russian-centred global culture of the future, on the other. Such moves, we have seen, are characterised by an attempt to negotiate a number of apparent dichotomies: internal versus external development; civilising through bottom-up versus top-down processes; the inevitability of the historical process versus the role of contingent circumstances and conscious human actions.

A refusal to consider such dichotomies as exclusive categories is, of course, not only a feature of Herder's writings on Russia, but characteristic of his philosophy in general. We have already had occasion to note that the notion of *Bildung* was prominently employed to connect opposing categories. In the next section, we will see *Bildung* emerging as a central concept of Herder's anthropology, which, itself, lies at the heart of his philosophy of history. As such, a consideration of this anthropology will enable us to define with some more precision the nature of the connection. Thereby it will provide us with a clearer understanding of the way his account of Peter and his proposal for reforms are related to each other. Sketching the main contours of Herder's anthropology will also prepare the ground for a reading of his philosophy of history, and specifically for a consideration of the place of his Russian prophecy within this philosophy, which will form the concluding part of this chapter.

Anthropology: Man as an animal striving for *Bildung*

It is arguably impossible to overestimate the importance of anthropology for an understanding of Herder's philosophy in general, and his philosophy of history in particular.⁶²² Herder himself stressed the centrality of anthropological knowledge for any philosophical enquiry already early in his career. In a fragment of 1764 entitled *Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volkes allgemeiner und nützlicher werden kann*, he remarked: 'wenn man den Gesichtspunkt der Weltweisheit in der Art ändert, wie aus dem Ptolomäischen das Kopernikanische System ward, welche neue fruchtbare Entwicklungen müssen sich hier nicht zeigen, wenn unsere ganze Philosophie Anthropologie wird'.⁶²³

This early programmatic aim to contribute to a Copernican revolution in philosophy by approaching it from an anthropological point of view was put into practice by Herder throughout his writings, but most particularly in the *Abhandlung vom Ursprung der Sprache* (1772),⁶²⁴ *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden, den zwei Hauptkräften der menschlichen Seele* (1775)⁶²⁵ and the first two parts of the *Ideen* (1784-1785),⁶²⁶ containing enquiries into the nature of the universe, the globe and its inhabitants which act as the basis from which a philosophy of history is developed. If we are to understand Herder's concept of *Bildung*, and its capacity to mediate between apparently opposing tendencies, we have to be alert to the solution offered in these anthropological writings to two related problems. The first such problem is to give an account of human freedom and a related capacity for progress (or *Fortbildung*), whilst at the same time firmly integrating human beings into a comprehensively deterministic conception

⁶²² This has also been consistently stressed in recent Herder scholarship. For good accounts of Herder's anthropological conceptions in general, see Hans Dietrich Irmischer, 'Grundfrage der Geschichtsphilosophie Herders bis 1774', in *Bückeburger Gespräche über Johann Gottfried Herder 1983*, ed. Brigitte Poschmann (Rinteln: Bösendahl, 1984), pp. 28-32; John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), ch. 8; Hugh Barr Nisbet, 'Herders Anthropologische Anschauungen in den "Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit"', in *Anthropologie und Literatur um 1800*, ed. Jürgen Barkhoff and Eda Sagarra (München: Iudicium-Verl., 1992).

⁶²³ SWS, vol. 32, p. 61.

⁶²⁴ Hanser, vol. 2, pp. 251-399.

⁶²⁵ Hanser, vol. 2, pp. 543-723.

⁶²⁶ Hanser, vol. 3/1.

of nature and the universe. The second one is to derive a normative account of human sociability and to tease out its political implications.

Herder's resolution of the first problem is in the first instance dependent on a move we have already encountered in Diderot: to completely collapse the world of nature and the world of human endeavours. Thereby, man is completely integrated within the order of nature, and its deterministic laws equally apply to him. Indeed, one chief target of the *Abhandlung vom Ursprung der Sprache* was the theory of a supernatural, godly origin of language; a position which had recently been put forward by Johann Peter Süßmilch in his *Versuch eines Beweises, daß die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe*.⁶²⁷ Such a theory of course implied that human beings, by virtue of their godly gift of language, must at least in part be considered as being qualitatively different from the rest of the universe. For Herder, by contrast, the origins of language are explicable with reference to natural causes only. Likewise, in the *Ideen*, he denied the validity of any sharp dualism between physical matter and spiritual mind,⁶²⁸ thereby preparing the ground for establishing a unitary frame of reference equally applicable to the analysis of human history (conceived as the unfolding of the productions of the human mind over time) and of the natural world (concerned with the explanation of physical, chemical and biological processes).⁶²⁹

⁶²⁷ *Abhandlung vom Ursprung der Sprache*, Hanser, vol. 2, pp. 257-60, 346-7, 354-7. Johann Peter Süßmilch, *Versuch eines Beweises dass die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe* (Berlin: 1766). On Süßmilch's argument, see also Hans Aarsleff, 'The Tradition of Condillac: The Problem of the Origin of Language in the Eighteenth Century and the Debate in the Berlin Academy before Herder', in *Studies in the History of Linguistics: Traditions and Paradigms*, ed. Dell Hymes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), pp. 131-4.

⁶²⁸ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 5, chap. 2, pp. 158-62. For a similar argument, see also *Abhandlung vom Ursprung der Sprache*, Hanser, vol. 2, pp. 271-2.

⁶²⁹ Berlin's claim that Herder advocated completely different methods for the study of physical nature and the study of the human mind seems wrongly conceived. It appears as if Berlin anachronistically reads the 19th century separation of the *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* advocated by the German historicists – of whom Herder is often portrayed as a spiritual father – back into the 18th century. However, especially in the *Ideen*, Herder is explicit about the intimate connection between nature and man, and matter and mind. Indeed, such a connection is already in evidence by the very structure of the work, which begins with a description of the universe and then moves in successive steps to a consideration of the nature of the earth, plants, animals, before reaching human beings and their history. And far from there either implicitly or explicitly occurring a change of methodology along this path, Herder stressed throughout that the process of history is best explained by means of drawing analogies to processes of nature. Much more convincing than Berlin's is therefore Reill's contention that

Unlike Diderot, however, Herder did not believe that natural processes are driven by atoms in essentially random movement. In his view, the elementary building blocks of nature are not atoms, but forces (*Kräfte*), whose operations are determined by a plan, which ultimately is of a godly and teleological nature.⁶³⁰ God, or the source and result of all operating forces, however, was not conceived as a transcendental being above nature, but, inspired by Baruch Spinoza's pantheism, as being itself part of nature. Indeed, it has been convincingly demonstrated that Herder's conception of the universe, and man's place therein, was intimately connected to the German reception of Spinoza in general, and the *Pantheismus-Streit* which erupted in the early 1780s in particular.⁶³¹ This quarrel that pitted, among others, the Spinozists Lessing, Goethe and Herder against Jacobi⁶³² and Kant⁶³³ was centred around the question whether Spinoza's philosophy leads by necessity to fatalism and atheism. Herder's position on this question was directed both against Christian orthodoxy and its notion of a transcendental, personal God who has revealed himself through scripture, as well as against the atheist and decidedly non-teleological implications of a radical atomist position such as the one espoused by Diderot.⁶³⁴ By equating God with

Herder belonged to a whole tradition of Enlightenment thought – labelled as Enlightenment vitalism – that attempted to bridge the gulf between mind and matter, thereby attempting to establish a unitary method capable of both explaining nature and culture. See Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, p. 170; Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*, esp. introduction and pp. 186-91; Reill, 'Anti-Mechanism, Vitalism and their Political Implications in late Enlightened Scientific Thought', *Francia*, no. 1612 (1989). See also Herder's *Plan zum Unterricht des jungen Herrn von Zeschau* (1772), where the intimate connection between nature and history, which is fully developed in the *Ideen*, is already announced. Hanser, vol. 3/1, pp. 1087-8.

⁶³⁰ See *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 5, chap. 1, pp. 154-8, pt. 2, bk. 7, chap. 4, pp. 245-53.

⁶³¹ Emil Adler, 'Pantheismus-Humanität-Promethie. Ein Beitrag zur Humanitätsphilosophie Herders', in *Bückerburger Gespräche über Johann Gottfried Herder: 1971*, ed. Johann Gottfried Maltusch (Bückerburg: Grimme, 1973), pp. 77-80; John H. Zammito, 'Herder, Kant, Spinoza und die Ursprünge des deutschen Idealismus', in *Herder und die Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus*, ed. Marion Heinz (Amsterdam u.a.: Rodopi, 1997).

⁶³² See letter to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Briefe, vol. 5, Weimar, 20 December 1784, Nr. 73, pp. 88-91. This letter contains an impassioned plea by Herder to Jacobi to re-read Spinoza and reconsider his position in the ongoing quarrel.

⁶³³ Indeed, Kant's ill tempered review of the first part of the *Ideen* – and especially the attack on Herder's theory of forces, usage of analogies, and his conception of the relationship between mind and matter – must at least partly be read in the context of the two author's different reading of Spinoza's philosophy. See Immanuel Kant, *Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, 6 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1964), vol. 6, pp. 781-94. See also Wolfgang Pross, 'Ein Reich unsichtbarer Kräfte – Was kritisiert Kant an Herder?', *Scientia Poetica* 1 (1997); Zammito, 'Herder, Kant, Spinoza und die Ursprünge des deutschen Idealismus'.

⁶³⁴ See, for instance, *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 5, chap. 2, pp. 158-62; see also Herder's objection to blind Epicurean atomism in the *Adrastea*, SWS, vol. 23, pt. 6, p. 512-14. Herder's

nature, and thereby by moving him from transcendence to immanence, Herder's pantheism, explicitly grounded on Spinoza's *deus sive natura*, was calibrated to safeguard an ordered and purposeful universe:

Dem sinnlichen Betrachter der Geschichte, der in ihr Gott verlor und an der Vorsehung zu zweifeln anfing, geschah dies Unglück nur daher, weil er die Geschichte zu flach ansah oder von der Vorsehung keinen rechten Begriff hatte. Denn wenn er diese für ein Gespenst hält, das ihm auf allen Straßen begegnet und den Lauf menschlicher Handlungen unaufhörlich unterbrechen soll, um nur diesen oder jenen particularen Endzweck seiner Phantasie und Willkür zu erreichen: so gestehe ich, daß die Geschichte das Grab einer solchen Vorstellung sei, gewiß aber ein Grab zum Besten der Wahrheit. ... Der Gott, den ich in der Geschichte suche, muß derselbe sein, der er in der Natur ist: denn der Mensch ist nur ein kleiner Teil des Ganzen und seine Geschichte ist wie die Geschichte des Wurms mit dem Gewebe, das er bewohnt, innig verwebt.⁶³⁵

Even though Herder did not believe that God's plan or purpose could ever be fully grasped by human beings, he did contend that through a combination of observing the natural world and drawing analogies, aspects of this plan could be divined.⁶³⁶ Indeed, in the introduction to the *Ideen*, Herder defined the main aim

attempt to banish any notion of a transcendent God who has revealed himself through scripture and, indeed, to deny the validity of any metaphysics that is not based on an empirical study of nature, without, however, endorsing a fully deterministic, monistic materialism has also been stressed by Martin Bollacher, "'Natur" und "Vernunft" in Herders Entwurf einer Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit', in *Johann Gottfried Herder: 1744 - 1803*, ed. Gerhard Sauder (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987), pp. 115-18, and Hugh Barr Nisbet, 'Herder und Lukrez', in *Johann Gottfried Herder: 1744 - 1803*, ed. Gerhard Sauder (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987), pp. 79-82. Pross, by contrast, suggests that Herder's view of natural philosophy and history is informed, like Diderot's, by a complete materialistic fatalism. However, as we shall see in the following, there are important differences between Diderot's and Herder's positions; most importantly, whilst Diderot's nature operates according to laws that are completely blind to human concerns, Herder's God/nature reveals a purpose that, far from being antagonistic to man, has distinctly humanistic tendencies. See Wolfgang Pross, 'Die Begründung der Geschichte aus der Natur: Herders Konzept von "Gesetzen" in der Geschichte', in *Wissenschaft als kulturelle Praxis: 1750 - 1900*, ed. Hans Erich Bödeker (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), pp. 188-91; Wolfgang Pross, 'Diversité des faits et unité de vue. Herder et la construction de la philosophie de l'histoire au siècle des lumières', *Revue germanique internationale* 20 (2003), pp. 64-71.

⁶³⁵ *Ideen*, pt. 3, bk. 15, chap. 5, Hanser vol. 3/1, p. 612. See also *Ideen*, Vorrede, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pp. 14-15 (emphasis in the original): 'Niemand irre sich daher auch daran, daß ich zuweilen den Namen der Natur personifiziert gebrauche. Die Natur ist kein selbständiges Wesen; sondern Gott ist Alles in seinen Werken Wem der Name "Natur" durch manche Schriften unsres Zeitalters sinnlos und niedrig geworden ist, der denke sich statt dessen jene allmächtige Kraft, Güte und Weisheit, und nenne in seiner Seele das unsichtbare Wesen, das keine Erdensprache zu nennen vermag.'

⁶³⁶ For the centrality of analogical reasoning in late Enlightenment conceptions of nature in general, see Peter Hanns Reill, 'Science and the science of history in the Spätaufklärung', in *Aufklärung und Geschichte*, pp. 439-40.

of a philosophy of history to reveal the ultimate meaning behind the hurly-burly of events.⁶³⁷ However, he insisted that such a revelation cannot be achieved by means of metaphysical speculation, but must be based on empirical investigation and analogical reasoning.⁶³⁸

The analogy employed by Herder to determine man's place and purpose within the order of nature, and to account for both his limited freedom and his capacity to progress, is based on the observation of an ascending ladder of ever higher forms within nature. Lurking behind visible forms are invisible forces or impulses which through their various configurations give rise to organised forms:

Vom Stein zum Krystall, vom Krystall zu den Metallen, von diesen zur Pflanzenschöpfung, von den Pflanzen zum Tier, von diesen zum Menschen sahen wir die *Form der Organisation steigen*, mit ihr auch die Kräfte und Triebe des Geschöpfs vielartiger werden und sich endlich alle, in der Gestalt des Menschen, sofern diese sie fassen konnte, vereinen. Bei dem Menschen stand die Reihe still; wir kennen kein Geschöpf über ihm, das vielartiger und künstlicher organisiert sei: er scheint das höchste, wozu eine Erdorganisation gebildet werden konnte.⁶³⁹

According to Herder, the heightened artificiality and complexity in the combination of the forces that constitute higher organisations manifests itself predominantly in decreased specialisation and concentration, which, by the same token, increases indeterminability and thereby freedom. Or, to put it differently, the higher up we travel on the chain, the bigger an organism's potential sphere of activity and existence, the less concentrated its sensuality toward this particular sphere, and the less instinctive its responses to external stimuli.⁶⁴⁰ Although there exist no sharp breaks within the chain – all transition form one node to the next is gradual not categorical – man, standing at its apex, has an organisation quite

⁶³⁷ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, Vorrede, p. 13. This idea is already developed in Herder's earlier *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, Hanser, vol. 1, pp. 619-20.

⁶³⁸ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, Vorrede p. 14: 'Wer bloß metaphysische Spekulationen will, hat sie auf kürzerem Wege; ich glaube aber, daß sie, abgetrennt von Erfahrungen und Analogien der Natur, eine Luftfahrt sind, die selten zum Ziel führet. Gang Gottes in der Natur, die Gedanken, die der Ewige uns in der Reihe seiner Werke tätlich dargelegt hat: sie sind das heilige Buch, an dessen Charakteren ich zwar minder als ein Lehrling aber wenigstens mit Treue und Eifer buchstabiert habe und buchstabieren werden.'

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 5, chap. 1, p. 154.

⁶⁴⁰ *Abhandlung vom Ursprung der Sprache*, Hanser, vol. 2, pp. 270-4, 320-2; *Ideen*, Hanser vol. 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 4, pp. 132-6.

distinct from any animal.⁶⁴¹ In particular, human beings' nature is indeterminate, because of their weak instincts. Whilst an animal can never fail to act in a certain way and thereby successfully fulfil the pre-determinate purpose of its existence – mainly vegetation and procreation –⁶⁴² human beings, if left to their weak lower animal instincts, would, in Herder's view, literally be without a *raison d'être* and quite possibly be unable to survive, simply because they would hardly be compelled to act at all.⁶⁴³ However, human beings compensate for their weak instincts by means of a capacity Herder termed *Besonnenheit* – conscious reflection – that allows them to discover and model the scope and nature of their purpose themselves. The vital medium by which *Besonnenheit* can be put to use is human language, which in itself is the medium necessary for the development of reason.⁶⁴⁴

So far Herder's account is by no means original. The notion of man's instinctual weakness and of the existence of a compensating capacity for reflection, leading, ultimately, to the development of reason, had been frequently invoked in the 18th-century debate about the origins of human language and knowledge, notably by Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Hermann Samuel Reimarus and Jean Henry Samuel Formey.⁶⁴⁵ However, the consequences Herder derives from this account arguably are.

Most importantly for our present concerns, Herder's concept of *Bildung* is intimately related to this account of the emergence of language. According to Herder, what *Besonnenheit*, language and reason enable man to do is not only to develop knowledge and technologies to enable him to master nature, even though this is an important aspect, but also to form (*bilden*) a complete image of the universe and their own place therein within themselves. *Bildung*, in this sense, is

⁶⁴¹ See esp. Herder's differentiation between man and ape and his discussion on the question of human races. *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 1, pp. 111-21; pt. 2, bk. 7, chap. 1, pp. 230-1. See also Nisbet, 'Herders Anthropologische Anschauungen', p. 8.

⁶⁴² See especially, *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 3, chap. 4, pp. 91-6.

⁶⁴³ *Abhandlung vom Ursprung der Sprache*, Hanser, vol. 2, p. 270.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 276-87; *Ideen*, Hanser vol 3/1, pt. 2, bk. 9, chap. 2, pp. 314-24.

⁶⁴⁵ For a good account of the intellectual context of Herder's *Abhandlung vom Ursprung der Sprache*, see Aarsleff, 'The Tradition of Condillac'. On Herder's substantial, but mostly unacknowledged, borrowing from Reimarus' work, see Günther Buck, 'Selbsterhaltung und Historizität', in *Geschichte - Ereignis und Erzählung*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck and Wolf-Dieter Stempel, *Poetik und Hermeneutik* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1973), esp. pp. 32-4.

the creation of a cultural, as opposed to a natural whole, which is, according to Herder, a free, conscious and creative exercise, which in itself governs man's reaction to external stimuli and sense impression:

Jeder Gedanke ist nicht ein unmittelbares Werk der Natur, aber eben damit kanns sein [i.e. man's] eigenes Werk werden. ...

Wenn also hiermit der Instinkt wegfallen muß, der bloß aus der Organisation der Sinne und dem Bezirk der Vorstellungen folgte, und eine blinde Determination war; so bekommt eben hiemit der Mensch, *mehrere Helle*. Da er auf keinen Punkt blind fällt, und blind liegenbleibt: so wird er freistehend, kann sich eine Sphäre der Bespiegelung suchen, kann sich in sich bespiegeln. Nicht mehr eine unfehlbare Maschine in den Händen der Natur, wird er sich selbst Zweck und Ziel der Bearbeitung.⁶⁴⁶

Rather than just reacting to sense impressions instinctively, human beings can assimilate them internally by integrating them into their own 'sphere of reflection' or *Bildung* before embarking on a reaction.⁶⁴⁷ The ultimate end behind this process is happiness, which is the sense of satisfaction human beings experience by assuring themselves about the meaning and purpose of their existence through the free and creative use of their own forces.⁶⁴⁸

Even though such a self-fashioning of happiness is ultimately a free and non-determinate activity, *Bildung* is nevertheless strictly bounded for Herder by at least four factors. First, *Bildung* is influenced by climate. The cultural whole human beings construct will always be dependent on the kind of sense impressions they receive, which are themselves to a large extent determined by climate, which is, for Herder, the sum total of the physical circumstances of a given locality.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁶ *Abhandlung vom Ursprung der Sprache*, Hanser, vol. 2, p. 271; see also *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 4, p. 135.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 4, pp. 131-5; pt. 1, bk. 5, chap. 4, pp. 169-70.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 6, pp. 150-1; pt. 2, bk. 8, chap. 5, pp. 298-305.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pt. 2, bk. 7, chap. 3, pp. 238-45; pt. 2, bk. 8, chaps. 1-2, 259-84. *Abhandlung vom Ursprung der Sprache*, Hanser, vol. 2, p. 340. On Herder's conception of climate, and its relationship to contemporary theories, see also Gonthier-Louis Fink, 'Von Winckelmann bis Herder. Die deutsche Klimatheorie in europäischer Perspektive', in *Johann Gottfried Herder: 1744 - 1803*, ed. Gerhard Sauder (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987).

Second, the use of language, or the outward expression and communication, of man's cultural achievements, is an inherently social process. Even though Herder is adamant that every individual human being constructs its own distinct view of the world,⁶⁵⁰ they will by means of communication coalesce in important respects. Such a socially, rather than individually, constructed cultural whole secures the individual by organically integrating him into an entity greater than himself: a community bound together by a shared set of norms and beliefs, that are expressed in a shared language; a phenomenon Herder termed the *Bildung* of a *Familien-*, or after a community has expanded over time, a *Nationaldenkart*, which itself stands at the basis of a distinct *Nationalgeist*.⁶⁵¹

Third and related, *Bildung* is not only a social, but also a historical process, as it is subject to inter-generational transmission. Every new generation does not start their cultural constructions from scratch but will be decisively influenced by tradition.⁶⁵² The transmission of tradition from one generation to the next is in itself a process of *Bildung*: it is not simply a process by which the old generation imposes its world view onto its children, nor one in which the new generation unconsciously imitates the old world view. On the contrary, it is a complex process of active learning involving both passive reception and creative production in which the old and the new are constantly merged by means of organic assimilation of the traditions to changing circumstances.⁶⁵³

Fourth, *Bildung* is a directional historical process, and the direction of its development is determined by man's place in nature. Whilst inter-generational transmission of culture opens up the possibility of progress, Herder posited an end

⁶⁵⁰ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 2, bk. 8, chap. 5, p. 298; pt. 2, bk. 9, chap. 1, 307.

⁶⁵¹ See especially, *Abhandlung vom Ursprung der Sprache*, Hanser, vol. 2, pp. 334-47. See also, *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 2, bk. 8, chap. 4, pp. 284-97.

⁶⁵² *Abhandlung vom Ursprung der Sprache*, Hanser, vol. 2, pp. 348-52; *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 2, bk. 9, chap. 1, pp. 306-14.

⁶⁵³ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 2, bk. 9, chap. 1, p. 309: 'Alle Erziehung kann nur durch Nachahmung und Übung, also durch Übergang des Vorbildes ins Nachbild werden: und wie können wir dies besser als Überlieferung nennen? der Nachahmende muß Kräfte haben, das Mitgeteilte und Mitteilbare aufzunehmen und es, wie die Speise, durch die er lebt, in seine Natur zu verwandeln.'

For a good, general account of Herder's conception of innovation and tradition, see also Hans Dietrich Irmischer, 'Die geschichtsphilosophische Kontroverse zwischen Kant und Herder', in *Hamann - Kant - Herder. Acta des vierten internationalen Hamann-Kolloquiums im Herder-Institut zu Marburg/Lahn 1985*, ed. Bernhard Gajek (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987), pp. 143-53.

towards which progress inevitably moves. Again, it is man's position at the top of the chain of organisms that serves as the analogy from which Herder derives this end. If human beings' exalted position in the chain is determined by their potential to use all their capabilities freely, it follows that the end towards which they must strive is to fully and freely develop all their capabilities. This is the essence of Herder's ideal of *Humanität*, positing the full actualisation of all inherent human possibilities as the end of the historical process:

Humanität ist der *Charakter unsres Geschlechts*; er ist uns aber nur in Anlagen angebohren, und muß uns eigentlich angebildet werden. Wir bringen ihn nicht fertig auf die Welt mit; auf der Welt aber soll er das Ziel unsres Bestrebens, die Summe unsrer Uebungen, unser Werth seyn Das *Göttliche* in unserm Geschlecht ist also *Bildung zur Humanität*; alle großen und guten Menschen, Gesetzgeber, Erfinder, Philosophen, Dichter, Künstler, jeder edle Mensch in seinem Stande, bei der Erziehung seiner Kinder, bei der Beobachtung seiner Pflichten, durch Beispiel, Werk, Institut und Lehre hat dazu mitgeholfen.⁶⁵⁴

The reference to lawgivers, inventors, philosophers, poets, and artists etc. as promoters of *Humanität* indicates that this is a comprehensive concept that encompasses all aspects of human endeavours at the same time. A fully developed *Humanität* would involve, according to Herder, the harmonious conjunction of reason with sensuality and imagination, refined arts, sciences and technologies with virtue, morality and justice, as well as the organic, non-domineering embedding of individuals into larger societies. If man is the most complex, but also the most indeterminate, organism in the universe, it is his historical mission to use his own powers to develop and hone his manifold forces and impulses into a harmonious whole; he is, in other words, a second God on earth, a potential microcosm of the whole universe, and charged to freely establish a purpose and an order for himself that mirrors the macrocosm of God/nature.⁶⁵⁵

⁶⁵⁴ *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*, Suphan, vol. 17, letter 27, p. 138 (emphasis in the original). Herder already elaborated in some detail on the ideal of *Humanität* in the *Ideen*. See Hanser, vol 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 6, pp. 142-52; pt. 3, bk. 15, chap. 1, pp. 580-5. For good accounts of Herder's usage of this ideal and its relation to his pantheism and naturalism, see Bollacher, "Natur" und "Vernunft" in Herders Entwurf einer Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit', esp. pp. 119-24; Adler, 'Pantheismus-Humanität-Promethie'.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 6, pp. 142-3.

To trace the gradual actualisation or *Bildung* of *Humanität* over space and time is, as we shall see in more detail in the next section, the fundamental objective of history.⁶⁵⁶ Here it is sufficient to note that Herder conceived this actualisation to move into two distinct directions: on the one hand, towards the gradual development of distinct local cultures through the inter-generational transmission of tradition; and, on the other hand, towards the gradual spreading of human culture across the globe by means of emigration, colonisation and inter-communal communication:

*Alle bisherige Tätigkeit des menschlichen Geistes ist Kraft ihrer innern Natur auf nichts anders als auf das Mittel hinausgegangen, die Humanität und Cultur unsres Geschlechts tiefer zu gründen und weiter zu verbreiten.*⁶⁵⁷

To the extent that this progressive development is driven by the inner nature of human beings themselves, that is by the distinct configuration of human forces and impulses, which does not restrict man to one particular place nor to one particular mode of existence, but which equally necessitates cultural development as a means to survival, it happens inevitably. And yet, given human beings' freedom and duty to fashion their own progress, there is no guarantee that every individual or every community will develop without interruption. Freedom to act equally implies freedom to make mistakes.⁶⁵⁸ Mistakes, Herder showed, typically manifest themselves in a dissonance between the intensity or the rootedness of a given culture, and its extent, leading to a situation which both prevents individuals to actualise their potential, and thereby achieve happiness, and communities to further develop.⁶⁵⁹ Or, to put it differently, both aspects of

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., pt. 2, bk. 9, chap. 1, pp. 307-9, 313-14.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., pt. 3, bk. 15, chap. 4, p. 608. Emphasis in the original. See also *Abhandlung vom Ursprung der Sprache*, Hanser, vol. 2, pp. 336, 341-2, 353-4.

⁶⁵⁸ *Ideen*, Hanser vol. 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 4, p. 135 (emphasis in the original): 'Der Mensch ist der erste *Freigelassene* der Schöpfung; er stehet aufrecht. Die Waage des Guten und Bösen, des Falschen und Wahren hängt in ihm: er kann forschen, er soll wählen. Wie die Natur ihm zwei freie Hände zu Werkzeugen gab und ein überblickendes Auge, seinen Gang zu leiten: so hat er auch in sich die Macht, nicht nur die Gewichte zu stellen, sondern auch, wenn ich so sagen darf, *selbst Gewicht zu sein* auf der Waage. Er kann dem trüglichen Irrtum Schein geben und ein freiwillig Betrogener werden ... '

⁶⁵⁹ On Herder's discussion of the relation between the extent and intensity of a given culture, see also Wolfgang Pross, 'Herder und die moderne Geschichtswissenschaft', *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 57, no. 1 (2007), pp. 39-43.

cultural development must be harmoniously combined; if not, stasis or alienation will rear their heads and prevent the progressive actualisation of *Humanität*.⁶⁶⁰

Stasis typically happens, according to Herder, in a culture that has predominantly developed in autarky, and, therefore, is marked by well-rooted, intense traditions. In such a situation, the traditional heritage can become an end in itself, rather than a means to continuous development by negotiating between the past and the present on the one hand, and the culture's internal core and the outside world, on the other. Such a culture will provide its individual members with a strong sense of belonging, but it will prevent them from contributing to its continuous development. Inward- and backward looking receptivity, in other words, has completely stifled outward and forward looking creative spontaneity.⁶⁶¹

Alienation is, in a sense, the opposite of stasis, but its results are similar. It occurs if a culture extends too far from its traditional, inner core, thereby reaching a level of complexity and diversity that prevents the organic assimilation of old and new and foreign and indigenous. The cultural whole, which enables individuals to find a sense of belonging and purpose, and thus happiness, becomes fragmented, and, as a consequence, individuals lose their mooring to a firm centre from which they can meaningfully reach out to the outside world.⁶⁶² Moreover, the complexity involved in a highly extensive culture implies high levels of specialisation in cultural production, preventing individuals from immediately and directly engaging with their cultural environment in its totality. If a static culture is

⁶⁶⁰ Herder returns to this notion of a necessary balance between the two aspects of cultural development again and again in his writings. See, for instance, his equivocation on the question of censorship, which he implicitly discusses with reference to Rousseau's advocacy of upholding a ban on theatres in Geneva as a means to protect the republic from corrupting, foreign influences. Whilst generally an opponent of any restriction of freedom of expression, Herder partly agreed with Rousseau by arguing that foreign influences may have to be partly suppressed, if a given culture is not rooted strongly enough to absorb them. See, *Vom Einfluß der Regierung auf die Wissenschaften*, SWS, vol. 9, pp. 357-61. On the idea that Herder's anthropology is heavily influenced by an aesthetic theory of harmony, see also Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*, pp.189-90; Nisbet, 'Herders Anthropologische Anschauungen', pp. 19-21. On the importance of an ideal of harmonious proportions for teleological conceptions of history in late Enlightenment Germany in general, see Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*, pp. 62-70.

⁶⁶¹ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 3, bk. 12, chap. 6, pp. 469-70; pt. 3, bk. 15, chap. 1, pp. 582-3.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, pt. 2, bk. 8, chap. 5, pp. 302-3.

threatened by death through inward ossification, an alienated one risks the same fate through outward disintegration and inward functionalisation.⁶⁶³

According to Herder, it is one of the key functions of government to establish institutions and structures that enable the necessary balancing of the two aspects of cultural development, thereby preventing both stasis and alienation. In order to understand this conception of government, we have to briefly look at Herder's solution to the second key problem of his anthropology: to establish a firm basis of human sociability.

The premise of Herder's conception of sociability is again provided by the notion of man as an animal with weak instincts. This conception is, in the first instance, directed against Rousseau, and particularly against the distinction between a natural and a social state, and the concomitant differentiation between natural man driven by a benign concern for his self-preservation and social man driven by a destructive and dehumanising concern for social recognition and domination. Herder's anthropology, by contrast, does not allow for any sharp opposition between nature on the one hand, and society and culture, on the other. In his view, man simply could never have been a completely isolated animal, able of find a fulfilled existence autonomously. Entering the world with weak instincts, survival would be impossible in such a situation, and parental love and integration into a wider community are needed to compensate for this weakness. From the moment an individual is born, it is a social animal in need of culture, and its sociability and its natural need for culture both express themselves in *Bildung*: that is the transmission of culture from parents to children by means of language, without which no survival, let alone a fulfilled existence is possible.⁶⁶⁴

⁶⁶³ See, for instance, Herder's claim that savages may well be happier than extensively cultivated Europeans because their culture is more direct, immediate and less specialised - *ibid.*, pt. 2, bk. 9, chap. 3, pp. 327-8. A similar argument can also be found in Herder's *Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker* where the strength, immediacy, spontaneity and capacity to describe a given scene in its totality of Greek and old Nordic poetry is favourably compared to the weakness, abstractness, artificiality and fragmentary nature of modern European literature. See, SWS, vol. 5, esp. pp. 164-83.

⁶⁶⁴ *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, Hanser, vol. 2, pp. 319-20, 332. The argument about the natural basis of both culture and society is repeated in *Vom Einfluß der Regierung auf die Wissenschaften*, SWS, vol. 9, pp. 313-19, and in the *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 2, bk. 8, chap. 4, pp. 285-97. On Herder's conception of human beings as cultural by nature see also Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire*, pp. 226-38.

By thus conceiving society as being both necessary and natural to man, Herder equally turned against any description of sociability as being, at its heart, not really sociable at all, but driven by self-interest. Here the target is of course not solely, or even primarily, Rousseau, but a whole tradition of anthropological theorising which for Herder most prominently includes Mandeville, Helvétius, Hobbes and Kant, but which equally encompasses all the thinkers so far discussed in this thesis. According to Herder, weak man's primordial instinct for self-preservation simply does not collide with the societal requirement of co-operation and peaceful co-existence; on the contrary, because man's self-preservation is by necessity collective, the two drives are intimately entwined.⁶⁶⁵ Therefore, a perceived existential conflict within man that underlies much 18th-century anthropological thinking - as for instance expressed in Rousseau's opposing principles of *amour de soi* and *amour-propre* or in Kant's notion of man's *ungesellige Geselligkeit*⁶⁶⁶ - is a non-issue for Herder.⁶⁶⁷

The most important consequence of this account of sociability is political. If Hobbes, Rousseau and Kant believed that the question of how to institute a sovereign power above individuals that is able to impose limits on their asocial drives is the fundamental problem of politics, Herder profoundly disagreed. Indeed, he claims that Kant's principle to this effect, namely that man is an animal that requires a master⁶⁶⁸ - i.e. the law-governed state - is an unnatural, evil one. In Herder's view, the most pressing issue a state faces vis-à-vis its citizens is exactly the same as the one parents have to confront in regard to their offspring:

⁶⁶⁵ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 2, bk. 8, chap. 4, pp. 284-7. See also, *Haben wir noch jetzt das Publikum und Vaterland der Alten?*, SWS, vol. 1, p. 24-6, and the essay on Mandeville in the *Adrastea*, pt. 8, SWS, vol. 24, pp. 103-19.

⁶⁶⁶ See *Idee zu einer Allgemeinen Geschichte in Weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, Kant, *Werke in sechs Bänden*, vol. 6, p. 37.

⁶⁶⁷ On Herder's notion of sociability in contrast to Hobbes' and Kant's, see also Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 503-7.

⁶⁶⁸ See *Idee zu einer Allgemeinen Geschichte in Weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, Kant, *Werke in sechs Bänden*, vol. 6, p. 40: 'der Mensch ist ein Tier, das, wenn es unter andern seiner Gattung lebt, einen Herrn nötig hat. Denn er mißbraucht gewiß seine Freiheit in Ansehung anderer seinesgleichen; und, ob er gleich, als vernünftiges Geschöpf, ein Gesetz wünscht, welches der Freiheit aller Schranken setzt: so verleitet ihn doch seine selbstsüchtige tierische Neigung, wo er darf, sich selbst auszunehmen. Er bedarf also einen Herrn, der ihm den eignen Willen breche, und ihn nötige, einen allgemein-gültigen Willen, dabei jeder frei sein kann, zu gehorchen.'

Ein zwar leichter, aber böser Grundsatz wäre es zur Philosophie der Menschen-Geschichte: "Der Mensch sei ein Tier das einen Herren nötig habe und von diesem Herren oder von einer Verbindung derselben das Glück seiner Endbestimmung erwarte." ... Die Natur nämlich hat unserm Geschlecht keinen Herren bezeichnet ... Das Weib bedarf eines Mannes und der Mann des Weibes: das unerzogene Kind hat erziehender Eltern, ... der Haufe Volks eines Anführers nötig: dies sind Natur-Verhältnisse, die im Begriff der Sache liegen. Im Begriff des Menschen liegt der Begriff eines ihm nötigen Despoten, der auch Mensch sei, nicht... So wie es nun ein schlechter Vater ist, der sein Kind erziehet, damit es, Lebenslang unmündig, Lebenslang eines Erziehers bedürfe ...; so mache man die Anwendung auf die Erzieher des Menschengeschlechts, die Väter des Vaterlandes und ihre Erzognen.⁶⁶⁹

Man is a weak animal in need of a tutor, and parents and states are charged with ensuring the education of their children/citizens. But the reference to the despot, or the bad father, who educates in a way that ensures indefinite immaturity, indicates that Herder conceived education not as *Erziehung* but as *Bildung*: imposition and dependence is to be kept to a bare minimum and the aim of education is to put the educated into a position where *Bildung* can happen autonomously; or, to put it differently, governmental responsibility only extends to create opportunities and circumstances that allow *Bildung* to take place, its goal, ultimately the realisation of *Humanität*, can only be reached by the individual through the unhindered use of all his forces.

This is also the upshot of Herder's most overtly political work, the essay *Vom Einfluß der Regierung auf die Wissenschaften*. Herder therein defined that a sovereign's reign can only be considered glorious if it had a beneficial influence on the development of the sciences (*Wissenschaften*) which are conceived very broadly as comprising all aspects of human culture.⁶⁷⁰ But he equally argued that such an influence generally best happens indirectly: by preparing the ground for the sciences to flourish through the granting of extensive, if not necessarily complete, freedom of thought and expression, by establishing institutions and structures that offer opportunities for learning, and by promoting emulative behaviour through the provision of beneficial examples for imitation and by

⁶⁶⁹ *Ideen*, Hanser vol. 3/1, pt. 2, bk. 9, chap. 4, pp. 336-7. For Kant's reply to Herder's attack, see his review of the second part of the *Ideen* in Kant, *Werke in sechs Bänden*, vol. 6, p. 804.

⁶⁷⁰ SWS, vol. 9, pp. 351-2.

rewarding achievements.⁶⁷¹ Any direct imposition of the sciences on a passive people is thereby in principle rejected, but Herder did grant the sovereign the power, in certain circumstances, to guide their development more directly. Especially the importation of foreign sciences needs supervision, Herder argued, and in case they should prove disruptive, a temporary and limited suspension of free expression may have to be considered.⁶⁷²

It is frequently argued that Herder was an essentially non-political thinker, or, that if he had a political theory, that it veered into the direction of anarchism or cultural nationalism. The underlying reason for this assessment is of course the rejection of a conception of the state along the lines suggested by Hobbes.⁶⁷³ By refusing to conceive the state as ontologically different from the family, or, by extension, from a community or nation defined by a shared language and tradition, Herder can of course be read as arguing that the state, understood as a coercive mechanism charged with imposing and administering laws, is not only not needed, but, ultimately, diametrically opposed to the attainment of happiness. After all, Herder suggested that human socialisation, pacification and the promotion of cultural development cannot, or in any case should not, be imposed by a rational political actor residing above a given nation, but instead should flow spontaneously and freely from the nation itself through the complex process of *Bildung*, comprising both the organic integration of individuals and the gradual development of culture through the meshing of tradition and innovation. It is of course only a small step from such a portrayal of Herder's politics to Isaiah Berlin's claim that Herder's thought should, above all else, be considered as a radical rejection of the Enlightenment, involving the pitting of cultural

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 351-71.

⁶⁷² On the question of censorship, see also *Adrastea*, pt. 4, Hanser, vol. 23, pp. 343-6, and footnote 660 above.

⁶⁷³ The classic accounts on Herder's alleged failure to deal sufficiently with either the state or politics are Haym, *Herder* esp. vol. 2, pp. 280-3, 506&ff.; Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, pp. 391-2, 445-7; Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat. Studien zur Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaates*, 3rd ed., (München und Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1915), pp. 29-33. For an argument that Herder should be considered as an advocate of a cultural and, fundamentally, apolitical version of nationalism which is close to anarchism, see Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, pp. 180-1, 205-6. For a good rejection of the claim that Herder's nationalism should be considered as non-political, see Frederick M. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), pp. 38-65.

nationalism, pluralism and populism against his contemporaries' cherished values of cosmopolitanism, universalism and étatism.⁶⁷⁴

There is of course some truth in such a portrayal. Most importantly, Herder had undoubtedly a very different understanding of human sociability and the state from, for instance, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, and Kant. And yet, to conclude from such differences that Herder radically opposed his own ideals to a monolithic Enlightenment tradition involves a significant misrepresentation of Herder's position as well as an over-simplified reading of the Enlightenment.⁶⁷⁵

Indeed, a consideration of Herder's Russian writings in the context of his anthropology demonstrates that, far from attempting to diametrically oppose doctrines or models, he endeavoured to mediate between opposing notions put forward by his contemporaries. In particular, in the context of Russia, his anthropological concept of *Bildung* enables Herder to carefully negotiate between Voltaire's championing of Peter as the prime example demonstrating the efficacy of rapid, willed, top-down civilisation by means of cultural importation on the one hand, and Diderot's attempt to convince Catherine of the virtues of slow, natural, bottom-up and indigenous development, on the other. *Bildung* combines determinate natural forces and contingent, willed human actions, internal and external influences, top-down imposition and bottom-up spontaneity; and the *Bildung* of an empire such as Russia, Herder consistently stressed, needs both Voltaire's Peter and Diderot's Catherine.

Moreover, and despite Herder's unquestionable uneasiness about the modern state, his is far from an anarchical political theory based on a notion of spontaneous, natural growth from the grassroots. It is again in his Russian writings that he most succinctly makes the practical case for the need for state intervention. As man is an animal in need of a tutor, the state has an important educating role to play as soon as a community has extended beyond the

⁶⁷⁴ Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, pp. 168-242. For a shorter version of the same argument, see Isaiah Berlin, 'Herder and the Enlightenment', in *Aspects of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Earl R. Wasserman (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1965).

⁶⁷⁵ For a very similar argument, see also Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire*, pp. 210-12.

primordial family or tribe.⁶⁷⁶ Even though this role is not qualitatively different from the one played by parents or a patriarch, and even though states should generally only act indirectly or negatively by creating opportunities for *Bildung*, especially in times when normal development has been blown of course, much more direct, positive and active guidance needs to flow from the top.

Indeed, stasis and alienation - the two prime obstacles to continuous progressive development - both figure large in Herder's understanding of Russian history. Peter, having inherited a country in historical stasis, had managed to provide Russia with a new source of dynamism through his cultural imports; the reform programme proposed to Catherine was calibrated to prevent Russia from falling into a state of alienation. Hence, the concern with nationalising and assimilating the imports through a comprehensive programme of *Bildung*. Catherine's job, in other words, was to start the process of reconstructing a cultural whole, to reconnect tradition with recent innovations, and thereby provide Russians with a new sense of belonging and purpose. To put it differently, Herder, the alleged quasi anarchist, can in certain circumstances, advocate means of development that are surprisingly close to a doctrine of enlightened despotism without violating his own principle that man is an animal in need of a tutor: when stasis or alienation occur, figures able to see beyond a country's current predicament are needed to impose reforms, even if they are resisted, in order to create a situation that allows for natural development, mainly driven by the *Nationalgeist* rather than the will of the sovereign, to resume.⁶⁷⁷

If Herder's anthropology thereby provides us with important clues about how his assessment of Peter and his plans for Catherine might be related to each other, the

⁶⁷⁶ That Herder's anarchism is severely limited due to his advocacy of state education has also been stressed by Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 212-15.

⁶⁷⁷ Barnard argues that Herder regarded state leadership as a transitional phenomena only: once a nation has been educated to a sufficient level of maturity, any imposition from above will have to wither away and be replaced by spontaneous joint-endeavour from below. Whilst Herder certainly made the case that diverging levels of imposition are needed depending on historical conjectures, I cannot find any firm textual evidence for a belief in a progressive historical decline of the state, matched by a related growth of the nation. A reading of Herder's Russian writings would rather suggest that he considered the relation between top-down and bottom-up, or state and nation, as one of a harmony which needs constant reconfiguration depending on circumstances. See Frederick M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought. From Enlightenment to Nationalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp.76-83.

question remains as to how these two aspects of Herder's Russian writings relate to his prophecy of a future Russian civilisation, centred at the Black Sea and spreading out across the world. His philosophy of history, which is itself intimately related to his anthropology, provides the answer.

Philosophy of history of mankind: Asian stasis, European alienation, and the quest for a new dynamic centre

According to Herder's philosophy, human history is an extension of natural history and anthropology. Whilst the latter establish human beings' place and role within the order of nature, the former investigates the uses they have made of their relative freedom to establish a purpose and order for themselves that mirrors God/nature. The history of mankind traces the ascending chain of human *Bildungen* across time and space, thereby following the ways by which the ideal of *Humanität* has been successively approached:

Es ziehet sich demnach *eine Kette der Cultur* in sehr abspringenden krummen Linien durch alle gebildete [sic.] Nationen In jeder derelben bezeichnet sie zu- und abnehmende Größen und hat Maxima allerlei Art. Manche von diesen schließen einander aus oder schränken einander ein, bis zuletzt dennoch ein Ebenmaß im Ganzen stattfindet, so daß es der trüglicheste Schluß wäre, wenn man von Einer Vollkommenheit einer Nation auf jede andere schließen wollte.⁶⁷⁸

By conceiving the chain of culture as proceeding in 'crooked lines' and by indicating that different cultural perfections, achieved at different times and by different peoples, may well be mutually exclusive, Herder stressed that the history of mankind is a complex, non-linear story, marked by incessant cultural diversification as well as by a unity and harmony discernable if it is regarded as a whole. This double characterisation of history as constituting diversity in unity provides the basis for Herder's scathing attack on contemporary historiography. In his highly polemical *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*⁶⁷⁹ as well as in a number of shorter essays and book reviews written in the 1770s – most notably of Schlözer's *Vorstellung seiner Universal-Historie* and Millar's *Observations concerning the distinction of ranks in society*⁶⁸⁰ – Herder faulted his fellow historians of mankind for two, related faults, both caused by an insufficiently broad perspective.

⁶⁷⁸ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 3, bk. 15, chap. 3, p. 599.

⁶⁷⁹ Hanser, vol. 1, pp. 589-683.

⁶⁸⁰ SWS, vol. 5, pp. 436-40, 452-6.

Indeed, he attacked at the same time those thinkers who solved the problem of how to find unity in history by elevating their own particular place or time to an universal yardstick by which the totality of the past can be measured, as well as the ones who have rejected such an optimistic view of the present and who are instead in danger of falling into complete scepticism, for whom, in other words, history threatens to become an essentially meaningless succession of random revolutions.⁶⁸¹ If we regard history from the perspective of a superior present, it may appear to be coherent and reveal purpose. But coherence and purpose, Herder argued, come at a high cost, since the past is reduced to a means for a higher end: the present. If, by contrast, we refuse to adopt any fixed point of view, and regard history only from within the hurly burly of events, we are in danger of seeing in the past nothing more than random flux. One perspective finds unity by destroying all diversity, the other loses sight of unity in the face of overwhelming diversity.

To a considerable extent, Herder's juxtaposition of presentists and sceptics is a continuation of the historiographical debate between *philosophes* and *érudits* which we have encountered several times already. Indeed, the former group most prominently includes the philosophically inclined Voltaire, Robertson, Iselin and Millar, and their presentist perspective is generated by their interest to uncover how modern, polite, commercial and civilised Europe emerged.⁶⁸² The second group encompasses German professional historians such as Gatterer and Schlözer who pitted their positivist project to construct a universal history by means of ordering and systematising critically verified facts in explicit opposition to the *philosophes*. In Herder's view such a project is doomed to fail: historical facts, no matter how well established and how meticulously systematised, will never speak for themselves. History thus conceived, far from revealing the *nexus rerum universalis* as the Göttingen professors had hoped,⁶⁸³ will always remain fragmentary and undermine, rather than strengthen, belief in an ordered, coherent and purposeful world.⁶⁸⁴

⁶⁸¹ *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 614, 619-20.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 630; see also SWS, vol. 5, p. 454.

⁶⁸³ Gatterer, *Vom historischen Plan*, p. 659.

⁶⁸⁴ *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 614; SWS, vol. 5, pp. 436-40.

In an early fragment Herder remarked that philosophy must be guided by history, and history be stimulated by philosophy.⁶⁸⁵ By the time he came to write the *Ideen* he had resolved the question of how the two can be married. It is the point of view afforded by anthropology that can provide history with a philosophically unifying perspective that enables to relate disparate facts and events without losing sight of the relative merit of past cultures.

As we have seen, Herder's anthropology posits that man's cultural development moves in two different directions: one driven by the inter-generational transmission of traditions towards the establishment of strongly rooted, distinct local cultures which in their diversity may well be incommensurable with each other; the other towards the meshing and spreading of local cultures across the globe through inter-communal communication and emigration. An anthropologically-inspired history thus entails by its very nature cultural diversification as well as unification, and it is the historian's task to investigate and integrate both modes of cultural development. The tense relation between the intensity and extension of cultures becomes the engine of the historical process, and man's successive resolutions to the problem of how the two can be harmoniously combined its main subject matter. Moreover, although the main trajectory of cultural development is progressive, or towards a deeper grounding and further extension of human culture, it is not linear, and the present is not by necessity more perfect than the past. As soon as a given community has established a harmonious cultural whole, it has, Herder argued, reached a point of perfection *sui generis*, and any future development is liable to result in dissonances and thereby amount to a loss rather than a gain. Indeed, such dissonances may well mean that the community in question will ultimately decline and fall. However, part of its cultural heritage may be taken up elsewhere and be used as a building block for the *Bildung* of a new cultural whole. Progress, in other words, follows a 'crooked' trajectory and is only discernable from a global perspective.⁶⁸⁶

⁶⁸⁵ *Von der Verschiedenheit des Geschmacks und der Denkart unter den Menschen* (1766), SWS, vol. 32, pp. 27-8.

⁶⁸⁶ See, especially, *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 2, bk. 9, chap. 1, pp. 313-14. For a very condensed outline of Herder's conception of the overall historical process, see also *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*, SWS, vol. 17, letter 25, pp. 115-22.

If we are to understand why Herder granted Russia such a prominent place in his conjecture about the future of human culture, we will have to follow his account of crooked cultural development both in its local and global dimensions, and in its ancient and modern guises, which is introduced as secondary division cutting across both directions in Herder's historical writings. We will specifically have to enquire as to why and how these different lines of development converge in Herder's mind spatially towards the Black Sea area, and temporally towards the near future.

Herder's account of the global spreading of human culture initially follows an East-West trajectory. According to Herder, the first flowering of culture occurred in South-East Asia, and throughout ancient history he described a cultural movement towards the West: from China to Egypt and Greece, with India, Babylonia, Persia, Israel and Phoenicia constituting important linking elements.⁶⁸⁷ The transition from ancient to modern history occurs with the Roman Empire, which corresponds with a geographic change of direction in cultural development: rather than from East to West, the developmental trend is now from South to North and thereby ever deeper into Europe.⁶⁸⁸

It is important to note that for Herder the geographical spread of culture is not a contingent process, but one that is considerably degree determined by climate. The entire sixth book of the *Ideen*, is taken up by an exposition of the physical geography of the globe. The centre piece of this section is a chapter on the *Erdstrich schöngebildeter Völker* (the region of beautifully formed peoples).⁶⁸⁹ This region, located between Kashmir and Greece, is, because of its physical attributes, particularly endowed by nature for the advancement of culture. Indeed, Herder went as far as to suggest that the roots of all cultural perfections can be traced back to this particular region:

Ersprößlich ist für das Menschengeschlecht gewesen, daß es in diesen Gegenden der Wohlgestalt nicht nur anfang, sondern daß auch

⁶⁸⁷ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 3, bks. 11-13, pp. 389-527.

⁶⁸⁸ See also *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, Hanser, vol. 1, pp. 621-2.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 2, bk. 6, chap. 3, pp. 199-204.

von hieraus die Cultur am wohlthätigsten auf andre Nationen gewirkt hat. Wenn die Gottheit nicht unsre ganze Erde zum Sitz der Schönheit machen konnte: so ließ sie wenigstens durch die Pforte der Schönheit das Menschengeschlecht hinauftreten und mit lang' eingeprägten Zügen derselben die Völker nur erst allmählich andre Gegenden suchen. Auch war es Ein und dasselbe Principium der Natur, das eben die wohlgebildeten Nationen zugleich zu den wohlthätigsten Wirkerinnen auf andre machte ... Aus den Gegenden schöngebildeter Völker haben wir unsre Religion, Kunst, Wissenschaft, die ganze Gestalt unsrer Cultur und Humanität, so viel oder wenig wir deren an uns haben. In diesem Erdstrich ist alles erfunden, alles durchdacht und wenigstens in Kinderproben ausgeführt, was die Menschheit verschönern und bilden konnte.⁶⁹⁰

The reason for the beauty of the people inhabiting this region, and for the perfection of their cultural productions, lies in the temperateness of their physical surrounding: lodged between high mountains and the sea, and between the extreme cold of the North and the heat of the South, nature offers here the spectacle of beautiful harmonious proportions in all her manifestations.⁶⁹¹ We have already seen that Herder's cultural ideal of *Humanität* always involves the harmonious ordering of extremes, and that man's striving towards this ideal is always influenced by the kind of sense impressions they receive from nature. Therefore, the preference shown by Herder for temperate climates in general, and the area of beautifully formed people in particular: it is here that God/nature has offered human beings a glimpse of what they are destined to achieve in its purest form.

This is an element of Herder's philosophy of history which is often under appreciated in modern scholarship, no doubt because Herder is generally portrayed as a radical cultural pluralist for whom every culture is equally valid, an hence incomparable to, and incommensurate with, others.⁶⁹² Even though such a claim certainly holds true if we only consider Herder's appreciation of individual cultures, it needs serious qualification in regard to his portrayal of the spreading of

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 204.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., esp. p. 203. On the importance of temperate climatic zones for cultural development more generally, see *ibid.*, pt. 1, bk. 1, chap. 4, p. 31. On the idea that a concept of beauty requires a perception of beauty in nature, see *Betrachtungen über das verschiedene Urtheil von menschlicher Schönheit*, SWS, vol. 12, pp. 15-19.

⁶⁹² See, for instance, Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, pp. 231-38; Brian J. Whitton, 'Herder's Critique of the Enlightenment: Cultural Community versus Cosmopolitan Rationalism', *History and Theory* 27, no. 2 (1988).

culture from a global perspective. Looking at the history of mankind as whole, Herder very clearly revealed a preference for certain parts of the globe, and this preference is caused by an aesthetic theory of climate with a considerable impact on his philosophy of history as a whole. The arguably most striking effect of Herder's climatic theory is that the Americas and Africa are largely written out of the history of mankind altogether. Both lack, Herder argued, an extended temperate zone, and are therefore significantly climatically challenged in terms of their capacity for cultural productions.⁶⁹³ In the *Ideen*, African and American peoples are only awarded a climatic and ethnographic description – in which their value relative to their physical environment is duly appreciated – but an account of their own historical and cultural development is never undertaken.⁶⁹⁴ Even though Herder projected to integrate Africa and the Americas into his historical narrative in the unfinished fifth part of the *Ideen*, this integration would have taken place in the context of European voyages of discovery and colonisation.⁶⁹⁵ According to Herder, in other words, the epicentre of the history of mankind is firmly centred in Asia and Europe, and is driven forward by nations that have been in contact with the region of beautifully formed peoples.

The Black Sea area is of course located within this region. In fact, the area between the Caspian and the Black Sea constitutes the most desirable locus within the region of beautifully formed peoples:

Man sollte glauben, daß in diesen Gegenden die Zunge der Waage menschlicher Bildung in der Mitte geschwebt und ihre Schale nach Griechenland und Indien öst- und westlich fortgebreitet habe.⁶⁹⁶

Given this climatic privileging of the lands surrounding the Black Sea, we can readily see why Herder would consider moving Russia's capital to Azov as being beneficial for the country's future development.⁶⁹⁷ However, the contention that

⁶⁹³ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 1, bk. 1, chaps. 6-7, pp. 41-4, 46-8.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pt. 2, bk. 6, chap. 4, pp. 205-12; pt. 2, bk. 6, chap. 6, pp. 215-24.

⁶⁹⁵ See Herder's plan for the continuation of the *Ideen* in Hanser, vol. 3/1, pp. 1155-8.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 2, bk. 6, chap. 3, p. 201.

⁶⁹⁷ Of all the studies concerned with Herder's Russian writings only the ones by Stavenhagen and Drews have cursorily drawn attention to the climatic reasons that underlie the advocacy of moving Russia's capital to Azov. See Stavenhagen, 'Herders Geschichtsphilosophie und Geschichtsprophetie', pp. 25-6; Drews, *Herder und die Slaven. Materialien zur Wirkungsgeschichte bis zur Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 53-4.

Russia's real centre lies at the Northern shore of the Black Sea is of course a highly dubious one, and serves as an indication that the concern underlying Herder's prophecy may not primarily lie with the civilisation of Russia as such, but with the future of human culture more widely. In order to understand the global historical importance of a new Russia, transformed by Peter I and Catherine II and with its heart located at the very epicentre of cultural production, we have to turn to the second dimension of Herder's philosophy of history: the inter-generational transmission of tradition leading to the development of distinct local cultures.

The story told by Herder about this second aspect of cultural development is again divided into two periods: ancient history, mainly centred in Asia on the one hand, and modern, European history on the other, with the Roman Empire again serving as transition. Crucially for our present concerns, Herder detected very distinct driving forces and stumbling blocks for progressive development in either period.⁶⁹⁸ This differentiation is best illustrated by the switch of analogies employed in the *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* to illustrate the development of culture in ancient and modern time. Whilst in ancient history the preferred analogy is the one of the life cycle – moving from childhood (Israel and South East Asia), boyhood (Egypt and Phoenicia), youth (Greek) to arrive at manhood (Rome) – this analogy is dropped as soon as he arrives at post-Roman European history.⁶⁹⁹ During this period the most commonly used metaphors to characterise the march of history is the one of the tree, whereby ancient history is represented by the upward movement from the roots to the trunk, and modern history by the sideways shooting of the different branches.⁷⁰⁰

Underlying the analogy of the life cycle is a perception of ancient, Asian history as being constituted by a progressive series of distinct national cultures. Whilst connected through successive processes of transmission, which serve as the engine for overall upward cultural development, each culture is nevertheless

⁶⁹⁸ The importance of Herder's strict differentiation between ancient and modern history has also been highlighted by Stavenhagen, 'Herders Geschichtsphilosophie und Geschichtsprophetie', pp. 33-6, and Pross, 'Herder und die moderne Geschichtswissenschaft', p. 37.

⁶⁹⁹ *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, Hanser, vol. 1, pp. 596-8 (childhood); pp. 599, 603-5 (Egyptian and Phoenician boyhood); pp. 605-6 (Greek youth); pp. 609-10 (Roman adulthood).

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 633-4.

described as a self-contained and highly original entity, defined by, for instance, particular, national systems of religion, philosophy and legislation. According to Herder, each such entity was intensely inward looking, and the behaviour of its members was informed by patriotism. Indeed, ancient cultures defined themselves predominantly in strict opposition to their neighbours; a proposition especially true in regard to China and Israel, but it equally applies to more open, receptive countries such as ancient Egypt and Phoenicia. In a highly evocative and characteristic passage, Herder characterised the relation between ancient cultures in the following manner:

... siehe, wie der Ägypter den Hirten, den Landstreicher *hasset!* Wie er den leichtsinnigen Griechen *verachtet!* So jede zwei Nationen, deren Neigungen und Kreise der Glückseligkeit *sich stoßen* – man nennt's *Vorurteil! Pöbelei!* Eingeschränkter *Nationalism!* Das Vorurteil ist *gut*, zu seiner *Zeit*: denn es macht *glücklich*. Es drängt Völker zu ihrem *Mittelpunkte* zusammen, macht sie *vester* auf ihrem *Stamme*, blühender *in ihrer Art*, brünstiger und also auch glückseliger in ihren *Neigungen* und *Zwecken*.⁷⁰¹

The cumulative effect of such national modes of *Bildung* were, according to Herder, inner strength, immediacy, simplicity and wholeness. There existed a unity of purpose of all societal forces - government, religion, arts and sciences - to draw the nation together towards its own particular centre.⁷⁰² Indeed, one of the most prominent cultural manifestations of ancient times is myth, unifying philosophy, theology, politics and poetry, and giving immediate expression to the experience and aspirations of a nation in its totality.⁷⁰³ Such simple, strongly rooted and immediately accessible traditions underlie the marked collective consciousness of ancient societies and the strong attachment of their members to their national identity.

The flipside of such centredness provided by strongly rooted traditions, however, is the danger of stasis:

⁷⁰¹ Ibid., p. 618. Emphasis in the original.

⁷⁰² See esp. *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 3, bk. 12, chap. 6, pp. 469-70. See also *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 597.

⁷⁰³ See also *Vom Einfluß der Regierung auf die Wissenschaften*, SWS, vol. 9, pp. 313-19.

Die Tradition ist eine an sich vortreffliche, unserm Geschlecht unentbehrliche Naturordnung; sobald sie aber sowohl in praktischen Staatsanstalten als im Unterricht alle Denkkraft fesselt, allen Fortgang der Menschenvernunft und Verbesserung nach neuen Umständen und Zeiten hindert: so ist sie das wahre Opium des Geistes sowohl für Staaten als Sekten und einzelne Menschen. Das große Asien, die Mutter aller Aufklärung unserer bewohnten Erde hat von diesem süßen Gift viel gekostet und andern zu kosten gegeben.⁷⁰⁴

The strength of the Asian opium of tradition is not uniform across ancient cultures. On the contrary, Herder described a whole spectrum ranging from complete stasis to relative dynamism, and in which increased dynamic qualities correspond with a movement from East to West geographically, and from deepest antiquity to the threshold of modernity temporally. Its starting point is provided by China, and Herder, just like Voltaire, regarded it as the most stable, self-sufficient and static civilisation known to mankind that has not changed since its institution despite the frequent shocks it has suffered through barbarian invasions.⁷⁰⁵ At the other end of the spectrum stands Greece. More open towards the outside and, thanks to its diverse and poly-centred nature, driven forward by strong internal emulation, Greece is the only ancient culture whose development was not cut short through internal ossification.⁷⁰⁶

In Herder's philosophy of history, Greece is a special and revealing case. Indeed, the Greeks are the only people in history to have followed the whole career of *Bildung*: from the smallest beginning, they have over time developed a culture as perfect as it could be given the constraints of time and space; they had, in other words, fully developed their potential and their history provides as close an approximation to the ideal of *Humanität* as possible.⁷⁰⁷ The cause for this achievement was, according to Herder, a successful harmonious meshing of internal and external *Bildung* and of tradition and innovation, helped along by favourable geographic, climatic and world historical circumstances. The Greeks arrived on the stage of history at a favourable moment - the arts and science had already developed to a significant degree in Egypt and Phoenicia - and were

⁷⁰⁴ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 3, bk. 12, chap. 6, p. 470.

⁷⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pt. 3, bk. 11, chap. 1, pp. 398-400; pt. 3, bk. 12, chap. 6, p. 468.

⁷⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pt. 3, bk. 13, chap. 1, pp. 472-3.

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pt. 3, bk. 13, chap. 7, pp. 520-2.

geographically optimally positioned to take full advantage of this historical conjecture by soaking up aspects of their neighbours. However, their real achievement lie in effecting a comprehensive transformation of these cultural imports into a completely new and original *Bildung*, reflecting the beauty of the climate they inhabited, and kept alive over centuries through internal emulation.⁷⁰⁸

Not internal ossification, but external over-expansion following Alexander's conquests finally put an end to the flowering of Greek culture. It was a combination of indiscriminate importation of Asian luxury goods, and of controlling territories disproportionate to the size of the motherland that brought Greece to its knees.⁷⁰⁹ As such, Greece already stands at the border to modern history; a border that was crossed for good by Rome.

As seen, Herder accompanied the change from antiquity to modernity with a shift in metaphor: rather than the metaphor of the life cycle, the one of the tree with its ancient trunk and modern crown is now used to illustrate the historical process. Rome stands right at the cross-road between the two: it occupies the last place in the life-cycle (manhood), and constitutes the transition from trunk to crown in the tree analogy.

If the tree trunk represents the strength and stability of ancient cultures, the image of the crown points to the exact opposite: composed of a variety of small branches and leaves, it implies weakness, but also great height and extensive spatial spread. What Herder sought to symbolise with this change in metaphor, is a comprehensive transformation regarding the overall historical process: no longer towards the development of strongly rooted, largely autonomous, and distinct national cultures, but towards the soaking up and meshing of the ancient cultural heritage into a much more fickle general culture, and the spread of this increasingly universal culture across the globe.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid., pt. 3, bk. 13, chap. 1, pp. 473-8; *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, Hanser, vol. 1, pp. 606-9.

⁷⁰⁹ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 3, bk. 13, chap. 6, pp. 515-18.

In the *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, Herder summarised Rome's contribution to this transformation with characteristic flourish:

Wie man auch die Sache nehme: es war "*Reife des Schicksals der alten Welt.*" Der Stamm des Baums zu seiner größern Höhe erwachsen, strebte, Völker und Nationen unter seinen Schatten zu nehmen, in Zweige. Mit Griechen, Phönicern, Ägyptern und Morgenländern zu *wetteifern*, haben die Römer nie zu ihrer *Hauptsache* gemacht; aber indem sie alles *was vor ihnen war, männlich anwandten* – was wurde für ein *Römischer Erdkreis!* *Der Name knüpfte Völker und Weltstriche zusammen*, die sich voraus nicht dem Laut nach gekannt hatten. *Römische Provinzen!* in allen wandelten *Römer, Römische Legionen, Gesetze, Vorbilder von Sitten, Tugenden und Lastern.* Die *Mauer ward zerbrochen*, die *Nation von Nation schied*, der erste Schritt gemacht, die *Nationalcharaktere aller zu zerstören, alle in eine Form zu werfen*, die "*Römervolk*" hieß.⁷¹⁰

And yet, Rome's project to render the whole known world Roman failed. Its constitution originally only calibrated to regulate a town was not equipped to support an extended empire, and Rome fell because of internal discord exacerbated by external over-expansion.⁷¹¹ But the historic trend set in motion – the eradication of national differences through the spreading of a synthetic, shallow culture – continued; indeed, it is the story told by Herder about modern European history.

Europe as it presented itself after the fall of Rome was fundamentally different from the Asia of antiquity. The latter had been a scene of a number of different peoples gradually developing relatively autonomously on the lands which they had inhabited since time immemorial. Their cultures, therefore, had a very strong climatic and national colouring perpetuated over centuries through inter-generational transmission. In Europe, on the other hand, all seeds of truly indigenous cultures – Etruscan, Gallian, Iberian – had been rooted up by the Roman juggernaut.⁷¹² Once Rome fell, Europe was carved up by a variety of nomadic barbarian tribes falling in from the East, and freely roaming and inter-mixing with each other. The modern Europe described by Herder is from its very beginning a confused melting-pot of peoples, rather than an orderly garden in

⁷¹⁰ Hanser, vol. 1, p. 610. Emphasis in the original.

⁷¹¹ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 4, bk. 14, chap. 4, pp. 552-60.

⁷¹² *Ibid.*, pt. 3, bk. 14, chap 3, pp. 550-2.

which each plant or culture flowers in its particular way on its particular soil as had been the case in Asia.⁷¹³

But the story of Europe is not one of a wildly propagating diversity. On the contrary, the gradual civilisation of the barbarians was from the outset driven by strongly unifying forces. The first such force is provided by Europe's physical geography. Because of its location, and particularly because of its three main bodies of water – the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea – Europe was predestined to enjoy a lively internal traffic of peoples, goods and ideas as well as to entertain ample contact to the outside world. Herder argued that those convenient means of communication stand at the root of modern Europe's historically unprecedented dynamism, generated through rapid cycles of intra-communal imitation and emulation. Moreover, rapid exchanges between its constituent parts also provided a crucial precondition for the gradual emergence of a common, unifying European-wide outlook or spirit.⁷¹⁴

Christianity is the second band that has tied Europe together. Indeed, Herder treated its emergence and spread as one of the key pieces of evidence to illustrate the fundamental historical transformation towards universality that occurred during the time of the Roman Empire:

Die Zeit der einzelnen National-Gottesdienste voll Stolzes und Aberglaubens war vorüber: denn so notwendig dergleichen Einrichtungen in älteren Zeiten gewesen sein mochten, als jede Nation, in einem engen Familienkreise erzogen, gleich einer vollen Traube auf ihrer eignen Staude wuchs: so war doch, seit Jahrhunderten schon, in diesem Erdstrich fast alle menschliche Bemühung dahin gegangen, durch Kriege, Handel, Künste, Wissenschaften und Umgang die Völker zu knüpfen, und die Früchte eines jeden zu einem gemeinsamen Trank zu keltern. Vorurteile der National-Religionen standen dieser Vereinigung am meisten im Wege; da nun beim allgemeinen Duldungsgeist der Römer in ihrem weiten Reich ... jetzt noch ein *Volksglaube* hervortrat, der alle Völker zu Einem Volk machte ... so ward dies allerdings ein großer, zugleich auch ein

⁷¹³ Ibid., pt. 2, bk. 6, chap 3, p. 203; pt. 4, bk. 16, chap. 6, pp. 648-51. See also *Vom Einfluß der Regierung auf die Wissenschaften*, SWS, vol. 9, pp. 337-9.

⁷¹⁴ *Ideen*, Hanser, vol. 3/1, pt. 4, bk. 16, chap. 6, pp. 647-51.

gefährlicher Schritt in der Geschichte der Menschheit, je nachdem er getan wurde.⁷¹⁵

The big, yet equally dangerous leap, the rise of Christianity marked in the history of mankind expressed itself in post-Roman Europe in the first instance through a wholesale cultural purging and unification process. After the conversion of the early Frankish kings, Herder traced the violent Christianisation of the Saxons, Slavs, Poles and Prussians, and the associated wholesale destruction of their own belief systems and rituals, ultimately leading to a more homogeneous cultural landscape.⁷¹⁶ But Christianity's unifying capacity also manifested itself more gently, particularly through the spreading of Latin across the continent's elite. Apart from providing Europeans with a first *lingua franca*, thereby supporting traffic and communication, Latin also acted as a bridge back towards the cultural heritage of antiquity, initially brought to Europe by Rome, and, after its fall, remaining there in ruins and acting as the basis out of which a new synthetic culture developed.⁷¹⁷

Indeed, modern Europe's culture is not indigenous, and its development has not primarily been driven by inter-generational communication within one community, but through imitation of foreign cultures, frequently brought to her by third-party purveyors such as the Arabs. Whilst this is particularly true in regard to Christianity, which through the transformation it underwent at Alexandria carried the baggage of a great deal of Greek philosophy, and in regard to the flowering of classical arts and learning during the Renaissance,⁷¹⁸ Herder throughout stressed the foreign roots of cultural manifestations which *prima facie* look particularly European such chivalry and Provençal poetry.⁷¹⁹

Europe, in other words, is not particularly culturally creative. Nor has it provided its adopted culture with strong roots. Its particular strength rather lies in rapidly exchanging goods internally and externally; a trend which can be traced right back to the continent's post-Roman beginning, but which has since become further

⁷¹⁵ Ibid., pt. 4, bk. 17, chap. 1, pp. 655-6.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid., pt. 4, bk. 16, chaps. 2, 4, pp. 634, 642; bk. 18, chap. 3, p. 719.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., pt. 4, bk. 19, chap. 2, pp. 757-60.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid., pt. 4, bk. 17, chap. 3, p. 676; pt. 4, bk. 20, chap. 4, pp. 820-3.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid., pt. 4, bk. 20, chap. 2, pp. 796-805.

enhanced through travels of exploration and overseas colonisation. Thereby, Europe has helped to establish an increasingly universalised culture by fusing elements from all times and all places:

In Europa sollte das *Gewächs* der alten *Weltjahrhunderte* nur *gedörret* und *abgekeltert* werden: aber von da aus *unter die* Völker der Erde kommen ... Alles war schon *erfunden, gefühlt, fein ersonnen*, was vielleicht ersonnen werden konnte: hier ward alles nun in *Methode*, in *Form der Wissenschaften* geschlagen – und denn kamen nun eben die neuen, kältesten Mechanischen *Erfindungen* hinzu, die es ins Große spielten: *Maschinen der kalten Europäischnordischen Abstraktion*, für die Hand des Allenkers *große Werkzeuge!* Da liegen nun die Samenkörner fast unter allen Nationen der Erde.⁷²⁰

The reference to the cold, mechanical and abstract means employed to mould the achievements of all times and places into one general form, points to the ultimate weakness of modern European culture when compared to the ones of antiquity. Indeed, the idea of the abstract, mechanical machine has a negative connotation in Herder when compared to its antonym of the concrete organism. The former implies a forced, artificial kind of construction lacking the vitality, immediacy and spontaneity of the latter.⁷²¹

This is a theme Herder elaborated upon throughout his career and the main lines of argument remain constant. Modern European culture is abstract, general and derivative rather than concrete, particular and original - a claim Herder typically supported with reference to the French *Encyclopédie* and its project to collect and systematize all human knowledge by using the most artificial of all ordering mechanism, or, as, already seen, by invoking Montesquieu and his attempt to taxonomise all forms of government.⁷²² Likewise, it is driven by mechanical imitation rather than organic meshing of old and new and foreign and indigenous – as for instance demonstrated by the strict, but untimely, adherence to Aristotle's rule of the unity of place, time and action in classical French drama, and by the equally blind German imitation of French Classicism in particular, and of French

⁷²⁰ *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 663. Emphasis in the original.

⁷²¹ On Herder's usage of the machine and organism metaphor, see Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*, pp. 186-7.

⁷²² *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, Hanser, vol. 1, pp. 640, 654.

culture in general, after it had assumed a hegemonic position in Europe.⁷²³ Moreover, the outlook of Europe's inhabitants is of an empty cosmopolitan kind – the love of everywhere and everyone in general, but of nobody and nowhere in particular – rather than of the intensely patriotic and xenophobic kind that acted as a unifying glue in antiquity.⁷²⁴ A host of similar examples could be added; they all point to the same conclusion. Modern Europe lacks the inner strength, unity and centeredness of the ancient, national cultures.⁷²⁵ Whilst its openness to the outside world and its intense internal communication provide it with a source of dynamism that shields it from the Charybdis of ossified tradition and stasis, Europe, only unified by rootless, mechanical and artificial links, veers dangerously towards the Scylla of alienation. Or, to use Herder's own metaphor, the extent of Europe's culture is disproportionate to its intensity; the manifold branches and twigs have become too far removed from the tree's trunk.

Herder is often described as a fierce critic of his own time. In particular, his philosophy is often conceived as a nationalistic reaction against the cosmopolitan and universalistic tendencies that he discovered operating in contemporary European culture.⁷²⁶ Such a portrayal seems to a large extent wrongly conceived, however, since Herder saw these tendencies as natural, and hence inevitable, aspects of the overall historical process.⁷²⁷ Herder was not primarily disquieted by the eradication of national differences in modern Europe, nor by the synthesising and universalising pattern of cultural development as such, but by a fear that these processes had gone too far and threatened to result in widespread alienation. In modern Europe the essential harmony between cultural rootedness and extent has become disrupted. However, he was adamant that a much needed equilibrium cannot be achieved through a return to the past, but only through a leap forward

⁷²³ *Von Deutscher Art und Kunst*, SWS, vol. 5, pp. 208-17. See also *Adrastea*, SWS, vol. 23, pt. 1, pp. 68-73.

⁷²⁴ *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 652.

⁷²⁵ Herder's two lengthy contributions to the long-standing quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, undertaken in the *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität* and the *Adrastea*, are premised on the same argument as is outlined here in regard to his philosophy of history. According to Herder, the quarrel is essentially meaningless because antiquity and modernity are fundamentally different and, as such, incomparable to each other. See *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*, SWS, vol. 18, letters 81-107, pp. 5-144; *Adrastea*, SWS, vol. 23, pt. 1, pp. 72-5.

⁷²⁶ Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, pp. 198-201.

⁷²⁷ That Herder's advocacy of national modes of *Bildung* is not normative but historically specific has also been noted by Pross, 'Herder und die moderne Geschichtswissenschaft', p. 33.

into the future. Indeed, Herder's laments about the contemporary state of Europe were invariably accompanied by conjectures about the next step in the historical process, and this step was typically conceived as leading to a new harmony at a higher, rather than lower, level of universality.⁷²⁸ Herder, for instance, concluded the *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* by expressing his conviction that a new world historical revolution similar to the one brought about by Rome was afoot, and predicted it would entail the spreading of universalised European culture across the globe towards a '*allgemeine Bildung der Menschheit*'.⁷²⁹

Herder's prophecy about Russia's future must be read in the context of such conjectures.⁷³⁰ As with Diderot, Russia is important to Herder in the context of fundamental doubts about the future viability of European culture. But in clear contrast to Diderot, the future of Russian culture is not to be achieved through a complete beginning from scratch, but on the contrary, through the fusion and synthesis of ancient and modern, or Asian and European history. It is, in other words, conceived as a truly global culture. If Peter had prepared the ground for this fusion by emulating Europe, Catherine had to provide strong, internal roots for the imports. European dynamism and Asian inner strength, in other words, were to be combined in the Russia of the future. Located at the Black Sea, in the best possible climate, Russia could thus become a new Greece – a perfect harmonious whole – but one with a much wider reach than the one of antiquity. Having received a far more extensive culture from Europe than Greece did from Phoenicia and Egypt, and situated in the middle of a larger, more interrelated world, this new synthetic culture could ultimately radiate out, so Herder hoped, and lead to a global cultural regeneration.

⁷²⁸ See also, *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*, SWS, vol. 18, letter 122, pp. 286-90. In this letter Herder passionately argued that the decline of Europe does not imply the decline of mankind as a whole, and predicts that dying Europe will leave a seed for a future, better culture which will ultimately blossom elsewhere without, however, specifying where this may be.

⁷²⁹ *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, Hanser, vol. 1, p. 683.

⁷³⁰ That Herder's Russian writing must at least in part be understood in the context of his negative assessment of the future of European culture, has also been highlighted by Stavenhagen, 'Herders Geschichtsphilosophie und Geschichtsprphetie', esp. p. 17.

Conclusion

Herder's dialogue *Über die schnelle Kunstbildung der Völker* in his *Adrastea*, contains the following lines:

D. ... Ich dachte eben an *Peter den Großen*, der seine Nation auf Einmal, und zwar mit Gewalt in Künsten blühend machte.

E. Ich auch; wir sind uns also auf Einem Wege. Laßen wir das Gleichniß und reden von Thatsachen der Geschichte. Es ist wohl das wichtigste Thema, wovon in unserm Jahrhundert, in dem *Alles aufs schnellste* cultivirt werden soll, geredet werden mag --

D. Und geredet wird, raisonnirend und deraisonnirend.⁷³¹

The *Adrastea*, written at the beginning of the 19th century, was conceived by the elderly Herder as a look back over the previous century. When he forecast that Peter I and his attempt to civilise Russia quickly may well turn out to be the most important theme of the 19th century, it was as much a statement about the past, as it was a comment on the present, or a prediction about the future. Indeed, this thesis has attempted to show that the reign of Peter was a crucial topic for Enlightenment thought during the second part of the 18th century. Herder, moreover, was not only correct to stress the importance of Peter for late Enlightenment discourse as a whole, but in this dialogue, characterised by a plurality of voices, he managed very fittingly to explore the question of whether the czar had succeeded in quickly civilising Russia without betraying the facts of history.

And yet, posterity has lost sight of what Herder asserted here. To the very limited extent that Europe's engagement with Russian history during the Enlightenment has been studied at all, it has generally not been considered as a dialogue, but as a defective monologue. Far from meaningfully discussing the interpretation of Russian history with each other, Enlightenment thinkers, so we are told by scholars such as Lortholary or Wolff, used the example of Russia's past and its most illustrious czar in order to lend support to problematic ideas that ostensibly

⁷³¹ *Adrastea*, SWS, vol. 23, part 5, p. 444. Emphasis in the original.

defined the age as a whole: the efficacy of enlightened despotism (Lortholary), or the unquestionable perfection of European civilisation in light of which Russia appeared as a barbarous, semi-Oriental and backward 'other' (Wolff). This thesis has sought to revise such interpretations by drawing attention to the considerable diversity that is manifested in the late 18th-century debate about Russia.

Regarding the claim that Russia provided above all an opportunity to extol the benefits of a politics of enlightened despotism, I have attempted to show that there simply does not exist an unequivocal celebration of Russia's two most prominent enlightened rulers - Peter I and Catherine II - in the texts considered here, despite the centrality afforded to their respective reigns. The closest approximation to such a celebration can be found in the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie*, where Voltaire indeed appears to suggest that Peter had single-handedly propelled Russia into the orbit of European civilisation by imposing his will on a passive nation. And yet, this Voltairian assertion needs to be taken with a pinch of salt, being, at bottom, a wake-up call to France's passive ruler rather than a formal elaboration of a theory of either historical causation or political reform. More importantly still, to the extent that Voltaire reduced the process of Russia's civilisation to the activities of Peter, his interpretation was firmly rejected, rather than adopted.

The most radical rejection of Voltaire's central claim in the *Histoire de l'empire de Russie* - that the will of the sovereign is the key determinant of historical change - is provided by Diderot. According to Diderot, it is ultimately the march of nature that guides history and not willed human actions. Even though his dynamic conception of nature allows for considerable human intervention in the context of a young society - and he, at least initially, suspected 18th-century Russia to be such a society - the scope for such intervention is nevertheless limited both temporally and in terms of the kind of actions that are possible. When Diderot told Catherine II that she was able to build solid foundations for a future civilisation by imposing a programme of reform, he insisted that the success of this programme was dependent on her following the natural course of history. Most importantly, he stressed that Catherine's first act would need to involve the use of despotic power in order to devise a political system that would prevent such usage in the

future. After all, the ascending slope of the natural historical cycle is defined for Diderot by ever tighter reciprocal relations between the members of the nation as a whole, and Catherine's scope for intervention is limited to create conditions that allow reciprocal social interaction to occur: once this is achieved, progress will be driven by the nation and not the sovereign, and it will happen according to the rhythms of nature – that is to say, only slowly and gradually. Moreover, no matter how solid the foundations laid, they can never last forever: as with everything else in the universe, they will over time weaken and dissolve.

If Diderot thereby challenged the core assumption not only of enlightened despotism, but of any theory of history or politics that places a premium on deliberate human agency, Levesque and Schlözer elaborated in detail under which precise conditions willed actions by sovereigns may result in desired progressive outcomes. For both, the reign of Peter I stood as proof that the crucial factor determining human beings' ability to intervene purposefully in history is the quality and quantity of knowledge at their disposal. Although starting from a similar premise, they arrived at different conclusions. According to the sceptic Levesque, our capacity to generate sufficient knowledge to ensure that the outcomes of our conscious actions match their intentions is strictly limited. Hence, historically grown institutions possess a certain legitimacy simply because they have proven over time to fulfil a certain function no matter how imperfectly this may appear to be the case. If such institutions need to be altered, the reformer must proceed with utmost care and particularly ensure that he keeps the channel of communication with his nation open: the princely council or representative institutions are to be calibrated in such a way, that the reforming will is provided with constant feedback about whether the reformed institutions are working as intended, or whether they are leading to social upheaval and disruption and need adaptation. Sustainable progress, according to Levesque, can thus only ever happen gradually by means of a complex process of partial reform, feedback and further reform, and to the extent that Peter attempted to bypass this process by unilaterally imposing his will, he, almost inevitably, failed.

According to Schlözer, by contrast, modern *Gelehrsamkeit* enables the generation and organisation of knowledge of a kind that enables a much more radical

approach to reform and more rapid development than Levesque admitted. Peter I and Catherine II are exemplary sovereigns for having imported the seeds of *Gelehrsamkeit* into Russia, thereby having created the vital precondition for their reforming projects. It is, in Schlözer's view, the quality of the relationship between *Gelehrte* and government, rather than the level of communication between government and the nation via appropriate institutions, that fundamentally determines the success of reforming policies.

Herder, finally, brought together, and mediated between, a number of conflicting strands discernable in the debate about Peter I and Catherine II since Voltaire. By considering these two rulers through the lens provided by his anthropological concept of *Bildung*, he sought to show that the precisely delineated freedom human beings possess to fashion their own fate had been fully exploited by these two rulers. Peter's forceful imposition of his will, manifested through his importation of aspects of European culture, had been successful in lifting Russia out of a situation of historical stasis - an ever present danger facing human beings allowed by God/nature to fashion their own cultural environment. Catherine, so Herder hoped, would reconnect Peter's innovations with Russia's past, and his imports with its indigenous cultural core, by nationalising them. If she succeeded in this task, Herder argued, she would prevent Russia from slipping into a situation of alienation - the flipside of the natural tendency towards stasis. Moreover, by providing Peter's imports with strong roots reaching down into the nation, the future flourishing of Russia's civilisation would no longer be dependent on the impetus provided from the top, but would be driven by creative cultural activity issuing from below.

Russia, in other words, provided a topic for a sophisticated debate about politics and political reform. It was not primarily a debate about constitutional arrangements. All thinkers considered here regarded 18th-century Russia as possessing no formal limits on the czar's power, and, apart from Diderot, none felt that the country was in urgent need of constitutional reform. Despite this absence of sustained engagement with constitutional questions, the debate about Russia can nevertheless not be collapsed into a defence of enlightened despotism. From Voltaire to Herder, the questions about the proper relationship between state and

nation, government and society, top-down imposition and bottom-up development, as well as the relative importance of human agency and non-human, natural forces in effecting historical change, were constantly revisited. And after Voltaire, the conflicting answers provided, far from shoring up an ideal of enlightened despotism, undermined some of its crucial foundations.

Nor can we hope to understand the debate about Russia if we approach it through the conceptual prism provided by the notion of 'otherness', and the concomitant idea that semi-Oriental and backward Russia served principally as a negative image against which Europe could define itself and assert its superiority. It is certainly true that throughout the second half of the 18th century, Russia, and its history, was predominantly assessed in relation to Europe, and the history of European civilisation. Such a comparative perspective, and the overriding concern with the development of civilisation, was inherent in the project of philosophic history, which provided the overarching framework by which Russian history was interpreted.

And yet, there is no necessary connection between writing philosophic history and asserting the superiority of Europe's civilisation to all others, or conceiving the continent's historical journey as a universal model that needs to be emulated elsewhere if progress is to be achieved. Far from it, as the cases of Diderot and Herder amply demonstrate. Rather than being self-congratulatory regarding the perfection of their own civilisation and wishing to export its particular civilising mechanism across the globe, they were pessimistic about Europe's future, and convinced that the continent was on a course of historical decline. For both, Russia constituted a counterpoint to such pessimism: a glimmer of hope that a more stable and sustainable civilisation may develop there in the near future than had been the case at home. This glimmer of hope lasted in the case of Herder, but was ultimately extinguished in the case of Diderot and replaced by a profound pessimism about the country's future. This pessimism, however, was not based on a perception of Russian backwardness, but, on the contrary, on the idea that the country was already too advanced. In Diderot's final analysis Russia did become somewhat Orientalised, but its Oriental nature did not suggest a lagging behind Europe; rather, studying the Orient and, ultimately, Russia, provided Diderot with

a glimpse into the continent's unenviable future: despotism, decline and dissolution.

Levesque and Schlözer likewise did not believe that the historical process of Russia's civilisation could be reduced to the simple imposition of European civilising mechanisms. Both asserted the importance of a profound understanding of pre-Petrine Russian history if the country's present situation and its relationship to Europe was to be properly comprehended. *Pace* Voltaire, they insisted that late 17th century Russia could not be considered as being fundamentally the same as 11th century Europe, and, *pace* Diderot, they rejected the idea that 18th-century Russia was a savage *tabula rasa* on which Catherine may build without interference from the past. Instead, they endeavoured to unravel the complex confluence of the particular historical forces that had defined medieval Russia, with particular emphasis placed on the interaction of Russian history with Byzantine and Tatar/Mongol history. Of course there may be similarities between the histories of Russia and Europe prior to Peter I - similarities explicable by the limited interaction between the two regions, and, as Levesque in particular observed, on account of the fundamental similarity of the historical process everywhere - but these should not blind us from perceiving the important differences.

The perception of such differences, moreover, greatly informed Levesque and Schlözer's respective assessments of Peter's project to civilise by means of Europeanisation. According to Levesque, this project was wrongly conceived in so far as it was based on Peter's failure to recognise the civilising mechanisms already in existence when he took over the reigns of government. This is of course not to say that Levesque objected to Russia opening up towards Europe - on the contrary, he deemed all inter-state communication to be greatly beneficial - but to the extent that Europeanisation became a fixed idea of Peter's to be ruthlessly imposed on the country, the czar undermined the progress of civilisation in Russia rather than advance it. Russians did not need to adopt European clothing habits in order to become civilised, they simply needed to increase the level of emulative communication with each other and the outside world. Given the long history of Russian interaction with its neighbours, the Europeanising Peter was not the first

to recognise the benefits of emulative communication, and some of his predecessors, Levesque argued, undertook measures to strengthen it in much more fruitful ways than the great czar himself. Schlözer was much more positive in his assessment of Peter, but agreed that Europeanisation was merely one part of the story of Russia's civilisation. Contrary to Levesque, he implied that both Peter and Catherine recognised this. Indeed, their attempts at importing the seeds of *Gelehrsamkeit* from Europe into Russia were only a means to formulate reforming policies appropriate to the particular situation of Russia. Modern, European *Gelehrsamkeit* is the tool the reforming czars sought to employ in order to understand the complexities of Russia's past and present. It is such particular knowledge about their own country, rather than general notions about Europe, Schlözer argued, that formed the bedrock of their respective reforming projects.

The nexus between Russia, Europe and the Orient, and the tension between autochthonous and allochthonous modes of development, also stands at the heart of Herder's analysis of Russian history. Indeed, his account of the respective reigns of Peter I and Catherine II is premised on an assumption that is central to his conception of cultural development as a whole: namely, that any culture's receptivity to foreign influences and its rootedness in indigenous traditions must be carefully balanced. If this balance becomes disrupted, either stasis or alienation occur, preventing further growth. Therefore, the dynamism Peter engendered in Russia through his imports from Europe needed to be stabilised through a programme of nationalisation to be implemented by Catherine II. Herder hoped that in the aftermath of such stabilisation, a world-historical revolution could occur on Russian territory: ancient, Asian history - marked by strongly rooted national cultures - and modern European history - characterised by dynamic receptivity but lacking inner strength - could be combined. This newly fused Eurasian-Russian culture could, Herder predicted, become the principal engine for future cultural development across the globe. Far from perceiving a simple antithesis between a progressive Europe and a backward Orient, with Russia occupying an uncomfortable middling position, Herder ultimately related the three entities in one grand historical synthesis. As a result, he stands at the end of a long and conflicting debate in which relationships and modes of interactions between

different cultures and their histories were conceived in much more complex and interesting ways than can be captured by Wolff's reductive historical scheme.

If Voltaire, Diderot, Levesque, Schlözer and Herder were therefore engaged in a proper debate about Russia's civilisation, each airing his own distinct position, rather than just adding yet another piece to one hegemonic account, the question remains as to whether unifying features can be found across their writings. What is certain is that no substantive philosophical unity can be found. Notions such as rationalism or adherence to a universal, natural law, which are often invoked as marking the Enlightenment project, are clearly too restrictive to capture the diversity of their thought. Instead, I have sought to argue that it is the idea of philosophic history – first formulated by Voltaire, and subsequently partly adopted, adapted and reformulated by each thinker considered here – that emerges as the common framework that gives coherence to their discussion, thereby making it possible to analyse it as a debate, rather than just a collision among widely diverging voices, each talking in a completely different tongue.

And yet, the idea of philosophic history has little in common with the ostensibly substantially unified philosophy of history of the Enlightenment as it has been presented by generations of historians of the period, beginning with German *Historismus*. Philosophic history as written by Voltaire - with its overarching pragmatic concern to render the excavation of the past useful to the present – is different from, say, Diderot's and Herder's endeavours to define the relationship between the course of nature and the march of human affairs, or, indeed, from Levesque's and Schlözer's attempts to re-conceptualise the place of erudition within the enlightened historical project. The historicist critique of the Enlightenment as a fundamentally unhistorical current of thought that reduced the complex laws of historical development to simple mechanical ones, and all manifestations of historical and cultural individuality to timeless universals, is simply not applicable to any individual thinker considered here, and certainly not to their historical *oeuvres* as a whole.

On the contrary, if there had been a ready solution to the problem of how to relate the individual to the universal, or a distinctive enlightened story about how to

account for historical development, the debate about Russia's civilisation would never have occurred. It is exactly the contested question of how the particular history of Russia may relate to general, or at least generalisable, accounts of the development of civilisation that is the principal topic of the debate. This topic, we have seen, was most prominently explored by studying the complicated relationship between the history of Russia and that of Europe, and the outcomes of these investigations were markedly diverse.

The prime reason for the investment of considerable energy into the resolution of such questions was political. Voltaire, Diderot, Levesque, Schlözer and Herder all agreed that philosophic history is politically useful history, and that any programme of reform must be informed by an historical understanding of how the present came about. In its most general terms, the debate about Russia's civilisation is a debate about the interaction between history and politics. All recognised, albeit to varying degrees, that civilisation is man-made and that human beings have scope to improve their lot, provided they understand the complex historical forces, both general and particular, that define their condition. Studying the debate about Russia reveals the intensely historical nature of political understanding during the Enlightenment. The breadth and depth of enlightened thought about the interrelation between history, politics and civilisation, I believe, still provides food for thought today.

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Abbreviations

Because the following works are cited frequently, I have identified them in the footnotes by abbreviations:

Voltaire:

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- Corr Diderot, Denis, *Correspondance*, ed. Georges Roth, 16 vols., Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1955-70.
- DPV Diderot, Denis, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Herbert Dieckmann, Jacques Proust and Jean Varloot, 36 vols., Paris: Hermann, 1975-.

- HDI-70 Raynal, Guillaume-Thomas, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des européens dans les deux Indes*, 1st ed., 6 vols., Amsterdam, 1770.
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